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May 11, 2007

Strange Alchemy: Transitions in Margaret Mahy's The Changeover

Change is something we expect in fiction. It is as necessary to story as oxygen is to fire, because without it story dies. This is true both at a sentence by sentence level—the most basic way the story advances—and at the more complex heights of theme and character. Many narratives do not just *contain* change, but are *about* it in the guise of time, death, coming of age, and similar concerns. There can be no change without transition—and yet, rarely is our attention focused on that between-space. Margaret Mahy signals her intention to direct us there in the very title of The Changeover, and then proceeds to masterfully use transitions both at the micro level and in much larger ways to make explicit her exploration of the nature of transformation.

Mahy demonstrates a particular fascination for the *process* of change—the in-between stage when a character is caught between the old thing and the next thing they will become. All the major characters in the novel possess this interstitial quality in some key way. Protagonist Laura Chant seems to be in transition from the novel's opening, when she hears a voice warn her vaguely that "It's going to happen" (3). Whatever "it" is, Laura is now suspended, waiting for its arrival. Soon, that promised change materializes in the guise of a mysterious shopkeeper, Carmody Braque, a revenant who marks her younger brother Jacko's hand in order to drain away his life force. Jacko is trapped between life and death for the rest of the novel, ebbing ever closer to losing his identity. Laura herself is a "sensitive," accounting for the voice, and so inhabits a space apart from those around her and yet as one of them. She knows she must go to classmate Sorenson "Sorry" Carlisle for help, because she can tell he is a witch. He lives in the big old house with three witches (like him, but older, wiser), who reveal that Sorry is not exactly settled

himself—he is a rare male witch, and they worry that in the process of becoming so, he has lost his humanity. The cast of major players is rounded out by Laura's single mother and a fragile but promising new love interest; their relationship and whether it will last through the book becomes a mystery. These characters serve as the rich, fertile soil from which the story can only grow and grow.

These characters are all peculiarly situated to bring on the transition of the title, the process through which Laura will become a witch in the course of her dealings with the Carlisles, in order to save her brother Jacko and her mother's happiness. The "changeover" itself takes only a chapter, and comes close to the end of the book. Much more time is spent examining the oddness of what is happening to Jacko and Laura's position and options. She is a character on the cusp of many things. Her burgeoning sexuality and attraction to Sorry is one, and in many ways her "changeover" from sensitive to full-fledged witch is symbolized by her romantic embrace of the older Sorry, her transition to womanhood in the traditional sense. Once Laura is a witch, Sorry seems to fear her in a way he did not earlier, their roles somewhat reversed.

Mahy enforces this emphasis on transition and transformation through the very way she paces sentences, chapters, and paragraphs on the page. As Jacko is beginning to show signs of illness, we go through an entire day, from the breakfast table to school to Jacko's babysitter to the bookshop, in four or five paragraphs. The transitions speed us from one scene to the next—Laura looking at Sorry flirting with a girl on campus, Jacko dazed at the babysitter's, rushing past Braque's sinister shop only to find their mother flirting at the bookshop (38-39). The rush of story is heady and odd. It is precisely the repetition of this sort of technique, this speeding up and slowing down of action, this focus on the in-between scenes that turn into focal points after all, that makes the entire novel so strange and unsettling. By using these unusual transition points,

our experience of the story is controlled by Mahy in such a way that we feel the discomfort the characters feel, trapped in it themselves. We are not free to have a lazy experience. We are caught between one thing and another and will not stop until fixed.

Interestingly enough, once that fix happens—once Laura saves her baby brother, the resulting final chapter becomes far more normal and soothing. The sunniness of it feels unreal, but in a different way than what came before. It is nearly impossible to believe, after what we have endured, that things have settled into such calm. Sorry and Laura have pulled back from the brink of a sexual relationship—at Sorry's insistence—because he feels she is too young for him right now (this in stark contrast to the scene where she asks him for help and he grabs her breast). Laura and Sorry use their magic innocuously to make Jacko a miniature farm to play with, complete with pink crocodiles. Kate and her boyfriend are talking marriage and all is well and happy, because the season of transition, threat, and change has passed.

Of course, from the vantage point of reality, we know that transition never really fixes anything very long. Change will continue to happen because reality continues to happen. But we can turn satisfied from The Changeover, or another story, because they end on a note of stasis. We know the story has ended, because the radical change, the desperate need to stop being one thing and become another, has ceased for now. Mahy's final paragraph acknowledges this wryly:

Outside in the city, traffic lights changed colours, casting quick spells of prohibition and release. Cars hesitated, then set off again, roaring with urgency through the maze of the Gardendale subdivision, a labyrinth in which one could, after all, find a firebird's feather, or a glass slipper or the footprints of the minotaur quite as readily as in fairy tales, or the infinitely dividing paths of Looking-Glass Land. Kate and Chris danced, the potatoes over-cooked gently,

Sorry carefully hung his pictures out to dry while his cat watched him, purring for no reason, Laura dreamed of many things, and Jacko, pleased and puzzled by other people's lives, fell asleep on her knee while the strands of wool along the edge of his Ruggie swayed backwards and forwards on the small tide of his even breath.

What can stasis mean, Mahy says as she shuts off the light, except that our story has come to an end? Yet, the intimation is that if one element here changes or shifts, the labyrinth could open back up and another story could begin. We would need only the possibility of another transformation for that to happen.

WORKS CITED

Mahy, Margaret. The Changeover. New York: Atheneum, 1986.