



BOOK REVIEW:

*The Evolution of African Fantasy and Science
Fiction*

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Barbini, Francesca T., editor. *The Evolution of African Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Luna Press Publishing, 2018. ISBN- 978-1-911143-51-2.

Edited by Francesca T. Barbini, *The Evolution of African Fantasy and Science Fiction* (2018) comprises five essays that provide insightful analysis of diverse aspects of African fantasy and science fiction. These essays trace the route of African science fiction's emergence, identify the forces shaping its development, survey readers' expectations, and examine the portrayal of African characters in popular entertainment. Overall, the anthology describes how African science fiction and fantasy address the social and political concerns of African societies while representing Africans through a fresh perspective. The essays in this book discuss how these genres add a new dimension to black studies by contesting the views of earlier critics who have defined African literature as linear, one-dimensional, and particularly focused on representation of the adversities faced by African people. In doing so, these essays re-trace past and contemporary socio-political themes such as racism, the portrayal of Africans in literature and popular entertainment, the impacts of the European colonization of Africa, and existing gender-based prejudices against black women.

In the opening essay, "On the Emergence of African Science Fiction," Peter J. Maurits studies the literary and socio-political dimensions associated with the emergence and rising popularity of African science fiction. Maurits contends that African science fiction is a joint tradition of science fiction and utopian writing that responds to dystopian tradition (4), and he identifies this genre as an efficient means to positively impact African literature while countering the literary gap fostered by colonization. Maurits also highlights

how African science fiction distances itself from colonial history and how increased access to mobile technology within the African continent has fostered the genre's market value, consumption, and circulation among readers (23). Thus, Maurits' essay can facilitate future researchers' re-evaluation of the processes of emergence and evolution of African science fiction in order to gain a better understanding of the specific context of criticisms often encountered by the writers of African science fiction.

In the second essay, "Forces Shaping the Development of South African Speculative Fiction Down the Ages," Nick Wood studies the socio-political contexts of the advent of South African speculative fiction. Wood also discusses how science fiction during the era of apartheid in South Africa was criticized as a medium used by black people just to represent their grievances. According to Wood, African science fiction has made a prominent contribution to addressing diverse concerns associated with the lives of black Africans, yet it has not garnered a significant audience among black readers. To rectify this, Wood suggests that publishing houses should recognize the importance of African science fiction, otherwise this genre will suffer a loss of readership. Wood further proposes that black readers' lack of appreciation for science fiction may also result in part from the policies of the apartheid era, which created an equality backlog in the education system and shaped a visible breach between the white and black populations (32–33). As a result, Wood's study examines how the importance of science fiction in South Africa was underestimated during the apartheid era as well as more recently since works by black authors have often been considered only a medium for political interventions and addressing grievances. Wood examines the impact of inequality between the African white and black populations in terms of the marketing, readership, and publication of science fiction. The latter part of this essay highlights how recent advances such as the formation of the African Speculative Fiction Society in 2016 and proper recognition of works by African authors through awards, such as the Nommo Awards, are significant steps towards centring African speculative fictions (45).

In the third essay, "The Dangers of Expectation in African Speculative Fiction," Ezeiyoke Chukwunonso studies how African writers enclose themselves in a constrained space through their rigorous attempts to meet a particular standard. This, according to Chukwunonso, restrains African literature and its authors in terms of style, theme, and genre. Chukwunonso argues that this adherence to a specific standard often limits authors to educating Africans and to providing a counterattack on the hegemonic principles of colonialism and neo-colonialism through their fiction. This essay warns black readers that similar expectations from African speculative fiction will limit authors to dealing with socio-political scenarios and prevent the genre from flourishing in terms of style, and themes. Chukwunonso also mentions how writers such as Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Flora Nwakpa, and Bessie Head laid the foundations of African literature. These authors created a novel tradition that addressed the history of Africa and taught people who Africans are by stepping outside the boundaries of representation determined for them during colonialism and neo-colonialism. However, this growing novel tradition gradually suffered in terms of style and themes by adherence to conventions established by earlier authors. Thus, Chukwunonso cautions the writers and the audiences that African speculative fiction should not be protest

driven and it should remain free from political tropes because fixation to a single theme or style can prevent it from exploring new horizons. Hence, Chukwunonso's findings suggest that the readers and practitioners of African speculative fiction should avoid fixation on set themes and remain open to experimentation so that this genre can secure a distinguished space in world literature.

In the fourth essay, "Scientists in Nigerian Science Fiction," Polina Levontin examines the representation of scientist characters in Nigerian science fiction through a socio-political lens. A particular highlight in this essay is its examination of how fictional representations of scientists can impact readers' opinions of Nigerian scientific research. Levontin notes that on a more general level, women have always been underrepresented both as authors and as characters in Nigerian science fiction. This leads the essay to highlight how the problematic issue of gender imbalance impacts portrayal of characters in the genre. Levontin also suggests that "When compared to reality, science fiction offers a more progressive view of gender in science, in both Nigerian and Western fiction" (91). However, Levontin re-evaluates this remark and mentions that although Nigerian science fiction is slowly approaching gender equality in representation of scientist characters, its pace is slow in comparison to Western science fiction (92). Overall, by pointing out how women, both as characters and as scientists, often suffer from the patriarchal ideals of society, Levontin's essay demonstrates the significance of considering how subjective interpretation and representation of characters can induce insights into public perception.

In the last essay, "Portrayals of South Africans in Popular Entertainment: Bad Accented Baddies, Prawns and Black Panther," Robert S. Malan examines representations of African people in popular entertainment. According to Malan, there has been a remarkable progression in the representation of South Africans in contemporary movies after suffering from a lack of true representation since the apartheid years. Malan notes how the entertainment industry is awakening to a more advanced outlook, casting black actors in progressive roles. Overall, Malan discusses how African actors' portrayals of central characters in popular entertainment will strengthen the confidence of black people, which in turn will progressively impact society. Malan's essay emphasizes that the casting of black actors in lead roles helps to weaken old racist stereotypes and to portray Africans as self-reliant individuals who are capable of directing their own progression by defending their own voice.

Taken together, the essays in *The Evolution of African Fantasy and Science Fiction* are significant in that they identify and introduce new horizons of African fantasy and science fiction. They do so by tracing its emergence and development, by cautioning readers and writers not to make the genre redundant through predefined expectations, by examining characterization in Nigerian science fiction, and by interpreting the portrayal of South Africans in entertainment. Thus, this book makes an important contribution to the existing scholarship on African science fiction and fantasy through theoretical and conceptual engagement with the social and political conditions of black people across the globe. This book is a must-read for those looking to gain a nuanced understanding of African science fiction and fantasy. As such, it supports research into the emergence of African science fiction, into factors that may

constrain this evolving genre, into portrayal of independent black characters in entertainment, and into the existing gender and racial prejudices in literature. Because of these strengths, this book can be recommended to scholars and critics who seek to explore new prospects of African fantasy and science fiction.

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