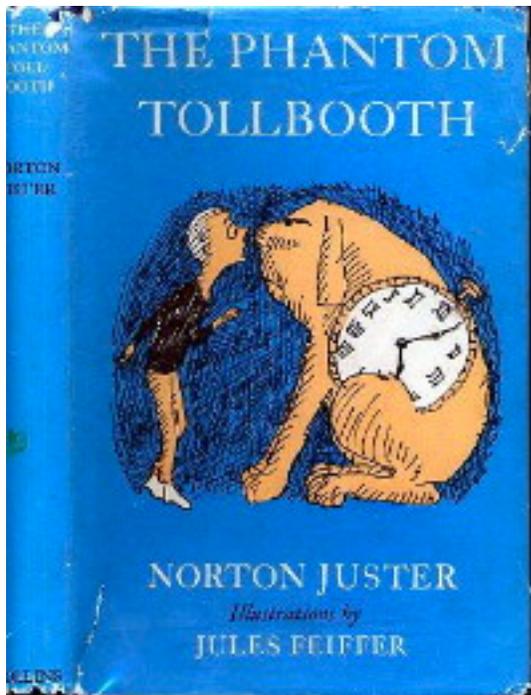




Books

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The Phantom Tollbooth Norton Juster

By **BARBARA FINKELSTEIN**

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Guest Butler Barbara Finkelstein is the author of *Summer Long-a-coming*. Her pieces for Head Butler include In Defense of Long Books and The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother.

When “The Phantom Tollbooth” was published in 1961, critics complained that children wouldn’t understand it. It’s certainly true they wouldn’t understand its “intertextual” associations, as a professor or two did, or its use as a metaphor by

computer scientists at UC San Diego, who co-authored a research paper called “The Phantom Tollbooth: Privacy-Preserving Electronic Toll Collection in the Presence of Driver Collusion.” The fact is that Norton Juster’s children’s book, illustrated by Jules Feiffer, has meant so much to so many people who encountered it in childhood that it keeps resonating with them for the rest of their lives.

I like to think that for the past fifty years, children have been doing what Maurice Sendak says they do: Read whatever they want and figure it out for themselves. God bless my parents. They were thrilled to see nine-year-old me reading “A Stone For Danny Fisher” by Harold Robbins and “Marnie” by Winston Graham because they trusted words and ideas to take up the task of educating me. I loved those books, but even more, I loved being left alone to puzzle out what

adultery was in the former and the "female criminal mind" in the latter. It took me a couple of decades, but I caught on, and critics didn't have to worry that I didn't get it.

You do have to pity critics a little. The ones who worry about so-called reader response don't fully trust people to figure things out for themselves. That's why you see them tell us that "Downton Abbey" is a British costume drama about being brought everything on a silver salver. Or that Adele's music reinforces the "values of an older generation suspicious of change." Or that Leonard Cohen "is not what he once was, but he's still got some good lines." Part of me is impressed that with 12.8 million Americans out of work, three critics are working overtime to come up with these deep thoughts — and are getting paid for them too. Why can't I get a job like that?

I digress, but that's precisely what "The Phantom Tollbooth" does. Milo, the novel's nine-year-old hero, takes a long, digressive route through terror and joy. Once he passes into the Land of Expectations, he aims to seek out an "interesting game" and be back in time for dinner. On his roundabout way home, he learns that the sister princesses, Rhyme and Reason, have been banished to the Castle in the Air for the crime of trying to reconcile art and science. He attempts during a long afternoon of childhood to restore the sisters to their rightful throne in Dictionopolis and Digitopolis. [To buy the paperback from Amazon, [click here](#). For the Kindle edition, [click here](#). To buy the DVD of the animated film, [click here](#).]

A detailed description of fantasy fiction tends to obfuscate more than intrigue, but suffice it to say that Milo befriends a dog, who is really a clock, and a humbug who endearingly says and does the wrong thing every time. The three friends pass through Foothills of Confusion and Mountains of Ignorance, where they meet the mutual enemies Azaz the Unabridged and Mathemagician. They eat a square meal, bite off more than they can chew and savor a synonym bun. "I didn't know I would have to eat my words," Milo says.

The technical term for these literary antics is Menippean satire — fiction "characterized by attacking mental attitudes instead of specific individuals" — but the genre is weirder and harder to describe than that. Menippean satire is part fantasy, like "Gulliver's Travels," and part sci-fi, like Lucian's stories about floating cities, and part juvenilia, like William Steig's "Sylvester and the Magic Pebble." Like these works, "The Phantom Tollbooth" is silly and grand. It sets out to do the arrogant and humble work of all satire: to speak truth to power. Every reader will figure out what that truth is for himself, but it helps to have a deep appreciation for the absurd.

I realize I'm doing the very thing I accuse critics of doing. I'm over-explaining, but I can't help but think this Menippean business has something to say to us. The genre is named after Menippus, a third-century Greek rhetorician and former slave. Sadly, everything Menippus ever wrote is lost to history. That tells you something about the lasting impact of his phantom work that he is remembered today, however orthogonally.

We probably don't have to worry about "The Phantom Tollbooth" vanishing in the way that Menippus' work did. We've got digitization to thank for that. But we early twenty-first-century readers might begin worrying about a certain "readerly" sensibility quashed by too much digitization, too much time spent browsing our smart gadgets, and too much faith in the search results they deliver to us.

"Search" once meant what Milo and his literary cohort took it to be: a sentimental journey through imagination. It's this capacity for unhurried exploration we stand to lose. Of all the interpretations that the critics (I among them) spout about Norton Juster's book, I hope this is one we can honor.

<http://www.headbutler.com/reviews/phantom-tollbooth/>