



'Marvell held up a bottle of liquid magic.' Frontispiece by Constance Barnes, in Arthur Groom's *Marvell the Amazing Magician*.

My Favourite Story

When I was Young

William Gray

It might have been one of Enid Blyton's *Noddy* books, which my mother read me at bedtime. My favourite was *Noddy and the Magic Rubber* (or 'Eraser', for US readers), which features a magic rubber that can literally erase anything – a concept that fascinated me as a child.

Or it might have been one of the stories my father read to me when my mother was out: either 'Rapunzel' or *Treasure Island*. My father (an actor *manqué*) used the same sinister falsetto voice for both the witch and Blind Pew (think Robert Carlyle), and on one dark winter afternoon slipped away mid-story to switch the electricity off at the mains and hide – a terrifyingly memorable, if hardly favourite, experience.

It might have been *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. It feels as if I read the book almost in one go (though I couldn't have), lying on my front with my elbows on the carpet, head propped on my hands, as children read. For some odd reason I never discovered the rest of *The Chronicles of Narnia* until I was older, and already into Alistair MacLean and Ian Fleming. So I only read the other Narnia books as an adult, old enough to start reading fairy tales again (as Lewis wrote in his dedication of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* to Lucy Barfield).

Unlike these stories by Blyton, Stevenson, Lewis and the Grimms, the story I've chosen is not famous. It's Arthur Groom's *Marvell the Amazing Magician*, published in 1956 by George Newnes in the 'Sunny Stories Bookshelf' series. Groom (1898-1964 – not to be confused with the Australian writer of the same name) was an extraordinarily prolific British writer of children's books with over four hundred titles to his credit. If there is such a thing as a 'jobbing' children's writer, Groom was it. He produced a huge variety of children's books including popular biographies (Lord Nelson, Elizabeth I, Roy Rogers, Davy Crockett, Buffalo Bill), westerns, annuals (*The Bonanza Annual*, *Lenny the Lion's Annual*), *Champion The Wonder Horse*, retellings of children's literature classics (*The Water Babies*, *Peter Pan and Wendy*), religious books (*Stories about Jesus*, *My Picture Book of Prayers*) and many more. You name it, he wrote it.

Groom also wrote *Writing for Children: A Manual for Writers of Juvenile Fiction* (1929), a book fascinating for its historical interest, not least when Groom opines that:

I think I am right in asserting that 'Jack the Giant-Killer' and his friends 'Red Riding Hood' and the others have had their day. The modern parent no longer feels inclined to talk to children about grinding the bones of Englishmen . . . The fairy tale and other children's stories of a past generation were designed either to terrify or to preach a sickly goody-goody moral, which were both equally bad for their readers. Today the younger generation wants clean, healthy tales and, while folklore still interests the youngster of 1929, tales of nature hold equal sway over youthful readers.

Presumably Groom is turning in his grave after the recent wave of fairy-tale films such as 'Jack the Giant Slayer' and 'Red Riding Hood'. Even in his lifetime he saw the publication of *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-56). Indeed one wonders whether in writing *Marvell the Amazing Magician* in 1956 Groom was trying to jump on the Narnian bandwagon (*The Magician's Nephew* having been published the previous year).

Marvell the Amazing Magician may have been a pot-boiler, but that didn't diminish its impact on me. At six years old or so I was quite without discrimination. Raw magic was what I craved, and if the story and pictures were pretty crude, it didn't bother me a jot. I was obsessed by the book, and had my own wizard outfit and book of spells (gramarye!) in 'magic writing' (scribbles and nonsense). The latter is not too far removed from the 'spells' in *Marvell*, which consist of such nonsense as 'Pinkerplank-jugg-chuff' or '7654, plus 5½, multiplied by 26', perpetrated by the wizard 'Ziggetty-Pop'. On re-reading *Marvell*, I'm intrigued by the ways it prefigures the mood, and even some of the details, of the early Harry Potter books (talking pictures, 'Go-to-Africa' pills), but disappointed overall by the lack of imagination. The illustrations by Constance Barnes are equally uninspired, making Geoff, the sorcerer's apprentice, look distinctly girlie, while there are no actual girls in the story at all. It seems very much a (boys' own) school story tarted up with some magical props—there's even a School of Magic run by a magician named Whizzlewink who 'looked exactly like a schoolmaster' (*sic*). But the props were enough to get my six-year-old imagination going, especially the Magic Mat, the illustrations of which I pored over.

There may be no 'goody-goody' morals in *Marvell*, but I think that in my case this did have an unfortunate influence, in that magic in *Marvell* was just *an effect*, without any sense of a moral context. A tale doesn't have 'to preach a sickly good-goody moral' to show that magic is only as good as the person using it. I have a vivid association of *Marvell* with one of my birthday parties (probably my seventh) at which I proudly sported my wizard gear. However, my wizarding identity was deeply shaken by the ridiculous fact that I was apparently 'out' in the first round of 'musical chairs', while all my merely 'muggle' friends (to speak anachronistically) were still in the game. This was not merely unjust, it was against the (magical) order of things! I'm afraid I had a tantrum: being a 'good loser' was all very well for 'muggles', but I was set apart, as a follower of *Marvell*. I was in effect a tiny Uncle Andrew. Whatever problems we may have with *The Magician's Nephew*, I think that on the whole it's better for children than the likes of *Marvell the Amazing Magician*.

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