

The Self-realisation of Gifted Children in Fantasy Literature: A Study of the Boy Protagonist in *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*

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Abstract

In this article, I shall discuss the self-realisation and the self-development of the boy protagonist in *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* (2011), which is the first novel written by the American author Ransom Riggs. Jacob Portman, who has a unique power given by nature, is a very gifted child, and he represents a character type that often takes a significant role in fantasy literature. Among Riggs' trilogy about 'peculiar children' who have unique abilities, the discussion is focused on the first volume. In the first book, Jacob, who has regarded himself as common, realises his true identity and makes an important decision in his life. To explore the process of the manifestation of a gifted child's latent power, the following three aspects are discussed: Jacob's encounter with peculiar children, his self-realisation through the relationships between them, and Jacob's decision made beyond the gap between him and peculiars living in a different time. I shall mention the film adaptation by Tim Burton, which was released in 2016, not only because it places a great emphasis on the protagonist's self-development, as does the original novel, but also because it seems to be an ideal collaboration between the author and the director because Riggs has been influenced by Burton and has respected him since his childhood.

ファンタジー文学における〈選ばれた子ども〉の自己認識

——『ミス・ペレグリンと奇妙なこどもたち』の少年主人公に関する考察——

笹田 裕子

本稿では、アメリカの作家 Ransom Riggs の初めての小説である *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* (2011) を題材に、少年主人公の自己認識と成長について考察する。生来の特異な才能を有する少年 Jacob Portman は、ファンタジーにおいて重要な役割を担う〈選ばれた子ども〉の1人に他ならない。異能者である 'peculiar' と称する子ども達を扱う Riggs の作品は3部作だが、論考は、自分をごく平凡だと思っていた Jacob が、独自性に目覚め人生における重要な決断をする最初の巻に焦点を当てる。Jacob のよき理解者であった祖父の死を契機に出遭う奇妙な子ども達、同一性によって奇妙な子ども達との間に築かれる関係の中での Jacob の自己認識、また、子ども達とは異なる時間に属することを越えて最終的に Jacob が下す決断などに関する考察を通して、〈選ばれた子ども〉に潜在していた能力が顕在化する過程を明らかにしていく。また、Riggs が幼少時か

ら Tim Burton を愛好し崇拝していたことから、原作者と映画監督による理想的な共同作品であるといえる 2016 年公開の映画化作品についても言及する。

Introduction

Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children (2011) is the first novel by Ransom Riggs, who was brought up in Florida and obtained degrees from both Kenyon College and the University of Southern California's School of Cinema-Television. As soon as it was published, this book became a bestseller. In spite of the author's expectation 'to sell about fourteen copies',¹ his first novel sold one million and five hundred thousand copies to take the seventh place in *The New York Times* best-seller list.²

As Riggs himself remarks, the book is the 'coming-of-age story',³ in which an ordinary sixteen-year-old boy in Florida realises his special talent through the encounter with 'peculiar children' living in the world of the past. This article discusses the theme of the self-realisation and the self-development of the boy protagonist in *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* in terms of the encounter that takes place after his grandfather's death, the relationship built up between the boy and peculiar children, and Jacob's decision made beyond the gap between him and peculiars living in the different time. The study is focused on the first book of the trilogy,⁴ in which the boy protagonist makes his first and important decision in his life as a gifted child; a character type that often takes a significant role in fantasy literature.⁵

In the discussion, I shall mention the film adaptation directed by Tim Burton, which is also focused on the boy protagonist's self-development. In addition, despite some arrangements, Burton's film seems to be an ideal collaboration between the author and the director because Riggs has been keen on Burton and has greatly adored him since his childhood.⁶

1. Grandfather's Death and the Sudden Encounter

The protagonist of this book, Jacob Portman, is an ordinary high school student who is living in Florida with his parents. Although he is intelligent enough to be in a few classes in the 'special-education-curriculum' for gifted students at his high school, Jacob has no particular strong points and has no friends, except for one named Ricky. Jacob explains the relationship between him and Ricky as follows:

The cooperation part was an unofficial brains-for-brawn trade agreement we'd worked out in which I helped him not fail English and he helped me not get killed

by the roided-out sociopaths who prowled the halls of our schools.⁷

For Jacob, Grandpa Abraham Portman (Abe) is the only person who has understood him very well since his childhood. However, when Jacob is fifteen, his grandfather is suddenly killed. In addition, strangely, Jacob is the only person who can see the murderer, who is invisible to others. Moreover, the murderer is exactly the monster that appeared in the grandfather's stories that Jacob was once eager to listen to in his early childhood. Jacob clearly remembers the figure because he has seen his grandfather's illustration:

It stared back with eyes that swam in dark liquid, furrowed trenches of carbon-black flesh loose on its hunched frame, its mouth hinged open grotesquely so that a mass of long eel-like tongues could wriggle out.⁸

However, Jacob later finds out that he is the only one who can see such an enormous monster. Since his parents worry that he must have become insane because he was so shocked by his grandfather's death, they make Jacob undergo counselling. Although he himself starts to doubt his sanity, Jacob cannot forget his grandfather's dying words: 'Go to the island, Yakob. Here it's not safe. . . You'll be safe there. Promise me.'⁹ Actually, Jacob promised his grandfather then. The island must be the place where his grandfather spent time in his childhood during the war, according to the story which Jacob listened to when he was an infant.

Soon after that, Jacob finds a letter put in a book he received on his sixteenth birthday. The book is a gift from Aunt Susie, and it was actually something left for Jacob by his grandfather. The letter is from Miss Alma LeFay Peregrine, the headmistress of the orphanage that features in his grandfather's story. Jacob knows the name of the island from the 'fading postmark' that reads '*Cairnholm Is., Cymru, UK*'¹⁰ and decides to visit there. As his counsellor allows him to make the journey, he departs with his father to Cymru, which means Wales in Welsh, as he learned from atlases in his childhood.

Jacob loved his grandfather's storytelling as an infant. Abe often showed him some black-and-white pictures. As a matter of fact, the trigger for writing this novel was a great amount of black-and-white photographs Riggs had collected since his childhood. One of them is the picture that is used as the front cover of this book. The picture depicts a girl, with a tiara on her head, who is obviously floating a few inches above the ground. It is highly assessed as 'creepy in the best way possible' in the book review by *The Guardian*. In addition, Tim Burton, who is also an earnest reader of Riggs, admires it as follows:

The photographs spoke to me on an emotional level; there was a sense of mystery,

power, and creepiness. I liked that they provoked my imagination, and that I didn't immediately know everything about the images.¹¹

An enormous number of black-and-white photographs that are similar to those described above are inserted into this novel and function to make the whole story real. Actually, Riggs first found some of these photos in second-hand shops where he was taken to by his grandmother when he was eleven or twelve. Since then, Riggs started to collect similar odd kinds of photographs. As Maria Russo points out, 'Mr Riggs's attraction to haunting photographs eventually became the catalyst for his first novel'.¹² Thus, they were not prepared for his novel, but Riggs was inspired by those photographs to create his novel.¹³ In the novel, Jacob was strongly attracted to these photographs and believed in the existence of such peculiar children till he realised in his elementary school days that they were fake. Despite their still good relationship, Jacob shows no interest in those fake photographs for a long while. However, after his grandfather's death, those photos are left to him. Thus, they become another motivation for Jacob to confirm the truth of his grandfather's story according to his dying words.

The encounter with the monster in Grandfather's story leads Jacob to a journey to realise the fact and he experiences another encounter in Wales where he meets the children in the photographs inherited from his grandfather. While he is visiting the former orphanage, which is now in ruins, Jacob catches a glimpse of vaguely familiar children and chases them. Thus, he goes to the world of 1943.

Finally, an invisible boy, Millard Nullings, and Emma Bloom, who can make fire with her hands,¹⁴ lead Jacob to their own home. There, Jacob actually sees the orphanage that is 'an enchanted place . . . a big house that was protected by a wise old bird'¹⁵ in his grandfather's story.

I gazed at it in wonder — not because it was awful, but because it was beautiful. . . . Turrets and chimneys that had slumped lazily on the house I remembered now pointed confidently toward the sky. The forest that had seemed to devour its walls stood at a respectful distance. . . . The yard was full of children, almost all of whom I recognized from yellowed photographs. Some lazed under shade trees; others tossed a ball and chased one another past flowerbeds exploding with color. It was exactly the paradise my grandfather had described. This was the enchanted island; these were the magical children.¹⁶

Moreover, Jacob is gradually informed that every one of these children has strange powers. Olive Abroholos Elephanta floats unless she wears her leaden shoes because she

is lighter than air. Bronwyn Bruntley has an extraordinary strength though she is a girl. Hugh Apiston has bees living in his stomach. Fiona Frauenfeld can make plants grow. Claire Densmore has an extra monstrous mouth with razor-sharp fangs in the back of her head. Horace Somnusson can predict the future because of his visions and dreams. Enoch O'Connor has an ability to animate the dead or non-living things, such as clay dolls, for a short while.¹⁷ Answering Jacob's question about what they are, Millard says, 'We're peculiar'.¹⁸ This name is used by peculiars to distinguish themselves from normal people who are without any strange powers.¹⁹

These peculiar children are protected by a bird called Ymbryne which lives in her orphanage. The name of the Ymbryne, who protects the home, is Miss Peregrine. As her name indicates, she is in fact a peregrine. As a Ymbryne, Miss Peregrine has two abilities. One is the talent to transform herself into a human being and back into a bird at random. The other is the power to create and maintain a loop. A loop is a 'limited area in which a single day is repeated endlessly.'²⁰ Therefore, peculiars can avoid every danger in the future because they are living the same period of time forever; and thus, do not age as long as they are in the loop. The peculiar children in Miss Peregrine's home are in a loop on the third of September in 1940 when the orphanage was destroyed by a German airstrike.²¹ This is why the building is just ruins when Jacob visits the house in his age. Miss Peregrine's ability makes time go backward to just before the bomb attacks the orphanage. Therefore, inside her loop, no destruction happens and everybody is kept safe.²²

2. Self-realisation through the Relationship with Peculiar Children

As it might be presumed from their habitation located in a remote place, abilities gifted to peculiars do not always make everybody happy. According to a short story titled 'The First Ymbryne' included in *Tales of the Peculiar*,²³ peculiars have historically been excluded and persecuted by normals. Burton told Dermot Power, the concept artist, that 'their "peculiarities" were more like afflictions than superpowers, something they have to suffer but then learn to put to good use.'²⁴ It can be presupposed that this is because Burton prepares a spectacular scene for peculiar children located in Blackpool in his film adaptation, as the opportunity for them to fight with their power.

Jacob easily makes friends with peculiar children because he himself is one of them. The peculiar children realise from the outset that Jacob is definitely one of them. However, as Enoch once says to him in jest, 'What can *you* do?',²⁵ Jacob cannot realise what kind of peculiarity he possesses. When he insists that he is just a common person, Emma tells the truth to him:

“You belong here, Jacob.”

“I don’t. I’m not like you.”

“Yes, you are,” she [Emma] insisted

“I’m not. I’m common, just like my grandfather . . . If I could do something spectacular like you, don’t you think I would’ve noticed by now?”

“I’m not meant to tell you this,” she said, “but common people can’t pass through time loops. . . . Abe had a rare and peculiar talent, something almost no one else could do. . . . He could see the monsters.”²⁶

Then, Jacob realises he is one of the peculiars because he can see monsters as well. Thus, it is clarified that Jacob is actually one of the gifted children described in fantasy literature, even though the gift brings him not only happiness but also suffering. Jacob identifies himself with peculiars who are similarly gifted. Just like an infant realises himself through the mirror image at the ‘mirror stage’ in the Lacanian concept, Jacob realises himself through children who are similar to him.²⁷

Ironically, it is when his important friends are exposed to danger that Jacob’s ability is awakened. In fact, there are two dangerous existences for the peculiars: wights and hollowgasts. Hollowgasts are monsters created through an experiment where some peculiars try to obtain more power from Ymbrynes. Both are explained in the ‘Glossary of Peculiar Terms’ in the third volume:

Hollowgast: Monstrous ex-peculiars who hunger for the souls of their former brethren. Corpse-like and withered except for their muscular jaws, within which they harbor powerful, tentacle-like tongues. Especially dangerous because they’re invisible to all but a few peculiars.

Wights: A hollowgast that consumes enough peculiar souls becomes a wight, which are visible to all and resemble normals in every way but one: their pupil-less, perfectly white eyes. Brilliant, manipulative, and skilled at blending in, wights have spent years infiltrating both normal and peculiar society. They could be anyone . . .²⁸

Moreover, it is Jacob’s fault for leading a wight to the loop. Because the wight keeps transforming himself into a school bus driver, Jacob’s counsellor Doctor Golan, and a bird researcher assigned to watch him all the while, Jacob cannot recognise him. Hence, the wight acquires the opportunity to succeed in capturing Miss Peregrine. As one of a few rarer peculiars, Jacob tries hard to protect peculiar friends as well as their protector Ymbryne to make good.

Emma becomes another source of trouble for Jacob. Since she was once his grandfather's girlfriend, she immediately understands why Abe's grandson visits them alone; because Abe has passed away. Therefore, she is impolite to Jacob at first in order to hide her true feeling. Jacob, who gradually comes to love her, cannot help worrying if she loves him only because he is similar to his grandfather. Nevertheless, he finds his own place in this 'enchanted place' for peculiars for the first time in his life. And while danger approaches the peculiar children, Jacob is required to stay with them and to make an important decision.

3. Jacob's Decision beyond the Gap

As has been discussed in the previous section, though a friendly relationship between Jacob and the peculiar children exists through identification, a difference between them still remains: they are living in different times.

Unlike Jacob, who is really sixteen at that time, all the peculiar children in Miss Peregrine's home are old people over seventy, eighty or one hundred, even though their appearances are those of children.²⁹ When Emma gives Jacob an apple and a kiss on his cheek as a token of her gratitude to him, Jacob treasures the apple and takes it back and displays it on his bed-side table in his own world that night. But the next morning he finds out that the apple has turned into ash:

I . . . went to grab Emma's apple, but it wasn't on my nightstand where I'd left it. A thorough search of the floor uncovered a lot of dust bunnies and one leathery thing the size of a golf ball. I was starting to wonder if someone had swiped it when I realized that the leathery thing was the apple. At some point during the night it had gone profoundly bad, spoiling like I've never seen fruit spoil. It looked as though it had spent a year locked in a food dehydrator. When I tried to pick it up it crumbled in my hand like a clump of soil.³⁰

In addition, when Miss Peregrine asks him to stay with them, she tells the truth that there is no other choice for him but to stay in the same loop if he longs to be with his friends because peculiar children cannot live with Jacob in his own time. Since the skipped time would return to them at that time, they would immediately become old and then die.³¹

Therefore, Jacob's final decision is made beyond the time gap between him and the peculiar children; in other words, beyond the difference. In the last part of *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*, Jacob makes a decision to stay with them and give up his life in his time in order to help his peculiar friends in trouble after Miss Peregrine is captured

and taken away by a wight.

“Well then,” I said, “it’s a good thing I’m coming with you.”

Emma spun to look at me. “Oh, that’s wonderful!” she cried, and hugged me. “Are you certain?”

I told her I was. Tired as they were, the children whistled and clapped. Some embraced me. Even Enoch shook my hand.³²

After making his decision, Jacob once returns to his own age to say farewell to his father. Since three peculiar friends, Emma, Olive, and Millard have followed him, he introduces them to his father. But his actual father cannot accept the fact that there is a girl who can make fire with her hands, a girl floating in the air, and an invisible boy, even if they are in front of him. Jacob’s father just thinks that he must be dreaming. Jacob leaves the message for him with Emma’s photograph, in which she and Abe in his youth are reflected. Jacob departs to search for and bring back Miss Peregrine with his peculiar friends.

Conclusion

Although the first volume finishes with a sort of positive ending brought by the boy protagonist’s self-realisation,³³ in the second and third volumes, he needs to have more severe experiences to find out that he is more powerful than he realised. On the way to the further realisation, he has an encounter with Miss Peregrine’s two younger brothers. Through them, the power relationship between the ruler and the subject and the human desire to be more powerful are described.

In addition, the plot also deals with how precious and rare Jacob’s power is. As is asserted by the wights, who keep capturing Ymbrynes, peculiars have inborn powers to rule the world if they wish so.³⁴ Thus, the matter of choice becomes another theme of the trilogy. As has been already mentioned, because of their strange abilities, historically, peculiars are once adored and then expelled to be marginalized in the mainstream. Since they contain so many significant aspects, further research is necessary to discuss the whole trilogy.

In the words of Mother Dust, who appears in the third volume, ‘Early in life we recognize certain talents in ourselves, and we focus on those to the exclusion of others. It’s not that nothing else is possible, but that nothing else was nurtured.’³⁵ This expresses the idea that it is possible for all human beings to live their lives without knowing their hidden talents. It can be argued that Jacob, who fortunately or unfortunately realises and develops

his ability because of his grandfather in peculiardom, just comes to the starting line of his life as well.

Notes

1. Leah Gallo, *The Art of a Tim Burton Film Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2016), p.4.
2. Maria Russo, 'A Book That Started with Its Pictures'. (*The New York Times* December 30, 2013)
3. Gallo, p.4.
4. The second volume titled *Hollow City* was published in 2014 and the third one, *Library of Souls*, was in 2015. Both also became bestsellers.
5. Christian DuChateau recommends *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* to readers 'searching for the next Harry Potter' and indicates that this book is another fantasy work that portrays the quest of a gifted child.
6. Riggs expresses his delight as follows:

'Tim Burton has been one of my film heroes since I was old enough to know what a film director was. His influence on *Miss Peregrine* is clear enough to anyone who reads it closely; his aesthetic is part of its DNA, sliced alongside that of Edward Gorey, C. S. Lewis, and Arthur Conan Doyle. If you had asked me to choose a dream director for *Miss Peregrine*, living or dead, I would have chosen Tim Burton. So the fact that he found my book at all — a little book from a little publisher and a first-time author — was amazing enough. That he wanted to *make a film of it* seemed too perfect to be true.' (Gallo, p.4)

7. Ransom Riggs, *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*. (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2011), p. 26.
8. *Ibid*, p. 33.
9. *Ibid*, p. 32. His grandfather, who is Jewish, calls Jacob 'Yakob'.
10. *Ibid*, p.60.
11. Gallo, p. 7.
12. As Russo quotes, Riggs himself says about those photographs have 'an "Edward Gorey-like Victorian weirdness, these haunting images of peculiar children."'
13. Gallo explains the interaction between the photographs and the story with the author's own words:

Over-all, it was a give and take in which the pictures served the story but also shaped it. "The story would affect the kind of pictures I [Riggs] looked for, and then the picture I found, which was never quite what I was imagining when writing, would change the story just a little bit . . . I thought it would be really interesting if I got this super-fake, fantastical story, and then it's anchored by pictures of real things and real places and historical events . . . I kind of like that tension between fiction and documentary." (p. 14)

14. In the film, Burton exchanges Emma's ability with Olive's. But he says, 'If I could describe Emma in one word it would be *fierce*' (Gallo, p.38), which is highly assessed by the author as a shrewd comment; and thus, makes full use of her floating ability when she needs to fight in the latter part of the film.

As another change, in the Burton version, there are twins among the peculiar children in

Miss Peregrine's home, though they are not among them but merely shown in two photographs included in the first volume.

15. Riggs, *Miss Peregrine*, p.9.

16. *Ibid*, pp.139-141.

Tim Burton's film successfully represents this 'enchanted place' by showing the large garden on a sunny day that seems like paradise where peculiar children are playing at first. Topiaries in the shapes of a dinosaur or a mythic figure, which are reminiscent of those shaped by Edward Scissorhands, are exactly like the description in the original. Manohla Dargis expresses the boy protagonist's journey to the world in the past and the encounter with a mysterious Miss Peregrine as follows:

Jake [Jacob] goes down the rabbit hole and lands in a time loop where Miss Peregrine (a delightful Eva Green), welcomes him to 1943 with mad eyes and a Sherlock-sized pipe that she likes to clench between her pretty teeth.

17. At the beginning of the second volume, *Hollow City*, all the peculiar children at Miss Peregrine's home are introduced with their full names, short accounts about them, and their black-and-white pictures.

18. Riggs, *Miss Peregrine*, p.142.

19. Peculiar refers to such ordinary people as 'normals' in their words.

20. 'Glossary of Peculiar Terms' in the third volume, *Library of Souls*.

21. Reality is skilfully woven into this story so as to be mixed with aspects of fantasy. Since the background of the story of peculiar children is situated in the Second World War, Jacob's Jewish grandfather could not help escaping from the Nazis to England. This logically accounts for the attitude of Jacob's practical parents who believe the fact rather than Abe's story, which seems to be created by his imagination. However, it becomes gradually clear that children living in the 'enchanted place' and the monster threatening the children in the seemingly-imaginary story Jacob is told by his grandfather is actually the truth, which indicates that this fantasy work is well-plotted.

22. How the first Ymbryne, Ymeene improved her talent to make a time loop and how the length of loop is limited to twenty-four hours are explained in 'The First Ymbryne' in *Tales of the Peculiar* (2016). Although the collection is also written by Riggs, according to the front page, it is supposed to have been edited and annotated by Millard Nullings, an invisible boy who once belonged to Miss Peregrine's home. Millard is described as an earnest researcher, who tries to record every detail of his limited daily life in the first volume. In addition, the publisher's name is printed as 'Syndrigast Publications'. 'Syndrigast' is another name of a peculiar. Furthermore, it is explained behind the front page that the publisher is somewhere in London, but 'you should not attempt to locate, for your own safety.'

23. In the second and third volumes of the trilogy, this book is often mentioned as being written to console and assist peculiar children in trouble. Usually, peculiar children are familiar with the book and during their harsh journey, Bronwyn is asked to read a tale aloud by younger kids among them. For Jacob, who was brought up among normals, this becomes the source of knowledge about the peculiar.

24. Gallo, p.25.

25. Riggs, *Miss Peregrine*, p.213.

26. *Ibid*, pp.240-241.

27. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 18-19.

28. Riggs, *Library of Souls*.

29. Riggs, *Miss Peregrine*, pp. 165-166.

30. *Ibid*, p.204.
31. *Ibid*, p.206.
32. *Ibid*, p.337.
33. The film adaptation, which is based on the first volume, is concluded with a happy ending. Jacob once returns to his own age and finally finds another loop where he can meet Emma again to live with her. In addition, he and peculiar children succeed to bring back Miss Peregrine, who gets back all her abilities.
34. The wight blames peculiars as follows:
- “No! What’s *really* insane is how you peculiars hide from the world when you could rule it —— succumb to death when you could dominate it —— and let the common genetic trash of the human race drive you underground when you could so easily make them your slaves, as they rightly should be! . . . That’s insane!” (Riggs, *Miss Peregrine*, p.322)
35. Riggs, *Library of Souls*, p. 258.

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