Speech given by DIA CALHOUN at the Young Adult Library Services Association "SF in SF – Science Fiction and Fantasy in San Francisco" Pre conference at the American Library Association Annual Meeting, June 2001.

The Robber and the Night Watchman

by Dia Calhoun

Good morning. Because it's early enough that we are all still thinking fondly of our pillows, I would like to tell you about my set of antique bedroom furniture—a bed, a chest of drawers, and a dressing table. I inherited this bedroom set from my mother, who inherited it from my grandmother, who purchased it in the 1920s in Aberdeen, Washington.

After years of repairs, the pieces are a patchwork of mahogany, bird's eye maple, and oak—all stained a dark brown. On each piece, ornately carved fans and scallops swoop across the front. The most prominent decorations are the golden split spindles. To make these, the craftsman turned spindles until they rippled with knobs and curves. Then he cut the spindles lengthwise and glued them on as appliqués.

When I was five years old, the chest of drawers stood against the wall in my bedroom, beside the door opening into the hall. My parents always left the hall light on at night. In my dark room, I could see the front edge of the chest silhouetted against the light framed in the open doorway. The ornate bumps and curves on the split spindle formed the profile of a man. His brow jutted forward; his nose belled out; and his lips pursed as though he were whistling. He wore a cap such as the Artful Dodger might have worn. For some reason, that cap convinced me the man was a robber, a thief.

All night, I lay on my right shoulder, afraid to turn my back on him because I knew he would rob the chest of drawers the second I lowered my guard. My father tried to explain away my fear by telling me the chest was only a piece of furniture, but I already knew that. Even at five, I knew perfectly well the robber was not real; he would not have frightened me so much if he were real. The robber was supernatural, magic, and that was why he both terrified and entranced me. When reasoning failed, my father simply left more lights on in the hall, which didn't help at all. Light made the robber come alive. The light and dark together formed the silhouette.

As I lay awake, I wondered what the robber wanted to steal from the chest. It contained not only my clothes—shirts, pants, white socks rolled up like snowballs—but also my treasures, bark from a tree-friend, a gum-wrapper necklace, and probably a squished Reese's peanut butter cup I had stolen from my brother. Because these would not interest a robber, I concluded that something secret must lay inside the drawers. What treasures might be hidden inside? What monsters might be waiting to get out?

In spite of the terror the robber caused me, I'm grateful to him, for he taught me to regard the dark as a source of perilous riches. And the first character I ever created came alive through the interplay of light and dark—one of the essential themes of fantasy. As a fantasy creature himself, the robber seeks magic treasure. He also steals in magical ways. Because of this, I think of him as one source of the fantasy elements in my novels.

When I write, I employ the robber as much as possible. I equip him with the latest in modern equipment—heat-seeking devices, night-vision goggles, palm pilots with satellite links—and then send him off to pry open the drawers in my mind and loot the treasures inside. To show you how the robber works, I would like to give an example from each of my books.

As some of you know, my in-laws' orchard in Eastern Washington inspired my first novel, *Firegold*. The Farm, as we call it, is the loveliest place in the world. When you feel the enchantment of an orchard, you don't need a robber to find the idea of a magic apple or the drama in the Garden of Eden. However, the robber did use his skills in the biggest fantasy scene in the novel: Jonathon's experience in the Skull Cavern. To create the fantasy elements in this scene, the robber pulled out his lock picks and stole several memories from the Farm. I will describe two.

The first came from a deer skeleton I stumbled over in the wild hills behind the Farm. The spine twisted across the trail, the bones grayish-white. In that country, the bones of many creatures—coyotes, magpies, deer, even cows—lay scattered on the sagebrush-covered hills or under the pines and aspens down by the creek in the canyon. But the deer skeleton I saw that day was almost complete—a recent kill. And yet, up through one of the eye sockets in the skull, a tiny weed grew, waving in the wind as though calling, "Here! I'm here!" In death, I saw life triumphant.

The second memory the robber pinched for the Skull Cavern scene comes from pruning trees. In winter, a crew prunes all the apple and pear trees on the Farm—down come twigs and branches and limbs crowned with water sprouts. All these forked branches lie on the snow, where they look like gigantic deer antlers.

Now, I'll briefly describe the Skull Cavern scene, and you will see how the robber turned both my memories into fantasy elements. Near the end of *Firegold*, Jonathon takes the Ridgewalk to Kalivi Mountain, mountain of dreams, a rite of passage that each fourteen-year-old Dalriada must take in order to become an adult. After many difficulties, Jonathon reaches the Skull Cavern, an enormous cave in the heart of the mountain. High up in the ceiling, stars shine through windows shaped like the eyes, nose, and mouth holes of a skull. Jonathon is inside of death.

Later in the scene, Jonathon sees the divine Red Hart—a deer with magnificent antlers—the Hart in the heart of the mountain. The Red Hart offers itself, and Jonathon shoots it with an arrow. After the god dies, his antlers grow, transforming into branches, becoming an apple tree that stretches up and up until at last it soars through the eye of the Skull Cavern. Jonathon climbs out through the eye of death.

To transform my memories into fantasy elements, the robber also stole the emotions wrapped around these images of life and death and then magnified them: from a weed growing through

the eye of a deer skull, to a magic tree growing through the eye of the Skull Cavern; from tree branches on the snow that look like enormous antlers, to a god's antlers that grow into a magic tree.

Before I talk about the robber's influence on a fantasy element in *Aria of the Sea*, I need to tell you about the most beautiful piece in my bedroom set—the dressing table. It looks like a fancy desk with two deep drawers on either side and a shallow one in the middle. At the back, two spindles thrust up like towers to support the arched mirror, which swings between them.

If I tilt the mirror backward, I see myself as predominantly nostril. If I tilt it forward, I admire the broad, noble brow I've suddenly acquired. What I see changes depending not only on the mirror's angle, but also on how closely I stand to the mirror and on how the light falls. Finally, what I see also depends upon who is holding the glass.

In *Aria of the Sea*, Cerinthe's family, friends, teachers, and boyfriend constantly hold mirrors in front of her. "Look," they say, "this is who you should be." What they really mean is, "Look, this is who I want you to be." How does a teenager find her self in a castle of mirrors constructed by others? Cerinthe discovers her true self through her choice of vocation—a word resonating with spiritual overtones. It suggests that God is calling you to a particular kind of work and, consequently, that you have a calling. An enchanting thought.

To explore these ideas, I chose the vocation of dancing because I spent twelve years training to be a professional ballet dancer. When you begin a career at age five, by age seventeen, it forms a huge part of your self. If you change your career, you change your self. You tilt the mirror to a different angle.

When I began *Aria*, I wanted Cerinthe to be an average dancer so I could show the experience of those who are as she would say "second best," those who end up in the Hometown Ballet instead of the New York City Ballet. But, as the robber's shovel probed deeper, I found I was really writing about the experience of changing your calling, with all its psychological

and spiritual difficulties. How do you know when a dream is no longer right? I needed to make Cerinthe's decision to switch from dancing to healing as hard as possible. The best way was to make her an excellent dancer. Giving up something you do well is harder than giving up something you do poorly. So, instead of an average dancer, I had Cerinthe see a protégé in her mother's mirror, but the sight gave her little pleasure. Something was wrong; something was missing, but what?

Enter, the robber, silently, on his magic footpads. He influenced the greatest fantasy element in the book—a fantasy character this time, and a character central to Cerinthe's understanding of who she is and what vocation she should choose. This character is a goddess called the Sea Maid. She sails through the Windward Archipelago in a gigantic scallop shell pulled by six blue sea horses. The robber swiped her appearance from Botticelli's *Venus*, but he built her character out of my own longing.

To do that, he stole two things. First, the aria. An aria is a song sung by a single voice, often a high, clear, beautiful, woman's voice. All my life, this voice has haunted me, called me, filled me with joy and longing. So has the second thing the robber stole: my love of Puget Sound. When I walk along the Sound, all blue water, blue-grey sky—except for the dark green islands

and the white mountains behind them—I feel the same inexpressible longing as when I listen to an aria. The robber combined these two sources of longing, the aria and Puget Sound and forged them into one fantasy character.

He did that by giving the Sea Maid a voice, the divine singing voice of the archipelago. Her song guides those who are lost at sea or, like Cerinthe, lost in their hearts. Cerinthe grows up hearing the Sea Maid's voice, taking it for granted until one day it stops. Cerinthe eventually learns that the Sea Maid's voice is her own voice, the truest part of herself, the part to trust and follow, the mirror in which to seek her reflection.

For my third novel, a prequel to *Firegold* that will be out next year, the robber used all his skills, hurling grappling hooks, placing bundles of dynamite, digging a warren of underground tunnels, always working expertly in his own medium—the darkness. In the middle of the book, Rose, a fifteen-year-old girl with asthma, spends every third night locked in a dark attic with a monster. The technical difficulties were immense. How do you keep the reader's interest when you can't describe anything visually? Or when your character huddles on a bed, afraid to move in the darkness? Both the writer and the character have only one place to go—into the character's imagination. But how?

Thinking about this problem one night, I lay awake in my bed—the last piece in the antique bedroom set. I touched one of the bedposts, exploring its knobs and rings in the dark. Have you any idea how many things a bedpost can be? A tower, a human body, a gnarled tree, a club, a bony leg, a chess piece—I was astonished. And I seized this idea for the novel. In the dark attic, Rose clings to the bedpost as something recognizable, familiar, a dependable anchor in the blackness. However, she finds that its shape creates images, and these images lead her imagination into perilous realms.

Rose's ordeal became extraordinarily real to me because the robber delights in opening buried vaults of emotion. When I write, my emotions sometimes parallel my main character's emotions. I'm not always aware of this, but it is evidence of the robber's work—the fingerprints he leaves on the windowsill. As I focused on the attic chapters, I grew depressed as Rose's experience being trapped in the dark became my own. Then, in the middle of this creative ordeal, a world tragedy struck. The Russian submarine, the Kursk, went down. Part of me, well-primed by my work, went down with them. After all, I had spent all summer imagining how it felt to be trapped in a dark place where I could scarcely breathe.

During the tense days when the world still hoped the crew might be rescued, I couldn't work. I burned candles—Rose is a candlemaker. I sent the crew my thoughts, my strength, my breath. My chest began to hurt. Gradually, I realized I was lost. I had to come up. I had the luxury of being able to come up, which they did not. Because of this experience and the robber's work, I developed powerful fantasy images and scenes for the prequel.

Now that I have told you about each of the pieces in my bedroom set—the chest, dressing table, and bed—I wonder whether I would be here talking to you at all if my grandmother had preferred Shaker furniture, preferred clean lines and plain surfaces. Without the ornate split spindle,

no robber would have haunted my childhood nights. I might have fallen asleep instead of telling

myself stories about the robber, and I might have grown up to write technical manuals instead of fantasy.

Like my bedroom set, fantasy is more ornate than the other genres—not necessarily as far as style, though that's often true, but as far as character or, especially, setting. What's more ornate than a dragon? More baroque than a sea goddess? More elaborate than an enchanted forest? More opulent than the grail? In fantasy, a surface richness suggests a richness of meaning, suggests the complexities of buried treasure in the subconscious. Surface richness stands in for the unexplained and the unexplainable. The surface becomes the point of departure for worlds unknown.

When I was writing this speech, I pulled out my chest of drawers one

night, adjusted the lights, and checked to see whether the robber's profile really existed. And yes! It sprang out instantly, unmistakably—cap, brow, nose, lips—and still so familiar. With the lights back on, I rubbed the split spindle where it formed the robber's nose. As I did, I realized that because

the split spindle was gold, the robber, too, was gold!

I stood, spellbound. Had I been wrong about the robber all these years? Is it possible that instead of a robber, he is a night watchman shining a golden light from his lantern? Is it possible that instead of robbing the treasure inside the drawers, he is guarding it? But why must the split spindle–man be only a robber or a night watchman? We have only to touch the bedpost to know that an object may be two things at once. Nestled into the silhouette is its reverse shape, a silhouette of light.

Like the robber, the night watchman works in a magic way to find fantasy elements for my books. Stories are made of stolen pieces arranged together, mere still lives until magic transforms them and gives them life. Could the night watchman's light sweeping through the darkness be the magic that brings a fantasy story alive? Perhaps he selects what we see in a story, and what order we see it in, pointing the way to the Beyondlands.

Of course, fantasy's power to transport us to other worlds points us to our experiences in this world. The robber takes me into other realms inside the chest of drawers, down into the deep parts of my psyche, down under the snowball socks and the squished Reese's and the assorted bags of potpourri neuroses. "Here you are," he says, "here you are!"

In all my books, magic is the ultimate source of the hero's true knowledge about herself. Once found, the magic reveals, and finally, illuminates. In *Firegold*, when Jonathon eats the magic apple, he realizes he is whole—the magic apple doesn't make him whole—it makes him understand that he always has been whole. In *Aria of the Sea*, when Cerinthe realizes the Sea Maid's divine voice is her own truest voice, she instinctively knows the direction her life must take. In the *Firegold* prequel, when Rose hears the enchanted land speak, she understands who she is and what she must do. All of these are examples of magic as voice, magic as the hero's identity, the unexplainable, mysterious part of the self that rises to guide us.

When teenagers read fantasy, I hope they will be inspired to search for their own essential magical voices. I hope they will trust this voice. I hope they will use it as a guide and a source of

strength as they enter a life that is rich and complex, a life where even the simplest objects can be loaded with meaning, and a life where perceptions change depending on how you tilt the mirror.

At our best, perhaps fantasy writers, like the golden split spindle–man, are both robbers and night watchmen. We steal shamelessly for the work we do—from friends, strangers, newspapers, books, and the musty drawers of our subconscious. But we also protect and illuminate the treasures we find. As robbers and night watchmen, we fantasy writers stride across the twilight roofs with a sack in one hand and a lantern in the other, searching for gold, scepters, dragons, unicorns, magic apples—for surfaces to hold the truth, for stories to illuminate the essential magical voice.