

## Lucy Boston's Kaleidoscopic World of Fantasy in *The Guardians of the House*

Yasuko Shirasu

### Introduction

Lucy Boston (1892 ~ 1990) is best known as the author of the *Green Knowe* series in which the Manor House at Hemingford Grey near Cambridge—her self-restored residence originally built in the early twelfth century—serves as a background. The first book in the series, *The Children of Green Knowe* (1954), along with *Yew Hall* (1954), an adult novel, marked the rather late start of her literary career at the age of sixty-two. In the ensuing years Boston wrote novels, autobiographies, poems and a play for both children and adults. The Manor House and its garden play an important role in most of her books for children. *The Guardians of the House* (1974) is one such story, written at the age of eighty-two, which focuses on the various artefacts with faces or heads which actually decorate the ancient stone house where silence is the prevailing feature. Like most of her titles for children, this one was illustrated by Boston's only son, Peter, an architect. This paper will explore Lucy Boston's artistry as seen in *The Guardians of the House*, after reviewing her life and major books for children.

### **Formative Years**

The crucial year in the life of Boston was 1937. This was when she had a life-changing encounter with the Manor at Hemingford Grey. This important event which occurred at the mid point of her life clearly determined the course of the second half of her long and active life. Boston's life is candidly recorded in her two autobiographies, *Memory in a House* (1973) dealing with her life after 1937, and *Perverse and Foolish* (1979) looking back on her childhood and youth. Reading these and the two short contributions by Peter Boston in *Memories* (1992) gives us her idea that the life before 1937 was a long formative period for Boston in terms of her literature, art and music.

As for Boston's childhood, there are some significant circumstances and experiences that had a lasting influence on her. One is the fact that she was raised by her strict, Victorian parents in an upper-middle household. They were keen Wesleyans who led an extremely evangelical and puritanical life, avoiding all sorts of pleasure. Rose (64) attributes the unique old-fashioned atmosphere of Boston's stories to "the sheer firmness of her moral judgements," while Townsend (1971: 32) states that "Mrs Boston is not an explicitly moral writer, but her values are clearly to be seen." It is undeniable that her Victorian upbringing formed a part of her attitude towards life in general and towards the characters in her stories.

Boston's second memoir *Perverse and Foolish* (1979) describes

how her childhood underwent a sudden change at the age of ten when her family moved to the country for a year for her mother's health. For the first time in her life she could indulge herself in the natural beauty of the countryside, which awakened her dormant five senses and fully developed them. Boston learned the joy of being one with nature, and perhaps at the same time the relentless aspects of nature as well. Based on her own experiences as a child, Boston stressed the importance of direct sense stimulus for children to nurture their imagination when she addressed an audience at a lecture in 1968 (Townsend, 1971). Boston's stories are written in such a way as to stimulate children's external senses and thus activate the internal sense of child readers.

As a teenager Boston was an avid reader, and enjoyed painting as well as playing outdoor sports. When she was a student at Somerville College, Oxford, she cut short her study to serve as a voluntary nurse in France during the First World War. Then in 1917 she married at the age of 25 and a son, Peter, was born the following year, but the marriage was dissolved in 1935. While Boston was going through a hard time before and after the traumatic experience of divorce, she spent a few years travelling around the cultural capitals of Europe, while devoting her time and energy to painting and finding solace in classical music. It was in 1937 that Boston returned to England, as her son Peter was going to be an undergraduate at King's College, Cambridge that year.

### **Multi-Faceted Life After 1937**

In the same year that Boston returned to England, she had a chance meeting with the Manor at Hemingford Grey, to which she was immediately attracted. As soon as she purchased the Norman stone house built about 1120, she embarked on ambitious restoration work. She spent two years trying to reveal the original hidden features of the house, and eventually settled there in 1939. Boston wrote that the “place where I have felt immediately rooted is my present home” (1992 : 140). However, she had to wait for another fifteen years patiently listening to the silent voice of the house before she was finally inspired to write the first two novels about the house in 1954.

In her first autobiography, *Memory in a House* (1973 : 288–289), Boston describes how she came to be categorised as a children’s writer. When she submitted her first two manuscripts to Faber and Faber in 1954, the publisher wished to put *The Children of Green Knowe* in their adult list alongside *Yew Hall*. However, when Boston insisted that the book should be illustrated by her son, Peter, they ruled that the books with pictures were only for children, and therefore Boston was automatically labelled as an author of children’s books. This means that if Boston had not asked Peter to collaborate with her, the *Green Knowe* series might have been regarded as adult literature. But now it is difficult for us to imagine the six *Green Knowe* books without Peter’s evocative monochrome illustrations. The stories and illustrations are inseparable and they together create a fantastic world of their

own, similar to the relationship between Lewis Carroll's two *Alice* books and John Tenniel's popular illustrations.

Being a children's writer is, however, only one facet of Boston's life after 1937. According to the DVD of the guided tour of the Manor House (1997), currently the house attracts four different groups of people. The largest group is, of course, the readers of Boston's books, particularly the *Green Knowe* stories. The others include those who are interested in the Norman architecture of the Manor restored by Boston, the garden that was set out and carefully tended to by Boston, and her patchwork masterpieces.

Boston spent the winter months writing books as a committed author while making patchwork quilts in front of the old fireplace. A collection of her beautiful meticulously sewn art patchworks is on display at the Manor, attracting patchwork enthusiasts from around the world. During the summer, she spent all day in the garden as a dedicated gardener. Her peaceful garden with variously shaped topiary trees and her favourite old roses is yet another of her important creative achievements.

In addition, though Boston was not a performer, her deep love of classical music, particularly Baroque, prompted her to hold regular musical evenings at home for RAF officers during the Second World War. She continued to hold private concerts for friends in later years. One of her important professional guest musicians was Colin Tilney who played his Irish harpsichord for her. Boston's favourite was Frescobaldi's *Cento Partite sopra Passacagli*—a hundred variations on the passacaglia. In 1973

Boston created a single-size patchwork quilt entitled ‘Thirty Variations on a Theme’ for Tilney as a token of her gratitude for playing her favourite Frescobaldi in her house. The photographs of this patchwork can be found in Boston’s daughter-in-law Diana Boston’s book (1995: 71, 73, 75). The description of the quilt in Tilney’s (1994) words:

Sitting among her guests, utterly still and absorbed (‘I love having to listen hard’), Lucy was evidently translating the figures of music into shapes and colours ... All the patches are of cotton ; the theme (passacaglia bass) is a dotted brown, and the thirty rose-like clusters (variations) are worked in every colour from gallica red to tangerine yellow. As in the music, figures in one flower turn up, transformed, in the next, and the whole structure is rigorously controlled by a mind that took special delight in Bach Fugues. (131)

As we have seen, Boston’s latent creative talents all burst into flower after her vital encounter with the Manor House in 1937. East (1994) sums up, “Whatever she touched, whether it was literature, horticulture, topiary, needlework or simply everyday life, bore the imprint of her unerring sense of beauty and quality” (34).

### **Overview of Lucy Boston’s Books for Children**

Lucy Boston wrote eleven major novels for children that can be classified into the following three categories : the *Green Knowe*

series, *The Sea Egg*, and shorter stories. The most important and well-known is the set of six books in the *Green Knowe* series written between 1954 and 1976, though there is a long gap between the fifth (*An Enemy at Green Knowe*, 1964) and the concluding (*The Stones of Green Knowe*, 1976) stories. Green Knowe, the house in Boston's stories, is her own residence at Hemingford Grey, which she regards as "the underlying symbol" (Boston, 1977 : 216) in all her books. Mrs Oldknow, the owner of the house, is the author herself in slight disguise, and her great-grandson, Tolly, is modelled after Boston's son, Peter.

Although Boston rarely travelled away from home after 1937, Hollindale (1994 : 78–79) points out that four different kinds of travelling took place from the Manor at Hemingford Grey, as the series developed over the years. First of all, "There is travelling in time." Most of the books in this series are 'time fantasy,' in which the child protagonist makes free movement through the centuries. For example, the modern boys and girls in *The Children of Green Knowe* (1954), *The Chimneys of Green Knowe* (1958) and *The River at Green Knowe* (1959) experience frequent time travels to the past, while in the final book in the series, *The Stones of Green Knowe* (1976), Roger, a twelfth-century boy, travels forward in time to meet the children who have appeared in the series. Secondly, "There is travelling in space." The series starts off with the manor house in the idyllic English countryside as its main setting, but it gradually expands its territory outwards and eventually, in *A Stranger at Green Knowe* (1961), it reaches as far

away as the African jungle where Hanno the gorilla was born and brought up before he was cruelly captured by humans and brought all the way to the London Zoo. The third is “travelling across ethnic boundaries.” The quality of Englishness is very strong in the first book in the series (*The Children*); however, in the second book (*The Chimneys*), a West Indian boy Jacob is introduced. It is followed by the third book (*The River*) in which the main character is Ping, a displaced Chinese boy. He appears again in the subsequent two stories, (*A Stranger*) and *An Enemy at Green Knowe* (1964). Finally, “Most radical of all there is travelling across the boundary of species.” This is achieved in the fourth (*A Stranger*) and the concluding (*The Stones*) stories. The former is the Carnegie Medal winner that tells the story of two refugees, one human and the other animal, forming a close friendship in a crisis. Boston’s sympathy towards the oppressed in any life-form and her belief in the harmonious co-existence of man and animal are poignantly expressed in this story.

The second category consists of a sole book, *The Sea Egg* (1967). This is exceptional among Boston’s works, because the setting is not her usual solid stone house, but the ever-changing unpredictable world of water. The author explains this abrupt shift in the locale thus: “Today [the Manor at Hemingford Grey] is in suburbia... My darling Green Knowe has dwindled... There is not room for it to be. This may account for the flight to *The Sea Egg*. The sea is still real, undiminished” (Townsend, 1971: 36–37). Boston depicts the friendship between Triton, born from a

magical egg-shaped stone, and two human boys against the backdrop of the wild sea off the coast of Cornwall. According to Carpenter and Prichard (1984 : 77), "At their best, L. M. Boston's books are excellent examples of what is generally called 'poetic fantasy.'" *The Sea Egg* is certainly one of them, with its strong evocative power of mood.

Although Boston made an abrupt change in direction in *The Sea Egg*, it was only temporary, because she returned to her familiar house and garden for the rest of her books for children written between 1965 and 1975. There are four shorter stories classified into this third category : *The Castle of Yew* (1965), *Nothing Said* (1971), *The Guardians of the House* (1974) and *The Fossil Snake* (1975). Of these *The Guardians* is most similar to the *Green Knowe* series in terms of setting as well as theme. A lonely boy who has not found his own place in his new environment happens to make contact with some old objects in the House. They act as guides to transport the boy through time to their past one after another. He regains his sense of belonging at the end of his time travels.

Boston's underlying themes of time, past, memories, awe of the unknown, concern for the preservation of nature, and sympathy for both men and animals in distress are always there, and they are told again and again in different ways just like "an artist will explore and re-explore a theme that engages his mind" (Townsend, 1971 : 28).

### ***A Comparison of The Guardians of the House* (1974)**

#### **with Boston's Other Books**

Boston is often compared with Philippa Pearce, since both of them published classic 'time fantasy' stories in the 1950s. Townsend's (1996) evaluation of these important female authors is : "Her [Boston's] style, clear rather than colored, has the endlessly varied flow and sparkle of spring water ; it is unsurpassed by that of any other British children's writer, and rivaled by very few. One of the few is Philippa Pearce" (229). The house in Boston's *Green Knowe* series (1954~1976) and the garden in Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* (1958) serve as the gateway to the past. Mrs Oldknow in the former and Mrs Bartholomew in the latter are old ladies of the house who help the child protagonist travel to the past through their memories or imagination. Why do they do so? Hall (1998) gives the following answer :

Lucy Boston and Philippa Pearce clearly demonstrate that it is the duty of the older generation represented by Mrs Oldknow and Mrs Bartholomew to pass on their memories of this precious past to the younger generation to secure both its survival (if only as myth) and the child's sense of its own identity and place in the world. (235)

Memories of the past passed on in this manner must be perceived and understood by the receiver before they can mean something to him or her. Ringrose (2007) explains how this is done and how the past is evoked by these authors :

In this tradition, knowledge of the past is a liberating

experience, which mimics the artistic experience itself, conceived not as a web of intertextuality and proliferation of provisional meaning, but as a real means of understanding experience. Ideologically, the meaning of such books may be conservative, as in the almost feudal continuities of *Green Knowe*, but the way they invoke a sense of the past can be poetic and mysterious. (211)

*The Guardians of the House* follows this line of poetic fantasy. It shares some distinctive features found in Boston's other books. One of the similarities is that natural phenomena such as thunder and rain, sunshine and shadows act as cues to open a gate to a magical world which lies just across the threshold. Boston often uses this technique not only in the *Green Knowe* series but in other stories, thus making it very characteristic of her books. This reflects Boston's sense-stimulating experience in childhood through direct contact with nature, as well as her general concern about environmental issues. The readers are not quite sure whether the child protagonist Tom is really drawn into the past, or if his time slips are simply made in his imagination, but the joys and fears he experiences in the other world are vividly felt by the readers in this mysterious atmosphere.

As for the situation surrounding the main characters in Boston's stories, a similarity can be found here, too. Tom is a lonely, lost boy without a sense of belonging. This boy reminds us of Tolly, Ping and Hanno the gorilla, all of whom are in search of their own place in the world. These children and animal are at the

mercy of the people (adults) around them. Tom's parents move to a new factory town from the Welsh countryside probably due to their occupational reasons; Tolly has a stepmother as a result of his father's recent re-marriage; Ping was driven out of his own country because of political upheavals; Hanno was captured by greedy humans to be sold to a zoo. Since they have no power over their parents', captors' or country's decisions, they simply have to accept the unfamiliar circumstances and come to terms with them on their own. Except for Hanno, who inevitably chooses to die of his own accord, the other protagonists regain their sense of belonging with the help of Mrs Oldknowe in the ancient atmosphere of the House. The same magic works for Tom, though the presence of the old lady of the Manor House is only introductory in the form of Tom's external observation of the lady and the groundless rumours about her among people in the village. The boy has no direct contact with the lady in this story, but his meeting with her in the near future is suggested at the end of it.

The representation of the old lady of the Manor in Boston's three short stories is also interesting to compare. The lady in these stories is Boston herself. In *Nothing Said* (1971) the lady is depicted as an intelligent, middle-aged painter. Since the girl protagonist temporarily stays with her during the half-term holiday, the lady not only talks to the girl as a hostess but also takes part in various leisurely activities with her for entertainment. This shows the artistic and fun-loving aspects of

Boston herself. On the other hand, this lady is depicted as an elderly woman in *The Castle of Yew* (1965) and *The Guardians of the House* (1974). She is quite similar to Mrs Oldknow in the *Green Knowe* series. However, in the former the positive aspects of the lady are emphasised as in *Nothing Said*. For example, “She would do very well, thought Joseph, for a fairy godmother, the one that comes after the bad ugly one and straightens things out again” (15). But in the latter, the strangeness of the lady seems to be deliberately stressed, though Tom is on her side. Boston introduces the owner of the House as “the cause of much whispering and speculation” (8). The passersby describe the lady using such unfriendly words as “queer” or “a witch” (10). This negative description of the lady in *The Guardians of the House* may have something to do with the publication of her first autobiography *Memory in a House* (1973) in the preceding year, in which Boston frankly tells us about how people in the village rejected her as a witch in peacetime and as a spy during wartime. *The Guardians of the House* is the last novel in that Boston herself appears as the old lady of the Manor, and in this last book Boston takes account of other people’s point of view for the first time in presenting herself negatively but somewhat humorously.

Despite these similarities and variations, *The Guardians of the House* is quite unique among all the novels Boston wrote for children. This story seems to be carefully constructed with her keen sense of beauty as an artist. She also experimented with various possibilities in terms of setting and characters. Moreover,

the harmonious collaboration between the story and its illustrations is another important feature of this work.

### **The Story and the Patchwork**

According to the DVD mentioned above, “She more or less made one patchwork for each book. As her fingers were busy sewing, her mind was often busy planning her books.” It indicates the close relationship between the books Boston was writing and the patchwork quilts she was making. In 1973 Boston published *Memory in a House* and early in the same year she created the aforementioned “Passacaglia Patchwork” for Colin Tilney. As the last chapter of the memoir is about this great musician friend, it is undeniable that these two works are closely related.

*The Guardians of the House* was Boston’s next book published in 1974. As stated by Diana Boston (1995 : 10), the 1970s was the decade when Boston’s “production of patchworks was most prolific.” According to *The Patchworks of Lucy Boston* (Boston, 1995), between 1973 and 1974, when Boston was presumed to be writing *The Guardians of the House*, she produced three patchwork quilts, among which the most complicated and beautiful quilt called “Kaleidoscope” (79) made in 1973 and early 1974 seems to have the closest association with the story. The templates used to create this quilt are either isosceles triangles or squares (78), but when the fabrics of many different colours and patterns are intricately combined together, they give the quilt a magical circular effect. Each circle is a complete art work on its

own, but as “the circles overlap along the diagonals of the patchwork” (77), each one forms a part of the four different circles around it. The same shapes are repeated again and again, but not a single circle has exactly the same colour or pattern combination. As the viewers move their eyes diagonally, horizontally or vertically along the patterns, they can enjoy the real kaleidoscopic view of the patchwork. This structure seems to be reflected in the general structure of the story in *The Guardians of the House*.

### **The General Structure of the Story**

Boston's stories are often not divided into separate chapters. Instead they tend to flow eloquently from beginning to end, though they are usually punctuated by inserted episodes and anecdotes. However, *The Guardians of the House* consists of four independent chapters that can be compared to the four movements in classical music. Also each chapter can be compared to each individual circle in the “Kaleidoscope” patchwork. One chapter presents a complete story in itself, but at the same time it forms a part of a larger story. Each chapter tells an adventure story in the world of fantasy, but in reality it corresponds with the process of Tom's search for his identity.

The ‘guardian’ of the Manor House in each chapter is either a stone head or a straw mask. The Malayan goddess, Triton, the Indian head and the Donkey's head carry Tom away into the world of their past one by one where they teach him important

lessons.

This story is told in the typical ‘there and back again’ style, both in each chapter and the entire story. Tom’s adventure starts and ends at the entrance hall of the Manor House, and at the end of the story Tom is a transformed boy. Towards the beginning of Chapter 1, when Tom takes a sudden liking to an unusual vase in the entrance hall and tries to justify himself not as a trespasser but as an explorer, a carved wooden cherub asks a question, “‘Are you a good one or a bad one?’” (14) Another cherub answers, “‘He doesn’t know!’” (14) Exactly the same question and answer is repeated at the end of the story (60). Also before Tom leaves the House after all his exciting but terrifying experiences, he picks up his favourite vase to kiss it again. This structural symmetry of the story is accompanied by the visual symmetry of its illustrations, thus concluding the story as one completed cycle.

The illustrations play an important role in this story of about sixty pages. A third of the book consists of Peter Boston’s black-and-white full-page illustrations. Out of twenty illustrations, four of them are used twice: <A> Tom and His Favourite Vase (13, 61), <B> The Mask of a Donkey’s Head (17, 54), <C> The Head of Triton (19, 30), and <D> The Indian Head (42, 52). The illustrations <A> and <B> are used both at the beginning (Chapter 1) and the end (Chapter 4) of the story respectively, while the illustrations <C> and <D> are used in Chapters 1 and 2 for the former and in Chapters 2 and 3 for the latter, that is, these eight illustrations appear in the following order, <A> <B> <C> <C> <D>

⟨D⟩ ⟨B⟩ ⟨A⟩. In this way there are two kinds of symmetry involved here—the major ones covering the entire book and the minor ones in the middle of the book.

### **Setting and Characters**

Boston once said, “All my water is drawn from one well” (Townsend, 1971 : 36–37). The source of her imagination was, of course, the Manor at Hemingford Grey. Boston had explored the house closely for nearly forty years before she started writing *The Guardians of the House*. The imaginative well she had been digging since 1937 must have been deep enough to strike a vein of water. Therefore Boston could probably break through into the space where an intuitive insight into everything was possible. In her lifetime Boston visited only a few countries in Europe, so the world beyond was an unknown territory for her, but she could create such a realistic fictional world of the places she had never visited.

In terms of the setting, *The Guardians of the House* is the most exotic story Boston ever wrote, because the reader is whisked to a steamy tropical rainforest in Southeast Asia in one chapter, then in the next to an Italian seabed with ruins of an ancient Roman villa, followed by a mysterious cave in the middle of a scorching Indian desert, and finally coming back to the familiar garden at the Manor. In this story many striking contrasts are used for dramatic effect : East and the West, the land and the sea, the world with and without sound, bright primary colours and

delicate pastel shades, light and darkness, good and evil, life and death, beauty and terror.

In this kaleidoscopic setting, Boston tells a story about Tom's journey to regain his sense of belonging. On the other hand, an important element that pushes the story forward is Tom's 'possessiveness.' In the intense silence of the House, Tom discovers various unusual but attractive objects, and whenever he is gripped by a strong desire to own one of them, retribution of one kind or another comes down immediately, ranging from the mild mocking by wooden cherubs to the terrible attack by shoals of small but fierce fish. Just as the setting is more varied than that of Boston's earlier works, the characters in this story are more diverse than ever before. Boston expanded the spectrum of her characters over the years, from purely English to foreigners, from humans to animals and then to mythological figures. In *The Guardians of the House* she gave life to inorganic objects and also introduced Oriental religious figures represented by the Malayan goddess and Indian monks. Furthermore, the voice that emerges from the inner sanctuary of the mysterious cave and rescues Tom from his identity crisis belongs to universal supernatural beings. "All is Illusion." (47) is the secret the monks and the glorious voice in the cave tries to inculcate in Tom. The word "Illusion" reminds us of the close relationship between this story and the "Kaleidoscope" patchwork.

In *The Guardians of the House* Boston presents a wonderful world

of fantasy filled with different and constantly changing elements. Her values, philosophy and worldview are interwoven with the plot of the story, which is constructed with meticulous care as a piece of art work. In the words of Boston, “All art is an invitation to share the creator’s world: a door thrown open or a mesh to ensnare. I prefer in this context the word *mesh*, because in a mesh every strand is equally important; lose one and there is a big hole in no time. In a work of art every word or pencil stroke or note has a reference to every other! They interrelate, foreshadow, recall, enlarge, and play all over each other to produce a specific feeling—*not* a moral” (Boston, 1977: 220).

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