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Review of The Golden Key: A Victorian Fairy Tale

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George MacDonald, *The Golden Key: A Victorian Fairy Tale*, illustrated by Ruth Sanderson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016). 136 pages, including “Afterward” and “Illustrator’s Note.” \$16.00. ISBN 9780802854568.

Scottish author and clergyman George MacDonald (1824-1905) wrote in nearly every form, from sermons and poems to translations of other authors. Yet the writing he is best known for and arguably best at crafting is fantasy, works for which he was famous during his lifetime. MacDonald’s *The Golden Key: A Victorian Fairy Tale* was originally published in 1867 and has been republished several times, most recently in 2016 by Eerdmans with black-and-white scratchboard illustrations by Ruth Sanderson. Sanderson’s depiction is her artistic interpretation of the story expressed in the “Illustrator’s Note” at the end of the book, following an Afterword by Jane Yolen.² The drawings provide a detailed, engaging visual complement to the story; however, it is advisable that the reader experience the story for the first time via text only, if possible, in order to let one’s imagination create mental pictures uninfluenced by another’s lens.

Regarding fairy tales, MacDonald writes that a fairy story “cannot help having some meaning; if it have proportion and harmony it has vitality, and vitality is truth. The beauty may be plainer in it than the truth, but without the truth the beauty could not be, and the fairytale would give no delight.”³ MacDonald enjoins, “The best thing you can do for your fellow, next to rousing his conscience, is—not to give him things to think about, but to wake things up that are in him; or say, to make him think things for himself.”⁴ The purpose of fairy tales is not merely to amuse, enrapture, or teach; they can be revelatory, evoke wonder, and/or promote change.

As a means of rousing his fellow mortal’s conscience, MacDonald focuses on character transformation as his characters journey through hardships. *The Golden Key* portrays the journey of the two main characters, Mossy and Tangle. Mossy, a young boy searching for a golden key, lives “on the borders of Fairyland” (10). When Mossy sees the rainbow of

² Some additional commentary and illustration samples by Sanderson are available at the following internet source: <http://www.worksofmacdonald.com/ruth-sanderson-unlocking-wonder/>.

³ George MacDonald, “The Fantastic Imagination,” *A Dish of Orts* (BiblioBazaar, 2006), 230.

⁴ MacDonald, “The Fantastic Imagination,” 236.

Fairyland for the first time, the experience captivates him “till he forgot himself with delight—even forgot the key which he had come to seek” (18). This glimpse into the supernatural makes him aware of “beautiful forms [within the rainbow] slowly ascending as if by the steps of a winding stair,” foreshadowing the end of his quest (18). Gradually, the vision ceases with Mossy’s falling asleep and then waking up to find the golden key where the rainbow’s base had been.

Mossy later encounters Tangle, a young girl who runs away to Fairyland. They meet and journey together to learn what his golden key will unlock. On their quest, they come across “a sea of shadows” (66). Mesmerized by the mysterious beauty of the forms in the shadows, Tangle and Mossy yearn to find “the country [from] whence the shadows came” (72). They eventually lose each other in the deepening darkness and must travel on alone. The light and dark contrasts of the black-and-white illustrations throughout the text rhetorically support the symbolism, such as the shadows, of the story.

Testament to his spiritual convictions, MacDonald did not view death as void of purpose but as the entrance to an afterlife of richness and beauty of which this world is but a shadow. This theme unfolds more toward the middle and end of the fairy tale. Tangle comes upon the rainbow and falls asleep as Mossy did when he first saw it. Upon awakening, the Old Man of the Sea is waiting for her, and she asks for his help in finding the country from which the shadows fall to find Mossy. For Tangle, and later Mossy, death transfigures them to a higher consciousness and more complete life, causing them to rejoice in the transformation. After her baptism of death, Tangle meets the young and beautiful Old Man of the Earth, although older than the Old Man of the Sea. Tangle follows his guidance to find the Old Man of the Fire, who—being the wisest, youngest, yet oldest of the three men—is able to send her to the entrance of the country from which the shadows fall.

Though their journeys diverge, Mossy and Tangle are eventually reunited, and they have achieved physical and spiritual transformation. The fact that Mossy and Tangle are younger than they had ever been is a paradox (similar to the Old Men) since they aged and died along the way. Through death, one grows younger in MacDonald’s understanding of the childlike, preparing one for the eternal kingdom of Heaven in which all

God's children live with their Divine Father. As the story ends, Mossy and Tangle now are *in* the rainbow that started them on their journey, thus completely within the experience of wonder. Their lengthy journey led them to this higher, more significant journey in the company of others as they transcend earth and have gained deeper insight through their quest, death, and renewed life. Their transfiguration complete, Mossy and Tangle attain their heart's desire and journey's end.

The Golden Key stands on its own as an enjoyable story for all ages and is rich enough to offer multiple interpretations for the reader upon re-reading. There are over 40 full-page illustrations, along with several smaller ones included on pages with the text. While the drawings threaten to dominate the words at times, there appears to be a good balance between the two, though occasionally the drawings can interrupt the tale's flow by having to pause or flip past some of the pictures to return to the narrative. Overall, this affordable edition by Eerdmans is an attractive copy to add to a collection of MacDonald's works or children's books.

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K. Alan Snyder, *America Discovers C. S. Lewis: His Profound Impact* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2016). ix + 202 pages. \$27.00. ISBN 9781498298209.

A sustained fascination in C. S. Lewis is apparent not only in the success of his books but in the burgeoning number of journals and books dedicated to and written about him. The writing and the breadth of his content contribute to the ease with which authors can find “new things to talk about” in Lewis studies. The wide expanse of his corpus—scholarly criticism, popular apologetics, and fantasy fiction for both adults and children—also contributes to the variety of approaches and academic disciplines which explore aspects of Lewis's work. It may at first sound strange that a man who has only been gone from us for half a century would be pursued by a historian, but it is also refreshing to have an historian's perspective on Lewis. Approximately twenty-five biographies have been written on Lewis, and, despite the occasional claim to perfection,