

## MIRACLES

Sarah Dowse

In 1957 I met an Australian named Dowse. I was living in Los Angeles, a student at the state university there, to which he had come on a scholarship especially set up to import Australians who could teach gridiron players how to play rugby in the off-season. This was to keep them fit and out of trouble generally. Well, I met this young man and not immediately but eventually fell in love with him. The next thing I knew I was crossing an ocean, to make a new life for myself in Australia.

Fourteen years and four children later I left him, to claim, as I saw it, that life back for my own. The years in Australia had been difficult for me. I didn't blame my husband for that but blamed the Australian culture which had shaped him. Specifically, I blamed its lamentably masculine bias, about which we all know. Yet there was much about Australia that I did like and by then I considered it my home. This was 1972, many exciting things were happening; the dull, stifling suburban complacency was changing, the possibilities for women were changing and I threw my lot in with it and became an Australian. Yet in spite of my deepening feminism, I kept my husband's name. I thought at the time it was because it was the name of my children. Now I wonder.

It may be difficult from this brief introduction to deduce that what I want to talk about is miracles. Though not perhaps an inappropriate subject for this conference, in the ordinary course of things there is something faintly embarrassing about it and I've been as diffident as the next person in approaching it. But now, with a deep sigh, I'm prepared to face the subject full on.

The first time I found myself actively thinking about miracles was when I was writing the draft of my last book, *Sapphires*. The paragraph which I'm quoting underwent many changes before it appeared as this:

My grandmother, Miriam Lavan, died the year the Russians sent a woman into space. She was neither surprised nor disdainful of this: 'There will always be miracles,' she said, 'and their blessings will always be mixed.'

There are things I want to say about this passage. The first is that it comes from the chapter called 'The Grove of Asherah'. As you would be aware, Asherah was the Canaanite version of the Great Goddess, here designated as 'The Lady who Treads upon the Sea'. The grove refers to the

places of her worship, but also, symbolically, to the female genitalia. Asherah's groves are mentioned in the Old Testament - in Kings - and there abominated; it was Jezebel who worshipped Asherah and she, too, was abominated. Questions of godhead, gender and creativity are raised in this chapter, which is among other things about what it means to be a writer. Intimately bound up in this is the issue of women's spirituality, and the difficulty of finding or expressing it in an overwhelmingly secular and technocratic culture. To me, it is all there in that one passage: the woman sent into space, the miracles with their shadows.

As such, 'The Grove of Asherah' brings together many of the themes enunciated throughout the book. *Sapphires* is often, perhaps mainly, read as a family saga, and that it is, after a fashion, though it is, in its form, deliberately deconstructive of that genre. The fundamental question it raises for me is how human beings connect, when time and distance and conflict pull them apart. Nor was it my intention to limit my concerns to one set of biologically related persons. Like most writers, my concerns were broader. 'Family' to me meant the human family as much as it did four specific generations of Ashkenazi Jews.

Like most creative acts, the writing of *Sapphires* was a journey. As for its destination, that, I believe, was hidden deep in my unconscious. What I fished up from it was a religious sensibility I hardly knew I had. What this means in my practical, day-to-day life is hard to say. As a result of my journey with *Sapphires* I joined my local Jewish community, an act that was hedged about with misgivings on both sides. I have not been a good Jew. The orthodoxy of my grandparents seemed bizarrely foreign and restrictive to me, and still does; my parent's sporadic attendance at their reform synagogue seemed flat and uninspiring. As is the case with many Jews, left-wing politics extracted the kind of faith and loyalty from me that others offer religion. Perhaps if I had never wanted to be a writer and had never become one, this is where it would have rested. But it has been my experience that the practice of the art of fiction brings a writer in touch with different dimensions of reality, and it is all too possible that it was my need for access to those dimensions that made me become a writer in the first place.

Serendipity or synchronicity? While I was pondering over what to say to you today I happened to hear the Irish writer Edna O'Brien being interviewed on Radio National. When asked about what was 'true' and what was 'made up' in her writing, she spoke instead about the 'transmutation' of autobiographical fact that occurs in the writing of fiction,

which leads the writer into deeper truths. She didn't hesitate to call this 'a little miracle' when it happens and I would agree with her.

But experiencing the miraculous is more than an act, even a profoundly mysterious and beautiful act; I think it is an attitude of mind. It's an attitude of mind that's especially difficult to cultivate in our resolutely scientific, secular culture, yet I don't think it's all that impossible. Nor do you, I venture, or you wouldn't be here at this conference. To understand and control some little corner of the universe - which is how science and technology work - need not detract from one's wonder. We can hear voices of people thousands of miles away; we see, instantaneously, their images. We fly in the bodies of bird-like creatures everyday - and think nothing of it. Yet are these not miracles? We see shadows move on a screen which tell us stories, about heroes so large and godlike they might have come from the sky. The ancient Polynesians thought the sky was a screen and the pale men who came in their ships were Papalangi, or 'skybursters'. Everything about life, even in our overdeveloped technocracies, is miraculous. A Tongan chief saw a shipwrecked teenager put marks on a piece of wood which was taken to a room where another shipwrecked seaman deciphered them. The chief thought he was witnessing a superior form of magic. And was he not?

My alter ego in *Sapphires* is a writer named Evelyn whose eyes are opened by a series of chance events. She finds a letter, and the letter leads her to the Holy Land. She goes to the northern part of Israel which was once the kingdom of Israel, a place where the monotheism of the Hebrews never took hold as decisively as it did in Judea, in the south. The worship of Asherah persisted in Israel, and there are references to her or other versions of the Goddess - for example, Deborah, who sat under her palm tree - throughout the Bible. On the mountain of Carmel - the orchard, or grove, of God (but it could be Asherah's) - Evelyn's limited vision is both expanded and challenged, as she comes to consider what it means to be a *sofer* - a writer:

...that it might have something to do with finding the connectedness of things, challenging or at least subverting all the notions of originality, individuality, nationality, the revelling in particularity that threw a beautiful veil over whatever it was we humans had in common...

What Evelyn is discovering, what I was discovering myself, is that the more we feel connected to the world, and everyone and everything in it, the more we sense there are worlds beyond. 'Family' here, then, is more than blood lineage, unless this is to understand that even in a physical sense we

are related to the universe. Evelyn's grandmother, Miriam, understood this from the insights she gleaned from the Kabbalah. In symbols and stories she tried to pass these insights on, but it is only when Evelyn is ripe to receive them that she comprehends why it is that she must write. As Edna O'Brien just happened to say in that interview, the writer is a kind of diviner, and uses a kind of dowsing rod to gain access to deeper meanings. So maybe it was because of this that I held on to Dowse, my husband's Cornish name.

This is not to say that writing fiction is the only way to reach what is, I now realise, a Neoplatonist position, but it has been my way. Unlike the Talmudic tradition, the Kabbalah has a genuinely equal place for women. This has been much overlooked in Hasidism, which itself turned to the Kabbalah to break from the dry scholasticism of the Talmudists. It was during my researches for *Sapphires* that I came across this interesting notion, put forward by the medieval Kabbalists: 'The source of all evil in the world,' one of them wrote, 'is the imbalance between male and female.' The more I contemplate this, the more I apprehend its truth. It is a wonderful gift, that makes me comfortable at last with being both a woman and a Jew.