Elizabeth Hale, "Entry on: Memory by Margaret Mahy", peer-reviewed by Miriam Riverlea and Daniel A. Nkemleke. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/116. Entry version as of November 01, 2026.

Margaret Mahy

Memory

United Kingdom (1987)

TAGS: Dionysus / Dionysos Oracles Pythia Sibyl





We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Memory
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1987
First Edition Details	Margaret Mahy, *Memory*. London: J. M. Dent, 1987, 234 pp.
ISBN	9780460062039
Awards	2007 - Phoenix Award, Children's Literature Association of America
Genre	Bildungsromans (Coming-of-age fiction), Novels, Teen fiction*
Target Audience	Young adults
Author of the Entry	Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au
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Creators



Portrait of Margaret Mahy with her dog, courtesy of David Alexander.

Margaret Mahy , 1936 - 2012
(Author)

Margaret Mahy was born in 1936, in Whakatane, in the North Island New Zealand, the daughter of an engineer (a bridge-builder) and a teacher. From her early years, she was a precocious reader and writer. She studied for a BA at the then University of New Zealand, before training as a librarian in Wellington. Her first stories were published in the New Zealand School Journal, and were published internationally from 1969, following their discovery by an American editor. Before she was able to support her full time writing, Mahy drove a book bus in Canterbury, in the South Island, and worked as a librarian at the Christchurch Public Library. She wrote over 100 works, including novels, story collections, picture books, songs, essays and plays, and received many literary awards, both nationally and internationally. She was awarded the New Zealand Prime Minister's Award for Literary Achievement (2005), and the Hans Christian Andersen Award (2006) and the Sir Julius Vogel Award for Services to New Zealand Science Fiction and Fantasy (2006). She died in 2012. In 2015, the *Margaret Mahy Family Playground* was opened in central Christchurch.

Sources:

Dossier, *Nomination to IBBY Hans Christian Andersen Awards DATE. Country of Nomination: New Zealand; Writer Candidate: Margaret Mahy*.

Duder, Tessa, *Margaret Mahy: A Writer's Life*, Auckland: Harper Collins, 2012.

Profile at the bookcouncil.org.nz (accessed: June 27, 2018).

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Additional information

Summary

In *Memory,* nineteen-year-old Jonny Dart is a dancer suffering from the post-traumatic stress disorder. Some years before, his sister Janine, also a dancer, had fallen from a cliff while playing a game with Jonny and their friend, Bonny Benedicta, in which Jonny was the "wolfman," and Bonny the "pythoness," or the "oracle." Jonny, who resented his family's favouritism towards his sister, is haunted by the thought that he might have pushed Janine and develops a drinking problem. One evening, he goes in search of Bonny (seeking the wisdom of the oracle), hoping that she can tell him what really happened. Ejected from a party at her parents' house, he comes to on a traffic island in the city and encounters Sophie, an old woman suffering from dementia, pushing a shopping trolley through an empty carpark. "Are you the one?" she asks him. Jonny helps Sophie to her home in a block of houses that are condemned, to make way for building development, and looks after her. As he cleans and feeds her, he pieces together fragments of her memories (marriage, a lost lover), and of his own. Sophie's dementia overlaps with Jonny's PTSD, and he gradually begins to see her as an oracle of sorts — Sophia, goddess of wisdom. It emerges that Bonny lives next door, and she is able to reassure Jonny that he did not push Janine, that she had gone too far on the cliff-edge. When Sophie is attacked by burglars, Jonny fights them off, leaping from her balcony to do so, in a move that mimics his sister's fall, and that recovers his shattered memories. The novel concludes with Jonny, now finding work and returning to dance, deciding to move in with Sophie to care for her. He recalls her original question to him: "Are you the one?" and decides that he is and that he is "one of the lucky ones."

Analysis

Memory is the fourth of a series of novels in which Margaret Mahy uses classical myth, literature, and philosophy to explore the modern adolescent condition. Set in contemporary Christchurch, *Memory* uses ideas about Dionysus, the Oracle, Sophia the Goddess of Wisdom, to show the healing of a young man (Jonny) suffering from survivor guilt, alcoholism and post-traumatic stress disorder, and to consider the workings of the mind through the depiction of Sophie, an elderly woman suffering from dementia. Jonny, a dancer, is a modern Dionysus, reeling like a drunk through the city, in search of himself and his past. Sophie and Bonny Benedicta function as different

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oracles, who in the end need wisdom from him as much as he does from them. These main characters seek ways to hold on to knowledge and wisdom in the face of fragmentary cognition and perception. Around them, certainties of life and culture are also crumbling: *Memory* is set against a backdrop of protest, about Maori Land Rights, and in a context of urban decay and the destruction of heritage. Ambivalences about New Zealand's heritage, then, inform this novel and work into the general theme about knowing and understanding oneself, coming to terms with the events of the past, and their relation to the present. Classical myth and religion connect both with adolescent identity, ideas about female power and knowledge, and a recurring tripartite pattern of power that Mahy deploys in several of her novels.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Dionysus / Dionysos Oracles Pythia Sibyl
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adolescence Coming of age Identity Memory Old age (Old people) Youth

Further Reading

Jackson, Anna, Geoffrey Miles, Harry Ricketts, Tatjana Schaefer, and Kathryn Walls, *A Made-Up Place: New Zealand in Young Adult Fiction*, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2011, 224 pp.

Pohl, Michael, *Classical Myth and Margaret Mahy's Young Adult Fiction: A Thesis Submitted to the Victoria University of Wellington in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in English Literature*; Victoria University of Wellington, 2010.

Scutter, Heather, "Choose Your Own Agenda: Margaret Mahy's *Memory*", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 20.2, (1995): 9–14.

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Waller, Alison, "Memory and the City in Mahy's Memory and 24 Hours", *The Lion and the Unicorn* 39.2, (2015): 146–165.

Winters, Sarah Fiona, "Aliens in the Landscape: Maori Space and European Time in Margaret Mahy's Fiction", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* (2008): 408–425.

Dossier, 'Nomination to IBBY Hans Christian Andersen Awards. Country of Nomination: New Zealand; Writer Candidate: Margaret Mahy.

Addenda

Mahy is a New Zeland writer, though many of her books were first published overseas.

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