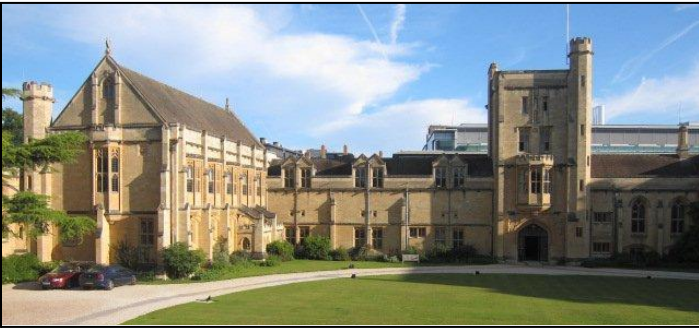


Oxford, Summer 2011

Rebecca C. Moore

Day One: Oxford



When I arrived in Oxford at the train station, I took a cab to Mansfield, the college hosting the Oxbridge program. Mansfield consists mainly of two large buildings in Cotswold gold stone facing each other across a round swath of putting-green lawn. A gravel drive encircles the lawn. One building, plainer in design and decorated with chalked oars courtesy of the crew team (chalk combined with sugar, to make it last), houses the staircases, or dorms. The other, an elaborate 19th century gothic revival, houses the dining hall,

tutors' rooms, common rooms, chapel, etc.

The first room assigned to me was in the old staircase building. The locks are massively complicated; all electronic, and controlled with little button keys you press to a metal pad on the doors. If you press for the appropriate amount of time and you're very lucky, the door will click open. If you do it wrong (which I did repeatedly), it won't. The room doors also have to be locked from the outside when you leave. The room I had was big as my living room and had a sink, but no bathroom, which I thought I'd paid for. The shower was one floor down, so had to be shared between six people, and we had to share the two toilets as well. I figured I'd misunderstood something and that no rooms had actual bathrooms, just sinks, so let it stand. Then, since I had arrived early and needed lunch, I got the porter to show me where to find a grocery store and walked into town.



Staircases. My building is the white one on the far right.

Since I had spent six weeks in Oxford in 1987 I had expected that everything would look familiar, but it really didn't at first. I knew where Trinity was, the college where I had lived, and that at least looked familiar, but Broad Street looked much more city-ish than I recalled, and colorfully crowded with people and bicycles. As I strolled around things started to look more familiar. Blackwell's bookstore, right by Trinity, was under construction and covered with scaffolding, which probably threw me off. The Sheldonian Theater did look familiar, as did Bailliol College.

I found Sainsbury's grocery store and got myself another egg and cress sandwich, but finding no public park or any place to sit, I ended up trudging back to Mansfield. There I found a bench by a small rose garden, under a tree. My staircase neighbor Lynn, from Pennsylvania, joined me and we of course talked about libraries, since she is also a librarian.

Later I went to check out the main building. The central door looks about a thousand years old, with dark oak and iron hinges, so I was startled when it opened as I approached, and there was no one behind it. It took me a minute to figure out it was electronic! I found the cultural disconnect of ancient oak and automation startling. The hall inside had a high and pale vaulted ceiling with carved bosses, and the central boss was a Green Man. The floor was dark stone slabs.



Before our welcome session, I got to talking with some of the other participants, and realized that some rooms did have bathrooms. Trying to get my room changed turned into a day-long saga, talking to porters and the program admin. She said the program director in NY claimed I hadn't paid for it, and

when I used the Nook to check, I couldn't find a confirming email. (The Nook was the only way I had to use the internet, and it only worked in one common room of the new Garden Building. Man, was it a pain to use!) I think I had just gone by my checks being cashed, and didn't have my checkbook with me. I knew I had paid for an ensuite, though.

In any case, I started meeting the other participants, most of whom were American and librarians. As it turned out, the program included two librarians from South Africa, two from Singapore, one from Vienna via Slovenia, and one in transit from Bogota to Zambia (American, though). It was a really nice group. We met in the Junior Common Room on the ground floor, a large, rather chilly room panelled in dark wood with high windows—too high to see out of. Benches lined the walls and chairs were set up on the floor with an aisle wide enough to land a plane—I'm not sure why. We met the director, Rebecca Bullard, who teaches at Reading University and is working on a book using Oxford resources. She came originally from Wales and had a delightful accent and a continual cheerfulness. She handled the program with consummate grace, and in high heels.

After our orientation, Rebecca took us on a walk through Oxford, starting with the University Gardens. These are a vast park system spreading up the Cherwell River, so we only walked through a short portion, coming out near the Pitt Rivers/Natural History Museum. It featured some marvelously complicated and enormous tree roots out in front as an installation art piece, called "Ghost Trees." It was highlighting deforestation. The museum itself is an imposing edifice, as are most old buildings in Oxford, neo-gothic and huge, with a green lawn.

We then passed Keble College, a Victorian explosion of multi-colored brick in many patterns, which is apparently



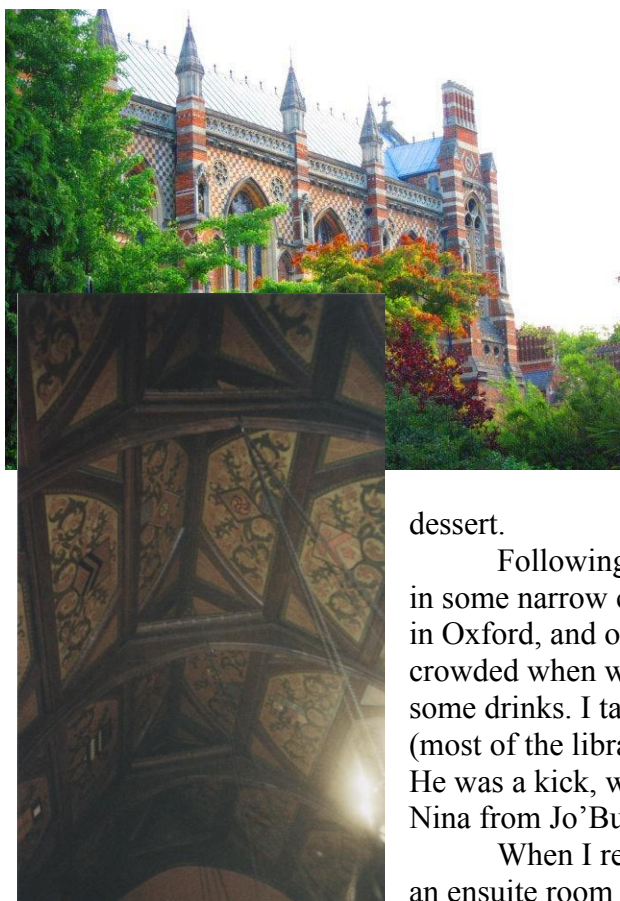
prettier on the inside. I actually liked the patterned brick, myself—perhaps I have no taste! As it turned out, the tutor for my seminar lectures at Keble. I had always thought that Keble was in some way connected to my middle name of Cabell, but she said probably not. Oh well!

Dinner took place in a long and narrow dining hall with a painted ceiling that looked like an illuminated manuscript supported by huge wooden vaulted beams, and a fireplace Harry Potter could have used for transport. The two main long tables could each hold at least forty people, and a group from GMU filled up one of them. Dinner was good; it started with a curry squash soup, just at my limit of spiciness, then beef bourguignon with mashed potatoes and vegetables, and fruit for

dessert.

Following dinner, Rebecca showed us the nearby Turf Tavern, concealed in some narrow cobbled alleyways. It's one of the oldest and most popular pubs in Oxford, and often features in the Morse/Lewis PBS series set in Oxford. It was crowded when we got there, but we managed to find some outdoor seats and get some drinks. I talked mostly to Robert, who teaches drama at Breairely in NYC (most of the librarians and teachers on the program come from private schools). He was a kick, which I'd expect from a drama teacher. I also made friends with Nina from Jo'Burg, and Julie from Chicago.

When I returned to Mansfield I had to repack all my clothes and move into an ensuite room in the Garden Building—they'd decided I could move, but if it turned out I hadn't paid for it, I would have to pay later. I was 99% sure I'd paid, so I moved and didn't worry about it. The new building, constructed in 2004, is rather institutional so lacked the character of the old

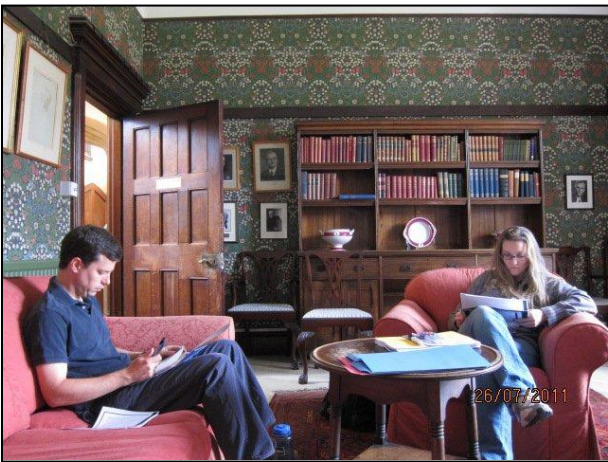


building, and I had to open three electronic locks every time I went to my room. Having a bathroom was worth it, though.

The room was a lot smaller than the one I'd first had and didn't have the lovely view across the lawn towards the main building, but it would do for a week. The bathroom was tiny and the plumbing sounded like a dying cow or a Cessna airplane engine, but it all worked and scouts cleaned it every day. The bed was unfortunately the epitome of uncomfortable—all springs—and had no blanket, but just a heavy quilt that made me too hot. I was too cold with just the sheet, though, so the following day I got a bedspread and used the quilt as padding and slept under the bedspread. Still, I didn't get much sleep that first night.

Day Two—Lewis Carroll, Oxford, Plenary Sessions, *Comedy of Errors*

The day dawned sunny and blue-sky perfect again, light streaming in my window in the morning. We ate breakfast informally in the gothic dining hall, rather crowded with two groups in college. I particularly enjoyed the toast, with real butter. Although English breakfast was always an option in the mornings, I always chose cereal instead—real muesli is a treat.



My small seminar of six, Literature and the Fantastic, had its first meeting today. We had the good luck to meet in the Tower Room, just above the front hall. It really looked like a tower room, too, with dark Morris wallpaper, stone vaulting, and a stone bay window with old leaded windows overlooking the lawn. Bookshelves full of religious books (reflecting the Nonconformist history of the college) flanked the walls, along with drawings of people connected to the college. We sat in squashy chairs, and it felt very much like Oxford.

Before the program started we received mailings with a suggested reading list of books by Oxford authors Lewis Carroll, C.S. Lewis, T.H. White, J.R.R. Tolkien, J.K. Rowling, and Philip Pullman. I had read most of the books on the list,

but re-read *Sword in the Stone*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Golden Compass*, and read for the first time one of Lewis' science fiction books, *Out of the Silent Planet*, which I enjoyed more than I'd thought.

Our tutor was Dr. Anna Caughey, lecturer at Keble in Old English, Tolkien, Anglo-Saxon, etc. She's young—maybe thirty—and came from Australia. Over the course of the week we found out that she's been in England for about six years, coming to get her doctoral degree at Christchurch, then staying on as a lecturer. She's also written books, and almost got a children's book, based on Arthurian legends, published. She's now working on another book, nonfiction, about Scottish peacemaking in Saxon times. She also DJs in her spare time. I found her charming, and she handled the group wonderfully. She listened carefully to everyone's opinions, but didn't let facile answers stand—she questioned us about our statements, but in a way that didn't make us feel wrong or stupid, just asking us to think more thoroughly about the topic from other points of view. I really enjoyed working with her and thinking more about things in an adult way. I'm used to discussing fantasy with kids, but it was refreshing to take a more intellectual look. Anna had also given us a packet of readings—literary criticism of each author—when we arrived, and while it was a pain to try to find time to read them (we were really busy), they were fascinating as well and added to the discussions.



Of all the people in the group, several were English teachers, and one other was a librarian. Beth came from Singapore, and Ted and Emily came from Landon and Bullis in the DC area. I was the only confirmed fantasy fan; the others had chosen the group to learn more about the genre, since it's popular with kids. Over the

course of our discussions I began to feel a bit like Hermione, since I have read so much fantasy and could make so many connections between books. I have a bad memory for many things, but realized I have a pretty good memory for stories, and making connections between them. Ted and the other English teachers were better at drawing deep meanings from individual stories, which I guess reflects both of our specialties. In any case, I tried to not be annoying!

Anna had drawn up somewhat of a syllabus, addressing one author each day. For the first day, we talked about Lewis Carroll and the definition of children's literature. I had found on re-reading that I didn't really like the book; Alice is not a particularly pleasant child, and the nonsense made it feel like reading someone else's dream. I also knew that the book was full of references I couldn't understand because I didn't have the necessary local and period-era knowledge, so it also made me feel unintelligent. The English teachers found more meaning in it, pointing out that Alice's interaction with the Mad Hatter and the March Hare was a bit like kids interacting with the adult world, and not understanding it and the arbitrary rules and so forth. Ditto with the size-changing potions; adolescence is a time when your body doesn't do what you expect. I never would have made those observations on my own, but even with them, I'm not fond of the book.



Tolkien's house.

Every day Anna had planned a field trip, so we walked over to Magdalen College, where Lewis lived, though the college wasn't open that early. We walked back to Holywell Street and saw the house where Tolkien had lived, not marked in any way, and then strolled on to the Pitt Rivers Museum again. The weather could not have been better—sunny and temperate—and I loved that everything in central Oxford was so old and authentic, with weathered carved stone and perfect green lawns. I found myself remembering more about my stay in 1987, and wishing I had more time to seek out old haunts.

We spent a little time in the natural history part of the museum, where Lewis Carroll took Alice Liddell, and I looked at dinosaurs and rocks and stuffed animals. Then we were free for lunch and split up; I walked down to Broad Street and ate at Blackwell's, which wasn't as interesting as it might have been since the café area's windows were blocked with plastic sheeting over the construction. I had a panini, which was too hot. Afterwards I went back to college to do the readings for the next day.

In the afternoons during the week we had plenary sessions, which for those who, like me, hadn't encountered the word before, means that the whole group attended. About half of the sessions, I'm sorry to say, were pretty dire. No teaching aids, lectures read directly from paper, incomprehensible accents, low voices, bad acoustics...I really had to struggle to stay awake in many of them, as did a lot of my colleagues. As the week went on, people kept skipping more and more. Some presentations were great, but you never knew when you'd just committed to another hour and a half of trying not to drool on yourself when you couldn't prop your eyes open any longer.

The two today were among the worst. The first was supposedly about politics and the relationship between England and America, but I can't remember a single thing of interest from it. The second was about a literary concept called 'ekphrasis' or something like that; how poets used identification of an object or person to confirm its reality. I suppose it's like making sure someone notices the tree falling in the forest, because otherwise it might not exist. It could have been interesting, but I had to pretend to go to the restroom and then napped on the couch in the hall, I was so bored. Everyone else said the same, when we compared notes afterwards. People started strategizing how to get out of boring lectures, like pretending to be cold and needing to fetch their sweaters.

We had tea in the entry hall of the building, which wasn't exactly cozy, but there were fairy cakes and shortbread so it wasn't bad. We had to eat dinner far too quickly, because most of us had theater tickets. Dinner included chicken, but I don't recall much else.



The play was *Comedy of Errors*, in the gardens of Wadham College, about ten minutes away. It was a lovely evening and a marvelous setting for any play, with huge old trees, herbaceous borders, smooth grass, etc. I think they oversold, though, because when our group arrived, the staff had to go fetch more folding chairs and ask people already in their seats to stand up and move their chairs back so they could fit more people in. I ended up way on the side, where I could see the sound effects bench and the changing area behind the small set.

The group performing was the Oxford Shakespeare Company, and I think it had eight members—six men and two women—playing all the roles. I’ve never seen that rowdy a *Comedy of Errors* in my life—it was almost like an English panto, though I’ve only heard of those. However, I knew it wasn’t your usual Shakespeare when the show opened with the cast in Harlequin costumes singing ‘Another Op’ning, Another Show,’ and I could see that one of the men had on fishnets and high heels. For the rest of the show the actors wore mostly modern dress, but they kept on breaking into Broadway songs. Those not in the scene sat on the sidelines doing sound effects, such as the burlesque-like cymbals whenever the drag queen playing the mistress sashayed onto the scene. There was quite a lot of raunch included (I won’t do more than mention the cop in the leather shorts), and overall it was just a slapstick hoot. And still Shakespeare! I think he would have appreciated it. Oh, and since they didn’t have many actors, the same actors played both Antipholuses and both Dromios (it’s a play with two sets of identical twins), and at the end, had to represent one pair with life-sized puppets.

Day Three—J.R.R. Tolkien, Wolvercote, Poetry, Winnie the Pooh

I woke to a cool and cloudy day, much like Seattle again. Breakfast was in the hall as usual—people dropped in at any time before nine—and then I met with my group in the Tower Room at nine. We were talking mostly about Tolkien, and a little about C.S. Lewis, in terms of what makes a good story for kids (Lewis wrote an article on it), what defines fantasy (Tolkien wrote an article on it), etc. I learned the term ‘eucatastrophe,’ in which the story seems doomed for catastrophe but then is suddenly saved, like Gollum falling into the lava, or the eagle plucking Frodo and Sam from the mountain. A sudden joyous turn, possibly based on the Gospels? (My notes are skeletal, alas). In any case, Tolkien said that a fantasy needs to offer three things: 1. Recovery—to see things with new eyes. 2. Escape. 3. Consolation.

We also talked a bit about Tolkien’s life story. He was born in South Africa, came to England around age twelve, and was orphaned soon thereafter. He had a forbidden love with the daughter of the family he lived with (they eventually married), and took part in World War I. He left Oxford to do so, and was wounded at the Somme.

My assignment for the reading had been to read about Tolkien’s sources, and the article I read talked about the Old English/Anglo Saxon sources of the rituals around Boromir’s death, the naming poem recited by Treebeard, and the culture and poetry of the Rohirrim, who were based on the Anglo Saxon people. Tolkien virtually copied an Anglo Saxon poem for Aragorn to recite as being Rohirrim poetry. I guess that’s why Tolkien’s world feels and sounds so real, because it has these deep roots. Anna read us some of the source poetry in Old English, and it sounded foreign and haunting.

Our field trip this day took us to Wolvercote, where Lewis and Tolkien liked to eat at the Trout Inn and where Tolkien and his wife are buried (we didn’t see the graves). Most of the group went through the University Parks by rented bicycle, but I was afraid the trip would be too long for my hips (which, as it later turned out, are much better, and I could probably have done it), so Anna and I rode the bus. I think we walked so much to get to the bus and then to get from the bus through the town to the park where we were meeting the others that I got just as much exercise. It was nice to talk to Anna and hear a bit about her life in Oxford and Australia, though I do wish I’d taken the bicycle route.

We met the others by Godstow Lock on one of the canals, and were fortunate enough that an old canal boat glided up just at the time and went through the lock. It seemed especially apropos considering that I had just watched that special on canals. The park at that end held



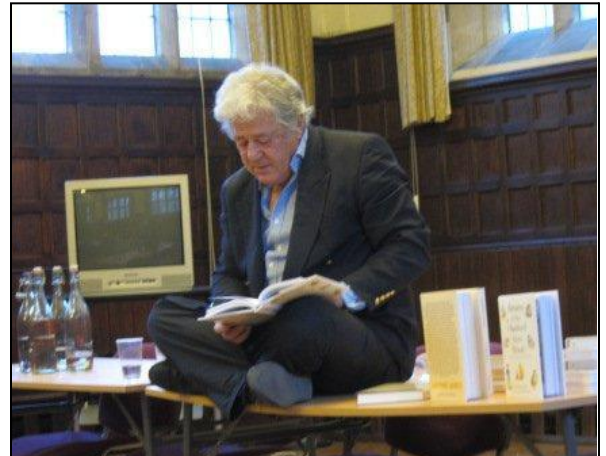
the walls of a ruined nunnery, so we poked around that as well, then headed off towards the Inn for lunch. We had to cross some old, narrow bridges, being careful of cars because there was barely space for one car at a time to cross.

The Trout Inn sprawls next to the Trout river, in which we did see fish, though I don't know if they were trout. I also saw ducks sleeping beneath an arching wooden bridge. Although the place was crowded, we eventually got tables, and enjoyed a delicious lunch. I had potato and leek soup—the best I've ever had—and bread. We then retraced our steps by bike or bus back to Oxford, but because lunch took so long, we got back really late and missed most of the plenary session. Unfortunately, it was one of the interesting ones; Andrew Motion, former poet laureate. I snuck in for the last bit and heard him reading some of his poetry and talking about being a poet laureate, and enjoyed what I heard.

The next session was Dr. James Basker, head of the Oxbridge program, speaking about how 18th century poetry helped end slavery in Britain. First, though, he asked us all to introduce ourselves. When I said I worked at Overlake, he brought up my colleague Gretchen, who used to work with the student part of the Oxbridge program. I told him she was now my aunt, because she had married my uncle in May, and he looked flabbergasted. It was a fun moment, and afterwards he and I competed to see who could offer the most praise for Gretchen—she's such a lovely, wonderful person. I also enjoyed his talk; perhaps, being American, he has a more American style of lecturing that connects with us better. He talked about how poets raised the awareness of slavery, and promoted empathy for slaves, and that helped to bring about the end of the institution.

The more I lingered in Oxford, the more I realized how much I loved the solidity of the old buildings, and the meticulousness of the lawns, the weight and curving ironwork of the doors. It felt familiar in the way of things you used to know, but have forgotten, and not just because I was there twenty years ago; in a deeper sense than that. There's comfort in old, stable things; things that have been there forever and probably always will be.

Dinner was unmemorable but for the parsnips, but the evening session was fun. David Benedictus wrote the authorized sequel to *Winnie the Pooh*, and gave a hilarious presentation. As he never quite found his niche in life, he's done many different things, including working in the film industry as a writer (he name-dropped many stars). He also worked as a bookie for twenty years, I think as a sideline, and has written several novels and his biography. I think he fell into the Pooh job by accident, through his various connections. He read us a chapter (he has a plummy voice, and does audiobooks) about the new character, Lottie the Otter, who is rather imperious and likes Portugese sardines. I don't think the book has gotten great reviews, but if the reviewers had heard the author reading it, I'm sure their reviews would have been more favorable.



Afterwards, I did my readings for class and went to bed wishing I had more time in Oxford, the way I did in 1987. One week is just not enough.

Day Four—Tolkien, T.H. White, St. Michael's, New College, Plenary Sessions

I woke to yet another cool and cloudy day (I can probably just cut and paste that phrase from day to day). Our discussion today finished up with Tolkien, then moved on to T.H. White. For Tolkien, some people had read a short story Anna had included in our readings (we usually split up the readings so everyone wouldn't have to read everything—we didn't have time for that), called *Smith of Wootton Major*. I read it later and didn't care for it—it's simply about a man who gets the gift of star that allows him to wander in Fairyland, but nothing really happens. However, the English teachers saw much more. They explored the effects of wandering, identity, knowledge, and belonging, and wondered if Tolkien was in some way referencing shell shock. There was also the odd definition of joy that I think Lewis propounded, wherein joy equals a divine glimpse that leaves discontent. I'm not sure I bought that one! The other ideas, though, bear some thinking.

Following Tolkien, we discussed T.H. White, and Sir Thomas Malory, White's inspiration for his *Once and Future King*. White's first book, *The Sword in the Stone*, drips with satire, so we discussed that (I brought up Terry Pratchett, whose whole purpose is satire), and also White's personal life. He lived a sad one, with an abusive mother whom White accuses of making him repulsed by women and therefore homosexual, although he never had any romantic relationships with women or men. He had an unfortunate streak of sadism, which repulsed him, so he apparently loathed himself as much as his mother. Not a happy situation.

White grew up with a Victorian Arthurianism, in which Arthurianism acted somewhat as propaganda for approving conquest. In writing Arthurian tales, then, some of what White satirizes includes Victorian beliefs. One, for instance, is "foreign places are scary." White thus surrounds Arthur's castle by wild forest, and only by risking the forest can Arthur have adventures.

Thomas Malory wrote between 1469-70, while imprisoned during the War of the Roses for his Lancastrian loyalty. He wrote using books from the nearby monastery, and White read his works while he (White) was at Cambridge. One trope that Malory used that remains common today is the "fair unknown," who in medieval times was always noble, but in modern times is more based on meritocracy. *Harry Potter* is an iteration of the fair unknown, for instance.

We also touched on Umberto Eco's *Faith in Fakes* which states that the modern view of medieval times is that they are the childhood of man. I also learned that a novel is concerned with character, and an epic is concerned with action—I hadn't heard that definition of a novel before, despite being an English major! I think I prefer epics, but I also like mysteries, which don't fit into either category.



After the discussion we walked around Oxford. We first stopped at St. Michael's Tower, a Saxon edifice that's the oldest building in Oxford. It's tall and square and rough, with many windows recently liberated by restoration. Inside it smelled like old church; that combination of dust, chilly stone, gently moldering kneelers, and wood that's been inhaling damp for centuries. It's like breathing the past. The climb to the top took us by some enormous bells, which made me think of Dorothy Sayers and her campanological mystery *The Nine Tailors*. There was also a small 19th century set of mechanical bells (I think—memory is fuzzy) that you could activate with 20p, and took a long time to wind itself up.

The door to the top of the tower said to keep it closed to prevent pigeons from entering the building, which made me laugh, but having had a squirrel down my chimney, I understood. The

view from the top was panoramic; you could see all of Oxford and out into the surrounding countryside, and it looked picturesque from any angle. We all took lots of photos.

After the tower, we strolled down a dark-stone-walled "haunted" lane—supposedly the ghost of a horseman rides out of a wall—to New College, built in the 13th Century. Beneath it still lie the bodies of Oxford plague victims. Anna showed us a sunken lawn anchored by a huge, forested mound and claimed that's where the bodies lie, but the official college brochure says that the mound is just to allow views over the town walls. The story about the bodies, it claims, is essentially an urban legend. Either way, though the mound had a staircase, neither the lawn nor the mound were open to the public (that's how lawns in Oxford are kept so pristine—you can't walk on them). The wall flanking the lawn was part of the town wall maintained by the college, its old stone brightened by flowers and wisteria vines.



Anna had to leave before lunch, so Ted and Emily and I strolled to the covered market, which I remembered from my last summer at Oxford. It's full of shops and restaurants, so we each found a restaurant we liked and got sandwiches. I got a goat cheese baguette with fig jam that was delicious, but we were kicked out of our table because Ted and I hadn't bought food from the nearest shop. Emily had, but that apparently

didn't matter. I thought it was pretty rude, since there were other seats available, but whatever. We finished our lunches on foot as we wandered to Blackwell's to look around.

The first afternoon session sounded really interesting; Rebecca, the program leader, was to talk about Margaret Cavendish, the subject of her book. She sounded like a fascinating woman. However, due to a miscommunication, an elderly gentleman arrived to give a lecture on his life at Oxford, and Rebecca stepped aside with more grace than any of us could have wished. We were then subjected to yet another incomprehensible reading of a lecture from paper about things that didn't really interest us. The stories might have been interesting coming from your own grandfather, but not from someone else's. Again I found it difficult to stay awake.

During the break I went to town (about a seven minute walk from the college) and did some souvenir shopping and got more cash—it goes fast! Following that, we had a session with a diverse group of Rhodes scholars (many black—almost the first we've seen here) from a wide variety of countries. Their stories were inspiring, but what mostly interested them at the moment was learning from us how to teach children, since they all worked with the student side of the Oxbridge program. I would have loved to hear more about their own stories; I found them all rather dauntingly intelligent!

That night the program director had scheduled a social for us with the staff of the student Oxbridge program, at Oriel College. However, since I was already inundated with trying to get to know the forty or so people on our program, I couldn't face making yet more chit chat with strangers. I stayed in and did the (incredibly long) reading for the next class, and wrote my postcards. My room was equipped with a desk and desk light, so that made studying easy, at least.

Day Five—C.S. Lewis, The Kilns, Shakespeare, The Botanic Gardens, *Harry Potter*

The weather today began cool and misty, but then later cleared to sunlight. After enduring the 90+ temperatures in DC before coming to England, I appreciated the cool weather!

Our morning meeting in the Tower Room was fairly brief, discussing negative criticisms of C.S. Lewis. We'd read a truly shocking story by Neil Gaiman entitled *The Problem of Susan* and some other criticisms, basically accusing Lewis of racism and sexism, banishing Susan from Narnia because she wanted to grow up. I personally had never read it that way; I thought Lewis had shown hints of Susan's frivolity and lack of belief in *Prince Caspian* and even a little in *The Horse and His Boy*, so while I didn't agree with his leaving her out in *Last Battle*, I didn't find it inconsistent after I'd thought about it for a while. I won't argue about the racism issue because it is obviously true, but I don't think it's unusual for the time in which Lewis was writing. Apparently, though, many people are outraged and infuriated by the Susan issue and other issues, and find them unforgivable. That kind of shocked me. I mean, come on, they're kids' books, and I don't think it's fair to throw them under the bus because they don't satisfy some adults' notions of what is proper in an enlightened adult epic.

One argument was that even though Susan grows up in Narnia and is an adult in *Horse and His Boy*, the 'adult' kids are basically just a kids' vision of what an adult would be, not real adults. To which I responded the same way—these are books for kids, and kids would be bored by reading about 'adult' adults; having arguments about economics and politics and acting on complicated emotions and so forth. That's not the purpose of the Narnia books, and if you ask too much of any book, you lose the wonder it might otherwise be able to give you. Kids remind me of that constantly when we're reviewing books for *VOYA*—they often express simple appreciation for a book I couldn't like for its faults, and I must remind myself that I am not the intended audience.

Another argument Lewis' detractors bring up is Lewis' supposed fear of adult women, pointing out that he never put a good adult female in a major role in Narnia—they were all evil witches, or pawns, like Ramandu's daughter. Anna told us a rhyme someone had come up with: "Ramandu's daughter, Caspian's wife, Rilian's mother, plot device." I can accept that one. Queen Helen and Digory's mother, who didn't have large roles, had the only other good adult female roles in the books, except for Mrs. Beaver. Anna said the reasons for that were based in Lewis' life, and she would tell us about them later.

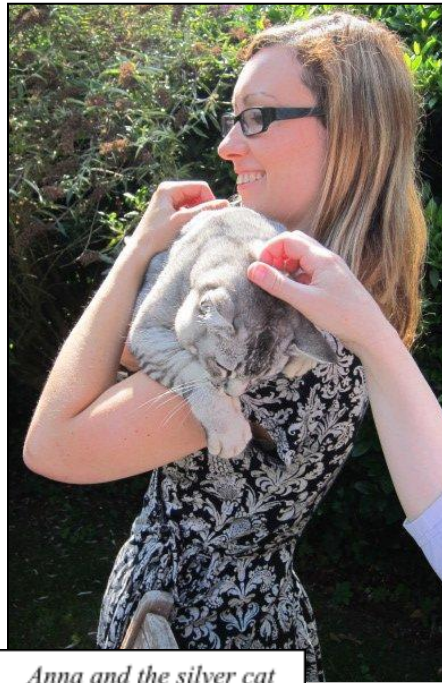
A couple of other things under discussion were Lucy as an aspirational figure, possibly representing Lewis himself. I pointed out that Lucy wasn't perfect, being tempted by the spell book in *Dawn Treader*. We also talked about how Lewis' ability to write character improved as the books went on, with Eustace and Jill being a little more complex than the earlier children. Eustace in fact is rather a modern character, acting a bit like Dudley in the *Harry Potter* books—a bully.

For the most part, people in the group who had read Narnia as children defended Lewis, whereas those who only read him later in life were more open to discussing and accepting the criticism. As I told Anna, to ask those of us who loved Narnia as children to agree with some of the harsher criticisms is asking us to sacrifice a sacred cow of our childhood—to lose part of our childhood, in essence. At least for me, that was asking too much. The interesting thing is, Anna also loves Narnia, but accepts that Lewis had some failings, and is interested to see how students react to the criticisms.

After the discussion, we ran up to the High Street to catch a double decker bus to The Kilns, Lewis' house, in Risinghurst over Shotover Hill. The bus let us off at a main street, and we walked through blessedly sunlit suburbs to Lewis Close, and The Kilns. It's a small brick house with a froth of herbaceous borders, owned now by the California-based Lewis Society. They still use the house for conference religion on a temporary basis at Oxford can live there or stay overnight. Anna told a look inside, as the Society was hosting a conference, but since she knew one of the the outside and sit in the garden to finish our discussion.

Anna told us a bit about Lewis' life. He also fought in WWI, like Tolkien. A friend from home named Paddy Moore also went to war, and he and Lewis made a pact that if Moore survived, he would care for Lewis' father, and if Lewis survived, he would care for Moore's mother. Lewis survived, Paddy did not. For the next thirty years, Lewis lived with Mrs. Moore and her daughter—they purchased The Kilns together—and Lewis' brother Warren. Anna said that many believe Mrs. Moore was the model for the White Witch, and might be responsible for Lewis' issues with women.

One story Anna told us to illustrate the relationship was that during WWII, three little evacuee girls stayed at The Kilns. Mrs. Moore did the bare minimum for them and never bought them sweets or did anything kind for them.



Anna and the silver cat

Lewis, then, would purchase sweets and stand under their window to throw them up to the girls; he couldn't do it openly for fear of crossing Mrs. Moore. She sounded like a real piece of work.

We were having our discussion in the garden when a silver cat stopped in. It was the most unusual color in a cat I've ever seen—white at the base, then shading to grey and then black at the tips, which made it silver. It was also extremely friendly, and made the rounds of our group (and especially Emily, who is allergic).

By sheer luck, we ended up getting a tour of the house because the conference was just ending and the people leaving, and the docent—a young American man studying religion at Harris-Manchester College (an Oxford college I'd never heard of)—said he'd give us a tour. None of the furniture is original, unfortunately, because other people owned the house after Lewis died, but the society has done its best to return it to its original state. The shelves in the library—which, after Mrs. Moore died, apparently developed yellow walls from all the nicotine smoked by Lewis and his brother—overflowed with works by Lewis and other fantasy writers of the era, and religious works. It does have the feel of an original room, with old

furniture and much related to Lewis. The restoration also included a copy of the room in Lewis' childhood home in which he and his brother, as boys, created their *Boxen* stories.

The docent told us lots of stories about Lewis and his life. We saw most of the rooms, which looked small to us but were capacious for the time (and had many wardrobes). Lewis' bedroom could only be reached



by going through Mrs. Moore's room, and to fix that problem, Lewis had the connecting door locked, and put in an exterior door and staircase for his own room. He had no access to the rest of the house except by going outside and down the ladder-like iron stairs.

Those who have seen *Shadowlands* know about Lewis' late marriage to American Joy Gresham, and we heard a few stories about her as well. Apparently she was quite a firecracker and enjoyed shooting guns, and wouldn't have cavilled at shooting a trespasser or two.

One other story the docent told us was about Maureen Moore, Paddy's sister, who lived with Lewis and Mrs. Moore for many years. Late in life, Maureen, through her father's family, ascended to the Baronetcy of Hempriggs in Scotland, and became Baronetess Dame Maureen Dunbar of Hempriggs. When Lewis became ill near the end of his life he also became forgetful, and when Maureen visited him in the hospital, she was told that he might not remember her. When she spoke to him, she said, "It's me, Maureen," and Lewis said, "No, it's not!" Before she could say anything else, he said, "It's the Baronetess Dame Maureen Dunbar of Hempriggs!" Apparently he then added, "I might forget a name, but I could never forget a fairy tale."

After the house tour, the docent offered to take us to Lewis' grave at Trinity Church, and led us on quite a long walk through the suburbs. Lewis is buried with his brother, who died later; Lewis' wife was cremated. In the church—which had that distinctive old church smell, and pews riddled with



polished woodworm grooves—there's an etched Narnia window, in honor of Lewis. Apparently he wasn't the most thoughtful of churchgoers, though; he didn't like hymns, so left during the last one, letting the door bang behind him and joining Warnie at a local pub.

The walk back to the bus took forever, but then the bus dropped us back in Oxford in time for lunch. A few of us returned to the covered market for some savory pies, which we'd seen the day before. Many shops offered them, but we chose the Pie Minister, and I had a 'Heidi' pie with sweet potatoes, goat cheese, and spinach. I liked it, but not as much as yesterday's baguette. We then split up and I did some souvenir shopping. Oxford is bursting with people in the summer, many foreign and many young students; the streets are full of foreign accents and bicycles.



Apparently at the best of times about 30% of the students at Oxford are foreign anyway, which I didn't know. The souvenir shops were doing good business, allowing payment in several different currencies.

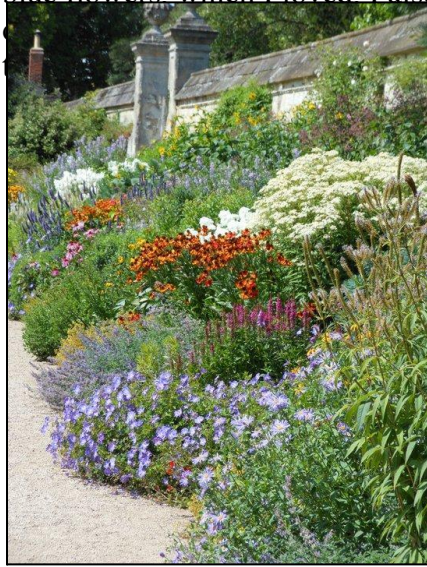
The first afternoon session was on Shakespeare, and how luck and diplomacy—including sucking up to monarchs—had basically made him famous. Many playwrights of the same era fell foul of the law and the monarch and died unknown, and since plays had very short runs, their plays fell into disuse. Shakespeare was not a great actor, which gave him more time to write, and he was prolific. His plays also got published, which allowed them to be distributed, and by luck, they spread around the world. In 1607, for instance, a ship's crew performed a version of *Hamlet* on a ship off the coast of Sierra Leone, because they had a copy of it. They traded a performance for goods from the locals, I think. Although Shakespeare was neglected during the Restoration when theaters were closed, he came back into vogue after the civil war and theater companies began including actresses and scenery in plays. It was an interesting session, thank goodness!

I skipped the second session (can't remember what it was) to visit the Botanic Gardens, since it was a lovely day and people from the science section had rhapsodized about it. The Gardens lie right on the Cherwell by Magdalen Bridge, where most people go to rent punts or other boats. The river was full of incompetent foreign punters, and their shouts and laughter echoed through the air (we later learned that about twenty people a day fall into the river).



I started by exploring the gardens' extensive greenhouses, each section set up with a different type of plant or climate. Some rooms were full of cacti, and some hallways were so dense with vines that they brushed your face as you walked through. One room had vast lily pads and palm trees. Some plants had huge stems smooth and hard as glass.

Outside, the grounds were full of beds with plants and flowers and endless bees. I saw many wonderful blue flowers, which I loved. I also found the regulation glorious herbaceous border, a static firework explosion of color, and vast ancient trees. The grass looked and felt like velvet underfoot, like a pleasant and peaceful place to meander and sit and read a book.



We had pork for dinner, but I missed dessert as I wanted to catch an early showing of *Harry Potter 7 part 2* in 3-D. It was a lengthy walk into town to the cinema, and turned out to be the most expensive movie I'd ever seen; with the extra pound for the 3-D glasses, it was over \$20. The seats were assigned, which startled me, and I didn't particularly care for the seat I got since I had a railing in front of me. As the theater was half-empty, I moved over, but during the 30 minutes(!) of ads and previews, it filled up and I had to move back. Throughout the movie the girls in back of me whispered in Russian, which didn't contribute to the experience.

I enjoyed seeing the movie in Oxford, knowing when I went outside that I stood near where some of it was filmed. Still, I was raised in a city so walking home alone in the urban dark is never a comfortable thing, even though I know Oxford is pretty safe, so I didn't enjoy the walk back to Mansfield. Oxford has lots of nightlife—many lively pubs—and I

encountered a drunken group discussing taking off their shirts with much hilarity.

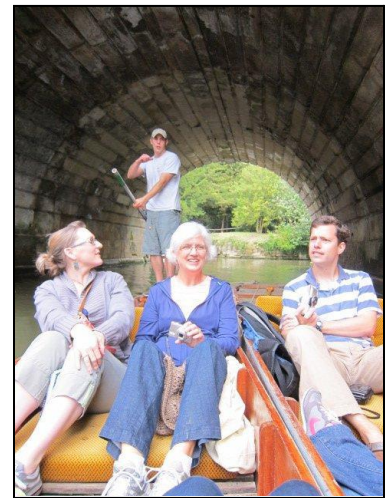
Day Six—*Harry Potter*, Christchurch, Bodleian, Magdalen, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Another cold and cloudy day. Today we discussed *Harry Potter*, and whether the books are worthy of criticism; one of the issues critics debate. Specific questions include wondering what effect marketing has on the books as literature. Does it give people the impression that the books are not worthy of criticism? One of the lengthy articles I read detailed the arguments critics offer to denigrate *Harry Potter* (mainly that it's derivative, as if any fantasy were anything else), then offered a legitimate look at the books from a critical angle—giving them the courtesy of a true exploration. The author talked about Rowling's sources and how she used them, about the characters, and many other things. I found it very interesting. From the author's opinion, the hype surrounding the books has no effect on the merit of the books themselves. Our group had an interesting discussion about all those issues, and it helped that this was one book everyone had read!

Following the discussion, we ambled over to Magdalen Bridge and went punting, because I had wanted to and Anna was always wonderfully flexible about our field trips (she organized the bike ride because Leslie had wanted to go biking). In the area just below the bridge and the Botanic Gardens were lots of punts lined up, and lots of flotsam and jetsam showing how busy the dock is during the summer. All those inexpert would-be punters! Since it was only about 10 AM and not a sunny day, few people had chosen to venture onto the river, which was nice.

The crew lashed together two punts and we crowded in. The punts are long and flat and shallow, so it felt rather like sitting on the floor. Cushions softened the seating area so it was reasonably comfortable; you just had to interweave your legs with those of the people sitting facing you. The punter, one of the crew who ran the dock and the boats, was a young man who handled the boats effortlessly.

It was lovely, even under cloudy skies, to glide along the smooth, brown river with the overhanging boughs and only the sounds of the punt and a few crows once we got away from the crowded areas. Peaceful. It



made me think of all those books in which people go punting on the Cherwell—*Gaudy Night*, *Three Men In a Boat*, etc.—all the reasons I had wanted to go punting.

Anna had brought scones, double cream, and jam, so we had a cream tea as we punted. We had to fend off a few ducks and geese, used to being fed and so bold as to stick their beaks over the side of the punt. The punter shooed them away with an oar—I guess they keep oars in case they lose the punt. In any case, a perfect way to spend a morning in Oxford. We learned that the canals and rivers around Oxford vary in depth and some are paved at the bottom. We passed under many bridges, and also saw some sleeping swans and cygnets. At that hour, we were the only boats on the water, though the punter said it would get really busy later. After punting, we over to Christchurch, where Lewis Carroll taught (I think), and where many of the *Harry Potter* scenes were either filmed or conceptualized. Jam packed among other tourists, we climbed the stairs on which McGonagall told the first years about the various houses, and toured the glorious dining hall that inspired Hogwarts' dining hall (they didn't film in the original—too disruptive, I would guess). The hall had an *Alice in Wonderland* stained glass window high up, which the docent pointed out.



Christchurch cathedral was less packed, but no less impressive, with lots of brilliant and complicated stained glass windows—so many tiny pieces of glass they almost looked like leaded mosaics. One by Burne-Jones related the

story of St. Frideswide, since Christchurch Cathedral supposedly stands on the site of her Saxon church, and a shrine to her rests in the side chapel there. Being modern, Burne Jones added a little modern touch in the last pane of the medieval tale, if you can see it.

We didn't have much time to view the grounds, but they are enormous and beautiful—classic Oxford with old Cotswold gold buildings and bowling green lawns. After a brief look, though, we almost literally ran back to Mansfield to meet the rest of our colleagues as we were all to have a tour of the Bodleian. Being late, we then ran to the Bodleian, and met up with everyone in the main courtyard.

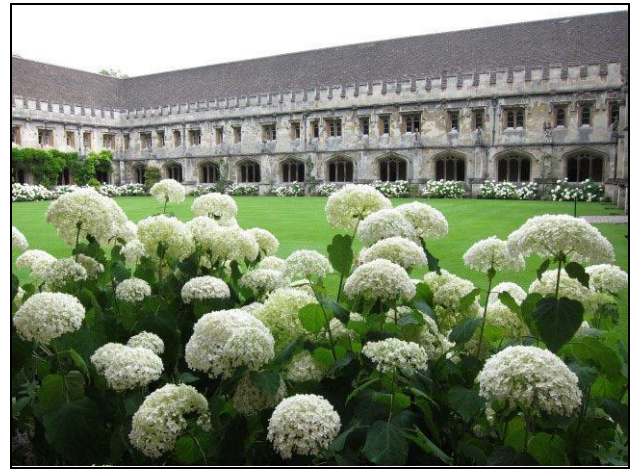


After all that, the tour wasn't very comprehensive. A docent gave us a brief lecture about the history of the Bod in a back room, then we surrendered all our belongings to be locked up before entering the library proper. We then had to go through an electronic gate and climb an impressive lot of stone stairs to Duke Humphrey's Library, the *Harry Potter* library. I'd used the library in 1987 and it looked exactly the same. We couldn't go further than the desk however, and couldn't see any other parts of the vast library. The oldest books live in the Duke Humphrey, and used to be chained. All the stacks are closed; you have to request books from the librarian, and must have to have a legitimate reason to look at them. We talked with the guide about the Bod and its history and how it handles books and collection development today. They have off-site storage for millions of books, as they are a depository library with the right to a copy of everything published in Britain, from a take-away menu to *Harry Potter*.



We then descended to a room in the former Divinity School, which had a marvelous fan-vaulted ceiling with bosses featuring either words or initials—the docent told us, and I think it was to do with religious matters, but I forget precisely. The vaulting also had other carved bosses the docent pointed out, and she described how the room had been used for oral exams, though it was set up more like a chapel. It also served as the infirmary in the *Harry Potter* movies. We went into another long chamber that looked like an old courtroom with a huge seat at one end, and I think was used for official town meetings—maybe still is. It was also set up like a chapel, with rows of benches facing each other and rising from the floor like bleachers.

Our group then split off from the main group and headed to Magdalen College, where Lewis taught and where he used to walk with Tolkien. It's another picture-perfect college, darker stone than the others, and one of the large courtyards was surrounded by cloisters and huge, popcorn froths of white hydrangeas. We ate lunch in the casual student bar/café, where I had a spicy samosa. Just outside our window flowed the Cherwell, complete with punts.



Afterwards we strolled around the grounds and saw where Lewis' rooms were, then crossed over the river and took Addison's Walk around the extensive deer park. We saw lots of deer, tails wagging madly, and they didn't look like the deer I'm used to. Many were dark as beavers, and others were spotted as fawns. Anna told us they weren't too bright; at one point, she had seen a young stag lose a fight with a tree. Feeling his oats, apparently, he had charged the tree, and got his antlers stuck (he got loose twenty minutes later).



The woodland walk was lovely but long, and I headed back to college afterwards. I did attend the last plenary session, as I thought many people would skip it and felt bad for the presenter. Tracy Kidd, a poet, turned out to be a kick and a half. First, she arranged the chairs in a semicircle, thank goodness, and we managed to get enough people to fill them. Then she involved us in an exercise. Having brought several noisemaking devices, she used them, and asked us to write down our thoughts as we heard the various sounds. Then each of us chose one line from what we had written, and she worked those lines into a poem (mine was, "high notes with breathiness like a patina"). It was lots of fun, and the poem didn't turn out too badly. It's a good exercise to use with kids, and the poet spent the rest of the time talking about teaching poetry to kids, and the natural rhythms and sounds to look for and strive to create in poetry. She was quirky and funny, and wore bright blue eyeshadow. For dinner we had pork chops, and for dessert, some fabulous ice cream and banana crepes (sort of like Bananas Foster). Then many of us had to leg it for Wadham College, which was further away than I had remembered, because we had tickets for

The Importance of Being Earnest on the lawn. It was enormously fun; a lively, well-acted performance with wonderful costumes. During the 'garden' scenes, the actors used the garden around them as scenery and props. Since the company only has two women, Lady Bracknell and Miss Prism were played by men, but they played the roles fairly 'straight,' though it was still hilarious. It's just so marvelous to see plays outside, in such a setting.

It struck me that Oxford is a bit like the worlds of Rick Riordan and Patricia Wrede, who explore what it would be like for normal, modern people to be thrust into a world full of mythological characters and tropes. In Oxford, it's historical things rather than mythological; you have to live a modern life in ancient buildings with ancient traditions that may or may not be still relevant, but must still be observed. It's a bit magical, though I can see how someone could get tired of it!



I woke to another beautiful sunny day, though it was quite chilly in the morning. Today we had a brief discussion about Philip Pullman, author of the *His Dark Materials* series. Anna is not entirely fond of him, and after reading the articles she gave us, most of us agreed with her. I defended the books, which I loved, but couldn't defend the man after reading his article tearing C.S. Lewis apart. Pullman levelled many charges at Lewis both on religious and writerly bases, including unoriginality, even though he himself is no better. No fantasy book I've ever read was completely original, because if it were, people would not be able to establish a connection with it; that's part and parcel of fantasy. You need stepping stones from our world into the fantasy world, to make it believable. As the brilliant writer Margo Lanagan puts it, "The different-ness of things that seem alike; that's the wonder of the universe."

In any case, Pullman clearly has some grudge against the church because he was pretty vehement about it, to the point at which I didn't believe he didn't believe in God or religion. If he really didn't, he wouldn't feel so personally threatened by them or feel such a need to tear them apart. Pullman feels Lewis and Narnia and their success are an affront to literature, to which I respond, then don't read them! Good lord, he was irritating. And Anna pointed out, the bombast about Lewis appeared just as *Golden Compass* was being published, and Pullman also made no bones about wanting success and finding ways to grab it. I think his dæmon would be a peacock as described in a Rumer Godden story—preening and full of himself, squawking loudly to distract people from his ugly feet. (But I still like the books.)

Following the discussion, everyone in the program went to the Ashmolean, a mammoth museum in Oxford full of a staggering variety of items. Some of us started on the third floor with Anna, in the room with Saxon relics. She told us a bit about them, and recited some more Old English. We were then free to wander for a couple of hours, which isn't enough to cover the whole museum. I stayed on the top floors with the European art; paintings, silver, ceramics, musical instruments, jewelry, and more. I found a whole bank of pocket watches, for instance, looking very steampunk.

Mostly I appreciated the exquisitely painted landscapes, since I love landscape art. I could never quite figure out the organization of all the rooms, though; it appeared to be by theme rather than by time, and I often encountered paintings by the same artist in several different rooms. Their most famous painting depicts a fox hunt, and featured in an *Inspector Morse* episode. I'm not really a museum person, though—I'd rather gaze at real landscapes than art, so I didn't appreciate the place as much as I should have.

Our seminar group met to go to lunch at The Eagle and Child (The Bird and the Babe), where the Inklings liked to gather. They were a group of Oxford fantasy writers including Lewis and Tolkien, and the pub remembers them with plaques and pictures. The pub is small and rambling, with tiny, cozy rooms and ebony-dark wood. We found tables in a cramped front room and I had salmon-broccoli cakes, which were delicious.

Afterwards we had a free afternoon, but I wasted part of mine by realizing, once I'd gotten back to Mansfield, that I'd left my camera at the pub. I had to walk all the way back (shortcutting through a narrow, cobbled pedestrian thoroughfare called the Lamb and Flag Passage, after a nearby pub—I do love English place names), then carefully jaywalking across a five-lane road to get back to the pub. I'd had the porter at Mansfield call to ask about my camera and they said they hadn't found anything, but I had to go check—it had two full rolls of film in it, one in the camera and one in the case. It wasn't in the room where we had eaten lunch, but when I asked at the bar, someone had indeed turned it in! Thank goodness.

I spent an hour strolling around Oxford, just enjoying. I went to Blackwell's, and passed by Trinity again. Although sorry that it was closed, on reflection, I decided that maybe it was better just to remember it as it was when I belonged there. I also walked over to University Parks, where Rebecca had taken us the first day, but it wasn't as beautiful as I had expected because bushes hid the river. I didn't stay long, but returned to my room and packed.



Late in the afternoon we had a feedback session with Rebecca, and she finally gave at least part of her talk about Margaret Cavendish, the ‘Mad Duchess’ of Newcastle; ‘mad’ because she wrote and published books of verse, drama, science, and more, starting in 1653. A fascinating woman with a supportive older husband, she lived a time when any published women writers blushed and demurred and said they were forced into it. Margaret Cavendish stated right out that she was publishing because she wanted to be “very, very famous.” Her works spanned multiple fields, touching, as Rebecca pointed out, each one of our seminar topics (science, libraries, Shakespeare, fantasy). For Shakespeare, she was the first person to write substantial literary criticism. For fantasy, she wrote a novel called ‘The Blazing World’ which the doth-protest-too-much Mr. Pullman used as inspiration, even adapting some of its ideas.

The funniest story Rebecca told about her was that at the time Cavendish lived, theaters had just developed the proscenium arch and stage curtains. To celebrate some theater event, the Duchess arrived in a gown the top of which looked just like stage curtains, and which could be drawn back to reveal her rouged nipples! Definitely a woman of great originality.



Because this was the last night of the program, we had drinks on the lawn before dinner. I had elderflower soda, which tasted rather citrus-y. Everyone was dressed up, and for once we got to walk on that lovely lawn! Dinner in the hall was a gala meal with formal menus. Starting with a wonderful squash-coconut soup, it continued with guinea fowl and a fruit tart. I should mention we had excellent wait staff the whole week. They had to negotiate between tightly packed chairs and tables with large plates, and managed wonderfully well, so we gave them an ovation.

Most of us went down to the cellar bar after dinner to continue the party, and also some of the discussion about fantasy writers and so forth. There were such congenial people on this trip—I will miss our discussions!

Day Eight—Oxford, Heathrow, D.C.

Our last morning was lovely, temperate and sunny, the best kind of summer day. We had our last breakfast in the hall, and said goodbye to many people.

It was a quiet morning, being Sunday, with nothing planned. Since I wasn’t leaving until lunchtime, I spent the morning walking around Oxford one last time. I walked up to the High Street, where I hadn’t spent much time. It has lots of shops, but I’m not really a shopper, so I didn’t feel much regret that the stores were all closed. I also walked on Merton street, which was cobbled, and saw the attractive Merton college (at least, what you could see from the street because the college was closed). Then I found an alleyway back to Broad—closed to cars for some kind of Eco-Rally, and therefore crowded with people—and walked past Trinity for the last time. Returning to Mansfield, I poked around the garden, discovering a whole other garden hidden from view behind the main building.

I shared a cab to the bus station with Emily, and the bus drove an hour and fifteen minutes through the Cotswold countryside to get to Heathrow. Overall, it was a wonderful trip and I would do it again in a heartbeat. Oxford is such a lovely place, and we had such good discussions, I would encourage any teacher or librarian to give it a try!

