the catalogue of the universe

Margaret Mahy
To Penny . . . Drive Carefully!
## Contents

1 Moonshine 1
2 Threats of Invasion 13
3 Family Matters 22
4 The Wobble in the Cemetery of the World 40
5 Encounters in a Changing Street 49
6 On Being a Child of Love 57
7 A Road of Blood and Flowers 69
8 Events are the Stuff of the World 82
9 Foreign Relations 86
10 Mrs Potter Rolls a Cigarette 103
11 Midnight Appointments 117
12 A Step Up in the World 125
13 A Leap into the Abyss 139
14 The Dragon’s Cave 149
15 Three-minute Hero 155
16 The Catalogue of the Universe 173
One hot summer night Angela woke up and found she could not go back to sleep again for, beyond her closed lids, the room was infected with disturbing silver. In the end she gave in to wakefulness in her own stubborn way, getting up but refusing to open her eyes, feeling her way from place to place, choosing to see by touch and memory rather than by an alien light. She was irritated with the moon for invading her sleeping time with a light that was not even its own, but stolen from the sun and hastily passed on, and for looking in at her window with its implacable white face. Her friend Tycho Potter, given as he was to passing on information that not many people particularly wanted to hear, had once told her that an ancient Greek, an Ionian scientist called Anaximander, had been the first person to work out that the moon might shine by reflected light alone.

‘Big deal!’ Angela had said, but now she remembered Anaximander in spite of herself, for understanding moon-light was not just simple, but another mysterious victory for the human mind.
Angela, eyes tight, groped her way along the settee under her window, pausing for a moment to feel the glass eyes, bald ears and unravelling nose of her old teddy, and to recall with troubled tenderness its strange, pointed face – more the face of a fox than a bear. Next she found on the windowsill the springtime goldfinch’s nest and, beside it, her collection of smooth stones which she held one by one against her lips, cool kisses in the hot, shiny night. Her fingers touched the bowl of potpourri she and her mother, Dido, had made together, sifted the dried, papery petals, and then at last traced the blunt face of the ominous doll, Rebecca, who looked at the world out of narrow, painted eyes that had no human whites to them – a doll-like creature from another planet, inspiring excitement rather than affection. But Angela loved thrilling things just as much as she did kind ones. Then she paused, a fold of Rebecca’s skirt pinched between her finger and thumb, and listened. She thought she had heard something – a sound like a whispered word. However, if so, it had been spoken and had gone. There was nothing out in the night but silence and silver. She began her slow exploration again, and came to her desk loaded with notes that would never be read again, hours of work for recent exams, all waiting to be burnt.

Angela, her boyfriend Robin, Tycho Potter and other people from their class were really killing time until the end of the school term released them. School exams were over and useful activities were being organised for them. But it was an odd, artificial time of year. There in the moony night Angela felt no nostalgia for school, though she knew that at eighteen, a big, important part of her life was ending for ever. She was looking forward to the following year when she would be doing a commercial course at the polytechnic, learning not only about typewriters but about word-processors and computers
too, entering the science-fiction world of stored memory and working memory, of machine memories at once more precise and more limited than her own (which rebelliously chose what it would remember and what it would forget, according to rules of its own). For many years, for example, she had believed she could remember her father, but Dido said such memory was impossible for her father had never seen her, even when she was a baby. All she really knew was what she had been told, and somehow or other she had turned the stories into a sort of memory of someone red-headed as she was, a taller, broader version of herself in men’s clothes. Only recently, however, she had discovered that appearances were not quite so simple.

Suddenly Angela grew tired of her game of blindness, opened her eyes and looked down at herself, quite naked in the moonlight, for she refused to wear a nightgown in summer. Her feet swam, long and pale, in the shadows that seemed to collect around the floor, drawn down by the secret gravity of a house at night, and once again she thought she heard a whispered word, come and gone before it could be truly understood.

Life was full of disadvantages for Angela. Apart from having no accountable father, she lived in a home with an outside lavatory, and drove in a car that rattled and backfired, always threatening to fall to pieces and spill empty apple-juice cans and paperback books with curling covers. But at least she could be confident about beauty. Angela had been given a wonderful dowry by her unknown father. She was her own currency and, being desirable, was able to pay her own way in the ferocious world beyond the fox-faced teddy and the smooth stones. There in her room, with moonshine stripping the fire from her hair and the gold from her skin, she had a moment of feeling grateful for something she generally took for granted.
As she stood, simply feeling grateful, she heard for the third time, beyond all doubt, a sound outside, a sound so soft that it would have been possible to think it out of existence again, except that this time she really knew she had heard it, a sound as gentle as a hand brushing down a velvet curtain. It made her curious but it did not alarm her, for she was used to many different sounds in the night, living as she did up above the city, in a wild place close under the sky. She went to her window and looked out, and there in the bright moonlight she saw her mother Dido in the centre of the square of grass half-contained in the right angle made by their odd home (a home that had never quite got as far as being a proper house). It took a moment to realise what Dido was doing, but that rhythmic and dreamy sway was familiar – Dido was scything the grass by moonlight. Angela could see the entranced, semicircular swing of her shoulders, heard the whisper of the keen steel and the sigh of long grass bowing down before her. Everything around her was drenched in a light so clear and so intense it seemed as if it must have more substance than ordinary light. It was the very light of visions and prophecies.

Resting on the shank of her scythe, Dido turned her head and looked straight over at Angela, but the slumberous lid of the verandah was half-closed over the small eye of Angela’s bedroom, and besides, Angela could plainly see that Dido’s own eyes were so flooded with moonlight that she was radiantly blind, a fairy-tale woman who, having lost her own sight, had been given pale, shining eyes of silver. She looked up into the air, smiled (Angela could see the gleam of her teeth) and returned to her scything.

Angela and Dido lived in a house which Dido was slowly buying, at the top of Dry Creek Road, a road rooted down in the city, but climbing up over the hills, increasingly jostled
by wild flowers, weeds, long grasses and golden broom, until all houses stopped. The blue-black asphalt ended with them, and Dry Creek Road became more of a track, in spite of its proud name. As it climbed, it began to swoop and curve, writhing like a desperate serpent pinned down and anxious to be free. A sturdy bridge crossed the great, branching scar of the dry creek from which the road took its name – a creek of barren stones, capable of bearing, after a night of rain, a swollen torrent that would roar like a beast on a continual, angry note as if the hillside itself had found a throat and was issuing a warning. Up above the bridge the road grew leaner and more treacherous, held at bay on one side by a bank alive with moss and ferns and broom and foxgloves, while on the other it surrendered to the void, a great airy fall on to stony slopes far below. Not only this, the road claimed victims just as if it were a serpent god. Hedgehogs, possums, magpies and rabbits were killed by cars, particularly close to the city, for nobody lived near the top except Dido and Angela May, and a morose farmer with the cheerful name of Charlie Cherry. He had two sons, Phil and Jerry Cherry, who often drove by Angela and Dido on the way home, burning past them even on corners, blasting the horn at them, contemptuous of their slow and careful descent.

Watching Dido scythe in the moonlight like Mother Time herself, Angela found herself thinking of the road, and wondering at the same time if Dido might not be just a little crazy. Like the road, Dido had a dangerous edge and sometimes she went right out to it and danced, apparently challenging it to crumble away under her. Angela feared for such a reckless dancer, though by now she knew that she too had an inside road as well as an outside one, and dangerous edges of her own. Still, sooner or later, she confidently expected to find
wonderful happiness in life. But whatever Dido challenged by
dancing on dangerous edges was no sort of happiness Angela
could recognise. Dido scythed on, leaving a swathe of shadow
behind her and, half-bent at the window, Angela watched her,
pulling on her dressing-gown as she did so.

Over the tops of the trees the sky was deep, deep blue,
dark and transparent at the same time, and between the sky
and the black frill of the tree tops, the outer edge of the city
twinkled, every bit as far away as the stars. In the city some-
where among those lights slept Angela’s boyfriend, Robin. The
moonlight, if it managed to get into his room, would shine
upon his cups and trophies, for he was a notable sportsman –
good in so many fields – the best all-rounder in the school. In
the city, but hidden from Angela by the trees, Tycho Potter also
slept, probably dreaming of stars, or of being good-looking,
or perhaps of Angela herself – all unattainable things. Over
his bed he had pinned various sayings that had caught his
attention. *Chance favours the prepared mind!* was one that
Angela remembered. She believed it was true, and tried to
keep herself prepared for whatever chance might offer. And
perhaps Tycho hoped that, by pinning such thoughts up and
sleeping under them and seeing them first thing when he
woke up in the morning, he might turn into a sort of latter-
day Ionian philosopher himself, able to command the world
by observing and predicting.

Dido paused in her scything and turned to inspect her
progress.

Now! thought Angela, and leaned out of the window. ‘Are
you OK?’ she called, and Dido, not too surprised to be spoken
to in the early hours of the morning, answered by asking
a question.

‘Heavens – what are you doing awake at this time of night?’
‘Why are you awake, you old, mad mother?’ Angela asked, buttoning her dressing-gown. ‘Same reason as me, I suppose. The old devil moon dipping its finger into our sleep – having a little taste of us!’

‘Tasting our dreams, sweet and sour!’ Dido said, watching Angela scramble through the window on to the verandah. ‘But I think it’s more like being baptised – total immersion in cold fire, and then we’re changed – never the same again.’

Angela ignored the old cane chair on the verandah, and chose to sit on the steps, drawing up her long legs and putting her arms around her knees.

‘I can’t think of one other kid I know who’d wake up at two a.m. and find her mother scything the grass,’ she said.

‘I couldn’t sleep, and it needed doing,’ Dido said. ‘I didn’t mean to do so much, but I got started and began enjoying it, and with all that light around it seemed as if I should use it up in some way.’

She came and sat down on the steps too.

‘You could have cut your foot off,’ Angela said severely.

Dido stuck out her feet. Under her dressing-gown she was wearing gumboots.

‘I was very careful,’ she said apologetically, ‘and I feel I know every bump of the ground. I’ve gone over it so often. And, once you get going, scything sort of takes over.’ As she spoke, she took the long steel from her dressing-gown pocket and began sharpening the scythe. ‘I used to struggle to begin with, but now I’m so used to it I’m sure I enjoy it more than other people enjoy their lawn mowers. It’s so silent.’

Angela looked around. She thought of her vanished father, and thought that she was surrounded by the light of revelation and prophecy.
‘Mum!’ she began all in a rush. ‘Remember you used to tell me about my father when I was a little girl, just as if it was a fairy story.’

‘It was,’ said Dido, nodding. ‘It really was.’ Angela, listening carefully, tried to work out if her mother’s voice had always been so dry and cautious, or if these were expressions that had only crept in over recent weeks.

‘You never tell me now,’ she said, hurt by the caution.

‘You know it all by heart,’ Dido replied, giving her a sideways glance, gentle enough, but also, Angela thought, warning her not to ask any more. It was so hard to be sure when you were seeing by moonshine. ‘It’s so long ago – it’s a fossilised dinosaur egg – it’ll never hatch. Why have you started pestering me about it all of a sudden?’

‘You said you’d love him for ever,’ Angela cried reproachfully, ignoring the question.

‘Yes, but I didn’t know then how long for ever was going to be,’ said Dido.

Angela felt hurt on behalf of her lost father. He was betrayed, and she was being betrayed with him.

‘But you did love each other madly,’ she prompted, determined to make Dido tell the old story once again, sitting on the step in the moonlight. Though she used an ironic voice to make fun of the soap-opera words, she also wanted Dido to admit that they were true.

‘OK – yes – we loved each other madly,’ Dido agreed like a genial parrot.

‘But he was married!’ Angela declared dramatically, putting her hand on her heart. ‘It was useless. He owed it to his family to stay and look after them.’

‘That’s right!’ Dido said, smiling gently and delicately rubbing the steel along the blade of the scythe.
‘But you couldn’t bear to let it end like that, so you had me,’ Angela finished impatiently. ‘Go on, say it! Let me feel chosen again, just like I did when I was little.’

‘You were chosen,’ said Dido, laughing. ‘Come on! You know you’re the marvellous person of my life.’

This was part of what Angela wanted to be told. She sighed and leaned sideways against Dido. The next part was the tricky bit.

‘Supposing you got a chance to see him again . . .’ she began.

‘Oh no!’ Dido said quickly, not letting her finish her sentence. ‘I’ve changed too much, and I’m sure he has too. Besides I’m too tired.’

‘Still – true love and all that . . .’ Angela said vaguely. ‘Tycho and I are making a list of romantic ideas, mostly from books . . .’

‘Is that why you were reading The Sheik last week?’ Dido asked, sounding amused. ‘Where on earth did you find it?’

‘I found it – in a junk shop,’ Angela said enthusiastically. ‘We’re never likely to get a chance to see the movie. It says, “He had the handsomest and cruellest face she had ever seen,” and “she felt the boyish clothes were stripped from her limbs, and her beautiful white body was laid bare.”’

‘Get away!’ Dido exclaimed, and began sharpening her scythe again.

‘And then she asked, “Why have you brought me here?”’ Angela recalled, ‘and he said, “Bon dieu! Are you not woman enough to know?”’

‘They don’t write lines like that any more,’ Dido said. ‘Though probably they do, but somehow I don’t get to read them.’

‘They make me laugh in a way,’ Angela said, ‘and yet . . .’ She stared out at the soft night. ‘It’s a bit like Gone With the Wind and Rhett Butler carrying Scarlett O’Hara up the grand
staircase. It bugs poor Tyke, him being so short. He does weight-lifting and exercises, so he says he could probably get Scarlett O’Hara up off the ground if he had to, but then her feet would keep banging on the stairs. Anyhow you count as a romantic notion to us because you sacrificed all for love.’

‘I didn’t sacrifice all – well, I had to put off going to university for eighteen years,’ Dido said, for she was finishing a degree very slowly, in time left over from working in the office of a film and video hire shop, and from the cooking and conversations of family life. ‘I don’t call that sacrificing all. I took on much more than I gave up. And I’d be an absolute dead loss as a romantic notion these days.’

‘Suppose I was to try and bring you together again?’ Angela asked in a sentimental voice. ‘With my father, I mean. Little children can do that, when their parents have grown apart. That’s a well-known romantic notion.’

‘Oh, go to bed!’ commanded Dido. ‘I wouldn’t know what to say to your father by now. We’d have one of those painful, polite conversations, asking one another what we were going to do over Christmas.’

‘You could talk about me – your wonderful child!’ Angela said, suddenly reaching up as if she would embrace the moon. ‘Gosh, Tycho’s parents talk about his sister all the time. Can you believe it, her name’s Africa! It’s Africa this and Africa that. It’s just as if they’ve got one real child, and Tyke and Richard are only near misses. Ring him up. Go on! I’d like to meet him.’

‘Never!’ said Dido firmly. She half-turned in order to look directly at Angela. ‘Listen, Angela. I do love you, and next to you, solitude. That’s a fact. There’s you, me and silence, and I don’t want anything else.’

Angela thumped the step irritably.
'How can you want so little?' she asked.
'I've listened to too much noise over the years,' Dido said.
'Sometimes it's drowned out a lot of other things I should have been listening to. I'm really lucky because I like my own company. What's wrong with that?'
Angela looked up through the layers of pearly air.
'So you won't ring my father or – or get in touch with him in any way and give me a chance to meet him. He's paid for me all these years. He might want to meet me.'
'Even if he did, he's too fond of his first family to run any risks,' Dido said.
Angela leaned back against the step above, which made an uncomfortable ridge halfway down her back. Suddenly she liked the thought of her own bed and solitude.
'OK – you know best,' she said, but found Dido looking at her very narrowly for a moment, before they hugged each other goodnight.
A little later, Angela, in her bed, watched a wand of moonlight move through the bedroom air, touch her breast and turn it from fabulous gold to cool silver. As she lay there, she thought of men. She thought of Robin and the band they were going to hear the following night, and she thought of Tycho, who was not a boyfriend but a different sort of friend, more precious than a boyfriend because he could never be replaced, a possession awkward but rare. She was prepared to put up with many spiky moments with Tycho because every so often he became an enchanter, often without meaning to, or realising what he had done.
Her last thoughts were of her father, who was also sleeping somewhere out there in the moonlit city. Angela knew just where. She had not told Dido, but she knew him by sight, and knew his two addresses, the one of his business in town and
the other his home. From the public footpath where anyone was allowed to stand and stare, she had stared up over the big green lawns, seen the pillared front door of his house, noted the swimming pool, the bricked-in barbecue area, the well-kept tennis court of his very expensive house.

On this night of moonshine she went to sleep, half-dreaming of that swimming pool and of the moon that might be reflected in it at this very moment, the same moon Anaximander had guessed about, the same moon she had often seen set squarely in the object lens of Tycho’s telescope, the same moon that had filled Dido’s eyes with so much silver that moonshine flowed back out of her, lighting up 1000 Dry Creek Road planted high on a hilltop, a house linked to the rest of the world by a snaky road.
Margaret Mahy (1936–2012) is one of New Zealand’s most celebrated children’s writers. She is the author of more than 150 titles, which have been translated into many different languages and sold around the world. Appointed to the Order of New Zealand in 1993, Mahy also won many global prizes for children’s writers, including the Carnegie Medal and the prestigious Hans Christian Andersen Award.

Also by Margaret Mahy

The Changeover
The Haunting
The Tricksters
Memory

For younger readers

The Great Piratical Rumbustification
Aunt Nasty
The Man Whose Mother Was a Pirate

www.hachette.co.nz