



The *Philippa Pearce* *Memorial Lecture*

celebrating excellence in writing for children

Philippa Pearce — Word Perfect

[*The italics within quotations are mine. - VW*]

In Philippa Pearce's fiction, every word, every nuance, every denotation and connotation, the sound, shape and melody of every phrase and sentence, was considered, tried out and sounded out, and finally approved by a profoundly self-critical and discriminating wordsmith.

She was satisfied with nothing less than *le mot juste*. She describes the flooding waters of the River Minnow as 'curdled here and there into white or yellow froth; . . . [hurrying] along with a full, rippling motion, and with a lipping sound.' [Minnow on the Say, Puffin, p. 10] Curdled is precisely right; so is lipping, which she would have known refers to water gently coming up against a rim or hard edge. In *A Dog So Small*, Ben watches heavy rain fall on the 'poppling water' [Puffin, p. 45]. Is this a coinage, a hybrid between popping and rippling? But no, there is a word popple and one can imagine her authorial pleasure at knowing it.

Her experience in radio taught her that a story-teller has to make the listener see the scene, the action, the faces, as she does here:

... the end of her *knobbed forefinger* came down *like a poker-end* on the table, so that Grandpa in the scullery jumped, and Tilly, who had been crawling forward until her nose rested on the threshold, *winc*ed back. [*A Dog So Small*, Puffin, p. 35]

Winc

ed is familiar; but here — unusually — it indicates also a retreat. Here is a dog from *What the Neighbours Did* — '[Miss Mortlock's elderly King Charles spaniel] sat down, with the regretful slowness of someone who has forgotten to bring his shooting-stick.' [Kestrel Books, p. 40]

Much of her writing is domestic and homely, kitchen life illuminated by metaphor. 'The milk in the pan,' she writes, 'began to steam. Given time, it rose in the saucepan, *peered over the top*, and boiled over ...' [*What the Neighbours Did*, Kestrel, p. 27]

Here, something different is happening:

Clasping the trunk with his arms, [Ricky] pressed his body close against it, tipped his head back, and *let his gaze go mountaineering up* into the tree — up — up — . [*What the Neighbours Did*, Kestrel, p. 39]

The choice of words [*mountaineering*] and the shaping of the sentence work together to outsmart the laziness or hurry of readers. We are compelled by vocabulary and syntax to *read into* Ricky's slow imagined ascent, up into the branches of this enormous tree.

When she describes the fall of the same tree, the phrasing paints a scene, suggests movement on a stupendous scale, changes the perspective, and concludes with a moment of dramatic terror.

There was a great, unimaginable creak, and then the elm began *to lean courteously towards them*. They stood staring; and the tree leaned over — over — *reaching its tallness to reach them*; and they saw what only the birds and the aeroplanes had ever seen before — *the very crown of the tree*, and it was *roaring down towards them* — . [p. 42]

She tells us that David Moss makes paper boats 'of *cocked-up paper*' [*Minnow on the Say*, Puffin, p. 8]. This is not the phrase used today to indicate an incompetence. This is *cocked* as in *cocked hat* — because Philippa Pearce knew that to make a paper boat you fold the paper in the same way as to make a paper cocked hat.

This is characteristic. Her words have connections which are not immediately apparent, hidden beneath the surface. And yet they are not strictly speaking metaphors. The next example *is* a metaphor. She says of Mr Smith towards the end of *Minnow on the Say* that 'an *obsequious* little breeze' ran ahead of him [Puffin, p. 227]. Why *obsequious*? — because Mr Smith would enjoy having attendants and flunkies preceding him, clearing the way, bobbing and bowing.

On one occasion she draws attention to her own authorial satisfaction. A maid in *Tom's Midnight Garden* 'reached the door, her hand was upon the knob, and then she seemed to go.' Then Philippa Pearce adds: '*That was it exactly*: she went, but not through the door. She simply thinned out, and went.' [Puffin, p. 27]

The power of her writing often has to do with tense, word order, metaphor and simile — all amounting to an achieved grace of structure, both syntactic and narrative, as here:

There is a time, between night and day, when landscapes sleep. Only the earliest riser sees that hour; or the all-night traveller, letting up the blind of his railway-carriage window, will look out on a rushing landscape of stillness, in which trees and bushes and plants stand immobile and breathless in sleep — wrapped in sleep, as the traveller himself wrapped his body in his great-coat or his rug the night before.

This grey, still hour before morning was the time in which Tom walked into his garden . . . [Puffin, pp. 40-41]

Having received a letter from his brother, Tom thinks 'he would have liked to bring Peter, if only for a little,

to the reach of his wishes. *Reach* is a much-used word in Philippa Pearce's fiction, suggesting both an achievement and the effort and extending of yourself necessary to bring it about. She associates the word especially with trees because, when climbing them, you need to stretch and reach upwards and outwards. So that phrase, *to the reach of his wishes*, links Peter's longing with the physicality of tree-climbing [Puffin, p. 150].

Note in the following quotation how the alliterative *ts* and *sts* deliberately choke the progress of the sentence. "Time no longer ..." murmured Tom, and thought of all the clocks in the world *stopping ticking*, and their *striking stopped* too, drowned and *stopped* for ever. . .' [Puffin, p. 160] It is not quite onomatopoeia, but rather that the words mime, or enact, the meaning. There is a similar miming in *A Dog So Small*, when Ben arrives at his grandmother's house. '[Ben's grandmother] was *climbing down the stairs backwards and very slowly, because of stiffness in the knees*' — a sentence which resists being read quickly. The reader is compelled to take it slowly, like the arthritic old lady [Puffin, p. 32].

When it first sinks in that Ben is not going to get a real dog, we have this:

He put the little picture down on the seat beside him, leaned his head back, and closed his eyes, overwhelmed. [Puffin, p. 60]

There is no '*He sighed*'. The placing of *overwhelmed* at the end of the sentence is sufficient to give the statement the quality of a sigh. There is no need for stage directions.

Here is an oddity from *Tom's Midnight Garden*:

[Tom] put his hand out for it, but *Mrs Long clung to the case* for a moment, *claiming* his attention first. [Puffin, p. 8]

Behind those words *Mrs Long clung to the case* the phrase *long-case clock* is lurking, nudged into half-being by the *Long*, the *case*, and the repeated *cl* sounds.

Philippa Pearce also uses words to hold together extended patterns and themes. *A Dog So Small* is held together by a web of words connected with seeing. At the end, when Ben's feeble and unloved dog has almost disappeared in the gathering darkness, 'suddenly, *when Ben could hardly see, he saw clearly*. He *saw clearly* that you couldn't have impossible things, however much you wanted them...' She could have used *realised* or *understood*. But Ben *saw* it because the preceding paragraph has been all about seeing and failing to see.

He *shut his eyes tight*, but he could see *no invisible dog* nowadays. He *opened his eyes*, and for a moment he could *see no visible dog* either. So the brown dog had gone at last. Then, as Ben's *eyes accustomed themselves* to the failing light, he *could pick him out* after all, by his movement: the dog had got up; he was moving away; he was *slipping out of sight*. [Puffin, pp. 155]

The narrative has been constructed with patterns of seeing and blindness, of closing your eyes in order to see better. So *saw* is not only the exact word; all those other incidents — and the central themes of lightness and darkness, seeing and not seeing — are clinched and confirmed in that final use of the word *saw*.

Each of Philippa Pearce's four full-length novels has a central character intently focused on a need or

desire — Adam Codling for the lost treasure; Ben Blewitt for a dog of his own; Tom Long for time to stand still; Kate Tranter for the truth about her father. Their need has to do with uncovering meaning, interpreting signs — Tom, for example, reading the signs of the garden; or Kate Tranter a duplicitous tombstone.

The Way to Sattin Shore is a dark work — and experimental in the way it addresses ways in which words can be used to deceive, or make up worlds which are illusory.

[Kate] saw a telephone box. Its redness stopped her. She got off her bicycle and stood, leaning across it, to think something out. If they had a telephone at home, and if she had the right change in her pocket, then she could telephone home, and her mother would answer the telephone, and she — Kate — could tell her where she was, and how tired she was. And if her mother had a car, and could drive it, she would come in the car and pick her — Kate — up. The bicycle would go in the car — which would have to be rather a large one — or on to a roof-rack.

She thought of all that, carefully; And then she realised that none of it helped, because none of it was true . . . [Kestrel, pp. 77-78]

This account is constructed of repeated *if*-clauses and stuttering parentheses, taking itself into a linguistic cul-de-sac which the narrative has to back out of. Other examples show characters simply failing to speak truly to one another.

‘Mum ...’ [Kate] wept and wept. ‘I’m so hungry. I didn’t have any tea ...’

Her mother said: ‘I’ll get you something to eat.’ And at her mother’s words, Kate wept more than ever, because what she — Kate — had said was not at all what she needed to say. Not at all.

[Kestrel, p. 82]

The Way to Sattin Shore addresses language frustration and trickery — and, incidentally, leaves Kate in possession of a new incommunicable secret.

Philippa Pearce’s mind was sharply and uniquely engaged in the words she used. This engagement involves the careful selection of exactly the right word, or the almost musical composition of mimetic story-telling sentences. There is also, I believe, a possibly unfathomable connection between her own intense focus upon language and the fact that four of her most interesting characters are similarly caught in needs which require a focused concentration on meanings.

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Based on a talk delivered at the first Philippa Pearce Memorial Lecture at Homerton College, Cambridge, on September 11th, 2008.