

Tove Jansson, *The Summer Book*

Tess Maginess

As Esther Freud says in her Foreword, it is impossible to categorise *The Summer Book*. It is all at once a work of fiction, a series of adventures, a book full of humour and philosophy. I would add that the book often contains little parables, but the lessons they offer are complex and even wryly contradictory. And that it is like a set of fables – and yet, it is not. And I could add that the book is written for children, with its short ‘vignettes’ or mini-stories and yet, it is very much a book for adults.

Jansson’s work also glides seamlessly between the finest naturalistic detail and a gentle surrealism. And the tone shifts also between the prosaic, the brutal, the tender, the rude, the playful and the elegiac.

Can we account for these curiously juxtaposing elements? I would tentatively suggest that it might have something to do with the characters. Of course, there have been other books written about the relationship between a younger and older person, but here the conventions are unceremoniously upended. The grandmother is not the orthodox wise old woman but rather, an older lady who is almost more playful and open to the world around her than her precocious granddaughter, who is often the wiser of the two. But, of course each are wise at times and, at other times, angry with each other and childish

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and petulant but they are each full of wit. Above all, these two people care a great deal about each other but there is not one hint of sentiment. The child is neither cute nor vapid, the older adult is neither dignified nor magisterial. The book, then, is also a very fascinating study of age and childhood and what the gerontologists call 'intergenerational' relationships. There are in literature many other fine examples of older characters who challenge and outwit stereotypes, including Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* (2018) and Jenny Joseph's oft quoted poem, 'Warning' (1961).

There is a third character on the island with them, the child Sophia's father, but he speaks but one line in the whole book and appears to have no interaction with his child or his mother. There may be a reason. For all three are grieving. Nobody says that, though. There are few tears.

The Summer Book is unique in many other ways. Perhaps it is due to the fact that Tove Jansson was a very experienced maker of cartoons (often satirical) that the structure of the book is like a series of visual frames. In that sense, each 'story' or chapter or vignette is separate and self-contained, but yet, they all do build, cumulatively and, though *The Summer Book* hovers between an account of one summer and many summers, we do have the sense, towards August, that this may well be the last. There is both an elegiac tone and a sense of inexorable sundering.

In these introductory remarks I would like, if I may, to highlight another very important aspect of this book, which is, again, perhaps a natural element for a visual artist. And that is the subtle attention that is drawn to perspective. I am grateful to Richard Pierce, who has such a very strong sense of the visual himself, for pointing this out to me. This creative preoccupation with

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perspective manifests itself in a number of ways throughout the book and it must suffice here to recall a few examples. In the Foreword Freud catches a hint of this when she remarks that the island seems, at first, very small. It takes her four and a half minutes to walk round it, But she realises that it will take her a whole summer to explore. In the chapter entitled 'The Tent', Sophia, who is valiantly sleeping out at night, gets out into the ravine and experiences in terms of hearing and touch, for the first time; 'the ground under the soles of her feet is cold, grainy, terribly complicated ground that changed as she walked... the island had grown tiny, floating in the water like a drifting leaf' (p.191). The most graphic example is, perhaps, in the chapter entitled 'The Scolder', when the Grandmother is lying on the reeds she actually frames a picture between what sees between the arm of her sweater, her hat and the white reeds – 'quite a small triangle' (p.36). Grandmother and Sophia, we come to realise, are both artists. The word 'beauty' is never once mentioned, but we see the island through their sharply observant eyes, but also through their vivid inner vision, their playing imaginations. Colour, shape, texture - we apprehend the exactness of this tiny world, but it is also the 'lift' which imagination gives which allows for so many other possibilities, stories, pictures, futures. It is notable that when the grandmother feels sad it is not because she is dying, but because she has not the energy to remember vividly and so both present and past seem empty, drab, pointless. Or, when Sophia is going through a rebellious period and her anger blinds her to what is around her. And it is her grandmother, co-conspirator, who announces her own rebellion, who leads the antics. And, maybe echoing the spirit of Jenny Joseph's poem, is not a little chagrined that waited to reach 85 to rebel. She does not dwell upon regret. She plays on.

The sense of experiencing the island with a kind of intense myopia, looking very closely, often from a prone or horizontal position, experiencing it through all the senses too, is a perspective that is juxtaposed with an almost

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Hardyesque sense of how tiny the figures are and, indeed the island itself. And it seems to me that the sometimes-unsettling co-presence of these perspectives helps us to understand a key theme, perhaps, the key theme in the book – precarity. How fragile is the moss – if you walk on it three times, it will not survive. How violating and ugly is the too big square house festooned with sentimental tourist cliches, how aggressive and destructive is the bulldozer as it rampages its road through the island (though Sophia must own that she is enjoying the excitement), how vulnerable are the people on the island when a storm hits ‘unnaturally’. Jansson published this book in 1972 when very few people had any kind of environmental awareness. But *The Summer Book* is also about the precarity of people. The child comes to the island and sleeps on her own because her mother has just died; the old woman is reliant on Lupatro (an opium based anti-spasmodic) and the father works all the time, away from them, separate, remote. Something bad has happened and we have a presage that something bad is likely to happen. Between these catastrophes are an increasing number of smaller ‘spasms’ or storms which threaten to overthrow the finely balanced relationship between the older woman and the child. In *The Summer Book* there are no hierarchies; people are not more important than nature, fact is not more important than storymaking, outer sight is not more important than inner vision, the young are not more important than the old.

And for this precarity to be preserved at all, there must also be a great sense of reciprocity and that depends, not on some strained politesse, but rather on a kind of willingness to challenge and question, to be, at times, thick witted, forgiving, playful, stubborn, tender, sardonic; to experiment and to adapt. So, the sometimes-disquieting frankness of the relationship is, I think, the key to its resilience. It is not that the old woman is always honest; she is

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not. Sometimes, she hides the truth, creates a saving fiction with very considerable art and effort, like the 'palace' in danger of being swept to sea. And the child also, sometimes wilfully ignores the evidence, as in her experiments with superstition. This reveals their humanity but any kind of superiority or sentimentality in the reader is undercut by the balance in tone between the sardonic and the wondrous which both the old woman and the child share. Ironies occur, sometimes outside both of them, but often there is a deep sharing; they are to each other what is known in early Irish Christianity as friends in spirit ('anam cara'). And that friendship extends, practically, matter-of-factly to nature and, beyond that, to the possibility of magic, miracle. And then there is God – in their zone and not quite in their zone.

We may note how many scenes in the book take place at night – again an unusual perspective – Sophia and grandmother are often out at night, unlike most people, and see what most people never see, as a result. It signals also their valour and freedom from conventional urban anxieties.

We may note also how many scenes feature the characters, especially the grandmother lying down, literally close to the earth, seeing it and sensing it with preternatural intensity. I am reminded of how many scenes in Jane Campion's film, 'The Piano', are shot. Perhaps this horizontal perspective signals another form of departure from convention and maybe too a challenge to the masculine notion that the earth must be walked upon, driven upon, mastered.

Let us now consider *The Summer Book*, close up.

Chapter 1: 'The Morning Swim'

Our first 'view' of the landscape combines both outer and inner vision – it is both naturalistic and seemingly magical. The bare granite 'steamed... the colours everywhere had deepened the vegetation like a rainforest of lush, evil leaves and flowers' (p.21). Our first view, or perspective on the grandmother is of a fragile, uncertain figure, 'she held her hand in front of her mouth and was constantly afraid of losing her balance' (p.21). Sophia is peremptory, sharp, demanding to know what her grandmother is doing. Grandmother responds angrily, with the answer a child would give; "Nothing". Before adding, "I'm looking for my false teeth." The almost Pastoral visual description of the island (a cliché in which the island becomes exoticized) is swiftly replaced by an incident which has probably never before (or since) graced the pages of a novel. The banality, precarity and even shame are not what the reader expects to intrude so unceremoniously in this predictable urban representation of the wild island. Some readers will recognise the necessity of that hand over the mouth. This is evidently no fairy tale grandmother and child. The directness of the child is matched by the older woman.

A darker note is sounded in this very first chapter when the child asks, matter-of-factly, "When are you going to die?" To which the grandmother responds, "Soon. But that is not the least concern of yours" (p.22). We may mistake disdain for tenderness here.

Soon after we see that there are many facets to their relationship; while the grandmother has appeared to shut the child out, they are now, thick as thieves, co-conspirators, heading towards the ravine where neither of them is allowed to go. Their shared sense of adventure and a certain attraction to the transgressive, towards the breaking of rules and norms is, of course, what allows the relationship to be so extraordinary and what allows Jansson to

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question conventional 'portraits' of children and older people. And, indeed, to question gender stereotypes here also; here they are embarking on rather a *Boys' Own* sort of escapade.

A further aspect of Jansson's concern with perspective is seen towards the end of the chapter as the 'angle of vision' or centre of consciousness seems to shift from the child to the old lady. We become aware of how frail she is but also how alert she is about the child. The subtle shifting between child and older person occurs many times throughout the book, enabling the reader to engage and identify with both characters.

Chapter 2: 'Moonlight'

We learn about the death of Sophia's mother in an extremely understated way. Jansson does not vouchsafe any kind of access to the inner feelings of her characters, yet, many times we gain an understanding through a surreal or symbolic description of landscape or interiors. Here, as is often the case, a passage of sharp observation establishes an undeniable verisimilitude which forms a sort of foothold for an entry into a strange, uncanny world:

The ice was black, and in the middle of the ice she saw the open door and the fire – in fact she saw two stive doors, very close together. In the second window, the two fires were burning underground, and through the third window she saw a double reflection of the whole room, trunks and chests and boxes with gaping lids. They were filled with moss and snow and dry grass, all of them open, with bottoms of coal-black shadow. She saw two children out on the rock, and there was a rowan

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tree growing right through them. The sky behind them was dark blue.

She lay down in her bed and looked at the fire dancing on the ceiling, and all the time the island seemed to be coming closer and closer to the house... A channel opened very slowly in the floor, and all the luggage floated out in the river of moonlight. All the suitcases were open and full of darkness and moss and none of them ever came back. (p.25-26)

This is surely a vision of loss, of mourning, but Jansson braces this extraordinarily vivid phantasmagoria with the grandmother's matter-of-fact explanation of the strange double perspective: "It's because we have double windows" (p.26).

Chapter 3: 'The Magic Forest'

By contrast, the next chapter tells a kind of parable about how a dead forest can be transformed into a magic forest. But the transformation is frankly, self-evidently, due to human hands; specifically the artistic powers of the grandmother. And the theme of precarity is embodied here too. The trees are not entirely dead (that is just melodrama) but, upon closer inspection, crouch and creep between survival and extinction, 'so that even the smallest change was unthinkable' (p.27). Is this, in turn, a metaphor for Sophia's internal state and, indeed, that of her grandmother?

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Grandmother sees, uninhibited, the amazing potential for the first to be even more scary. But it is not turning out tight, even though she has crawled past the marsh and ferns, looks up, lying down.

And, lying there she is hyperaware of the fine detail of the very earth; that myopia which is at the heart of her artistry and her way of being. And though she is fully aware of the precarity of the moss, she is also playful in her art, she sits in the magic forest and carves outlandish animals – ‘not too distinct so they retained their wooden souls’ (p.29).

Chapter 4: ‘The Scolder’

Another night scene – grandmother gets up at night so she can hear the cry of the scolder (long-tailed duck); an old woman, still full of wonder, stiff as a board but captivated by nature. Though this is certainly not a ‘novel of ideas’ in the German or French tradition, Grandmother does have her philosophical side:

Grandmother walked up over the bare granite and thought about birds in general. It seemed to her no other creature had the same dramatic capacity to underline and perfect events – the shifts in the seasons and the weather, the changes that run through people themselves. (p.33)

She invites her granddaughter to come with her. It is a sort of apprenticeship. But then, Sophia has much to teach grandmother maybe also. Sophia angrily challenges her grandmother’s story about a dead scolder, tell it right, she insists. And Grandmother invents another story, one more realistic.

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Less sentimental. Sophia concedes “That’s better.” High and specific standards are they which grandmother must meet. I like this rigour.

At the end of the chapter, we have the wonderful ‘picture’ that Grandmother, lying down makes, framed between her arm and her hat and the white reeds, quite a small triangle. And there is a kind of diminution, after this perfect epiphanic ‘frame’; ‘When she got to her feet, the landscape had grown smaller’ (p.36).

Chapter 5: ‘Berenice’

Sophia chooses Berenice as her friend because she admires her hair. Grandmother conspires. What the chapter also ‘riffs’ on is a plot line evident in other chapters. What we may call, ‘enter man with gun’. In this case, the rather petulant Pipsan. While Grandmother appreciates the child’s isolation on the island and hiding with Berenice from strangers is surely an act of solidarity Sophia is left out. And is furious. Yet, grandmother is loyal to Sophia, losing patience with Berenice and telling her, sardonically, to draw “the awfulest thing you can think of and take as much time as you possibly can” (p.45). Both Sophia and grandmother must, in justice concede that Berenice’s drawing is very good, but grandmother speculates that it is a one-off.

Chapter 6: ‘The Pasture’

Grandmother rises to philosophical heights, dismissing Sophia’s views about the existence of Hell: “You can see for yourself that life is hard enough without being punished for it afterwards” (p.50). Note how Grandmother acknowledges that a child can suffer too, she gives Sophia her own integrity,

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never talking down to Sophia or being one of those adults who always tell young people that they know nothing and they will know all about it when they are older. Yet the tone is not allowed to grow too dark. The chapter ends with Grandmother shocking Sophia with a song about cow shit; 'And before they got to the shop under the trees, Sophia had learned the song and could sing it just as badly as her grandmother' (p.52).

Chapter 7: 'Playing Venice'

Here we have another example of the imaginative 'fetch' of the old woman and the child, their superlative ability to enter unencumbered, the world of the imagination, of inner vision. And yet, of course, like Marianne Moore's description of poetry, as an imaginary garden with real toads in it, grandmother is most particular and sedulous in fashioning appropriate 'sets'. We had the sculptures in the magic forest, now the pair 'play' Venice, acting out a story about the city slowly sinking. Grandmother builds palaces; a real storm comes, and 'Venice' is sunk. Grandmother rises very early to make another palace. Even the razor-sharp Sophia is convinced, the princess has survived:

"You can rest easy. Her mother says it was a perfectly dreadful storm. Now she's cleaning up the mess, and she's pretty worn out."

"Yes, I'll bet she is," Grandmother said.

Does Sophia know her grandmother has been up, repairing the damage of the storm? Are they both involved in a saving fiction?

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Chapter 8: 'Dead Calm'

The 'equilibrium' in terms of power and status between the two is demonstrated here when Gran learns to curse from Sophia, or at least, follows her lead in mischief. Sophia is the adult, allowing Grandmother to come swimming, "but only when I tell you" (p. 62). And they collude not to tell papa about their dangerous adventure:

"I guess maybe not," she said. "But you can tell it on your deathbed, so it doesn't go to waste."

"That's a bloody good idea," Grandmother said.

Chapter 9: 'The Cat'

In some respects, this little vignette echoes 'Berenice' though the relationship Sophia has with the cat is more complex. The story is a kind of fable or even parable, since after all the ructions, Sophia demands the original cat back, hateful as it is. We may note how Jansson renders the vivid description of the cat so that it 'fits' somehow, with the landscape: 'the same colour as the island – a light yellowish-grey with striped shadings like granite, or like sunlight on a sand bottom. When he slipped across the meadow by the beach, his progress was like a stroke of wind through the grass (p.69). Nature – tooth and claw; not to be tamed.

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Chapter 10: 'The Cave'

Another adventure for the intrepid pair, but grandmother matter-of factly vomits on the grass and then tenders her Lupatro pill box as a sacrificial object for the altar in the cave. A quiet reminder of impending mortality and a subtle presage of an afterlife that is not hell.

Chapter 11: 'The Road'

Jansson's environmentalism is at its strongest perhaps in this story where the reader cannot but be shocked by the brazen rampage of the bulldozer. Sophia is deeply shocked and, of course we see the machine through her eyes: "Jesus Christ," she shrieks. We become hyperaware of the precarious nature on the island. Sophia, horrified, watches the machine 'pluck up huge boulders that had lain in their moss for a thousand years; but now they just rose in the air and were tossed to one side. And there was a terrible cracking and splintering as pine trees gave way and were ripped from the ground with torn and broken roots. The bulldozer 'bellowed' on; leaving in its wake an apocalyptic ruination (ironically anticipating McCarthy's novel, *The Road*, 2006):

It was bordered on both sides by a sprawling chaos, as if huge hands had pressed back the forest, bent it and folded it like some soft grass that would never rise up again. The splintered white trunks of the trees were running with pitch, and farther from the road there was an immovable green mass: not a single branch and not one leaf was free to move in the wind... The stones were drying and the soil that cling to them was turning grey... Severed roots stuck up everywhere. In

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places they formed a thin lacework filled with tiny clumps of earth that trembled on invisible wires as they dried in the sun (p.79).

But the ending affords another terrible shock. Sophia surveys the carnage: “it’s like when God smote Gomorrah. It’ll be a lot of fun to ride instead of walk” (p.80). Realism or bad judgement?

Chapter 12: ‘Midsummer’

A wonderful character study of the figure of Eriksson. He is like one who came from the pen of Liam O’Flaherty. This quester for others, ‘lives in a perpetual state of quiet excitement’ (p.84). He is half fairy tale, half postmodern lonely man, but, of course, he brings his own magic, though the obvious magic of the fireworks does not work, a far more important magic operates. And there is the immemorial, cross-cultural business of ‘greening the house’, turning it into a bower of birch, rowan, lilies of the valley and white wildflowers. We may note the structure of the story – inflation, deflation, inflation and also its position in the book itself, half-way through the book and the season, like an Act 111.

Chapter 13: ‘The Tent’

We see yet another side of grandmother – the Feminist, it is thanks to her that girls were allowed to be Scouts. But Jansson, as always, tempers and caveats any gushiness; the girls write to her but she thinks they are being just a

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bit sentimental. Papa hides – why? Is it grief, or inability to face hostility as with Berenice? Is the relationship between Grandmother and Sophia excluding, dangerously?

This chapter also contains an important counterweight to the representation of grandmother as eternally young and open to adventure. She recuses herself from talking about the past because this is expected and explains to Sophia that she can only tell if she wants to, “otherwise, it is as if it never happened, it gets closed off, and then it gets lost” (p.90).

Juxtaposed with this sense of a past that threatens to fade, in which the intense experiences of youth lose their meaning, Jansson brings us the young Sophia bravely sleeping outside over the ravine in a tent. Counterpointing the loss of intensity, Jansson inscribes vividly Sophia’s first encounters:

She really listened for the first time in her life. She noticed for the first time what the ground felt like under her toes and the soles of her feet. It was cold, grainy, terribly complicated ground that changed as she walked. And, as Sophia surrenders to this myopic, sensual closeness, by contrast, the island itself grows tiny, ‘floating on the island like a drifting leaf’ (p. 91).

The real deal – what is big and present and palpable – is the intense, tactile connection with the earth below her. And, as the reader knows, this precarious, precious connection is what is lost as we grow older and forget all but the memory of intensity.

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Grandmother does not fuss or impede but stays, of course, alert, casually greeting Sophia when she comes in: "How's it going?" (p.92).

The contrast between youth and age is renewed as even now Grandmother must acknowledge that "things that were a lot of fun don't mean anything anymore. It makes me feel cheated, like what was the point?" But it is the child who brings her from this dark entropy, who causes her to remember.

Chapter 14: 'The Neighbour'

Grandmother is determined to ignore the sign which tries to appropriate the islands. She defies the no trespassing sign which she angrily views as 'a slap in the face'. Grandmother transgressively breaks the padlock. She is contemptuous of the brash and clichéd sentimentality of the décor:

The big square house changes the island. 'it was no longer wild, it looked ordinary and embarrassed' (p.97). Supplying a disarming and contrapuntal perspective Sophia 'thought the room wonderful, but she didn't dare say so' (p.98). Grandmother and Sophia hide but are sniffed out by the new neighbour's dog. Grandmother is not for the first or last time, wrong-footed: "Nice doggy," said Grandmother soothingly, "Shut up you little bastard".

We can feel Jansson's glee in exposing Malander's pastoral clichés. Malander waxes lyrically and too long upon solitude. "Solitude", Grandmother said. "Yes, indeed. That is a luxury" (p.103). We can hear a craggy Elizabeth Bennet.

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The sense of an immemorial way of life changing is never far from the surface: 'If you squinted and thought about something else, it might almost *be* a channel marker – an objective indicator that here was a change, of course' (p.105).

Chapter 15: 'The Robe'

It is as if a 'still life' slowly assumes a kind of Dickensian life of its own. Jansson manages to capture through a deft set of cameos, the grief and loneliness of the father and also the yearning of the child to be inside the robe too and the sense of distance between the child and the father, seemingly not communicating. Yet, there are moments which also show us that one centre is a child and a child who reads. She is the voice of the story, and it is as if she is writing it, at times in the manner of conventional children's literature: 'the work of the mice who nibble off the soft downy material at the edge of the collar and use it for bedclothes, along with some finely chewed handkerchiefs' (p.107).

Yet, shortly after, Sophia navigates to the attic and says 'dreadful, crushing things to the robe' (p.107). She is grieving, unhappy, feeling alienated and sorry for herself and this feeling is contagious. She plays cards with Grandmother and 'they both cheated shamelessly and their card playing afternoons ended in a quarrel' (p.107). The robe changes meaning, becoming at times menacing, a signifier of the collective unhappiness and sense of emptiness.

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But there is some other emotion operating here. Somehow, boredom, grief turns into protest, anger, rebellion. Grandmother, wise as she is, 'realised that people can postpone their rebellious phase until they are eighty-five years old and she decided to keep an eye on herself' (p.108).

Yet, the robe offers inspiration for Sophia's drawings. If the 'shaggy shadows' she creates reveal her jagged state of mind, there is also the sense that art can be made from distress, perhaps is only made from distress. At the end, there is a kind of mystery, something crawls out of the robe, unseen and disappears under the door. There is a parable-like feeling here, as if an evil spirit had just been exorcised. But what a complex sequence of meanings the robe wears.

Chapter 16: 'The Enormous Plastic Sausage'

This is a simpler parable – the dangers and ugliness of the attempt to conquer nature. Yet, maybe we have a little admiration for papa too?

Chapter 17: 'The Crooks'

The tone here is mostly playful as Grandmother and Sophia console each other for being excluded from the party on the yacht. Grandmother turns the hosts into crooks. But then there is a kind of 'eruption of the marvellous' (to borrow from the Russian scholar Todorov's analysis of fantasy, especially in relation to fable and folktale) towards the end – that inexplicable box of

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chocolates sitting on the rock – a saving fiction or a sentimental trinket for the powerless natives?

Chapter 18: 'The Visitor'

A powerful meditation on aging. The story begins with Grandmother, for once, overwhelmed by the sheer burden of age; 'it was only time on top of time, since everything is vanity and a chasing after the wind' (p. 135). And, as before, this darkness and anomie is contagious. Sophia writes her a letter: "I hate you. With warm personal wishes, Sophia"... all the words were correctly spelled (p.133). But then – an eruption of the marvellous. Enter man with gun – in sharp contrast to the vapid Berenice, we have Grandmother's gracious friend of many years, Verner. Verner has brought sherry since 1910. Grandmother cannot bear to tell him she hates sherry. They share a grim, wry stoicism:

"How are your legs," Verner asked.

"Bad," said Grandmother heartily (p.135).

Verner confesses he more or less stole the boat from his relatives to get out to the island. To which Grandmother offers a sharp answer:

"But you're only seventy-five... surely you can do what you like."

"It's not that easy," Verner replied. "You have to be considerate. They do have a certain responsibility

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for you, after all. And when you get right down to it, you are mostly just in the way.”

The searing honesty of this might give us all pause. Irony prevails. It turns out that Verner hates sherry too, and only values it in conjunction with the memories they share, which are very dear to him. He breaks through her sharpness: ““They are very dear to me, too,” said Grandmother honestly’ (p.138). Subversive to the core, though, she advises him to find some way to outwit his relatives.

Chapter 19: ‘Of Angleworms and Others’

A portrait of the artist as a young woman – so here is Sophia, writing here first ‘story’ a scientific account (or so it begins) of what happens when angleworms are cut in two. It is a parable maybe of how Sophia might survive after her Grandmother is no longer there. It is also, a touching example of how the child learns her craft through her grandmother’s utmost seriousness in entering the child’s imaginative universe. She is her accomplice, her amanuensis, her mentor. Sophia is characteristically arch. She tells her grandmother she has not time to have the story read back to her right now, ““But you can save it for my children.”” A wonderful ironic take on the idea of inheritance, of passing on, in the teeth of the grandmother’s decline.

Chapter 20: ‘Sophia’s storm’

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Jansson rightly places one of the moments of high drama towards the end of the book. There is an authorial voice here, sardonic like Grandmother's; "If only people had known from the outset that everyone would be saved, they could have given the storm their full attention and admiration" (p.149).

The parable shape is evident – Sophia, bored to distraction, prays for something dramatic to happen. And then it does. She is proud at first of her storm, sent by God. And the storm may be purgative. Perspectives too are brought into question, viewed from the pilot's cottage tower:

...she saw the island had shrunk and grown terribly small, nothing but an insignificant patch of rocks and colourless earth. But the sea was immense, there was only this one island, surrounded by water, threatened and sheltered by the storm (p.156).

The island is like one of Hardy's figures, precarious, tiny, powerless. But nature, we may note, both threatens and shelters.

Chapter 21: 'Day of Danger'

Grandmother has a liminal relationship with superstition. She speaks contemptuously of her own grandmother who 'made things up because she was bored, and so that she could tyrannise her family' (p.161). Grandmother and Sophia, of course make things up too, but rarely with a black heart. Grandmother, characteristically, enters the world of make-believe but always

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with a very rigorous commitment to verisimilitude. She collects herbs for her elixir in a very choosy way:

There was not the least doubt that she would find what they needed to avert misfortune and death. ...Sophia followed along right behind her and saw how Grandmother carried the moon on her head, and the night became utterly serene (p.164).

Sand the irony is quietly mordant. We, as readers, for once are ahead of Sophia and know that Grandmother cannot avert misfortune and death. And we know too that, when grandmother sends her coat to the cleaners, with all the elixir herbs in the right hand pocket, superstition seems to rule; almost immediately Sophia's father sprained his ankle (p. 165).

Chapter 22: 'August'

The last chapter begins with a paradox: 'Grandmother had always liked this great change in August, most of all, perhaps, because of the way it never varied' (p.167). The island seems to be shaking them off. Papa speaks for the first time, presaging a kind of continuity 'But we'll be back by then' (p.169). We know that not all of them will return. That the pattern will, inexorably, vary radically.

The closing scene is magisterial in its discretion and vividness. The last sound Grandmother hears is not, as she first thought, the herring boat, but her

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heart. For one who has dwelt so long refusing sentimentality, a heart that is too audible for its own good. It is, we know, a good heart.