Babette Pütz, "Entry on: The Other Side of Silence by Margaret Mahy", peer-reviewed by Elizabeth Hale and Daniel A. Nkemleke. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/119. Entry version as of November 01, 2026.

Margaret Mahy

The Other Side of Silence

United Kingdom (1995)

TAGS: Hero(es) Metamorphosis





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

General information	
Title of the work	The Other Side of Silence
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1995
First Edition Details	Margaret Mahy, *The Other Side of Silence*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1995, 185 pp.
ISBN	10: 0241135516 | 13: 9780241135518
Genre	Novels, Teen fiction*
Target Audience	Young adults
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This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

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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Bio prepared by Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au

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Additional information

Translation

German: *Die andere Seite des Schweigens*, trans. Cornelia Krutz-Arnold, Muenchen: Deutcher Tachenbuch Verlag, 2000.

Italian: *L'altra faccia del silenzio*, trans. ?, Milano: Mondadori, 1996.

Spanish: *La Otra Cara del Silencio*, trans. ?, Barcelona: Montena Mondadori, 2001.

Summary

Twelve-year-old Hero is an elective mute. She is the third child (of four) in a talkative family of high-achievers. At the point where the story starts, Ginevra, the eldest daughter of the family has just returned home after she fell out with their mother four years ago, throwing the family into further turmoil. She is pregnant and has the teenager Sammy in tow. In order to have some power in her family, Hero has stopped speaking, except sometimes to her older brother Athol. She thinks of her ordinary life as "real" life, but also has "true" life of her own imagination, as she climbs high up in the trees around a mysterious and slightly spooky house in her neighbourhood in the early mornings. One day she falls out of the trees and, dazed, meets the owner of the house, Miss Credence. She hires Hero to do her gardening, while at the same time telling her a story about "Jorinda," the bird girl, based on Grimm's fairy tale of Jorinda and Joringel. In this story, Hero features as Jorinda. Hero grows increasingly uncomfortable about the very odd Miss Credence, who Hero realizes also has both a "real" life (working in the local post shop) and a "true" life, keeping up the memory of her father who was a famous professor, and grieving the life she herself could have had as an academic high-achiever. Miss Credence makes it impossible for Hero to quit her job with her and, once Hero has entered her house, also employs her to clean and tidy her study. In there, Hero cannot help but look at an address book and deduces that some of the numbers written in it are the codes to open the gate of the property, the house door and a locked internal door.

One day, when Miss Credence would usually still be at her job in the post shop, Hero decides to open the internal door. It leads up to a

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tower room which is completely white – even the window has been painted over – and contains nothing but a bed. Chained to the bed is a young woman whom Hero recognises as Rinda, the absent daughter Miss Credence had mentioned. Rinda is unable to speak, apparently strongly intellectually disabled and disturbed by a total lack of stimulation and human contact. At this moment, Miss Credence comes home unexpectedly early, sees that Hero has discovered her secret and locks her in Rinda's room for the night. Watching Rinda scream silently, Hero realises that Rinda did not choose to stop speaking but was forced into silence. This makes her realise what an inappropriate over-reaction to her family her elective muteness is. This is the lead up to the turning point in the story: The next morning, in her fear of the completely mad Miss Credence, Hero smashes the window and calls out to Sammy for help. She is freed, Miss Credence shoots herself in the head (she survives, but spends the rest of her life in a white hospital room, in silence) and Rinda is taken care off. Hero writes down her story but decides to burn it.

Analysis

This novel mostly uses fairy tales as intertext, but it is possible to discern a light Classicism, in particular in the personal names Mahy has chosen for her characters: Many names used in the story come from the Latin. Hero and Miranda ("admirable") express the great expectations their high achieving parents are setting for their children, something both Hero and Miss Credence suffer from, each in their own way. The last name Credence means "believing" in Latin, probably hinting at Prof Credence's and Miss Credence's great belief in their academic superiority. Hilary comes from Latin "hilarious" which means "happy, cheerful", contrasting Prof. Credence's unhappiness in his great isolation. Clemens in Latin means "mild, gentle". This fits Clemence's nature which made it possible for him to be the only one who could get along with Prof. Credence. Elizabeth Knox (see "Further Reading" below) sees an allusion to "clammed up" in his name, suggesting silence, which could be telling of his and Prof. Credence's relationship as student and teacher. Jorinda's middle name Carmen ("song") is a sad reminder that she is never allowed to find her voice, Emily is derived from Latin Aemilia, reminding one of the gens Aemilia, one of the most prominent patrician families in ancient Rome. The bad wizard Nocturno's name refers to the night, fitting his dark nature and mirroring that of Miss Credence who made up this character.

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	The theme of bird-metamorphosis, based on the Jorinda and Joringel fairy tale, which Miss Credence makes into a story about Hero and herself, reminds one also of the stories of bird metamorphosis in Greek and Roman myth, where bird metamorphosis is used as punishment, usually for family crimes (cf. Philomela and Procne). This is parodied in Aristophanes' *Birds*, where characters voluntarily change into (incomplete, comical) birds and the protagonist Peisetaerus, turned bird, roasts his rebellious fellow-birds, without any divine punishment. Given that the Philomela/Procne story involves silence and silencing, a parallel with Hero's elective mutism and Rinda's forced silence is potent. "MENSA": Miss Credence speaks about her father's and her own acceptance into MENSA, an elite academic circle.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Hero(es) Metamorphosis
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Fairy tale references Other literary figures, texts and writers
Further Reading	Hale, Elizabeth and Winters, Sarah Fiona, eds., *Marvellous Codes. The Fiction of Margaret Mahy*, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2005. Hebley, Diane, *The Power of Place: Landscape in New Zealand Children's Fiction 1970–1989*. Dunedin: Otago University Press, 1998. Knox, Elizabeth, *Margaret Mahy's The Other Side of Silence*, 2012, elizabethknox.com (accessed: August 2, 2018).
Addenda	Mahy is a New Zeland writer, though many of her books were first

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published overseas.

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