



Dreams and the Writer

Penny Boxall

BEFORE I WAS a writer, I was a reader; and before that, I dreamt.

At the beginning of each chapter in *Northern Lights*, the first book in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, there is a small illustration. The second chapter, 'The Idea of the North', is illustrated by a small projector of an old and intriguing sort and, operating it, an anonymous hand. The drawing, by Pullman himself, is economically done: a few lines for grains of wood, a couple of cogs, and that bold flood of white light. This image, and the book in which it is found, made a deep impression on my twelve-year-old mind: it was, to me, emblematic of the whole experience of the novel, and indeed of reading itself. Someone clever and assured projecting images, magic-lantern-like, against the blank wall of my mind. When I was about fourteen, my mother introduced me to the stories of Katherine Mansfield. 'Something Childish but Very Natural' stood out, with its adolescent lovers, and the house they dream into existence through sheer force of longing. Certainties morph and expand; reality is thin and unreliable as gossamer. Here is the dream sequence from the end of the story:

Henry thought he saw a big white moth flying down the road. It perched on the gate. No, it wasn't a moth. It was a little girl in a pinafore. What a nice little girl, and he smiled in his sleep [...]

The girl gives him a telegram.



The garden became full of shadows — they spun a web of darkness over the cottage and the trees and Henry and the telegram. But Henry did not move.

What images are conjured here, and what gaps between those images of the white moth, the pinafores girl, the telegram, the shadows. They are disparate but connected by a spotlight logic. Those same images, examined in the daylight, would lose the moonlit magic which unites them here. That last image of Henry – caught still – glows and fades like a dream.

I think that the act of writing puts us in a place that isn't far from this dream-state. Associative images; meandering streams-of-consciousness; pools of light projected onto scenes of which we might not guess the significance. We sit; we dream up situations and conundra and resolutions for people who have never quite existed. To try to achieve that 'flow' state of deep concentration, I silence external distractions. I mentally wander. I encourage that same delicious distractibility which makes me such a poor listener at lectures.

Lately, frustrated by my inability to stay awake to read at night, I've been waking earlier and earlier, and taking a cup of tea and a book back to bed for an hour. I slip back between the covers and pick up reading where I left off the morning before. Newly woken, my mind has still not quite caught up with the reality of the world. My round-bellied bedside lamp throws a loop of warm light. I lean in, and fall into the projected light of someone else's dream.