

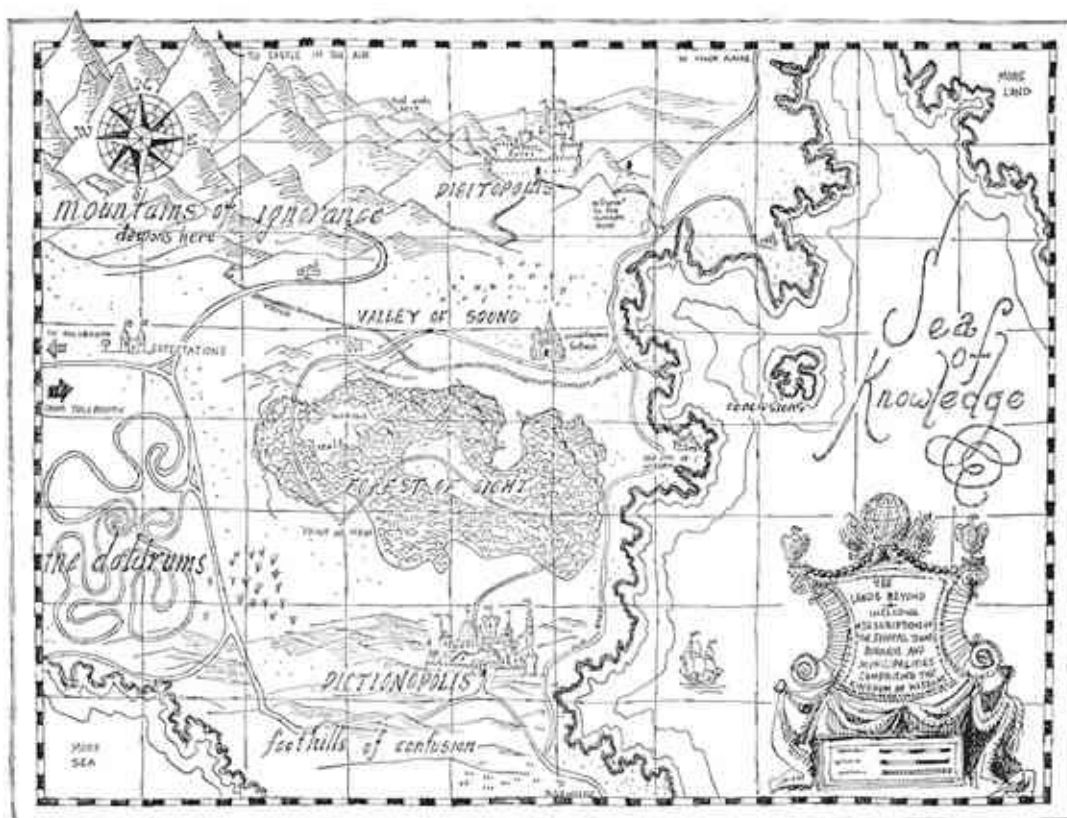
THE PHANTOM TOLLBOOTH



NORTON JUSTER

Illustrated by **JULES FEIFFER**

With an appreciation by Maurice Sendak





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NORTON JUSTER

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JULES FEIFFER

With an appreciation by
MAURICE SENDAK

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To Andy and Kenny,
who waited so patiently

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AN APPRECIATION

You know you're in excellent hands when, in the midst of some nutty, didactic dialogue, the author disarms you.

"I guess I just wasn't thinking," said Milo.

"PRECISELY," shouted the dog as his alarm went off again.

"Now you know what you must do."

"I'm afraid I don't," admitted Milo, feeling quite stupid.

"Well," continued the watchdog impatiently, "since you got here by not thinking, it seems reasonable to expect that, in order to get out, you must start thinking." And with that he hopped into the car.

It's what Tock, the literal watchdog (see the Feiffer illustration), says next that makes my heart melt, as it did on my very first reading way back when: "Do you mind if I get in? I love automobile rides." There is the teeming-brained Norton Juster touching just the right note at just the right moment.

The Phantom Tollbooth leaps, soars, and abounds in right notes all over the place, as any proper masterpiece must. Early critics responded enthusiastically, garnishing their reviews with exuberant Justeresque puns and wordplay. Comparison with *Alice in Wonderland* was inevitable, "for the author displays a similar ingenuity, bite, and playfulness in his attack on the common usage of words." All well and good—wonderful, in fact—this miracle of instant recognition by contemporary critics. And nice—lovely, even—to be compared to *Alice*, though I suspect Norton Juster would have preferred, if his book had to be compared, *The Wind in the Willows*. It was even

compared to Bunyan! “As *Pilgrim’s Progress* is concerned with the awakening of the sluggardly spirit, *The Phantom Tollbooth* is concerned with the awakening of the lazy mind.”

All of the above would gladden the heart of any young writer, but comparisons to Carroll and Bunyan only begin to suggest the qualities that make *Tollbooth* so splendid. For me, it is primarily the heart and soul of Norton Juster—his *menschkeit*—that produced this marvel of a book. Another part of the marvel: even though *Tollbooth* is extraordinary fantasy, it is tightly hinged in the here and now, and conveys an urgent and vivid sense of reality. Jules Feiffer—that rare artist who can draw an idea—combines the same insistent reality and uninhibited fantasy in his superb scratchy-itchy pen drawings.

Tollbooth is a product of a time and place that fills me with fierce nostalgia. It was published in New York City in 1961, that golden moment in American children’s book publishing when we lucky kids—Norton, Jules, myself, and many more—were all swept up in a publishing adventure full of risks and high jinks that has nearly faded from memory. There were no temptations except to astonish. There were no seductions because there was not much money, and “kiddie books” were firmly nailed to the bottom of the “literary-career totem pole.” Simply, it was easy to stay clean and fresh, and wildly ourselves—a pod of happy baby whales, flipping our lusty flukes and diving deep for gold. *Tollbooth* is pure gold.

Rereading it now (even Milo would be amazed at the quick whirling away of thirty-five years), I am touched all over again by the confidence, certainty, and radiance of a book that *knew* it had to exist. It provides the same shock of recognition as it did then—the same excitement and sheer delight in glorious lunatic linguistic acrobatics. It is also prophetic and scarily pertinent to late-nineties urban living. The book treats, in fantastical terms, the dread problems of excessive specialization, lack of communication, conformity, cupidity, and all the alarming ills of our time. Things have gone from bad to worse to ugly. The dumbing down of America is proceeding apace. Juster’s allegorical monsters have become all too real. The Demons of Ignorance, the Gross Exaggeration (whose wicked teeth were made “only to mangle the truth”), and the shabby Threadbare Excuse are inside the walls of the Kingdom of Wisdom, while the