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Landscapes: ‘Going foreign’ in Arthur Ransome’s *Peter Duck*

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Literature...reminds us that we understand, create and experience not only the world around us but also the world of our dreams, desires and fears, in terms of the very language we learn to articulate.1

One can gain a powerful insight into a culture’s sense of identity precisely through its fantasies of ‘Otherness’, rather than simply those of ‘Home’. Identities of place are formed through a constant process of negotiation between fantasies of Self and Other, of Home and Away, of Here and There. Who we think we are is inextricably connected to who we think we are not. How we imagine where we are is directly related to how we imagine other places.2

In much children’s literature criticism, there is an idea that place or location is important to children’s literature. These places and locations are then often discussed as either part of a familiar and recognizable landscape, or as part of existing but strange and new places. In this chapter I argue instead that in texts notions of ‘the real’ and ‘the fantastic’, of the ‘exotic’, and of ‘home’ and the ‘foreign’, and by extension of ‘the child’ are very precisely ideas, not self-evident fact. Furthermore, I argue that these ideas are produced in a constant and never-ending process of negotiation, using each other to define themselves and vice versa. I use Arthur Ransome’s novel *Peter Duck* as an example and, critiquing some of the ways this text has been positioned in the past, hope to demonstrate how *Peter Duck* is engaged in this process of negotiation, producing one place in relation to another, offering multiple ways of reading landscape and ‘home’. Along the way, I also try to demonstrate the problems with claims of any kind that children’s literature and its language offer a simplicity or transparency that somehow provides a direct view of a world just as it is.

Of the 12 texts going under the name of the ‘Swallows and Amazons’ series, three have been termed as ‘fantasies’: *Peter Duck, Missee Lee* and, perhaps more contentiously, *Great Northern*.3 Peter Hunt groups the three texts
together in the ‘Fantastic Voyages’ chapter of *Approaching Arthur Ransome*, Victor Watson says that two of the texts took the protagonists ‘to distant exotic seas and involved them in adventures of a more or less fantastic nature’, while Hugh Shelley (and, following him, Christina Hardyment) describes *Peter Duck* and *Missee Lee* as ‘realistic fantasy’ rather than Ransome’s usual ‘fantastic reality’. As the term ‘fantasy’ may not appear to be one most obviously applicable to the work of Arthur Ransome, associated as it usually is with a specific genre of other worlds and supernatural events, it is notable that Peter Hunt has to explain and qualify his use of the term. It is the assumptions that seem to be at work in this explanation that provide a useful introduction to the issues I wish to discuss in this chapter as they raise a number of questions concerning not only the definitions of ‘realism’ and ‘fantasy’ as literary genres, but also the nature and status of a literary ‘series’.

Peter Hunt’s explication of his own fantasy definition begins to acknowledge some of the problems. He notes that a general definition of ‘fantasy’ as ‘something out of the ordinary’ could include all fiction, while a more narrow genre definition of ‘fantasy literature’ as to do with magic and ‘wondrous events’ would exclude the Ransome texts. He therefore suggests that ‘romance’ may be a more appropriate term. Nevertheless, he persists with a ‘fantasy’ definition, insisting that the three texts ‘deal with the shadowy area between the improbable and the impossible’. This can direct us to the problems inherent in genre criticism, where the emphasis is placed on taxonomical classification and which has little to offer those texts that do not fit neatly into one of its delineated categories. Lucie Armitt in *Theorising the Fantastic* writes that fantasy is ‘like all other literary modes, fluid, constantly overspilling the very forms it adopts, always looking, not so much for escapism but certainly to escape the constraints that critics ... inevitably impose upon it’. In the light of this, Shelley’s depiction of Ransome’s work as realistic fantasy/fantastical reality is both more interesting and useful as it acknowledges further layers and shadings between the genre extremes of ‘fantasy’ and ‘realism’. This acknowledgment in itself serves to blur the genre boundaries, and its application to Ransome suggests that the *Swallows and Amazons* texts negotiate genre and cross borders in a much more fluid and flexible way than Hunt’s terminology can provide for.

But what factors have led these particular three texts to be defined as fantasy in the first place? From my reading of the criticism it would appear that the two key factors in the definitional process are setting – the place in which the action of the text is sited – and the relationship to the rest of the series. These two elements can actually work in combination. Of the 12 books which make up the series, five are set in the Lake District, two in the Norfolk Broads and two centre around the Pin Mill and Harwich area of Suffolk. The three ‘fantasies’ each have a setting shared by none of the others in the series; respectively, an island in the Caribbean, islands off the coast of China, and a non-specified location in the Inner or Outer Hebrides.