"consolation" of fairy-tales has another aspect than the imaginative satisfaction of ancient desires. For more important is the Consolation of the Happy Ending.

J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories"

The great epics dignified death, but they did not ignore it, and it is one of the reasons why they are superior to the artificial romances of which *Lord of the Rings* is merely one of the most recent.

Since the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution, at least, people have been yearning for an ideal rural world they believe to have vanished - yearning for a mythical state of innocence (as Morris did) as heartily as the Israelites yearned for the Garden of Eden. This refusal to face or derive any pleasure from the realities of urban industrial life, this longing to possess, again, the infant's eye view of the countryside, is a fundamental theme in popular English literature. Novels set in the countryside probably always outsell novels set in the city, perhaps because most people now live in cities.

If I find this nostalgia for a "vanished" landscape a bit strange it is probably because as I write I can look from my window over twenty miles of superb countryside to the sea and a sparsely populated coast. This county, like many others, has seemingly limitless landscapes of great beauty and variety, unspoiled by excessive tourism or the uglier forms of industry. Elsewhere big cities have certainly destroyed the surrounding countryside but rapid transport now makes it possible for a Londoner to spend the time they would have needed to get to Box Hill forty years ago in getting to Northumberland. I think it is simple neophobia which makes people hate the modern world and its changing society; it is xenophobia which makes them unable to imagine what rural beauty might lie beyond the boundaries of their particular Shire. They would rather read Miss Read and *The Horse Whisperer* and share a miserable complaint or two on the commuter train while planning to take their holidays in Bournemouth, as usual, because they can't afford to go to Spain this year. They don't want rural beauty anyway; they want a sunny day, a pretty view.

Writers like Tolkien take you to the edge of the Abyss and point out the excellent tea-garden at the bottom, showing you the steps carved into the cliff and reminding you to be a bit careful because the hand-rails are a trifle shaky as you go down; they haven't got the approval yet to put a new one in.

I never liked A. A. Milne, even when I was *very* young. There is an element of conspiratorial persuasion in his tone that a suspicious child can detect early in life. Let's all be cosy, it seems to say (children's books are, after all, often written by conservative adults anxious to maintain an unreal attitude to childhood); let's forget about our troubles and go to sleep. At which I would find myself stirring to a sitting position in my little bed and responding with uncivilized bad taste.

According to C. S. Lewis his fantasies for children - his Narnia series of seven books beginning with *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and ending with *The Last*

Battle - were deliberate works of Christian propaganda. The books are a kind of Religious Tract Society version of the Oz books as written by E. Nesbit; but E. Nesbit would rarely have allowed herself Lewis's awful syntax, full of tacked-on clauses, lame qualifications, vague adjectives and unconscious repetitions; neither would she have written down to children as thoroughly as this childless don who remained a devoutly committed bachelor most of his life. Both Baum and Nesbit wrote more vigorously and more carefully:

Old Mombi had thought herself very wise to choose the form of a Griffin, for its legs were exceedingly fleet and its strength more enduring than that of other animals. But she had not reckoned on the untiring energy of the Saw-Horse, whose wooden limbs could run for days without slacking their speed. Therefore, after an hour's hard running, the Griffin's breath began to fail, and it panted and gasped painfully, and moved more slowly than before. Then it reached the edge of the desert and began racing across the deep sands. But its tired feet sank far into the sand, and in a few minutes the Griffin fell forward, completely exhausted, and lay still upon the desert waste.

Glinda came up a moment later, riding the still vigorous Saw-Horse; and having unwound a slender golden thread from her girdle the Sorceress threw it over the head of the panting and helpless Griffin, and so destroyed the magical power of Mombi's transformation.

For the animal, with one fierce shudder, disappeared from view, while in its place was discovered the form of the old Witch, glaring savagely at the serene and beautiful face of the Sorceress.

L. Frank Baum, *The Land of Oz*, 1904

Elfrida fired away, and the next moment it was plain that Elfrida's poetry was more potent than Edred's; also that a little bad grammar is a trifle to a mighty Mouldiwarp.

For the walls of Edred's room receded further and further till the children found themselves in a great white hall with avenues of tall pillars stretching in every direction as far as you could see. The hall was crowded with people dressed in costumes of all countries and all ages - Chinamen, Indians, Crusaders in armour, powdered ladies, doubleted gentlemen, Cavaliers in curls, Turks in turbans, Arabs, monks, abbesses, jesters, grandees with ruffs round their necks, and savages with kilts of thatch. Every kind of dress you can think of was there. Only all the dresses were white. It was like a redoute, which is a fancy-dress ball where the guests may wear any dress they choose, only the dresses must be of one colour.

The people round the children pushed them gently forward. And then they saw that in the middle of the hall was a throne of silver, spread with a fringed cloth of chequered silver and green, and on it, with the Mouldiwarp standing on one side and the Mouldierwarp on the other, the Mouldiestwarp was seated in state and

splendour. He was much larger than either of the other moles, and his fur was as silvery as the feathers of a swan.

E. Nesbit, *Harding's Luck*, 1909

Here is a typical extract from Lewis's first Narnia book, which was superior to some which followed it and is a better than average example of Lewis's prose fiction for children or for adults:

It was nearly midday when they found themselves looking down a steep hillside at a castle - a little toy castle it looked from where they stood which seemed to be all pointed towers. But the Lion was rushing down at such a speed that it grew larger every moment and before they had time even to ask themselves what it was they were already on a level with it. And now it no longer looked like a toy castle but rose frowning in front of them. No face looked over the battlements and the gates were fast shut. And Aslan, not at all slacking his pace, rushed straight as a bullet towards it.

"The Witch's home!" he cried. "Now, children, hold tight."

Next moment the whole world seemed to turn upside down and the children felt as if they had left their insides behind them; for the Lion had gathered himself together for a greater leap than any he had yet made and jumped - or you may call it flying rather than jumping - right over the castle wall. The two girls, breathless but unhurt, found themselves tumbling off his back in the middle of a wide stone courtyard full of statues.

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, 1950

As a child, I found that these books did not show me the respect I was used to from Nesbit or Baum, who also gave me denser, better writing and a wider vocabulary. The Cowardly Lion was a far more attractive character than Aslan and Crompton's William books were notably free from moral lessons. I think I would have enjoyed the work of Alan Garner, Susan Cooper and Ursula Le Guin much more. They display a greater respect for children and considerably more talent as writers. Here is Garner:

But as his head cleared, Cohn heard another sound, so beautiful that he never found rest again; the sound of a horn, like the moon on snow, and another answered it from the limits of the sky; and through the Brollachan ran silver lightnings, and he heard hoofs, and voices calling, "We ride! We ride!" and the whole cloud was silver, so that he could not look.

The hoof-beats drew near, and the earth throbbed. Cohn opened his eyes. Now the cloud raced over the ground, breaking into separate glories that wisped and sharpened the skeins of starlight, and were horsemen, and at their head was majesty, crowned with antlers, like the sun.

But as they crossed the valley, one of the riders dropped behind, and Colin saw that it was Susan. She lost ground though her speed was no less, and the light that formed her died, and in its place was a smaller, solid figure that halted, forlorn, in the white wake of the riding.

The horsemen climbed from the hillside to the air, growing vast in the sky, and to meet them came nine women, their hair like wind. And away they rode together across the night, over the waves, and beyond the isles, and the Old Magic was free forever, and the moon was new.

The Moon of Gomrath, 1963

Evidently, Garner is a better writer than Lewis or Tolkien. In the three fantasy novels *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* (1961), *The Moon of Gomrath* (1963) and *Elidor* (1965) his weakness, in common with similar writers, is his plot structure. In a later, better-structured book, *The Owl Service* (1970), **he improved considerably**.

This deficiency of structure is by no means evident in Ursula K. Le Guin, Gillian Bradshaw or Susan Cooper. For my taste Susan Cooper has produced one of the very best sequences of novels of their type (modern children involved in ancient mystical conflicts). They have much of Masefield's *Box of Delights* magic. Her sequence, *The Dark is Rising*, has some fine moments. The strongest books are the title volume and the final volume *Silver in the Tree* (1977), while some of the best writing can he found in *The Grey King* (1975):

They were no longer where they had been. They stood somewhere in another time, on the roof of the world. All around them was the open night sky, like a huge black inverted bowl, and in it blazed the stars, thousand upon thousand brilliant prickles of fire. Will heard Bran draw in a quick breath. They stood, looking up. The stars blazed round them. There was no sound anywhere, in all the immensity of space. Will felt a wave of giddiness; it was as if they stood on the last edge of the universe, and if they fell, they would fall out of Time... As he gazed about him, gradually he recognised the strange inversion of reality in which they were held. He and Bran were not standing in a timeless dark night observing the stars in the heavens. It was the other way around. They themselves were observed. Every blazing point in that great depthless hemisphere of stars and suns was focussed upon them, contemplating, considering, judging. For by following the quest for the golden harp, he and Bran were challenging the boundless might of the High Magic of the Universe. They must stand unprotected before it, on their way, and they would be allowed to pass only if they had the right by birth. Under that merciless starlight of infinity any unrightful challenger would be brushed into nothingness as effortlessly as a man might brush an ant from his sleeve.

Ursula K. Le Guin in her trilogy *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), *The Tombs of Atuan* (1971) and *The Farthest Shore* (1972) is the only one of these three to set her stories entirely in a wholly invented world. She writes her books for children as