



Penguins, Tigers, and Dragons

by Susan Olson

"I desired dragons with a profound desire."

—J. R. R. Tolkien

As a child, I tried without success to like fairy tales. I remember thumbing through volumes of Grimm and Andersen, peering at the colored pictures of bizarre characters and strange animals. I loved to read, but none of the stories appealed to me—in fact, my reaction was quite the opposite. I could not identify with the cruel parents, wicked Kings and Queens, and abandoned children who populated the fairy tale world. *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, and *The Wizard of Oz* took place in realms I found difficult to imagine. Who ever heard of girls falling down rabbit holes, children flying, or houses being swept up by tornadoes and plunked down in a kingdom inhabited by witches, Munchkins, talking lions, and flying monkeys? I much preferred heroines like Nancy Drew, Clara Barton, and Sacagawea, safely ensconced in the "real world." My favorite was a little girl named Maida who enjoyed a series of adventures with a trusted group of friends. Some of her escapades (drifting off in a houseboat, searching for a stray anaconda) were a bit outlandish, but not impossible to imagine. It was not until much later in life that my dominant sensate function relaxed, allowing me to suspend my disbelief and make the leap of faith into the world of fantasy. If it had been up to me, Tinkerbell would have died. I could not clap my hands and believe in fairies.

Recently I took my two granddaughters to see a remarkable movie, *The March of the Penguins*. Their reaction startled and delighted me. Accustomed as they are to Disney films, computer games, and TV cartoon characters, the girls were confused. "Are those real penguins, or people dressed up in penguin costumes?" the six-year-old wanted to know. "Maybe

Susan Olson, a Zürich C.G. Jung Institute graduate, is a Jungian Analyst practicing in Atlanta. She has lectured previously on *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, the archetypal symbol of the Fish, and the subject of bereavement dreams and visions.

they're like the talking animals in *Racing Stripes*," she added. "They don't look like cartoon penguins," her nine-year-old sister sagely observed. I explained that real people went to Antarctica and filmed the penguins as they made their heroic journey across the ice, found their mates, laid their eggs, hatched their chicks, and managed to survive in the most inhospitable of all possible worlds. The girls got it, but their questions made perfect sense to me. The world of the penguins was unimaginable to them (they do not often have the chance to skate on ice, play in deep snow, or feel the bite of winter winds) and they could not identify with it. What they really wanted to know was, "Is this the Real World, or are we in Fairyland now?" They know the difference between "real" and "pretend" and understand that it is essential to determine whether one is in the black-and-white world of Kansas or the colorful world of Oz. Are we awake, or are we dreaming? Our psychic health depends upon our consciousness of that distinction. If we can differentiate the thing from the image, fact from poetry—in other words, if we can think symbolically—we can walk the razor's edge between one world and the other. If not, we can get stuck in the quagmire of literalism or topple over the brink into psychosis.

I have just finished reading a book which raises the same questions, but from a very different angle. In Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, a sixteen-year-old boy finds himself marooned on a lifeboat in the middle of the Pacific Ocean in the company of a 450-pound Bengal tiger with the improbable name of Richard Parker. Like the story of the penguins, this is a heroic tale of survival against impossible odds in a lonely and inhospitable world. And like the penguins, boy and tiger instinctively band together to survive. Pi quickly discovers that he would die of loneliness and despair without Richard Parker's companionship, and finds food for the tiger so as not to become tiger food himself. (He has some very close calls.) For his part,

Richard Parker seems to comprehend (in his own tigerish way) that since Pi provides his food and water, devouring the boy would not be in his best interests. As their relationship develops, the two castaways establish their own territories, scrupulously guard their boundaries, and learn never to cross the line between them. Their uneasy but mutually beneficial alliance endures for several months, until at last their battered boat washes up on a sandy beach in Mexico. Then the great divide between human and feline becomes crystal-clear. Much as he fears the tiger, Pi is now emotionally attached to him and wants to say a proper good-bye. Richard Parker does not reciprocate, but trots off into the jungle without so much as a backward glance. Pi, of course, is both devastated and relieved: sorry to see the tiger go, but grateful to be alive to tell the story. And the reader is left wondering if the relationship between the boy and the big cat is real or imaginary. The people and animals and fish and ocean and storms and plants and sun and moon and stars in the story seem absolutely real—but are they? Are we in the real world, or have we stumbled into a vision or a dream? As we turn the final pages and hear another version of events (for those who haven't read it, I won't be a spoiler), it is hard to tell.

Penguins and tigers really exist. They inhabit the wastes of Antarctica and the jungles of India and are uniquely suited to survive in those hostile environments. Dragons, however, are another matter. They are the stuff of myth, fable, and fairy tale. We know that they do not “really” exist and never did, not even in the Age of the great dinosaurs. And yet, like J. R. R. Tolkien, we desire dragons with a profound desire. When they appear in stories like *The Hobbit*, we can almost hear the beating of their wings and feel their fiery breath blowing down our necks. “Smaug the Tremendous, Smaug the Mighty, Smaug the Chiefest and Greatest of Calamities” is convincing because he is a creature of Middle-Earth, which is similar enough to our world to be credible, but different enough to be enchanting. There dragons and trolls, elves and dwarves, wizards and orcs, hobbits and humans, ghostly riders and talking trees live together, not in perfect harmony (or there would be no story), but in perfect authenticity. The world of Middle-Earth is an example of what Tolkien calls the “Secondary World” of “subcreation,” fashioned by the story-maker’s art and truthful within the scope and boundary of its own laws. In such worlds, drawn by the power of the creative imagination, we enter a state of enchantment. Penguins march, rabbits talk, children fly, witches melt, boys and tigers share lifeboats, hobbits find magic rings, dragons are slain. We clap our hands and believe.

Now that I think of it, all the stories I have mentioned are heroic tales, following the three-part structure of the hero’s departure, initiation, and return. Penguins follow this pattern when they leave the sea, march 70 miles to their breeding ground, raise their young, and finally return to the open water. Pi and Richard Parker follow it when their mother ship sinks and they take to the life-boat, drift around the Pacific for seven months, and finally wash up on dry land, more



dead than alive. Bilbo Baggins follows it when he leaves the safety of home, encounters Smaug, retrieves the stolen treasure, and then returns to the Shire to tell his story. (The golden Ring he finds along the way is the real treasure, although he does not know it at the time.) His cousin Frodo follows it when he takes the Ring, leaves the Shire, travels to Mt. Doom, survives his ordeal, and lives to tell his story in the Red Book. The motif of the hero’s journey crops up everywhere, whether we are looking for it or not. It is certainly one of the great archetypal patterns of our natural and cultural life.

Two years ago, in a talk on *The Lord of the Rings*, I focused on Frodo’s journey to Mordor and his quest to destroy the Ring of Power. In October I returned to Middle-Earth to examine the roles of Galadriel, Arwen, and Eowyn in Tolkien’s epic. These women undertake their own heroic journeys and under-go their own initiations, culminating in critical decisions that determine the course of their lives and the destiny of their world. Their impact upon Middle-Earth—and upon us—cannot be overestimated. We know that they dwell in a “Secondary World” and exist only in imagination. But in spite of this, we identify with their struggles, suffer their sorrows, celebrate their triumphs, and delight in their joys. Their stories, like tales of penguins, tigers, and dragons, touch our souls and move us to tears. If fairy tales “mirror the basic patterns of the psyche,” as Marie-Louise von Franz suggests, these fairy-tale figures reflect the archetypal pattern of feminine heroism and invite us to recognize and affirm it in ourselves. That is why we believe in them, desire them, and return to Middle-Earth again and again to hear their stories. By enchanting us, they summon us to look in the mirror and become enchanted with ourselves. That is their great beauty and their most precious gift ■

References:

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 Marie-Louise von Franz, *Interpretation of Fairy Tales* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1982).

For this poll we've created a list of the greatest tigers of all time, featuring tigers you know from movies, television, video games and more. Of course your favorite cartoon tigers are included, but this list doesn't only feature animated characters that can talk. If your favorite fictional ...
For this poll we've created a list of the greatest tigers of all time, featuring tigers you know from movies, television, video games and more. Of course your favorite cartoon tigers are included, but this list doesn't only feature animated characters that can talk. If your favorite fictional tiger is missing, don't be salty- just add it to the list so that other people can vote for for it too! This list includes Hobbes, Tigger and more characters. Who is the number one tiger that people just can't get enough of? penguins: comes in a few different species, as well as sliding ones! Monkeys: both regular and snow! Very small animals Squirrels, rats, chinchilla, ferrets, moles, large moles, frogs, large frogs, small turtles, large turtles, snakes, lizards, small birds, owls small crabs, large crabs, cobras, bees/beeheives, butterflies and dragonflies.
Asian serpent dragons: upright walking dragon; kind of my take of the old RPG maker 2000 dragon both winged and wingless. Dragon Recolors: I gave them more interesting colors based on region. Desert, tundra, volcano and ocean. (so far).
Lions, Tigers and Bears! Oh my! Seriously though, these look great.