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## Mapping Numinous Ground

Wayne Dodd

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

## Mapping Numinous Ground

*Wayne Dodd (bio)*

*The Spring on the Mountain*, by Judy Allen. 153 pp. (Farrar, Straus, & Giroux. \$4.95.)

*Sweetwater*, by Laurence Yep. Pictures by Julia Noonan. Ages 10 and up. 201 pp. (Harper & Row. \$5.50.)

*Stag Boy*, by William Rayner. 160 pp. Ages 12 and up. (Harcourt, Brace,

Mysticism, magic, a sense of the supernatural—it's in the air nowadays, from astrology to Zen, from exorcism to witches. It should not be surprising, therefore, that writers of books for children are incorporating this interest into their work, or even launching out onto it as the true sea, to be explored and experienced. There is, of course, nothing new about the presence of the wonderful in children's books. And a serious concern for the numinous was as strong in George MacDonald as it was to be later in C. S. Lewis. What is perhaps noteworthy is the number of works that now offer to map this territory, of which these four books are examples.

Fantasy/science fiction has always seemed to be at least a second-cousin to the authentically visionary. The very spring of its conception would appear to be a dissatisfaction with the merely ordinary, with the generally verifiable, the mundane. In short, it has, at its best, a yearning for more, for "other." Laurence Yep's *Sweetwater* reflects and embodies that yearning. And at moments the feeling for it is truly present in the bitter-sweet tone of the book, as these future descendants of the human residents of earth struggle to perpetuate a dying way of life and its system of values on another planet, which has for generations been their home. Nostalgia, loss, regret, even the sense of the largeness, the vastness of life (human and nonhuman) in which they participate—these emotions anchor this writing in the firm substance of loss-longing that is involved in the quest for the unknown.

But *Sweetwater* shares a major problem of fantasy/science fiction whenever it leaves the familiar terrain of this world, earth. It has to introduce the reader to another literal world. It has to convince him of its physical presence. It's a difficult task, particularly if the setting is to **[End Page 173]** be not only another world, but even a change from a dry-land existence to a life on and in the water. Yep almost succeeds in making this existence come fully alive, but the life remains somehow alien, for all its sympathetic beauty. And that fact may well keep readers from going

back to this book a second time, to relive the experience. Still, *Sweetwater* does have the energies of authentic emotions, and that is a considerable strength.

Madeleine L'Engle's new book, *A Wind in the Door*, also attempts to get to the spiritual by way of fantasy/science fiction. But she also takes other routes as well: namely both the "dragon" road and that familiar street that runs through the unnoticed gap in the everyday and into the beyond. The result is that, in terms of wonder, we get nowhere. Mrs. L'Engle really can't make up her mind whether she wants the reader to be involved in the realistic dimension of her story (which is rendered with superfluous and unselective detail) or to be caught up in the discovery of the "other" in our lives. The idea for this story is a promising one: the discovery (by the children) of the presence, in the strange illness of one little boy, of a whole universe of struggle between good and evil, order and chaos, integration and disintegration. This is the same territory C. S. Lewis worked, both in the chronicles of Narnia and in the Perelandra series for adults. The difference is that genuine wonder is never present in *A Wind in the Door*. The problem appears to be one of writing, primarily. For not only is there a confusion of routes (lack of commitment?) but also the spiritual (galactic) dimension, once moved into, is simply too confusingly vague and obscure to...

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