

# **The Juxtaposition and Merging of Reality and Imaginative Play in Sylvia Cassedy's *Behind the Attic Wall* and *M.E. and Morton***

**Barbara Carman Garner, Carleton University, Ottawa (Emerita)**

How do lonely and isolated children perceive the world in which they live, and how does the real world relate to such children's imaginary worlds? For Maggie in *Behind the Attic Wall*, real and imaginary worlds interconnect and in subtle ways merge as the novel draws to a close.

## **Authorial Intention and Critical Assessments**

The parallels Sylvia Cassedy drew between her own childhood and that of her young protagonists help readers situate Maggie in the syntagmatic structure of her fiction:

On the whole I was not an unpopular kid. I had some good friends. I got invited to birthday parties. When I was eleven a boy asked me to a dance. But I felt unpopular. My good friends had better friends of their own, or seemed to,.... The boy who asked me to dance was the shortest boy in the class. I was the shortest girl. He picked me for my size.... I spent much of my time suffering. I collected hurts.... And I remembered. Not only then, but now. Except that now I don't suffer over them; I write about them. All those troubled 11- and 12-year-old girls in my novels are, in their way, recreations not of my actual childhood but how I perceived it at the time and remember those perceptions now.... I remembered all that suffering, in what can only be described as loving detail. (McDonnell)

Reviewers have praised Cassedy's achievements. Roger Sutton comments, "Without ever resorting to superficial psychologizing, Cassedy always showed a deep understanding of the imaginative obsessions behind children's most ordinary games." Kit Pearson commends her ability to write "with the inward eye of a child," and Christine McDonnell lauds her unusual treatment of her characters' imaginary worlds:

Ignoring traditional boundaries between fantasy and realism, these novels trust the reader to travel with the characters back and forth between imaginary inner worlds and concrete, everyday reality. These are not, in fact, fantasies at all. In each the child's inner world is created by her imagination to fill an emotional need, and this inner world is as real and as important as the external concrete world that she suffers through ... the children's inner worlds are developed so fully that readers, like the central characters themselves, can inhabit them and explore the interplay between these inner and outer realities. (McDonnell)

Lois Kuznets in *When Toys Come Alive* terms this interplay the "blurring of external and internal reality," arguing that the dolls in *Behind the Attic Wall* serve as "transitional objects in a transitional space" (125) and noting the "absence of any reliable support for [Maggie] other than the dolls" (125). Kuznets contends that, although Maggie's "experience with the dolls in their homelike attic surroundings is not postulated as pure psychological fantasy" (125), "Cassedy's doll books insist on some space in which external and internal reality are blurred" (128). Kuznets's critical insights reinforce McDonnell's view that all three Cassedy novels "explore the depth of children's inner lives, the intensity of their suffering, and the healing power of their imaginations."

Claudia Nelson's article, "Writing the Reader: The Literary Child in and Beyond the Book," helps us to identify how readers respond to Cassedy's characters' imaginary play by alerting us to the possibility of reading *Behind the Attic Wall* as metafiction. Adopting Gass's 1970 definition of metafiction as "self-reflexive texts," and Robyn McCallum's pronouncement that "Underlying much metafiction for children is a heightened sense of the status of fiction as an elaborate form of play, that is, a game with linguistic and narrative codes and conventions," Nelson argues that "children who read metafictional intrusion fantasies consume a model of slippages between 'fiction' and 'reality'" (226-227). Thus, it could be argued that readers' familiarity with metafictional texts facilitates their "willing suspension of disbelief" when engaging with Cassedy's novels.

### *Behind the Attic Wall*

Readers of various ages have reflected on the weirdness and the scariness of *Behind the Attic Wall* and whether the dolls in the attic are ghosts from the past who believe Maggie is the child for whom they have been waiting or simply a new dimension of her imaginary play. Their musings appear in postings on websites inviting comments on Cassedy's books. One fan confessed to reading *Behind the Attic Wall* every six months while growing up and carrying it with her whenever she moved. Several adult readers placed it among their top ten favorite childhood novels after rereading it in their 20's and 30's. One twenty-four-year-old stated that Cassedy must have relied on personal experience in developing Maggie, Lucie (*Lucie Babbidge's House*), and Mary Ella (*M. E. and Morton*). These readers' comments attest to the continuing rapport Cassedy establishes with a broad spectrum of readers.

Critical assessments and authorial intention facilitate our mapping of the ways imaginary play, role playing, and self-reflective mindscapes blend with the real world of Cassedy's young protagonists. In each novel, transitional spaces nurture the inner psyche of the main character. One of Maggie's games, caretaker, illustrates how the imaginary world prepares the child to reach out in the real world. Cassedy explains the function of this game:

Throughout the book I have emphasized the main character's need not only to be cherished, but to cherish in return—to fix, to heal, to look after, to be what she calls "caretaker"—and insofar as the story has a theme at all, it can be characterized as the power of such cherishing to alter the life of a troubled human being. As her need to cherish is fulfilled by the two dolls, Maggie develops from a withdrawn, emotionally crippled twelve-year-old, incapable of dealing with anyone except in the most hostile terms, into a girl who can for the first time sing a song, join in a game, cry over a death, and, finally, say "I love you." (McDonnell)

Maggie's games serve her in good stead when she finds herself in compromising situations. They also provide a respite from Uncle Morris's probing questions when he is delivering her to her new home. Maggie, playing a common childhood game, tries to "pick out letters of the alphabet

from storefronts and billboards, getting quickly from A to I, but it was a while before she found a J” (9). She also imagines what her great-aunts will be like and whether their house will conform to her imaginary house, exactly like the one in which she had lived with her real parents, and “in which she placed the Three Bears and Little Red Riding Hood’s grandmother and Jo, Meg, Amy, and Beth” (13), as well as all her old schoolmates when they went home for weekends. So clear is the image in Maggie’s mind of her aunts’ welcoming house, that she asks Uncle Morris to stop the car so she can throw up when she views what appears to be an institution or a prison.

### **What constitutes imaginary play?**

When Aunt Lillian gives Maggie a doll, Maggie insists, not only that she does not play with dolls, but also that she does not play “with” *anything* (41). Once she is alone in her room, she realizes she has not been completely truthful. She played solitaire. “She played games in her head. She played caretaker” (44). She summons the Backwoods Girls, five imaginary girls—(Mary, Kate, Elizabeth, Helen, and Anne, whose names she uses infrequently, but first when she is illustrating how her pen works)—girls to whom Maggie must explain everything. On one level they function as a method of exploring and cataloguing her surroundings. Like the alphabet game, they serve to take her mind off her situation. The Backwoods Girls’ responses to Maggie’s explanations of the world around her are generally limited to “Ooh, how wonderful,” but although they also ask simple questions, it is why she needs to address them that is important. They enable her to play in ways she otherwise never would.

As Maggie holds the gift doll, undresses and describes it to them, she feeds and cuddles it. One can legitimately ask what exactly constitutes “playing with” a doll. She continues to explore various rooms in the house, showing the imaginary girls the curlers whose use she illustrates by putting them in her hair, the fancy evening shoes, the ruby necklace, a green hat, and the purpose

of the bath, where she leaves the water running. As they explore the grounds, Cassidy tells us, “She was tiring of their company, and she wanted to be all alone so she could enter the shade of the white trees that seemed only hers” (59). The aunts and Uncle Morris find her there decked out in all her finery, and, once she is disciplined and back in the room she has been assigned in the house, she gradually realizes this is not a school and that “she would live in it with her two aunts and her uncle—and the Backwoods Girls, who spoke only silently, in her head” (62). As she waits to learn her fate, she takes out her deck of cards, and suddenly the Backwoods Girls reappear. In spite of her attempt to keep reality at bay with her imaginary play, aspects of the real world intervene, peopling Maggie’s mindscape with teachers’ warnings and the fear of being sent to a place her former schoolmates had called “kids’ jail.”

The real and imaginary worlds are still juxtaposed at this point. Maggie, a lonely, isolated, friendless child with a low self perception, has moved from one institution to another nine times since her parents’ deaths. Her situation affects her both physically and psychologically and influences her behavior. Her imaginary games become building blocks that not only mirror, but ultimately ameliorate, her perceived reality. She thinks she is ugly, she is never chosen for games, and classmates taunt her.

Some reviewers believe Maggie created the Backwoods Girls so that there would be someone to whom she felt superior and to whom she could say some of the nasty things that have been said to her. We learn that she summons them almost every day. They also make the transition to “playing with” the dolls in the attic easier. When Maggie discovers the “other room,” she comments: “The Backwoods Girls would love it” (160). She has previously documented her new surroundings for them, but she keeps the dolls secret from them. Gradually the “nice room” she discovers in the attic becomes “the little house with people” (165), and by the time Maggie has

something to share with her school class, the dolls have become real people whom she visits. She concludes her account to the class with “It was a good thing I came. They all need me there. I’m their caretaker, sort of” (205). The relationship she had previously had only with the Backwoods Girls, she now has with the dolls.

The Backwoods Girls, forgotten momentarily when she discovers the birches and sets out a house of sorts there with twigs dividing the rooms, are now displaced. Once she peoples her imagination with Miss Christobel, Timothy John, and Juniper, the dog, the imaginary girls’ function in her daily life is better served by the dolls who actually speak out loud and are not totally controlled by her. One day she realizes that she has not called the Backwoods Girls for a month or two (213).

How do the dolls become such an integral part of Maggie’s daily reality? Cassidy prepares her readers for this new dimension in Maggie’s life by showing us Maggie’s sense of drama as she documents her initial response to the dolls: “Maggie felt as though she had been suddenly picked out of an audience and addressed by a puppet on a stage” (157); next she thinks they may be mechanical toys that need winding and “watched as though the two dolls were puppets in a theatre” (158). Maggie superimposes her impression of the dolls on her aunts downstairs, “dusting and writing and gliding about on their silent wheels,” opening and shutting their mouths with derogatory comments about Maggie’s appearance, eating habits, and behavior. This is why she tells Miss Christobel who comments, “Now you belong” after she shakes hands with Timothy John, that she does not “belong to anything” (165). She is still a frightened and confused child, hoping to find a place where she is loved and where she can establish real relationships with others. She recognizes the make-believe aspects of the dolls’ daily rituals and lashes out at them, “You’re just a couple of old dolls.”

This first encounter with the dolls ultimately terrifies Maggie as she sees them coming towards her with their arms outstretched after her diatribe against them. She imagines being poisoned by the tip of Timothy John's cane and lying dead and forgotten in the secret attic room. She retaliates, as she had to others who threatened her in some way, by kicking. Like Carroll's Alice, she tries to control her fear by naming them as Alice did the cards just before she woke up. "You're just a couple of old dolls," Maggie reiterates and, as she reaches the top of the attic stairs, calls back, "I don't play with dolls" (178).

As Maggie's interaction with the dolls progresses, not without complications, she discovers that she is capable of fixing things, of becoming the child the dolls have waited for so long. Yet the dolls make it quite clear that she is their visitor, not someone who can live with them. Their home is a transitional space for Maggie. Yet in a mysterious way that we cannot comprehend, she is the "right" one to make their lives "quite complete" when the third doll arrives to join the attic family the day Maggie leaves.

The novel ends happily. A family with two little girls adopts Maggie, and they love her as she comes to love them. It has been a year since Maggie left the aunts' house where she had lived for nine months, and the epilogue tells us how much has changed in Maggie's life during the year she has spent with her new family.

Alice in Wonderland's comment on the world she discovers down the rabbit hole, "Curiouser and Curiouser," applies to the intertwining of real and imaginary worlds in Cassedy's novels. Maggie must move beyond the transitional space provided by her imaginary games "when the time comes to abandon them" as Kuznets postulated (125); yet Maggie, a year later, continues to cherish her time spent with the dolls and wonders what is going on in the attic room during her absence. They are a part of her life at Adelphi Hills that she keeps secret from her new sisters, as

she had from the Backwoods Girls. The narrator divulges that Maggie compares these new sisters with the “old Backwoods Girls.” “They were real, and Maggie didn’t call them dummies or tell them they were too ugly or too poor to try on her purple dress” (151), but, like the Backwoods Girls, her sisters thought “everything she did was wonderful” (151). After a year she has learned to accept their smiling faces and recently to call their parents Mother and Father (4).

In spite of Maggie’s newfound happiness, the pain and the joy Maggie has experienced in her inner and outer worlds remain as reference points not only for her, but also for many readers, just as they did for Sylvia Cassedy. Given the complexity of the interplay between the real and the imaginary realms in this novel, it is facile to conclude, as one reviewer did, that “make-believe comes true through the healing power of love” (see Appendix A).

### *M.E. and Morton*

Mary Ella’s experiences are quite different from Maggie’s, but there are parallels in the two girls’ imaginary play. Mary Ella lives with her parents, whom the writer of the CCBC Newbery discussion group terms “M.E.’s heretofore situation-paralyzed parents,” noting that “M.E.’s dramatization of twin-ness with her mildly-retarded brother Morton and their economically poor neighbor Polly” alarms them (Horning).

Mary Ella perceives that her parents scarcely notice her as a result of their concern for Morton; she craves attention, wants her special qualities to be noticed, and needs to be part of a family like the one she imagines for the rabbit family in the egg Aunt Sophia gave her one Easter. Mary Ella turns her now dead Aunt Sophia into the sort of companion the Backwoods Girls became for Maggie. She says, “Sometimes I pretend that she’s with me when I walk down the street, and I show her things that have changed” (203). Her response, like that of the Backwoods Girls, is brief: “Imagine that,” or “Who would have thought?” Mary Ella knows her aunt would be

surprised at the changes in her when she starts to imitate her brother Morton but remarks, “My mother didn’t seem to mind or even to notice” (205).

M.E. initially considers Polly, who later befriends Morton and M.E., to be someone she can guide. She imagines that Polly is foreign and can’t speak English and that she teaches her the names of things. Like Maggie, M.E. wants to be a caregiver. She creates 24 orphan girls out of the bottles in the paint set she had been given two Christmases ago. In her imaginary game, they go to school and engage in activities similar to those at Agnes Daly, the private school she attends for gifted children. There are a few exceptions, such as banging their heads together to discipline them or taking them to visit the poor children who are the marbles on her Chinese checkerboard. This game mirrors Mary Ella’s school routine, but in the game she is head mistress and not a pupil. Polly sees the bottles of paint and wants to paint with them. This proves a traumatic experience for M.E. who confesses, “They were my orphan girls, and I loved them more than I loved anything in my whole life. More, even, than the Easter egg” (72).

It is Aunt Sophia who prompts Mary Ella to invent the game of Easter egg. She tells M.E. that the egg is magic and that the father rabbit she sees in the egg when she holds it to her eye has “Bunny Money” in his pocket. That evening Mary Ella pretends that her room is the inside of the egg, and she imagines a giant girl putting her eye to the slats of the window shade and watching her. She, like Mary Ella, will be fascinated by what she sees, the father, mother, and child rabbit sitting around a table painting wooden eggs. Time for the egg family, like time in the “other room” of Maggie’s encounters with the dolls, stands still, for it is always Easter Day, and the activity is always the same. That is until the evening of M.E.’s meeting Polly when she dresses like Polly, complete with a band-aid stuck on her forehead, and twirls wildly in an interpretive dance for the giant girl she imagines peering through her window.

The way imaginary games function in these two novels is much more complex than the discussion thus far suggests. Games in each book are displaced, only to be reinstated in times of need. The Easter egg game comes true, but not in the way M.E. expects with the removal of her brother Morton to make her an only child. She and her parents sit in the hospital waiting room, around a table, and each night the father purchases a bag of M&M's from the vending machine. The three of them resemble the family in the egg, and the room with its wall posters even resembles the room in the egg, but M.E. is left alone each evening to eat the "eggs" while her parents visit Morton who is allowed only two visitors at a time. When her mother speaks to Morton about coming back home while he is still in a coma, M.E. thinks, "We were going to be a family, like the one in the egg, except the child rabbit would now have a brother. If he woke up" (293).

This novel also ends happily. *M.E. and Morton* covers the period from June to September in Mary Ella's life, but September brings her new friends at school, and by then her parents' attitude to Morton has changed. M.E. can now be proud of him, and she realizes that she should have loved him all along, instead of just feeling sorry for him.

Whether we consider Polly as the catalyst of the change in Mary Ella depends on how we read Polly's craziness and unthinking actions. In many ways she is just as selfish as Mary Ella and does not treat her grandmother well. She has a very literal mind and lacks the ability to grasp things logically. The quirkiness of her mind seems to enable her to interact with Morton in a way Mary Ella cannot. Yet when M.E. asks Polly whether she will miss Morton when she goes away, she answers, "I never miss anybody" (249). Polly seems unable to understand what friendship entails.

Morton is more socially adept than Polly and worries about Mary Ella's becoming more like

him, walking the way he does, keeping her head down on her chest, refusing to wipe her nose, spilling her milk, and wearing his old clothes. It is only when Mary Ella pretends to forget her Mother's birthday, even though Morton has reminded her, that her mother acts out of character. When she realizes that the card is from Mary Ella and the present from Morton, and not the other way round as it usually is, she assumes the role of the imaginary mother in the Easter egg: "It's just lovely!" she said, at last sounding like the mother rabbit in the egg. "'Lovely' she said, for the first time ever, but she said it because she was sorry for me, because she thought I had forgotten her birthday and had made the card in a hurry. Not because the card was lovely at all; it was terrible" (210).

How does Polly and Morton's imaginary play differ from M.E's? At least one reviewer argues that Polly's imaginary games are far healthier than Mary Ella's. I would disagree and argue that she is in need of a caregiver, someone to nurture her. Mary Ella does love her, partly for removing some of her fears concerning the possible converging of reality and the imaginary games she plays. Ever since her grade three friend Wanda told her that "If you play something bad it will come true" (5), she has feared that this is so. Polly allays that fear by telling her, "Things just happen, no matter what" (281). M.E. finally believes Polly is magic in the way she draws Morton back to the world of reality by telling M.E. to place the little coal car she has repaired in his hand. Even the nurses believe magic was at work in Morton's hospital room.

Morton, Mary Ella, and Polly all play imaginary games, and although some games that Polly and Morton play seem stupid and childish to Mary Ella, she appreciates the way friends bond when they play games together. The conclusions of the reviewer of these books for the *St. James Guide to Children's Writers*, however, are based on faulty premises. It is Morton, not Polly, who first suggests they board his electric train, saying, "You could grow down to be small ... I could be the

conductor. I could get small, too, and wear a blue uniform with a cap to put on my head” (101-102). And later, “And we can get on it, . . . . We can get small” (142). Polly merely continues Morton’s idea by talking of “shrinking” things to take on the trip with them because she is “magic.”

Furthermore, it is Polly’s, and not M.E.’s, fantasies that are unhealthy. Polly’s initiations for membership in clubs where she is the self-termed president are anything but healthy and in no way bring joy. M.E. realizes that Polly has tricked her just to have her walk the awning frame in front of her apartment building and lied to her about Morton’s initiation into another of her clubs. So upset is M.E. that she lashes out at Morton and hits him in the face with a glove she throws at him. This is the only time he has ever cried. M.E. retaliates, not out of anger at Morton, but because she is angry that Polly has played a trick on her.

Polly causes more havoc than sunshine in the lives of M.E. and Morton. One could argue that she is responsible for Morton’s fall by asking him to retrieve the coal car for her. She might also be said to fulfill the role Uncle Morris does in *Behind the Attic Wall*. She is just as evasive, defines words in her own peculiar manner, and disappears when she is most needed. As one reviewer remarks, “We learn that Polly marches to the beat of her own drummer,” yet I find it hard to subscribe to the same reviewer’s conclusion that M.E. Morton, and Polly constitute a “fun-loving threesome” (Heim).

Things work out well for M.E. as they did for Maggie. She knows her future is secure as part of a loving family, yet she is less connected to or haunted by her imaginative play than Maggie is at the end of her novel. Polly ruined M.E.’s paints, and the Easter egg game has served its purpose. Nonetheless the pain and the joy M.E. has experienced will remain as reference points in her life as they did for Maggie. M.E. now understands Polly’s kind of magic and defines it for us:

Suddenly I understood what Polly was all about. She wasn't dumb and she wasn't crazy. She was magic, just as she had always said. Not the kind of magic that can shrink things or make bugs win a race, not the wand kind either. Not that. The other kind; the kind of magic that can make things wonderful. She made the pigeon wonderful. She made Morton wonderful. Maybe she made me wonderful too. (311)

M.E. learns that sometimes the magic of everyday reality can contribute joy to life. This is a lesson that Maggie too has learned living with her new family.

The acclaim Cassedy's novels continue to receive is rooted in their complex interweaving of reality and imaginary play. Extending, as they do, beyond the confines of the physical book, they may indeed be termed metafictional texts.

## Appendix

The writer in the *St. James Guide to Children's Writers*, in comparing *Behind the Attic Wall* with *M.E. and Morton* hypothesizes:

In *M.E. and Morton*, Mary Ella—or M.E., as she prefers to call herself—also uses fantasy as a solace. In a game similar to the “Backwoods Girls,” M.E. pretends that her bottles of paints are orphans. She also deludes herself into believing that she is more popular and loved than she is. Her neighbor Polly has fantasies as well—she imagines that the bugs on her ceiling are dancing or that she can shrink herself to fit into a toy train. Unlike the unhealthy fantasies of M.E., however, Polly's inventions enable her to transfer the dull reality of her poverty-stricken life into joy. M.E.'s childlike adolescent brother Morton is a perfect companion for Polly. His slowness saves him from the guilty confusion of his sister, and he can engage with Polly in simple play. Although *M.E. and Morton* is realistic, the use of imagination in both books results in a similar “magic”: make-believe comes true through the healing power of love. (Pearson)

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