Praise for *Dæmon Voices*

'Pullman is eloquent on the craft and power of storytelling' *Observer*

'As if I'm sneaking into a year of lectures and classes with one of the masters of this art… Pullman shares advice, secrets, thoughts in such a down-to-earth, friendly manner, it almost makes me want to weep' *Guardian* Best Books of 2017

'Luminously written' *Times Literary Supplement*

'A gold mine… So much richness is to be found in this collection… Humane, wise and immensely readable, *Dæmon Voices* is a fascinating tour of Pullman's teeming imagination and an inestimable illumination of the writing life' *Financial Times*

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'Pullman is as fine a thinker as he is a storyteller… abundant wisdom, provocative notions, and illuminating insights' *Kirkus starred review* (US)

'This very impressive collection of essays, lectures and reviews…distils the thoughts on storytelling of one of our great storytellers' *Children's Books History Society*

Praise for Philip Pullman

Winner of the Carnegie Medal (1996, 2007)

Winner of the Carnegie of Carnegies Award (2007)

Winner of the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize (1996)

Winner of the Costa Book of the Year Award (2001)

Winner of the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award (2005)

British Book Awards' Author of the Year (2018)

Winner of the JM Barrie Lifetime Achievement Award (2019)

'Philip Pullman's trilogy, *His Dark Materials*, is one the best works written in English in my lifetime' *Spectator*

'The importance of Philip Pullman to the cause of reading cannot be overstated' James Daunt

'Time and again… he brings small scenes alive with a perfect ordering of description, action and dialogue' *New York Times*

'Everything he has to write is worth reading' *Telegraph*

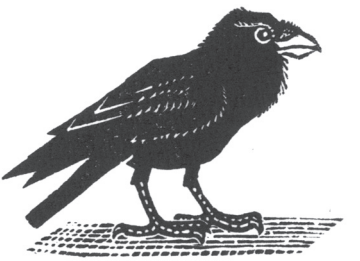
'He is a master storyteller' *Evening Standard*

'Philip Pullman's fictional universe blazes with vitality' *The Times*

'[*His Dark Materials* is] an exhilarating and poetic mixture of adventure, philosophy, myth and religion' *Guardian*

'[*La Belle Sauvage* is] thrillingly entertaining and beautifully written' *Independent*

DÆMON VOICES



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Selected Works by Philip Pullman

The Book of Dust **trilogy**	*La Belle Sauvage* *The Secret Commonwealth*
His Dark Materials **trilogy**	*Northern Lights* *The Subtle Knife* *The Amber Spyglass*
His Dark Materials **companion books**	*Lyra's Oxford* *Once Upon a Time in the North* *Serpentine*
The Sally Lockhart quartet	*The Ruby in the Smoke* *The Shadow in the North* *The Tiger in the Well* *The Tin Princess*
Other books	*The Haunted Storm* *Galatea* *Count Karlstein* *How to be Cool* *Spring-Heeled Jack* *The Broken Bridge* *The Wonderful Story of Aladdin and the Enchanted Lamp* *Clockwork, or, All Wound Up* *The Firework-Maker's Daughter* *Mossycoat* *The Butterfly Tattoo* *I was a Rat! or The Scarlet Slippers* *Puss in Boots: The Adventures of That Most Enterprising Feline* *The Scarecrow and his Servant* *The Adventures of the New Cut Gang* *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* *Grimm Tales: For Young and Old*
Graphic novels	*Count Karlstein* *The Adventures of John Blake*

PHILIP PULLMAN

DÆMON VOICES

ON STORIES AND STORYTELLING



edited by

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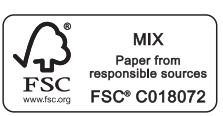
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To Michael and Clare





Magic Carpets

THE WRITER'S RESPONSIBILITIES

On the various sorts of responsibility incumbent on an author: to himself and his family, to language, to his audience, to truth, and to his story itself

Thank you for inviting me to talk to this conference. I've been racking my brains to think of a way of addressing your theme of magic carpets and international perspectives, because I think one should at least try, and I've come to the conclusion that although I'm not going to say anything directly about that, what I do have to say is as true as I can make it. I'm going to talk about responsibility.

And responsibility is a subject I've been thinking about a lot recently, because it has a bearing on the way the world is going, and on whether or not our profession, our art or craft, has anything to contribute to the continual struggle to make the world a better place; or whether what we do is, in the last analysis, trivial and irrelevant. Of course, there are several views about the relationship between art and the world, with at one end of the spectrum the Soviet idea that the writer is the engineer of human souls, that art has a social function and had better damn well produce what the state needs, and at the other end the declaration of Oscar Wilde that there is no such thing as a good book or a bad book; books are well written or badly written, that is all; and all art is quite useless. However, it's notable that the book in which he wrote those words as a preface, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, is one of the most moral stories that was ever written, so even Saint Oscar admitted with part of himself that art does have a social and ethical function.

Anyway, I take it that art, literature, children's literature, do *not* exist

in an ivory tower; I take it that we're inextricably part of the world, the whole world; and that we have several kinds of responsibility that follow from that.

So that's what I'm going to talk about briefly this evening – the responsibility of the storyteller – and how far it extends, and what directions it extends in, and where it stops.

The first responsibility to talk about is a social and financial one: the sort of responsibility we share with many other citizens – the need to look after our families and those who depend on us. People of my age will probably remember that wonderfully terrifying advertisement they used to have for Pearl Assurance. It told a little story which I used to read all the way through every time I saw it. When many years later I learned the meaning of the word 'catharsis', I realised what it was that I'd been feeling as I read that little story: I had been purged by pity and terror.

The advertisement consisted of five drawings of a man's face. The first was labelled 'At age 25', and it showed a bright-eyed, healthy, optimistic young fellow, full of pep and vigour, with a speech balloon saying 'They tell me the job doesn't carry a pension.'

Each succeeding drawing showed him ten years older, and the speech balloons changed with each one. At forty-five, for example, he was looking sombre and lined and heavy with responsibility, and saying 'Unfortunately, the job is not pensionable.' It ended with him at sixty-five: wrinkled, haggard, wild-eyed, a broken-down old man staring into the very abyss of poverty and decrepitude, and saying, 'Without a pension *I really don't know what I shall do!*'

Well, I'm not going to sell you a pension. I'm just going to say that we should all insist that we're properly paid for what we do. We should sell our work for as much as we can decently get for it, and we shouldn't be embarrassed about it. Some tender and sentimental people – especially young people – are rather shocked when I tell them that I write books to make money, and I want to make a lot, if I can.

When we start writing books we're all poor; we all have to do another job in the daytime and write at night; and, frankly, it's not as romantic as it seems to those who aren't doing it. Worry – constant low-level unremitting anxiety about bank statements and mortgages and bills – is not a good state of mind to write in. I've done it. It drains your energy; it distracts you; it weakens your concentration. The only good thing about being poor and obscure is the obscurity – just as the only trouble with being rich and famous is the fame.

But if we find we can make money by writing books, by telling stories, we have the *responsibility* – the responsibility to our families, and those we look after – of doing it as well and as profitably as we can. Here's a useful piece of advice to young writers: cultivate a reputation – which need have no basis in reality – but cultivate a *reputation* of being very fond of money. If the people you have to deal with think that you like the folding stuff a great deal, they'll think twice before they offer you very small amounts of it. What's more, by expecting to get paid properly for the work we do, we're helping our fellow writers in their subsequent dealings with schools, or festivals, or prisons, or whatever. I feel not a flicker of shame about declaring that I want as much money for my work as I can get. But, of course, what that money is buying, what it's for, is security, and space, and peace and quiet, and time.

The next responsibility I want to talk about is the writer's, the storyteller's, responsibility towards language. Once we become conscious of the way language works, and our relationship to it, we can't pretend to be innocent about it; it's not just something that happens to us, and over which we have no influence. If human beings can affect the climate, we can certainly affect the language, and those of us who use it professionally are responsible for looking after it. This is the sort of taking-care-of-the-tools that any good worker tries to instil in an apprentice – keeping the blades sharp, oiling the bearings, cleaning the filters.

I don't have to tell any of you the importance of having a good

dictionary, or preferably several. Every writer I know is fascinated by words, and developed the habit of looking things up at a very early age. Words change, they have a history as well as a contemporary meaning; it's worth knowing those things. We should acquire as many reference books as we have space for – old and out-of-date ones as well as new ones – and make a habit of using them, and take pride in getting things right. The internet also knows a thing or two, but I still prefer books. There's a pleasure in discharging this responsibility – of sensing that we're not sure of a particular point of grammar, for example, and in looking it up, and getting it to work properly.

Sometimes we come across people in our professional lives who think that this sort of thing doesn't matter very much, and it's silly to make a fuss about it. If only a few people recognise and object to a dangling participle, for example, and most readers don't notice and sort of get the sense anyway, why bother to get it right? Well, I discovered a very good answer to that, and it goes like this: if most people don't notice when we get it wrong, *they won't mind if we get it right.* And if we *do* get it right, we'll please the few who do know and care about these things, so everyone will be happy.

A simple example: the thing that annoys me most at the moment is the silly confusion between *may* and *might.* 'Without the code-breaking work at Bletchley Park, Britain may well have lost the Second World War,' you hear people say, as if they're not sure whether we did or not. What they mean is, 'Britain *might* well have lost the Second World War.' They should bloody well learn how to say it. Anyway, when I see someone getting that sort of thing right, I become just a little more sure that I can rely on the language they're using.

Of course, we can make our *characters* talk any way we like. It used to be one of the ways in which snobbish writers would mark the difference between characters who were to be admired and those who were to be condescended to. I think we've grown a little beyond that now; but when

a present-day writer hears the difference between 'bored with' and 'bored of', and uses it with brilliant accuracy to mark not so much a class difference as a generational one, as Neil Gaiman does in his marvellous book *Coraline*, then he's being responsible to the language in just the way I'm talking about.

As well as taking care of the words, we should take care of the expressions, the idioms. We should become attuned to our own utterances; we should install a little mental bell that rings when we're using expressions that are second-hand or blurred through too much use. We should try always to use language to illuminate, reveal and clarify rather than obscure, mislead and conceal. The language should be safe in our hands – safer than it is in those of politicians, for example; at the least, people should be able to say that we haven't left it any poorer, or clumsier, or less precise.

The aim must always be clarity. It's tempting to feel that if a passage of writing is obscure, it must be very deep. But if the water is murky, the bottom might be only an inch below the surface – you just can't tell. It's much better to write in such a way that the readers can see all the way down; but that's not the end of it, because you then have to provide interesting things down there for them to look at. Telling a story involves thinking of some interesting events, putting them in the best order to bring out the connections between them, and telling about them as clearly as we can; and if we get the last part right, we won't be able to disguise any failure with the first – which is actually the most difficult, and the most important.

When it comes to imaginative language, to rich and inventive imagery, we have to beware. But what we have to beware of is too much caution. We must never say to ourselves: 'That's a good image – very clever; too clever for this book, though – save it up for something important.' Someone who never did that, someone who put the best of his imagination into everything he wrote, was the great Leon Garfield.

Here's a passage from one of my favourites among his books, *The Pleasure Garden* (1976):

> Mrs Bray was the proprietress of the Mulberry Garden… Although a widow for seven years, she still wore black, which lent her bulk a certain mystery; sometimes it was hard to see where she ended and the night began. Dr Dormann, standing beside her, looked thinner than ever, really no more than a mere slice of a man who might have come off Mrs Bray in a carelessly slammed door.

There's fast-food language, and there's caviar language; one of the things we adults need to do for children is to introduce them to the pleasures of the subtle and the complex. One way to do that, of course, is to let them see us enjoying it, and then forbid them to touch it, on the grounds that it's too grown-up for them, their minds aren't ready to cope with it, it's too strong, it'll drive them mad with strange and uncontrollable desires. If that doesn't make them want to try it, nothing will.

Next in my list of responsibilities comes honesty – emotional honesty. We should never try to draw on emotional credit to which our story is not entitled. A few years ago, I read a novel – a pretty undistinguished family story – which, in an attempt to wring tears from the reader, quite gratuitously introduced a Holocaust theme. The theme had nothing to do with the story – it was there for one purpose only, which was to force a particular response and then graft it onto the book. An emotional response from the reader is a precious thing – it's the reader's gift to us, in a way; they should be able to trust the stimulus that provokes it. It's perfectly possible – difficult, but possible – to write an honest story about the Holocaust, or about slavery, or about any of the other terrible things that human beings have done to one another, but that was a dishonest one. Stories should earn their own tears and not pilfer them from elsewhere.

When it comes to the sheer craft of depicting things, describing them, saying what happened, the film director and playwright David Mamet said something very interesting. He said that the basic storytelling question is: 'Where do I put the camera?'

Thinking about that fascinating, that fathomlessly interesting, question is part of our responsibility towards the craft. Taking cinematography as a metaphor for storytelling, and realising that around every subject there are 360 degrees of space, and an infinity of positions from very close to very far, from very low to very high, at which you can put that camera – then it seems that the *great* director, the great storyteller, knows immediately and without thinking what the best position is, and goes there unhesitatingly. They seem to see it as clearly as we can see that leaves are green.

A good director will choose one of the half-dozen best positions. A bad director won't know, and will move the camera about, fidgeting with the angles, trying all sorts of tricky shots or fancy ways of telling the story, and forgetting that the function of the camera is not to draw attention to itself, but to show something else – the subject – with as much clarity as it can manage.

But actually, the truth is that great directors only *seem* as if they know the best place at once. The notebooks of great writers and composers are full of hesitations and mistakes and crossings-out; perhaps the real difference is that they *keep on* till they've found the best place to put the camera. The responsibility of those of us who are neither very good nor very bad is to imitate the best, to look closely at what they do and try to emulate it, to take the greatest as our models.

What I want to say next has to do with an attitude I suppose one could call tact. I mean that we who tell stories should be modest about the job, and not assume that just because the reader is interested in the story, they're interested in who's telling it. A storyteller should be invisible, as far as I'm concerned; and the best way to make sure of that is to make the story itself so interesting that the teller just… disappears. When

I was in the business of helping students to become teachers, I used to urge them to tell stories in the classroom – not read them from a book, but get out and tell them, face to face, with nothing to hide behind. The students were very nervous until they tried it. They thought that under the pressure of all those wide-open eyes, they'd melt into a puddle of self-consciousness. But the brave ones tried it, and they always came back next week and reported with amazement that it worked, they could do it. What was happening was that the children were gazing, not at the storyteller, but at the story she was telling. The teller had become invisible, and the story worked much more effectively as a result.

Of course, you have to find a good story in the first place, but we can all do that. There are thousands of good stories in the world, and it's perfectly possible for every young teacher to acquire three dozen or so and to know them well enough to tell them all, once a week, throughout a school year. Responsibility again: I salute all those who gather folk tales and give them back to us. Jane Yolen's marvellous *Favorite Folktales from Around the World* is a splendid example of this. So are the collections made by Alan Garner, by Kevin Crossley-Holland, by Neil Philip, by Katharine Briggs. The oral traditions of storytelling once seemed to be on the verge of dying out, but they didn't die; they're being kept alive by new generations of storytellers. And many of those who tell stories these days get their stories not from Granny or from Old Bob down in the Red Lion, but from books, because that's where they'll find them.

And there's nothing exclusive about stories, nothing snobbish, nothing stand-offish. They make themselves at home anywhere. Nowadays a storyteller in Ireland can learn Australian stories, an African storyteller can tell Indonesian stories, a storyteller in Poland can tell Inuit stories. Should we storytellers make sure we pass on the experience of our own culture? Yes, of course. It's one of our prime duties. But should we *only* tell stories that reflect our own background? Should we refrain from telling stories that originated elsewhere, on the grounds that we don't have the

right to annex the experience of others? Absolutely not. A culture that never encounters any others becomes first inward-looking, and then stagnant, and then rotten. We are responsible – there's that word again – for bringing fresh streams of story into our own cultures from all over the world, and welcoming experience from every quarter, and offering our own experience in return.

And as I say, invisibility is important here. When it comes to actually putting the story across, the best storytellers are the tactful ones, those who don't burden the audience with their own self-consciousness, whether it's just plain nervousness at speaking in public or a complex intellectual post-modernist angst about the unreliability of signifiers and the slippery nature of the relationship between text and utterance. Whatever it is, we should put all that aside and try to say what happened, and who did what, and what happened next. That's all. The way to deal with feeling self-conscious is to pretend that we don't. Don't let's burden other people with our own embarrassment. That's what I mean by responsibility here: it's a form of tact. It helps us remember to be courteous to our readers and listeners.

And that leads me to the next thing I want to talk about, which is the matter of responsibility to the audience. Knowing that our readership includes children – notice, I don't say *consists of children*, because every children's book is also read by adults – but knowing that there are children reading us, what should our attitude be? Where does our responsibility lie?

Some commentators – not very well-informed ones, but they have quite loud voices – say that children's books shouldn't deal with matters like sex and drugs, with violence, or homosexuality, or abortion, or child abuse. Taboos do change over time: only a couple of generations ago, it was rare to find a children's book that confronted divorce. Against that, I've heard it said that children should be able to find in a children's book anything that they might realistically encounter in life. Children do know about these things: they talk about them, they ask questions about them,

they meet some of them, sometimes, at home; shouldn't they be able to read about them in stories?

My feeling is that whatever we depict in our stories, we should show that actions have consequences. An example of this came up with Melvin Burgess's Carnegie Medal-winning novel *Junk* (1998). The predictable journalists said the predictable things, and the book created a storm of controversy. I defended Burgess on the grounds that in this book, he shows exactly the sort of responsibility that I'm talking about. It's a profoundly moral story, because it shows that temptation is truly tempting, and – as I said – that actions have consequences.

There are other kinds of responsibility to the audience too. Some writers feel that they shouldn't take too bleak a view of the world, that however dark and gloomy the story they're telling, they should always leave the reader with a glimpse of hope. I think that has something to be said for it, but we should remember that tragedy is uplifting too, if it shows the human spirit at its finest. 'The true aim of writing,' said Samuel Johnson, 'is to enable the reader better to enjoy life, or better to endure it.' Children need both those kinds of help, just as grown-ups do.

What's true about our responsibility towards depicting life in general is true of our responsibility when it comes to depicting people. There's a sentence I saw not long ago from Walter Savage Landor, which is the best definition of this sort of responsibility I've ever seen: 'We must not indulge in unfavourable views of mankind, since by doing it we make bad men believe that they are no worse than others, and we teach the good that they are good in vain.' Easy cynicism is no more truthful than easy optimism, though it seems to be so to the young.

So in depicting characters who struggle to do good, and do it, or who are tempted to be weak or greedy, but refrain, we the storytellers are providing our readers with friends whose own good behaviour, and whose high valuation of the courage or steadfastness or generosity of others, provides an image of how to behave well; and thus, we hope, we

leave the world at least no worse than we found it.

But what about our responsibility to our readers in a more simple and basic sense? They write to us – many, many of them write. Should we respond to them all? I don't think there's any doubt in the mind of the writer who receives the first fan letter they've ever got. Of course they respond. It's wonderful! Someone out there loves me! But as you become better known, the number creeps up and creeps up, and you find yourself spending more and more time sending every individual child a reply. Should you carry on responding in the same sort of way, no matter how many of them write, no matter how much time it takes up?

It's difficult. The contact between the storyteller and the reader is a very close and personal one – more so from the reader's side, because they know both who they are and who I am, whereas I only know who I am. But there's no frustration quite as baffling as that felt by the writer who receives a wonderful letter from a child who's forgotten to enclose his or her address. They long for a reply – they deserve a reply – I *want* to reply – they'll think I'm mean and arrogant if I *don't* reply…

But what can we do about it? Well, not all that long ago, there was nothing we could do. But I had a delightful letter recently from a child somewhere in America who told me all about herself, how she loved my books, how she played the violin, and so on; but the publisher had forwarded it without including the envelope, and there was no address. My son suggested we try Google, so we typed in the child's name and presently there it was – I almost felt it should have been announced with the words 'Lo and behold' – a school in Pennsylvania was presenting a concert featuring a violin solo by… and there was her name. Amazing! So at least I could write to her, care of the school, and I did.

But it does take time, and as our books reach more and more readers, our time gets more and more eaten into. I don't mind spending a few minutes searching for things like that, while I can still manage to do so; but I'm less conscientious, shall we say, about the letters that say, 'I had

to do this book report and we had to write to an author and I picked you because no one else did. You have to send me a reply or I will get a bad grade also can I have a photograph and a signed copy of your book *The Golden Spyglass* here are my questions. Where do you get your ideas from? What is your favourite colour? Do you have any pets? What is a spyglass?' And there was a good one recently from a boy who said, 'We have been studying obituaries in school and we have to write the obituary of someone famous and I would like to do you. Could you tell me how you would like to die and can you make it as dramatic as possible?' I told him that I would prefer to let nature take its course. They all do get a reply, eventually, but it takes time.

Almost the last in my list of responsibilities is this: we have to pay attention to what our imagination feels comfortable doing. In my own case, for reasons too deeply buried to be dug up, I have long felt that realism is a higher mode than fantasy; but when I try to write realistically, I move in boots of lead. However, as soon as the idea comes to me, for example, of little people with poison spurs who ride on dragonflies, the lead boots fall away and I feel wings at my heels. For many reasons (which, as I say, are beyond the reach of disinterment) I may regret this tendency of my imagination, but I can't deny it. Sometimes our nature speaks more wisely than our convictions, and we'll only work well if we listen to what it says.

But now I come to the most important responsibility of all. It's the one that's hardest to explain, but also the one I feel most strongly about. The last responsibility I want to look at is one that every storyteller has to acknowledge, and it's a responsibility that trumps every other. It's a responsibility to the story itself. I first became conscious of this when I noticed that I'd developed the habit of hunching my shoulders to protect my work from prying eyes. There are various equivalents of the hunched shoulder and the encircling arm: if we're working on the computer, for example, we tend to keep a lot of empty space at the foot of the piece, so

that if anyone comes into the room we can immediately press that key that takes us to the end of the file, and show nothing but a blank screen. We're protecting it. There's something fragile there, something fugitive, which shows itself only to us, because it trusts us to maintain it in this half-resolved, half-unformed condition without exposing it to the harsh light of someone else's scrutiny, because a stranger's gaze would either make it flee altogether or fix it for good in a state that might not be what it wanted to become.

So we have a protective responsibility: the role of a guardian, almost a parent. It feels as if the story – before it's even taken the form of words, before it has any characters or any incidents clearly revealed, when it's just a thought, just the most evanescent little wisp of a thing – as if it's come to us and knocked at our door, or just been left on our doorstep. Of course we have to look after it. What else could we do?

What I seem to be saying here, rather against my will, is that stories come from somewhere else. It's hard to rationalise this, because I don't believe in a somewhere else; there ain't no elsewhere, is what I believe. *Here* is all there is. It certainly *feels* as if the story comes to me, but perhaps it comes *from* me, from my unconscious mind – I just don't know; and it wouldn't make any difference to the responsibility either way. I still have to look after it. I still have to protect it from interference while it becomes sure of itself and settles on the form it wants.

Yes, *it* wants. It knows very firmly what it wants to be, even though it isn't very articulate yet. It'll go easily in *this* direction and very firmly resist going in *that*, but I won't know why; I just have to shrug and say, 'OK – you're the boss.' And this is the point where responsibility takes the form of service. Not servitude; not shameful toil mercilessly exacted; but service, freely and fairly entered into. This service is a voluntary and honourable thing: when I say I am the servant of the story, I say it with pride.

And as the servant, I have to do what a good servant should. I have

to be ready to attend to my work at regular hours. I have to anticipate where the story wants to go, and find out what can make the progress easier – by doing research, that is to say: by spending time in libraries, by going to talk to people, by finding things out. I have to keep myself sober during working hours; I have to stay in good health. I have to avoid taking on too many other engagements: no man can serve two masters. I have to keep the story's counsel: there are secrets between us, and it would be the grossest breach of confidence to give them away. (I sometimes think that the only way I could survive a creative writing class would be to write two stories – a fake one which I'd bring out to share with the class and be critiqued, and a real one which I'd work on in silence and keep to myself).

And I have to be prepared for a certain wilfulness and eccentricity in my employer – all the classic master-and-servant stories, after all, depict the master as the crazy one who's blown here and there by the winds of impulse or passion, and the servant as the matter-of-fact anchor of common sense; and I have too much regard for the classic stories to go against a pattern as successful as that. So, as I say, I have to expect a degree of craziness in the story.

'No, master! Those are windmills, not giants!'

'Windmills? Nonsense – they're giants, I tell you! But don't worry – I'll deal with them.'

'As you say, master – giants they are, by all means.'

No matter how foolish it seems, the story knows best.

And finally, as the faithful servant, I have to know when to let the story out of my hands; but I have to be very careful about the other hands I put it into. My stories have always been lucky in their editors – or perhaps, since I'm claiming responsibility here, they've been lucky they had me to guide them to the right ones. I suppose one's last and most responsible act as the servant of the story is to know when one can do no more, and when it's time to admit that someone else's eyes might see it more clearly.

To become so grand that you refuse to let your work be edited – and we can all think of a few writers who got to that point – is to be a bad servant, not a good one. Well, that's all I know about responsibility.

But I haven't quite finished, because I don't want anyone to think that responsibility is all there is to it. It would be a burdensome life, if the only relation we had with our work was one of duty and care. The fact is that I love my work. There is no joy comparable to the thrill that accompanies a new idea, one that we know is full of promise and possibility – unless it's the joy that comes when, after a long period of reflection and bafflement, of frustration and difficulty, we suddenly see the way through to the solution; or the delight when one of our characters suddenly says something far too witty for us to have thought of ourselves; or the slow, steady pleasure that comes from the regular accumulation of pages written; or the honest satisfaction that rewards work done well – a turn in the story deftly handled, a passage of dialogue that reveals character as well as advancing the story, a pattern of imagery that unobtrusively echoes and clarifies the theme of the whole book.

These joys are profound and long-lasting. And there is a joy too in responsibility itself – in the knowledge that what we're doing on earth, while we live, is being done to the best of our ability, and in the light of everything we know about what is good and true. Art, whatever kind of art it is, is like the mysterious music described in the words of the greatest writer of all, the 'sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not'. To bear the responsibility of giving delight and hurting not is one of the greatest privileges a human being can have, and I ask nothing more than the chance to go on being responsible for it till the end of my days.

This talk was given at the Society of Authors Children's Writers and Illustrators Group conference, Leeds, September 2002.

There are other responsibilities, of course. In the years since I wrote this piece, the world of bookselling and publishing has changed enormously, and if I were giving this talk today I'd certainly say something about the need to preserve the best aspects of publishing (close editorial attention, the preservation of a midlist and a backlist, a mutual respect and understanding of common interest between author and publisher) and of bookselling (the knowledge and enthusiasm of individual booksellers, combined with the ability to exercise them free of overbearing commercial pressures towards the bland sameness of a narrow range of stock). The world of books is not a collection of random units of self-interest, but a living ecology. Or it used to be, and should be still. Whenever we can see something going on in any field where we can make a difference on the side of virtue, we have a responsibility to make it.