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The narrative framework of The Borrowers: Mary Norton and Emily Bronte

It is exactly thirty years ago that Mary Norton, with two mediocre stories behind her, produced one of the most inventive and compelling books ever written for children. There is no need to apologise for those three decades. While some of its contemporaries and predecessors have aged visibly, one or two of their old qualities, if they are lucky, showing through, like 'good bones', The Borrowers remains vigorous. Its strength lies in its basic idea: original, but with traditional echoes; its refusal to be 'twee', anchoring fantasy firmly to reality; the sureness of its characterisation; and, finally—going back to bones—the structure of the story itself. It is Mary Norton's gift as a storyteller, perhaps more than any other quality, that makes The Borrowers a gripping, even a haunting book.

We come to the story indirectly, through the intervention of more than one narrator. Mary Norton has constructed a framework around her basic story. The book opens some time after the main events take place, and the outcome is not made explicit. Such devices serve two purposes: they whet our appetites, and they lend the story a quality of truth and seriousness that keeps it from degenerating into whimsy. There is nothing new in this method of telling a story. Ghost stories, the most obvious examples of fantastic tales which depend for their effect on an involuntary suspension of disbelief, have made abundant use of it. It has won the competent storyteller an audience, and has given the good one a chance to tantalise
his or her readers. In Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, for example, we are invited to speculate about the narrator's possible motives for lying, just as we are in the case of the unnamed boy in *The Borrowers*. However, it is upon the work of one writer in particular that Mary Norton, consciously or unconsciously, appears to have drawn. Absurd as it may seem at first glance to compare her with Emily Bronte, it is interesting to note how similarly the two writers have structured very different material.

*Wuthering Heights*, readers will recall, is a story on three narrative levels. It opens with a visit by Lockwood, writing in the first person, to an old house whose inhabitants arouse his curiosity. The mystery is finally explained to him, on his return home, by his housekeeper, Mrs. Dean, who knows the Heights and its occupants. She now takes over the narrative. Compare this opening with the first chapter of *The Borrowers*, in which Kate hears of Pod, Homily, and Arrietty from Mrs. May. Even the circumstances of Lockwood's and Kate's hearing the respective stories are the same: each sits, idle and curious, by a fire, while Mrs. Dean and Mrs. May busy themselves with needlework.

Mrs. May, indeed, could be a descendant of Ellen Dean. The latter, in Lockwood's words, 'a worthy woman', in her own, 'a steady, reasonable kind of body', is the perfect narrator for such a wild and unlikely story as *Wuthering Heights*, her quiet good sense counterpointing its violence and obsessive passion. It is she who cares for neglected children, nurses the sick, watches over the dead. She has learned through her role in life; she tells Lockwood, 'I have undergone sharp discipline, which has taught me wisdom.' Mrs. May, similarly, is a sensible, down-to-earth woman, whose quiet authority the rebellious Kate recognises: "...she was—not strict exactly, but she had that inner certainty which does instead. Kate was never "wild" with Mrs. May, nor untidy, nor self-willed."

Neither of the two women is a gossip; they both have to be coaxed into telling what they know—a handy device for increasing our eagerness to hear it. Both authors make clever use of their characters to whet our appetites further, by allowing them to interrupt themselves. Ellen Dean, after sowing the seeds of her story, breaks off with a characteristic apology for