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Margaret Mahy: Librarian of Babel

Catherine Butler

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In 1982 Robert Phillips interviewed the English poet Philip Larkin about his life and work for the literary magazine *Paris Review*. At one point, Phillips unwisely asked Larkin, who was the university librarian in Hull, whether he knew of any other contemporary poet of note who was a librarian – apart, of course, from Jorge Luis Borges. Larkin, typically, replied: “Who’s Jorge Luis Borges?” (60). It didn’t occur to either man to mention Margaret Mahy, whose first novel, *The Haunting*, was published that year. It is hardly a surprising omission: writing for children in New Zealand, Mahy was even further beyond Larkin’s horizon than Borges, writing for adults in Argentina. Yet Mahy had already published poetry in addition to the children’s fiction for which she would become increasingly famous, and was, just as importantly, a librarian in Christchurch. In this article I will (with some assistance from Borges) consider what it means – and more particularly what it meant to Margaret Mahy – to be not only a writer but a librarian too. How did her day job affect the form of her wider preoccupations and of her writing?

Libraries and librarianship hold a significant place in Mahy’s work. As late as 2006, more than a quarter of a century after she had left the profession, she made a library a central locus in her post-apocalyptic novel, *Maddigan’s Fantasia*, and its librarian the founder of the travelling circus that gives that book its name. However, I will concentrate my discussion on

some of the texts Mahy produced around the turn of the 1980s, the point at which she left the library and began to make her living as a full-time writer. These include her 1978 story “The Librarian and the Robbers” and the novels *The Haunting* (1982), *The Changeover* (1984) and *The Catalogue of the Universe* (1985). I will argue that many of Mahy’s characteristic concerns – notably with the relationships between order and chaos, containment and release – are profoundly influenced by her dual vocation as writer and librarian.

According to her biographer, Tessa Duder, Mahy was not always ambitious to be a librarian. Rather, she saw it as the least bad choice from the restricted set of possibilities available to a woman of her class and education in 1950s New Zealand (81). Nevertheless, Duder quotes as evidence of the young Mahy’s precocity a poem about the destruction of a library by fire, written when she was sixteen, which in retrospect hints at an early interest in some of the perplexing aspects of librarianship Mahy was to explore in her adult work:

[...] Dante with Defoe and Dekker fell;
No Virgil came to guide him through the Hell;
See how he mingles ashes on the floor
With Homer, Hardy and Sir Thomas More.

(“The Burnt Library,” ll. 15-18, qtd. Duder, 71)

Dante, Defoe and Dekker fall, but at least they fall in alphabetical order: if Virgil didn’t guide them, perhaps the spirit of Melvil Dewey did. In this early vision Mahy is already fascinated by the mingling of order, exemplified by the library and the books it contains, and the power of nature to reduce all human efforts to ash. What is certain is that, despite feeling no early vocation for librarianship, Mahy came in time to love and value her work. Perhaps the most

important reasons for this were the human ones – the opportunities it gave her to meet people and books and introduce one to the other. This article, though, will consider a more Borgesian aspect of Mahy’s work, one that reveals the library as a place of paradox and mystery, and the librarian as the Janus-faced gatekeeper of two worlds. Mahy once declared: “I am here to assert that librarians stand dancing and pivoting on the tenuous ridge that separates chaos from order” (qtd. Duder, 82). Mahy’s assertion will be our starting point, as we join her for a while on that tenuous ridge.

The Marriage of Chaos and Harmony

More than most professions, librarianship has acquired a number of stereotypical associations, many of which involve, in Mahy’s words, “prim austerity” (qtd. Duder, 81). In the popular mind librarians love silence, order, neatness and control, and are intolerant of their opposites. The stereotypical female librarian (and the stereotypical librarian *is* female) wears her hair up, often in a tight bun. Mahy, famous for her appearances in multi-coloured clown wigs, may have set herself up in deliberate opposition to this forbidding figure, but she also confessed to sharing the librarian’s love of control, or “containment,” and considered her library work as a natural extension of the same impulse that made her first a reader, then a writer:

I began as a listener, and then, since I wanted to join in that particular dance, I put together stories of my own [...], telling them aloud to walls and trees. Because I couldn’t write back then, I learned them by heart as a way of containing them, but I went on to become a reader. Very shortly after that, I learned to write and began to contain stories by putting them down in notebooks. I began as a listener, became a teller, then a reader and then a writer, in that order. Later still I became a librarian,

which in some ways is the ultimate result of this evolutionary process, since a lot of library work is concerned with orderly containment.

(“A Dissolving Ghost”, 31)

As this passage implies, the crude opposition between the repressive, orderly librarian and the creative, exploratory writer is inadequate. Writing books, no less than cataloguing and shelving them, is in part a process of “orderly containment”. Conversely, librarians, synonymous with order and restraint, have always had a wild streak. As Tycho Potter, one of the protagonists of *The Catalogue of the Universe*, puts it, “[Casanova] was a librarian as well as a stud”; although he lugubriously adds: “Just my luck to get stuck with the librarian bit” (137). This aspect of the profession is hinted at by a toy popular with librarians in recent years, the Archie McPhee Librarian Action Figure (“With amazing push-button Shushing Action!”), modelled on the real-life Seattle librarian, Nancy Pearl.¹ While the phrase “Librarian Action Figure” suggests a humorous oxymoron, it does so uneasily. The librarian, with a minatory finger to the lips, may be an icon of silence, but she is also a figure of power and authority. Her appearance may suggest restraint, but it implies an energy that *requires* restraint.

We may indeed begin to doubt whether Casanova was really such an exception to the librarian rule. Is there a rebel hidden within every librarian, and a bookworm inside every wild child? A story such as Mahy’s “The Librarian and the Robbers” (1978) might have been written to illustrate that hypothesis. In this tale, the beautiful librarian Serena Laburnum (even the name suggests her capacity for calm) is kidnapped by a band of robbers. Thanks to her access to books she is able to nurse these ruffians through a bout of the Raging Measles

¹ A short video of the figure in action can be found in “Librarian Action Figure from Archie McPhee”, at Youtube.com. Accessed 2 June 2014.

and back to health, and later (after they have released her) she shelters their chief from the police by stamping him “with a number, as if he was a library book” (61) and shelving him under L, his name being Salvation Loveday. “Alphabetical order is a habit with librarians” (61), Mahy notes, and the fact that the two bear the same initials is an early indicator of their compatibility. The act of using a library stamp as a way of asserting ownership is one to which I shall return, but suffice it to say that it is Miss Laburnum’s sense of order that prevents the police from arresting the robber chief: “You weren’t allowed to take anything out of the library without your library card. This was a strict library rule” (62). The rules of the library trump the laws of the land.

Later, the robbers are able to return the favour. After a violent earthquake they run to Miss Laburnum’s rescue, and on reaching the library find a scene of great disorder: “Books had fallen from their shelves like autumn leaves from their trees, and lay all over the floor in helpless confusion” (66-67). (This is already the second ruined library to appear in the present article, and the “confusion” caused by this quake may hint at Babels to come.) Miss Laburnum’s love of words, of order and of knowledge is almost her undoing. She is buried under a pile of old books, which she had been shelving in the store room when the quake struck. “Ancient, musty encyclopaedias showered down upon her. When the earthquake was over she was still alive, but so covered in books that she could not move” (67). She needs all the robbers’ strength and energy to release her from this wordy dungeon and put the library to rights. The upshot is, first, that she and the robber chief are married, but also that the robbers become librarians, and with the extra staff the council are able to “open a children’s library with story readings and adventure plays every day” (71). Mahy writes that Serena Loveday (as she becomes) does not mind “that the robber librarians all wore wiry black whiskers still, nor that they took down all the notices saying ‘Silence’ and ‘No talking in the library’”,

concluding that “Perhaps she herself was more of a robber at heart than anyone ever suspected” (71). In marrying the chaotic energy of the robbers and the serene order of the librarian, in other words, we manage to walk Mahy’s tenuous ridge, achieving a neat synthesis between order and chaos.

This pattern is repeated in a different (and less obviously library-based) context in Mahy’s first novel, *The Haunting*. The protagonists of this book are three siblings, Tabitha, Barnaby and Troy, whose elderly relatives are the Scholar family. Some of the Scholars are sensitives and some outright magicians, but all their lives they have been kept in rigid check by a matriarch, Great-grandmother Scholar, who – horrified by the childhood discovery that she too is a magician – has devoted her life to disciplining any such tendencies out of herself and her children. As one of those elderly children tells Tabitha: “anytime we showed any oddness – any individuality, I suppose you might say – she felt she had to suspect it and attack it, too. She clipped and pruned us as if we were a family of standard roses; in the end our lives were all straight lines” (64). Tabitha’s sister Troy later expands on this point: “[Great-grandmother Scholar] set herself to crush the magic right out of her life, to wipe out her own specialness. She put a false order on things around her. She tidied, tidied, tidied and turned all wild games into her sort of chess” (117).

Only the youngest of Great-grandmother Scholar’s children rebelled. Great-Uncle Cole was a born magician, who refused to hide his magic and eventually left the family home. But Cole’s life has been one of loneliness and maladjustment, and he has developed the potential to use his magic just as cruelly and selfishly as his mother deployed her powers of repression and manipulation. Cole’s selfishness and his mother’s mirror each other, both being destructive reactions in a world where people need magic *and* order.

In *The Haunting*, the possibility of salvation lies in the new generation, and especially in Troy, who has inherited the Scholar magic. She has kept her abilities secret all her life, until the book's crisis – in which Cole threatens to kidnap her brother Barnaby – forces her to reveal herself. Up to that point, Troy's self-restraint has been in danger of pushing her in the direction of Great-grandmother Scholar, as an early description of her room hints:

[...] there was something about Troy's tidiness, even when it was expected, that was shocking – something eerie and astonishing. The books in her bookcase were in exact order of size, pulled out to the very edge of the shelf and not a quarter of an inch forward or back. [...] Neatness was well known for being a good thing, so why did Troy's neat room look somehow so mad – so demented? (78)

Significantly, it is the instinct to shelve books neatly that Mahy selects in choosing a symbol for Troy's obsessiveness. If it is demented, it is a very librarianly form of madness. Once Troy is able to be – or make – herself, however, the sharp edges of her being become less well defined:

Her boundaries with the rest of the world ebbed and flowed. She shrank to the size of a seed, grew great and dim like a mist spreading through the room, blazed once more and then became Troy again. (121)

Troy will not repeat Great-grandmother Scholar's errors. On the other hand, she has learned from Cole's mistakes too, and *The Haunting* ends with her resolving to lead a path of moderation, veering only a little from the life of an ordinary teenager, using her magic in

proportion to her growing wisdom, and becoming (in her father's words) "more of a human being and not just a magician" (124). In this way, as Anna Jackson notes, Troy reconciles the canny and uncanny aspects of her being (Jackson, 162-64); in doing so she achieves a synthesis, or happy medium, recalling the marriage of Serena Laburnum to Salvation Loveday

Perhaps there is nothing very radical in a reading that recommends moderation in all things, and it is all too easy to cast the librarian as the introverted, bookish and organized end of a spectrum that runs away in the direction of creativity, chaos and madness, and to place the well-lived life somewhere in the middle. That would be too simple, however, for there is something a little mad about being a librarian in itself. Troy's neat room with its neat books looks "demented," after all, and Great-grandmother Scholar's neatness is belied by her wrinkles:

She was absolutely neat, so neat that she seemed like a doll brought out of a glass case in a museum and sat up especially for the occasion. But her eyes were sharp and unfriendly, and her wrinkles untidy – even wild as if time had played a careless game of noughts and crosses all over her. (19)

Who would insist so vehemently on neatness except someone morbidly aware of her own affinity for chaos? In this context it is instructive to recall the seed from which *The Changeover*, Mahy's next book, sprang, when Margaret Mahy, Christchurch children's librarian, found herself growing demonic in the course of duty:

One day when I was working at the front desk in the library a woman and a little boy were taking books out and the child smiling with pleasure put out his hand to have a Mickey Mouse stamp on it. I often put stamps on children's hands in those days, taking pleasure in making them clear and straight. On this occasion however I suddenly felt very sinister, as if I were a goblin king branding a stolen child of a slave. I felt myself acting out something of this ominous thought, looming over the child and putting the stamp on his hand. Then, filled with dismay at myself I glanced rapidly and placatingly at the child's mother, who stood by smiling and having no idea, I hope, of what was passing through the kindly librarian's mind. (qtd. Duder, 182)

This hint is expanded in *The Changeover*, in which fourteen-year-old Laura Chant is horrified when the vampire-like Carmody Braque uses a similar stamp on her young brother Jacko, creating a psychic channel between them that allows him to suck out Jacko's life force. Only by "changing over" to become a witch with the help of her friend Sorry Carlisle and attacking Braque with a stamp of her own can Laura hope to turn the tables and save her brother. The pen may be mightier than the sword, but *The Changeover* is that rare thing, the story of a fight to the death in which the weapon of choice is a librarian's ink stamp.

If Mahy's pleasure in making her stamps "clear and straight" recalls Troy's concern for neatness, she resembles Serena Laburnum still more. Serena stamped Salvation Loveday in order to mark him as library property and thus take him out of reach of the law. But in saving Salvation she also claimed him as her own. It was an act of love, but love in its possessive aspect. With the evil Carmody Braque the possessive implications of stamping, always implicit, are placed centre stage. Lisa Scally has recognized in Braque's power to "write" on Jacko's body a "grotesque parody" of an author's power over her characters (Scally 136), but

Braque's stamp is also an assertion of ownership, the psychic equivalent of an Ex Libris plate. Braque is the book's antagonist and Laura Chant and Sorry Carlisle are the couple at its centre, but it is salutary to remember that it is in Braque that the story had its genesis.

All Paths Lead to Babel

It is now time to reintroduce Jorge Luis Borges. According to Tessa Duder, Borges's stories were Mahy's first encounter with magical realism, engendering an amazement in her that was to have a lasting effect on her work (78). Elsewhere Duder quotes Mahy's recollection that the inspiration for *The Tricksters* (1986) was a section from Borges's *A Dictionary of Imaginary Beings* (1957) in which he describes a rivalry between human beings and the figures reflected in mirrors (Duder, 194-95); and in her essay "A Dissolving Ghost" Mahy records her early fascination with a line from Borges's story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", in which he writes that "the metaphysicians of Tlön are not looking for truth, not even an approximation of it; they are after a kind of amazement" (46). Borges immediately adds that "They consider metaphysics a branch of fantastic literature" – a proposition bound to appeal to a writer such as Mahy, whose own fantasy writing is so deeply infused with philosophical and scientific thought.

We might connect Borges with Mahy at numerous points, but here I want to use him principally to provide a way of thinking about the various tensions inherent in the profession of librarianship, many of which find their echo in that of writer. I shall begin with his story "The Library of Babel", from which this article takes its name and in which he states that "The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries, with vast air shafts between, surrounded by very low railings" (78). Borges's story, told by one of the librarians, goes on to describe what might

seem to be the best library imaginable, and certainly the most complete, for it contains every possible combination of alphabetical characters in its volumes, which are all of a standard size and length. Any book one can imagine will be in the library somewhere – from *Hamlet* to *The Changeover* – as well as many, many more that appear to be composed of nonsense words. But even the nonsense words may have meaning in some language yet unknown, as the story's narrator points out:

I cannot combine some characters

dhcmlrchtj

which the divine Library has not foreseen and which in one of its secret tongues do not contain a terrible meaning. No one can articulate a syllable which is not filled with tenderness and fear, which is not, in one of these languages, the powerful name of a god. To speak is to fall into tautology. (85)

What librarian would not wish for a truly comprehensive library? Yet the very plenitude of language makes it vacuous. Words that mean everything might as well mean nothing – a Babel indeed. Finding a book with any useful knowledge is virtually impossible in this vast place. We may wish to consult the library catalogue, but although the library (which others call the universe) contains an uncountable number of catalogues, there is no knowing which is the true one.

Here we catch our first glimpse of the central paradox of librarianship. Librarians wish their libraries to be as complete as possible, but they also want to them to be *usable* – and these goals are fundamentally opposed, for reasons that will become apparent. The traditional way to make the library usable is to impose order on it, to classify and divide the books into

categories so that they are easy to find – and this inevitably involves dividing the world into categories too. Many visitors to the British Library will have seen Sir Eduardo Paolozzi's monumental statue of Blake's Newton, sitting with his dividers in the library's piazza, a tribute perhaps to this librarianly ambition. But we are not living in a Newtonian universe, and universal schemes of classification, while they speak of an attractive intellectual optimism (which some call *chutzpah*) will always be doomed to failure. How can we know which is the true catalogue of the universe?

As a preliminary to addressing that problem it will be helpful first to draw on a related Borgesian fable that offers further insight into the desire for completeness and the problems of categorizing language and the world. Borges's story "The Garden of Forking Paths" tells of a mysterious Chinese manuscript – a novel, the plot of which confuses its reader by depicting not just a sequence of events, not just a series of choices and actions made by the characters, but *every* choice they *might* have made, each leading to a slightly different reality, to further choices, to more forks in the path: "In all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the fiction of the almost inextricable Ts'ui Pên, he chooses – simultaneously – all of them" (51).

Some (for example, Stuart Moulthrop) have seized on this story as an early description of hypertext. But even in a hypertextual book the reader can take only one path at a time, not all at once. Borges's Chinese manuscript attempts simultaneous completeness, and in the process achieves incomprehensibility. Mahy alludes to this problem, quite possibly with Borges's story in mind, in describing Laura Chant's experience of changing into a witch in *The Changeover*. While travelling through the dangerous landscape of her own mind during the

changeover ceremony, which involves going into an extended trance, Laura unwisely ignores the advice she has been given and looks back along the way she has come:

Behind her, the road branched infinitely. Kate and Stephen stood together in church being married; she saw herself born, her first day at school, saw Winter Carlisle, much younger and softer, feeding hens, saw Mrs Fangboner looking at her dahlias with a rare, solitary pleasure, saw Miryam, stricken, hold a baby who must be Sorry, and Sorry himself crouched under a rain of blows [...] She saw Chris, in another country, holding a letter he hesitated to post, saw herself looking in a mirror, saw all the possibilities, her own and other people's, that had brought her to this point. (194)

It is at precisely this moment that Laura begins to fall out of her trance, with a panicking sense that she is drowning and near-disastrous consequences for her changeover. The very plenitude of her awareness is dangerous. One can see life steadily or one can see it whole, as the refrain of E. M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910) has it, but not both. In any moment you may have the illusion of a unitary, meaningful self, and a life that makes coherent narrative sense: but look backward or forward, and the forking paths of past and future show you the arbitrary nature of your journey, splitting you into a dissipated network of chances and choices. Those ways madresses lie.

This principle does not apply to narrative alone: at every level of its structure, language is a branching, polysemous medium. Elizabeth Hale has noted that many of Mahy's characters – and, one might add, third-person narrators – enjoy “twisting meaning, rhyming, rapping, punning and joking. They read, they quote and allude, revealing themselves as intertextual beings who orient themselves through literature” (10). Single words branch into multiple

meanings, each spawning yet further meanings, in a cascade of Derridean *différance*. Words are vital, but their fissiparous nature makes them also feral and unruly, insusceptible to the kind of “orderly containment” that Mahy identifies with the work of librarians. One could find evidence almost anywhere in Mahy’s oeuvre for her gleeful exploration of these qualities, but let us take as an example the following brief exchange between Laura and Sorry Carlisle, again from the chapter describing Laura’s changeover from girl to witch. As part of this process Laura must pay Sorry (here in his persona as gatekeeper) one of the stone coins she has been given by his mother, Miryam:

“Have you got any money? I’d do it for you free, but you know... even to cross the Styx you have to pay the ferryman.”

“You couldn’t call Gardendale ‘the sticks’,” Laura protested, showing her stone coins. “It’s right in the city.”

“But built of sticks,” Sorry said. “Sticks and stones. Styx and stones!”

(*The Changeover*, 188-89)

Even these few lines provide Mahy with the opportunity for a virtuoso display of intertextual reference and wordplay. It begins with Sorry’s rather self-conscious reference to the Greek mythological River Styx, passage across which involved paying a coin to Charon, ferryman of the dead. Like Charon, Sorry needs to be paid in order for Laura to gain further passage into changeover country, and his allusion thus signals that Laura’s journey is a *katabasis*, a journey into the underworld. Given the customary symbolism of such journeys she can thus be thought of as undergoing a death and rebirth (indeed, later in the chapter she feels as she is being pushed painfully along a birth canal to her own rebirth as a witch [199]); however, she is also being identified as an Orpheus figure – a role hinted at in Miryam’s earlier injunction

to “never turn back” (185). It is a fitting identification, for as Orpheus she is the rescuer of her brother, who has been reduced to death-in-life by Carmody Braque’s stamp on his skin, just as Eurydice was banished to Hades, traditionally by the bite of a snake.

Laura demythologizes Sorry’s reference to the Styx, protesting that Gardendale is not “the sticks” (that is, not in the countryside). Here too language extends beyond the immediate context to incorporate other concerns of the story, particularly the encroachment of the city into the formerly rural area around the Carlises’ house. In response, Sorry takes the word “sticks” on another tangent, this time in reference to a differently vulnerable home, the stick-built house in the tale of “The Three Little Pigs”, one of a number of traditional stories associated with Jacko’s plight as he is pursued by the wolfish Braque. Finally, in adding that houses are built from “sticks and stones,” Sorry alludes to the adage that “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me.” His wordplay is verbally dextrous, but like the rest of the exchange this has a wider resonance. In an earlier chapter Sorry has confided to Laura that he is a survivor of physical abuse by his foster father, at the mere mention of which “his cheeks swelled and his eyes blackened” (155), implicitly problematizing the saying’s facile dissociation of language and physical effect. More generally, in this novel magic relies on the power of words and imagination to work directly on the physical world, and this is to become crucial when Laura is able to hurt – indeed, destroy – Carmody Braque by virtue not of sticks or stones but of verbal commands, laid on him through the power of a stamp bearing her name (202).

Had we world enough and time we could leapfrog further, from the land of Serendip, through the garden of forking paths, to the library of Babel. Each word, each allusion, leads to others, and others beyond those. “Tonight, this room is a crossways of many lines of space and

time,” says Miryam to Laura at the beginning of the changeover ceremony. “They cross in all of us all the time, these lines, but only witches and similar people can catch fish on them – strange fish sometimes” (180). One need hardly add that writers – and librarians – are amongst those similar people, and that the lines are not only lines of magical energy, or lines for acute anglers to catch strange fish on, but also lines of text – of words.

Mahy’s texts revel in their ability to make connections and propagate meaning, and this is a quality that has been widely recognized. As Claudia Marquis has noted: “scholar after scholar speaks of fluidity, shifting, borders transcended, fixities challenged, paradox” (108). The danger is that without some principle of constraint the field of meaning will become formless, and thus void. In the account of the changeover ceremony there are several sustained metaphors that impose a degree of structure and direction on Laura’s otherwise phantasmagorical experience. “You’re inventing the terrain,” Sorry tells her, “but we’re putting in a few of our own symbols” (189) – and Mahy appears to be engaged in a similar division of labour with the reader. The metaphor of gestation and birth is one such structuring principle. Another, rather more submerged form of organization is provided by the Tarot pack, the four suits of which (cup, coins, sword and wand) are echoed in the objects given to Laura in her journey, although the text never names the Tarot explicitly. In addition, the narrative urgency of the situation (Laura is after all in a race against time to save her brother’s life) militates against any temptation to self-indulgence or aimlessness. Even so, to read the chapter called “The Changeover” is, amongst other things, to be astounded at the skill with which Mahy combines external structural elements with features that are idiosyncratic to Laura’s personal experience and the shape of her unconscious, to create a dazzling and compelling narrative. Here, as much as anywhere, we can see Mahy dancing on that tenuous ridge between order and chaos.

Cataloguing the Universe

I have suggested that the novelist's world is a garden of forking paths, both at the larger level of plot and at the smaller level of individual words. But so too is the librarian's. The underlying basis of most library cataloguing systems can be represented as a tree diagram, a branching taxonomy that starts with broad concepts and breaks them into ever finer ones, splitting them into branches that are, potentially, infinite in number. This principle of subdivision lies behind the Dewey decimal system, but also behind many other systems created before and since. For example, in 1668 Newton's Royal Society colleague John Wilkins published a book (about which Borges went on to write an essay) entitled *An Essay towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language*. In this volume Wilkins describes a language designed to reduce everything in the universe, abstract qualities as well as material objects, to a set of forty fundamental categories. These were in turn divided into sub-categories, then sub-sub-categories, and so on. At each stage of subdivision a vowel or a consonant would be added, with the result that in Wilkins's language to refer to a thing by its name is also to define its position within a comprehensive taxonomic structure embodied in the language itself. In the following century Carl Linnaeus, in his *Systema Naturae* (1735), used a similar (if slightly less ambitious) principle to landscape the garden of life as a set of forking paths: kingdoms, phyla, classes, orders, families, genera and species. In 1852 Dr Peter Mark Roget (taking his inspiration partly from Wilkins) gave us the first edition of his *Thesaurus*, and twenty-five years after that Melvil Dewey published *A Classification and Subject Index for Cataloguing and Arranging the Books and Pamphlets of a Library* (1876). All these catalogues, of the universe and of the library (which some call the same thing), are gardens of forking paths, in which language and reality are forced as far as possible to conform to the same branching structure.

These endeavours are however haunted by the suspicion, which I have mentioned before, that madness and chaos are not simply opposed to neatness and order but are actually implicit in them. Anyone fortunate enough to have handled a first edition of Wilkins's *Essay towards a Real Character* will have had a taste of what can result from the obsessive pursuit of rational goals. Wilkins's folio volume contains, in addition to a description of his invented language, a foldout diagram with a detailed representation of Noah's ark, constructed according to the measurements provided in Genesis. Aware that explorers were continually bringing new plants and animals to the attention of European natural philosophers, and aware too that his language was not infinitely extensible, Wilkins aimed to use the Bible to set an upper limit to the number of still-undiscovered species and thus to demonstrate that his language was sufficiently capacious to accommodate them. He started from the premise that the Ark must have been large enough to house all the species in existence for forty days, as well as adequate food to provide for them, and worked backwards from there. His scrupulous calculations allow for no fewer than 1,825 extra sheep to help the carnivores survive the deluge (166), besides the pair required for post-diluvian breeding, as well of course as the hay needed to supply this ever-diminishing flock. Wilkins's procedure was eminently, admirably rational; but even before the theory of evolution undermined the belief in eternally discrete species on which it was based its startling intensity of focus must surely have given some of his readers pause.

A more general problem for the cataloguer lies in the paradox of librarianship to which I alluded earlier. We may wish to make the world manageable by dividing it up, describing it more exactly and making ever-finer distinctions, but the more thoroughly we do so the less the result resembles a catalogue and the more it simply replicates the reality of which it is

meant to be an epitome. Borges wittily skewered this effect in his one-paragraph story, “On Exactitude in Science” (1960), in which (borrowing from Chapter 11 of Lewis Carroll’s *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* [1893]) he quotes from an account of a fictitious empire where the art of cartography once achieved unheard-of perfection, only to suffer an ignominious fate:

the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography. (“On Exactitude in Science”)

In order to avoid this kind of *expandio ad absurdum*, cartographers and librarians alike are forced to simplify, to amalgamate, to omit, to discard, in search of a compromise between completeness and usability. This process in turn can rapidly become addictive. There is no more alarming sight than the gleam in the eye of a librarian culling books – except, perhaps, that of a novelist murdering her darlings. The step from happy medium to harpy Medea is a short one.

Another intractable difficulty concerns the question of accuracy. The Library of Babel is full of false catalogues, we are told; and there are many false catalogues of the universe too. The out-of-date encyclopaedias that fell upon Miss Laburnum when the earthquake struck were

put into storage because they had been shown to be, in part at least, false catalogues of the universe, and such acts of consignment are a continual and inevitable process, at least in a world where the stock of knowledge is increasing. Not only are particular beliefs liable to prove false, but the ways in which knowledge is organized are also likely to require revision – a fact that strikes more fundamentally at the cataloguer’s art. Borges points out that many of the classifications Wilkins proposes in his *Essay towards a Real Character* are made on a basis that now appears obviously inconsistent. Some stones, for example, are categorized according to their appearance, others according to their practical uses, still others by their rarity – a multiplicity of criteria that inevitably generates semantic gaps and overlaps. To make the point still more trenchantly Borges cites a Chinese encyclopaedia, “Celestial Empire of Benevolent Knowledge,” a volume no less pertinent for being fictional:

In its remote pages it is written that the animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies. (“Analytical Language”)

Such divisions may appear arbitrary or even ridiculous to readers far removed from the cultural context that gave rise to them, but Borges suggests that this is inevitable: “there is no classification of the Universe not being arbitrary and full of conjectures. The reason for this is very simple: we do not know what thing the universe is” (“Analytical Language”).

Librarians, however, being slaves to the taxonomic systems they employ (or by which they are employed) are forced to suppress this fact. As Mahy observed: “Being a librarian forces you to think a lot about truth, and to pretend to have got over any confusions you might ever

have had about it. You have a book and it has to go in some particular physical place on the library shelves. It can't really be both here and there ("A Dissolving Ghost", 31-32). The professional obligation to act as if truth is unitary and unambiguous is a prime instance of irrationality masquerading as rationality. It's enough to drive anyone to write novels.

Questions about how to interpret the world and establish systematic ways to represent one's knowledge are central to Mahy's 1985 novel, *The Catalogue of the Universe*. The book's plot centres on the friendship between two teenagers, the amateur astronomer Tycho Potter and the beautiful Angela May, who has been raised by her mother but is now increasingly determined to track down and meet her estranged father. Early in the story we learn that for his birthday Angela has given Tycho "a thick, dark-covered book" about astronomy, entitled *The Catalogue of the Universe* (31). *The Catalogue of the Universe* thus contains *The Catalogue of the Universe*; but the Borgesian proliferation of catalogues does not end there, for a popular astronomy book of that name (albeit lacking the first definite article) exists in the world *outside* Mahy's fiction too, and may well be the model for Angela's fictional gift. *Catalogue of the Universe* (1979) by Paul Murdin and David Allen really is a thick, dark-covered book, comprising a catalogue of astronomical phenomena. Like the Dewey decimal system or Wilkins's *Essay* it branches down the forking paths from general to specific, from galaxies to nebulas, to single stars, to planets, labelling as it goes. It is a particularly appropriate gift for New Zealander Tycho, containing as it does a generous representation of sights from the southern sky, something its authors offer as a corrective to the "hemispheric chauvinism" of most works of popular astronomy (7). Nor is the catalogue of catalogues exhausted even now, for in its appendix *Catalogue of the Universe* includes the standard star catalogue, a splendid tidying, ordering and simplifying of the universe named after its eighteenth-century creator, who (in an ironic wobble of fate) was called Messier.

In Mahy's novel *Tycho Potter* admires the Ionians, a group of pre-Socratic philosophers who believed devoutly in the underlying order of the universe, a notion Tycho (whose own family life is anything but orderly) finds deeply appealing, although he is well aware of its limitations. Tycho himself is named – although only by accident – after the sixteenth-century astronomer Tycho Brahe, the most careful and assiduous collector and cataloguer of celestial data before the invention of the telescope. Brahe might seem an ideal exemplar of the Ionian faith in order; however, as Mahy has noted elsewhere, his painstaking approach to the accurate observation and systematic recording of the movements of the heavens was actually the catalyst for a major shift in the scientific approach to knowledge that would have the effect of undermining that faith. Before Brahe, “if a minor detail did not fit into a major hypothesis it was easy to shrug it away” (“Dissolving Ghost”, 38), but Brahe's unparalleled data set allowed his amanuensis Johannes Kepler to revolutionize the revolutions of the planets by showing that planetary orbits were not quite as perfectly circular and neat as everyone (including Brahe) had assumed, but were in fact elliptical. In a previous age, the unexpected discrepancies in Brahe's data might have been glossed over: a circle being the most perfect geometrical figure, it was after all only to be expected that God should have chosen it as the basis of planetary motion. But “in computing the orbit of Mars”, Mahy notes, Kepler “acknowledged as significant an error of eight minutes of arc which Copernicus had been able to ignore” (“Dissolving Ghost”, 38). An ellipse, unlike a circle, has not one focus but two, something that people who believed in an ordered and geometrically perfect cosmos were bound to find disconcerting. From results such as these Mahy's *Tycho Potter* draws a more general conclusion about the universe's lack of symmetry: “The world's left-handed. Planets move in ellipses, parity isn't preserved, and the square root of two is an irrational number” (*Catalogue*, 59). Tycho sees a continual mismatch between reality and the human

demand for order: “The big deal is we’re made to expect symmetry. [...] But we’re wrong. Our idea of things being fair is a sort of symmetry, but there’s always the wobble” (60-61).

There’s always the wobble. From the mysterious “swerve” of Epicurean atomic theory to the uncertainty principle of quantum mechanics, our expectations of order are always thrown off course, no matter how slightly. The aesthetic-cum-religious assumption that the universe should be perfect and symmetrical finds its narrative and ethical equivalent in the demand that life provide visible justice, neat endings, and a perfect settling of karmic accounts – a demand likely to be met only in fiction, if at all. When Tycho’s friend Angela plucks up the courage to meet her father, she finds not the joyous welcome and reunion that the circularity of fiction and the idea of “things being fair” seem to promise, but irritation and rejection. A more roundabout way to happiness has to be found, into a kind of relationship with her paternal grandmother, a more honest one with her own mother and a deeper one with Tycho. The shortest distance between two points may not always be a straight line, and there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in Euclid’s geometry. The same is true of Tycho himself. As Sam Hester has observed: “Tycho, who has built his life around the search for order, finds that his chances of being loved cannot be determined by Ionian principles” (185).

Truth is unstable; knowledge is fragile and tentative. Libraries can be burned, as the schoolgirl poet Mahy realised. They can be destroyed by earthquake, as Miss Laburnum discovered – and the citizens of Christchurch found to their cost in 2011. Books are physical artefacts, not just abstract repositories of knowledge. Tycho not only reads *The Catalogue of the Universe* but also stands on it, the extra inch it provides being just enough for him to kiss Angela May at approximately equal height. Even catalogues of the universe are also

catalogues *in* the universe. Mahy's pirouetting librarian cannot change this, and perhaps would not wish to. Her pivoting dance is a gyroscope that defies gravity and laughs in entropy's teeth, for as long as it lasts – which is as long as we have time to read one of Margaret Mahy's books. And if our own feet learn to move more rhythmically after that, if they follow the universe's syncopated and elliptical beat, if we too begin to spin like pulsars and to fling out light, then so much the better.

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