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## Tommy and the Cloud

Leon Green  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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## Tommy and the Cloud

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#### Abstract

Tommy and the Cloud is an attempt to create an experience. It tells of a sr.1all boy's imagination, and his search for something more satisfying; than that provided by ordinary childhood.

The story is followed by a subjective analysis of Tommy and the Cloud in light of certain literary qualities shared by "good" children's books. Some of the concepts to be explored will include theme--the underlying idea or ideas of a story; originality of idea or presentation--there's a difference between a truly unique approach and an unrealistic overly-fantastic "ripoff"; and characterization--do the people seem real and lifelike? The reader may wish to keep these three points in mind as he travels through Tommy's world.

TOMMY AND THE CLOUD

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Leon Green

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Read and approved by

Mary Lou Mc Grew

---

Leah Hiland

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Accepted by Department

Elizabeth Martin

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## INTRODUCTION

Children are people who need wider experiences before becoming adults. A lack of experience, however, doesn't imply a lack of emotions or ambition. It doesn't mean a child can't think, reason, and use his imagination. Most children, in fact, are very emotional and ambitious, and their imaginations are limited only by their ability to think and reason. It might be said that children are really no different from adults--they just look at life through lower windows.

Like adults, children have needs. If adults require a good book to satisfy some emotional need, likewise do children. Authors of children's books hold the belief that childhood deserves as much recognition as adulthood. They feel quite firmly that children can and do enjoy and appreciate a good book. Most good authors write children's books because they like, understand, and respect children. If they didn't, there wouldn't be many good books around.

But, fortunately, there are many good books around--and children read them. We as adults can sometimes only stand aside and watch with awe and a bit of jealousy at a child's ability to draw a wide range of emotional experiences from a book. Only a child can experience that magical feeling when he completely immerses himself into another world for a short

time, and comes back a little wiser for the experience, or a little happier, and probably a little more human.

Childhood can be a time of wonder. It can be an exciting period of discovery, beauty, and adventure. Books can play a major role in enriching this time in a very thrilling and captivating fashion.

Tommy and the Cloud is an attempt to create an experience. It tells of a small boy's imagination, and his search for something more satisfying than that provided by ordinary childhood.

The story is followed by a subjective analysis of Tommy and the Cloud in light of certain literary qualities shared by "good" children's books. Some of the concepts to be explored will include theme--the underlying idea or ideas of a story; originality of idea or presentation--there's a difference between a truly unique approach and an unrealistic overly-fantastic "ripoff"; and characterization--do the people seem real and lifelike? The reader may wish to keep these three points in mind as he travels through Tommy's world.

## TOMMY AND THE CLOUD

Tommy was sitting quietly on the edge of his sandbox. There wasn't much else to do on this warm summer afternoon. It was the kind of lazy day that makes you feel like yawning for no real reason. Tommy liked to feel the sand sifting through his fingers and sliding between his toes. But somehow the sandbox didn't seem to be as much fun as it used to be. Maybe he was getting too old for it.

Tommy gazed up at the sky. A huge white fluffy cloud was slowly floating by. Tommy had often wondered what a cloud feels like. It probably felt something like cotton candy, only not as sticky. Or maybe like mashed potatoes, only puffier. If there were only some way to find out. Tommy closed his eyes and tried to pretend he was sitting on a cloud. There must be a way--maybe some magical way to sit on a real cloud. But Tommy didn't know if he even believed in magic any more. Maybe he was too old for that. He used to believe in fairies, and magicians. And he used to make wishes on falling stars. But he wasn't so sure any more. He just closed his eyes and tried to pretend.

"Tommy, I'm going to the store," came his mother's voice from the back door. "Do you want to come along?"

Tommy decided to go. He always enjoyed the short walk to the corner grocery store.

When they reached the store, Tommy noticed a small, new building on the vacant lot nearby. He had never seen it before. A sign on the window said "Mahoovy's Magic Shop." Tommy decided to explore this curious-looking place while his mother did the shopping.

He walked in. The store was completely empty except for an old man with a long, grey beard and a funny black hat. He was sitting in a rocking chair reading a book. Tommy looked around, but there was nothing to see--just an empty room with this man and his rocking chair. The man saw Tommy and said, "Good afternoon, young man. Do you see anything you like?"

"But I don't see anything at all," replied Tommy with a puzzled look. "There's nothing here."

"But I'm here. And you're here. And the Magic Shop is here," answered the old man in a matter-of-fact voice.

"What do you sell?" asked Tommy. "Where is everything?"

"I guess I should explain," said the old man. "My name is Mahoovy. I don't sell anything, but I can give you anything you want, because I am a magician. You are here because you believe in magic. If you didn't, you could not see me or my shop."

Tommy found this hard to believe. "You mean you're invisible to people who don't believe in magic?" he asked.

"Magic is real only for those who believe it is," answered Mahoovy the Magician. "Now, then, what would you



like?"

Tommy didn't have to think for a second. "A cloud!" he answered excitedly. "Could you please get me a cloud, Sir? That's all I want. Just one cloud!"

"A cloud, eh?" replied Mahoovy. "Hmm. I'm afraid there's one problem with a cloud. I could make you one, but it wouldn't last long. Only the sky has the right weather conditions to support a cloud."

Tommy felt sad. It seemed that not even magic could grant him his only wish.

"Of course, there's always another way to do it," added the magician. "You could simply fly up to a cloud."

Tommy's eyes grew very wide, and his mouth fell open. Before he could say anything, Mahoovy continued.

"Let's see. I guess all we'll need is an ordinary magic wand."

Mahoovy waved his hand, and a magic wand appeared from nowhere. The old man really was a magician.

"Did you say I'll fly?" asked Tommy eagerly.

"Yes, it really seems to be the only way," answered Mahoovy. "Now let's go outside and try it out."

They walked out to the back of the shop. Tommy couldn't believe all that was happening. He looked up and saw the same giant cloud he had seen from his sandbox.

"Now, then," said the magician, "let's get started. It's really a very simple operation. You simply hold on to the magic wand with both hands, like this, and point it to

whatever cloud you wish. It should take you there in a short time."

Tommy's hands were shaking with excitement as he took the wand from the magician. He carefully pointed it toward the big white cloud high overhead. Suddenly he was lifted into the air, soaring upward toward the sky. Higher and higher he flew, above the houses and trees.

As Mahoovy the Magician watched him go, he said to himself, "Oh, muskmelons! I forgot to show him how to get down. Ah, well, he's a bright boy. He'll find a way."

Tommy finally reached his cloud and landed on his stomach with a soft "poof!" He was too excited to be scared. The huge cloud was bigger than his back yard. It was very soft, but strong enough to sit in. It didn't feel like cotton candy or mashed potatoes. It just felt like... like a cloud. And nothing else.

Tommy could see the big city far below. But it didn't look so big anymore. And the people were only small dots. He thought of all the kids below playing in ordinary sandboxes. Tommy was the only boy in the whole world with his own cloud.

Tommy took off in a bouncy run, made a flying leap, and landed on his nose. He got up and did three handsprings ending in a double forward roll. Then he stood on his head until a light breeze blew him over. He rolled up a small cloud ball, threw it into the air, and watched it break up and float away.

Tommy bounced and hopped, and rolled and jumped until he was tired. He punched a big pillow and fell back in happy exhaustion. This was certainly a lot more fun than playing in an old sandbox. How he wished he could stay up there forever.

When he had caught his breath, Tommy invented more cloud games while several hours passed. Suddenly he remembered his mother in the grocery store. She must have gone on home by now. Tommy knew it must be getting late. His parents would begin to worry soon.

Tommy found the magic wand and pointed it toward home. In a few seconds he was in the air. But instead of taking Tommy down, the magic wand turned itself around and carried him higher up to another cloud!

Tommy landed on this new cloud on his head. He was so surprised, he fell over backwards when he tried to get up. He sat down and looked at the magic wand in his hands. What was wrong with this strange stick? It was easy flying up, but how do you fly down? Had Mahoovy given him a one-way wand?

It was starting to get dark now. Some big, dark clouds were swiftly approaching.

Tommy was still thinking about the magic wand. Maybe if it were held upside down it would carry him down. He decided to try it. He stood up and pointed it toward the ground again. Just as he was about to be lifted away, a huge black raincloud suddenly rammed full speed into Tommy's

cloud! Tommy fell headfirst into the black cloud full of cold rainwater, and dropped the magic wand far below!

Tommy splashed his way to the edge of the dark cloud and sat down, wondering what to do. He was getting scared now. The magic wand was gone, and he was cold and wet. Suddenly a great wind came and started blowing Tommy and the raincloud through the sky! Tommy hung on to the edge of the cloud as he sailed wildly over the city below. Faster and faster, he blew past the city and far out into the country. When the wind finally quit blowing, the cloud came to a stop high over a hay field.

It was very dark now, and Tommy could see the lights of the city far away. He had never been this scared before. How was he ever going to get down? Who would ever find him up there? He thought about his sandbox back home. He thought about his mother at the grocery store. He thought about the magician and his strange magic shop. They all seemed so far away. It was all the magician's fault! Mahoovy and his mixed-up magic wand! All that magic only got him in trouble.

Just then Tommy noticed a falling star off in the distance. He remembered how he used to make wishes upon falling stars. There was only one wish in Tommy's mind now. He wanted to go home. More than anything else in the whole world he wished he could be safely back home.

Then a strange thing happened. Tommy felt himself lifted on a strong warm breeze while in the distance the

falling star glowed larger and brighter! At first, Tommy feared he would be hurled violently to the ground far below. But the gentle wind was so steady, and its path was so straight, that Tommy felt he was being guided by some magical force. The falling star glowed even brighter. Suddenly Tommy realized what was happening. His wish was coming true! The magic of the falling star was taking him home!

Tommy felt like a soaring bird as he rode the wind high in the night sky back into the city. The bright lights of the swiftly approaching city made Tommy squint his eyes. Yet he could just make out the form of some familiar-looking buildings below.

The wind seemed to lose its strength as Tommy slowly glided toward the ground. Closer and closer he came until he finally landed with a "poof" on something very soft. Tommy felt sand under him. His sandbox! He was back in his sandbox in his own back yard!

Tommy's eye was caught by a flashing light in the sky. The falling star! As it twinkled for a few seconds it almost seemed to be sending a message. Then it disappeared from sight.

Suddenly the sky was bright with sunshine. Had Tommy been in the sky all night? Or had he only been dreaming?

"Tommy, I'm going to the store," came his mother's voice from the back door. "Do you want to come along?"

Tommy decided to stay home. Maybe he would play in his sandbox.

## ANALYSIS

A book is of little value if the children don't like it, regardless of whether or not it contains all the usual literary requirements. The final test of a book's worth is made when a child either accepts or rejects it. No one can be sure with any degree of certainty how successful a book will be.

Most of the best books, however, do share some literary attributes. One of the most important of these is a good central idea--an underlying theme. An author will build his entire story around some strong idea or ideas worthy of book form.

Some concepts often explored in children's literature deal with truth, justice, and honesty; self-identity; the meeting and overcoming of challenges and difficulties; physical, emotional, and mental maturation; and love and acceptance of self and others. Sylvester and the Magic Pebble, William Steig's popular picture book, is the story of a young donkey who magically turns himself into a rock to escape danger. Unable to change himself back, he appears to be doomed to a rock's life until finally rescued by the never-forsaking love of his parents. The theme is simple, but quite clear. Such qualities as love, friendship, and loyalty carry a universal significance, and can be understood and

appreciated by children everywhere.

Huck and Kuhn state that "theme provides a dimension of the story beyond the action of the plot."<sup>1</sup> All the events occurring in a story are subordinate to, but support the idea in some manner. As a child broadens his reading experiences he will begin to enjoy not only the series of events on the surface, but also the more hidden messages that lie deeper.

On the surface, Tommy and the Cloud is a wild fantasy story, plain and simple. But it is also intended to demonstrate a small boy's attempt to cope with his feelings of disillusionment over some ideas and experiences he once held strongly to. Stated simply, a child is growing up, but is unaware of it. His sandbox no longer holds the same interest it once did. His belief in magic, fairies, and the like is dwindling. As a result of his dream, he is probably as uncertain as ever of the existence of magical powers, or at least of their value if they do exist. Tommy appears to be approaching an era of doubt and change. Most children reach a stage in life similar to Tommy's, and could possibly identify with his feelings.

A theme should never call undue attention to itself and stick out in the story like a sore thumb. If it carries some developmental values, great care should be taken to avoid

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<sup>1</sup>Charlotte S. Huck and Doris Young Kuhn, Children's Literature in the Elementary School (2d ed.; New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), p. 11.

an overly-dominating, "preachy" style of writing. Children can easily tell the difference between a good story with a theme, and a good theme without a story.

Another important quality in children's literature is originality of idea or presentation. In trying to cope with originality, an author must differentiate between a unique approach and an overly-fantastic approach. Children will accept the unbelievable if told in a believable manner. Madeleine L'Engle's A Wrinkle In Time tells of children space-traveling through the process of "wrinkling" themselves. Fantastic? Yes, but also a winner of the Newbery Medal, the most coveted award given to children's literature.

The idea of a boy playing in clouds, and riding a wind may appear equally fantastic. Yet those of us who can remember our own childhoods know that a child's imagination is not limited by reason or reality. If it were, much of the beauty and fascination so characteristic of this age would be absent.

Another example of creative fantasy lies in Maurice Sendak's popular Where the Wild Things Are, a favorite among the picture book generation. This is the story of a small boy who imagines himself running away to a kingdom of wild creatures. After taming the monstrous beasts, he becomes their ruler and friend. This type of story epitomizes every child's dream to escape from the everyday hassles and frustrations of childhood by running off to a different world and performing remarkable feats of courage and strength. A



fantasy of this nature will be accepted with open arms by children, many of whom often have little opportunity for self-expression, and no chance to "prove themselves" in an adult-oriented world.

The work of Dr. Seuss, creator of many popular picture books, offers another example of originality in the treatment of fantasy. One of his most popular books, the humorous Cat in the Hat is full of wild and wacky nonsense, and holds the fascinated interest of children of many ages. Another, his The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins tells of a young boy's predicament when ordered by the King to remove his hat after he had already removed his hat. Hat after hat appears on his head as he desperately tries to please the King to avoid being beheaded.

Dr. Seuss's expertise in rhymed narrative and his colorful, unforgettable illustrations combine to produce delightful experiences to be enjoyed time after time. Children, like adults, will readily accept good entertainment in almost any form, magical or otherwise.

A third judge of literary value is characterization. How realistic and convincing are the characters? When creating a personality on paper an author must pay close attention to what a character says and does, in order to maintain a consistent "human-like" person. The character should act in a manner expected of his age, background, and education. Children have no trouble spotting a "phony".

In addition, a true character will not behave in a

superficial, robot-like fashion, but will reveal his range of emotions as any real person would. Arbuthnot states that "there should be depth of characterization, since to emphasize only one or two traits produces a one-dimensional portrait that is often more caricature than characterization."<sup>2</sup>

Due to the rather minimal amount of dialogue in Tommy and the Cloud, the character of Tommy is revealed mostly through the narration. This means was employed not only to tell some specific facts about Tommy, but to describe his thoughts as well.

Tommy was hopefully presented as an ordinary child, with the usual curiosities and ambitions. The magical series of events with which he is confronted do not exist in an unreal, candy-coated wonderland free of problems and difficulties, but rather in a world where fear and danger are very likely. Tommy must eventually rely upon his own ingenuity to handle his dilemma.

A child is attracted by a story whose characters must overcome obstacles to achieve goals. To a child, problems arising in a fantasy world can be just as menacing as those in a real world. Childhood, no less than adulthood, is full of mountains to climb, and rivers to cross. Don't we all like to read about people who succeed, and give us confidence to climb our own mountains?

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<sup>2</sup>May Hill Arbuthnot and Zena Sutherland, Children and Books (4th ed.; Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1972), p. 25

Another feature present in sound characterization is personality growth and development. It has been said that any person is the sum total of all his experiences up to the present time. Each new experience, large or small, inevitably changes a person in some way. Good books will reflect a person's change and development as the story progresses. Huck and Kuhn believe that "to be truly human, (the characters) must grow and change before the reader's eyes. In keeping with life itself, that change is usually gradual and convincing, rather than mercurial and unrealistic."<sup>3</sup>

After the dream, Tommy showed a deeper appreciation of his sandbox and his home. But, of course, who wouldn't after enduring such a traumatic series of hair-raising events? However, on a deeper level, we leave Tommy in the process of reaching some conclusions about magical powers. Needless to say, a rejection of this childhood fantasy would lead to a rejection of other beliefs. Consequently, growth and change are inevitable.

A well-developed theme, originality, and true characterization are only three of the many qualities to be found in enjoyable children's literature. Yet a comprehensive study of all the qualities would still not explain why children like some books more than others. That elusive, indefinable

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<sup>3</sup>Charlotte S. Huck and Doris Young Kuhn, Children's Literature in the Elementary School (2d ed.; New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), p. 12.

"something" is impossible to pinpoint, yet children can spot it a mile away.

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