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MASTER'S THESIS

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"Curiouser And Curiouser":  
Margaret Mahy's Novels For Adolescents

by  
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of the interconnections between Margaret Mahy's novels for adolescents. It argues that whilst interconnected networks infuse the *oeuvre* with appropriate material for adolescents, some textual elements exceed the limitations of all but the most sophisticated adolescents.

After an introductory chapter, Chapter Two proposes a typology of structure in New Zealand novels for adolescents. It finds that Mahy's novels are archetypes of the hope-inducing structures identifiable in New Zealand novels for adolescents generally. It also finds that Mahy adapts structure to the stage of adolescence she is writing for.

Chapter Three discusses the generic content and stylistics in the Mahy *oeuvre*. It argues that even though the content is eminently appropriate for adolescents, some elements of style are not.

Chapter Four argues that knowledge of the various networks enriches response, guides interpretation and highlights Mahy's ability to pitch content at an appropriate level for adolescence, but again argues that some subtleties of style are too sophisticated for an adolescent audience.

Chapter Five argues that understanding of each novel is expanded by identifying points which imply one reader at the expense of others. Hence, this thesis concludes that meaning and response multiply in Mahy's texts in proportion to (1) knowledge of Mahy's unique interconnecting textual elements and (2) the number of Mahy's implied readers inhering in the actual reader.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Ms Margaret Mahy has had nine novels published for the adolescent "stage" group. Her first, The Haunting, was published in 1982 and subsequently won the Carnegie Medal in Great Britain. The Other Side of Silence, her most recent novel to date, was published in 1995. Judging principally from the issues dealt with in these novels and the stages and ages of their central characters, I conclude that they are published for three stages of adolescence - early, middle and late - as follows:

Early Adolescence:

- The Haunting (1982)
- Aliens in the Family (1986)
- Dangerous Spaces (1991)
- Underrunners (1992)
- The Other Side of Silence (1995)

Mid-Adolescence:

- The Changeover: A Supernatural Romance (1984)

Late Adolescence:

- The Catalogue of the Universe (1985)
- The Tricksters (1986)
- Memory (1987)

A synopsis of each of these novels is provided in Appendix One as an *aide-memoire* for readers. This thesis shows how the Mahy *oeuvre* is composed of unique networks of interconnecting textual elements which become "curiouser" the more they are studied.

Chapter Two reveals structural interconnections between the novels, showing how they are archetypes of the hope-inducing *eucatastrophic* structures identifiable in New Zealand's Adolescent Novels generally. Additionally, this chapter explains Mahy's adaptations of *eucatastrophe* to the stage of adolescence she is writing for. Appropriately, the structures match the adolescent's need to deal with the past and to anticipate the future with optimism.

Chapter Three shows how the *oeuvre* consists of a network of thematic and stylistic similarities. Two broad topics receive ubiquitous thematic attention in these novels: family harmony and adolescent empowerment. The network of family harmony sub-plots become "curiouser" the more they are studied. All of the families in these novels are "broken families" in one way or another and all of the novels

conclude with the resolution of an important difficulty in the family. Even though the familial plot operates as sub-plot and setting, I show how it is of central significance. Secondly, I show how adolescent empowerment is the other driving force behind action and metaphor in these novels.

For the purposes of this thesis, I have limited my discussion of stylistics to the level of determination of narrative codes, diction, allusions, and the extended metaphors. Chapter Three shows that whilst some elements of Ms Mahy's stylistics defer to the abilities of adolescents, other elements of style will elicit different responses depending upon the reader's cognitive development. Curiously, other elements of style will almost universally exceed the limitations of the publishers' target audiences, especially Ms Mahy's sophisticated vocabulary, her sophisticated allusions and the metaphoric tenor of her texts. (I often refer to the publishers' target audience in order to differentiate between the popular view of the appropriate age of readership and Ms Mahy's own view of who she is writing for.)

Chapter Four explores the findings made in Chapter Three by applying them in more depth to two novels, The Haunting and The Catalogue of the Universe. I show what difference the knowledge of Ms Mahy's networks makes when analysing these texts. Additionally, I show how the texts become "curiouser" by virtue of the fact that whilst the networks infuse the *oeuvre* with eminently appropriate material for the publishers' target audiences, other textual elements exceed the same audiences' limitations.

Chapter Five further illustrates and expands on these conclusions by showing how a range of implied readers inhere in four texts: Aliens in the Family, The Changeover: a Supernatural Romance, The Tricksters and Memory. I show the presence of each of the following implied readers in these novels: the formal-operational reasoner, the publishers' target audience, the child who approximates to the sort of reader Mahy was as an adolescent, the educated adult reader, and the re-reader. Curiously, the findings indicate that understanding of each novel is expanded by identifying textual elements which imply one reader at the expense of others. When analysing Memory, this chapter shows how knowledge of the other novels in the *oeuvre* augments comprehension by adding extra levels of meaning.