



# The Cultural Work of Fantasy in the Anthropocene

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## 1. Introduction

Whose dreams are we living in 2025? What forces and visions have created the larger ecological and geopolitical reality which seems at once erratic and designed? More importantly, how do we fight for the futures we want instead of surrendering to the futures being imposed on us? This essay suggests that there is a path. It argues that fantasy has a role to play in empowering us to chart our way forward, and that challenging the extractive and transactional mindset at the heart of the current systems dynamics requires conceptual strategies – especially anticipatory imagination and dreaming forward – that can best be learned through fantasy.

The argument rests on two premises that blend my personal reflection and academic experience as a literary scholar specializing in speculative fiction for young audiences – especially in the context of teacher education on the use of narratives in classroom practice.

Premise One: at the present moment, it feels like the world is falling apart. Not just this year but over the past decade or so – perhaps since the 2008 financial crisis, or since the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine, or since the first Trump election in 2016, or Brexit, or Covid, or other events – we have been living through what Amitav Ghosh has dubbed “the great derangement,” an accelerating, race-to-the-bottom negative competition generative dynamics in which nobody wants the disaster yet all are incentivized to amplify it (11). In place of “disaster” feel free to insert the climate emergency, the unchecked AI arms race, the rise of authoritarianisms and extreme ideological polarization, the emergence of technofeudalism and economic instability, unprecedented wealth concentration coupled with widespread impoverishment of the vast majority of people, the social media-driven decline of human capacity to focus, read, and think critically, wars in Asia, Middle East, Africa, and Europe –

including Putin's neoimperial delusions, or the dismantling of the whole security architecture of the world put in place after WWII. The name you put to this sense of the ending depends on where you stand. In *At Work in the Ruins* (2023), for example, Dougal Hine reflects on making sense of what is ending and advocates midwifery in the birth of something new. "The end of the world as we know it," he stresses, "is not the end of the world, full stop" (5). In *Abundance* (2025), Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson suggest that we are witnessing the dissolution of the neoliberal political order, a rare period in history "when a decline of one political order makes space for another" and when "ideas once regarded as implausible and unacceptable become possible and even inevitable" (206). Regardless of what you call it, accepting that something is ending opens an opportunity for – indeed, requires that we consider – a new beginning.

Premise Two: most of the changes we see are driven by powerful underlying narratives – stories that envision the goals and direction of the process, invite the audience's participation, and project their agency and role. In the political space most of these narratives are distributed and vague enough for the audience to fill in the gaps with their own assumptions, emotions, and dreams. "Special Military Operation," "Take Back Control," or "Make America Great Again" – just as "We Are Nature," "Green New Deal," and other catchphrases – are each expressions of specific story-supported belief systems. One good term for these systems is "intersubjective imagined orders." Coined by Yuval Noah Harari (111), this term refers to sets of collectively shared beliefs – that is, stories and story systems – that enable humans to create societies and maintain social cohesion. As Harari correctly notes, intersubjective imagined orders are not about facts or truth. Their role is to create connection and meaning.

When you consider our time as one of something ending and a possible new beginning, as well as the role that intersubjective imagined orders play in (re)shaping human societies, it is not hard to realize that fantasy has long functioned as an imagined order. Alongside being a literary genre with its own structures, subgenres, and their combinations, fantasy as an intersubjective imagined order is what Brian Attebery describes as "mode" – "a stance, a position on the world as well as a means of portraying it" (*Stories* 1) – and what John Clute calls "fantastika," a larger, culturally maintained system of stories through which we tell ourselves what is possible or impossible (np). Fantasy as an intersubjective imagined order manifests not merely in references to fantasy tropes, characters, settings, stories, or authors. It operates predominantly as "stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and the world, stories that might imagine the fulfillment of our desires or the realization of our fears, a kind of storytelling that pervades everyday life and profoundly shapes social interaction at every level" (Rieder 137).

It is on this level – rather than on the genre level – that fantasy's cultural work is most impactful. This work is not about what happens in any particular story, though. It is about what happens – through fantasy – in the community, society, in people's heads and hearts. At its best, fantasy can offer visions of emerging imagined orders – say, visions of a post-carbon ecological civilization, interspecies democracy, justice, circular economy, and mutualistic thriving without domination, pollution, or destruction. It can project these visions as alternatives to the dominant ecocidal imagined order whose institutionalized

articulation we inhabit today. The cultural work of fantasy is to enable readers to register these visions and to realize that there are alternatives.

The notion that stories perform cultural work is intuitively appealing to anyone who has ever been deeply moved by a story in any format. Its theoretical underpinnings, especially as regards fantasy, stretch through S.T. Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817), J.R.R. Tolkien's essay "On Fairy Stories" (1947), and many of Ursula K. Le Guin's critical writings to Attebery's *Fantasy: How It Works* (2022). To give it a clear articulation, the cultural work of stories means that stories always do things to their audiences: they make you think of certain ideas, they make you feel a certain way, and they make you see things from a certain perspective. They also invite questions and comparisons, especially to your own life and experience. In all those ways, stories serve as organic and subjective templates for making sense of our experiences. Their cultural work is to encode assumptions about the world, provide lenses for understanding, and serve as sources of ethical and cognitive order that helps individuals and collectives "organize [our] complex motivational dispositions into a functional program of behavior" (Carroll 43).

## 2. Fantasy of the Anthropocene vs. Fantasy for the Anthropocene

When it comes to fantasy, its essential and most ambitious cultural work today is the capacity to envision, inspire, and help unfold the intersubjective imagined order of a just, ecological future that has yet to be dreamt into being. Of course, anticipatory dreaming can develop toward either utopia or dystopia. Back in 2022, I proposed a distinction between the fantasy *of* the Anthropocene and fantasy *for* the Anthropocene (Oziewicz 64). Three years later, it seems we have even more of the former, and at its more destructive too.

The fantasy of the Anthropocene, the dominant culture today, is predicated on a belief that humans are masters of this planet, separate from and above nature, destined to rule and subdue it, or move to other planets once Earth is exhausted. The discursive constructs of "mastery," "control," and "separateness" at the heart of this ecocidal imagined order feed not only new levels of aggressive denial of climate change – especially in the US – but also authoritarian visions of remaking the world by force, libertarian visions of abolishing governments and nation states, technoutopian visions of transhumanist overlordship, and a diverse host of end-of time "Rapture Ideologies" shared by ISIS fighters, Christian Zionists, doomsday preppers, and millionaires who invest in New Zealand bunkers (Wheal, xii). These fantasies operate through narratives – both nonfictions like *Project 2025* or *The Sovereign Individual* (1999) and fictions like *Interstellar* (2014) or *Termination Shock* (2021). They also have real-world analogues such as "SpaceX, Saudi Arabia's The Line, and an increasing number of would-be geoengineering firms" (Shipko np). Like the boast to broker Russia–Ukraine peace deal within a day, fantasies of the Anthropocene promise immediate or miraculous solutions to all of the world's complex problems – usually through economic growth, technocratic fixes, future technologies, or their combinations – while actively exacerbating these problems in the present.

The counterforce capable of rerouting our imagination and effort toward regenerative, just, and healthier futures is fantasy *for* the Anthropocene: fantasy that resists the ecocidal *status quo*, asserts our kinship with all life, and helps us imagine active hope. The challenge for fantasy today is to help us imagine fantastic alternatives to authoritarianism, ecological collapse, technofeudalism, AI takeover, and other forms of devastation actively driven by the fantasies of the Anthropocene. Indeed, what can be more fantastic today than visions of ecocentric, sustainable communities on a vibrant, living planet? What can be more fantastic than visions of technology and AI aligned with love and care that protect and sustain all life and biodiversity? What can be more radically fantastic than stories about ordinary characters taking ordinary steps in their ordinary lives to stop ecocide and enable regenerative futures? This may be our dream time, at the ending of an especially destructive imagined order, when a rare confluence of circumstances enables us to create dreams that will determine the shape of tomorrow.

### **3. Fantasy for the Anthropocene and Young Audiences' Literature**

Much of the cultural work of fantasy and speculative fiction for young audiences is trending toward fantasy for the Anthropocene. Peter Brown's *The Wild Robot* trilogy (2016-2023) – and the 2024 film adaptation – imagines a humanoid AI learning from nature and becoming a steward to animals and the ecosystem on a remote island. The first novel in the series does not include human characters at all, but has a host of animal characters whose intelligence, emotions, and individuality cast them as nonhuman persons worthy of respect and care. The sequels offer glimpses of a regenerative human civilization of the future in which ecological balance is restored and technology supports the flourishing of life. Lipan Apache author Darcie Little Badger's *A Snake Falls to Earth* (2021), set in part in the "Reflecting World" of spirits and animal people and in part in the present day American southwest, tells the story of a shapeshifting cottonmouth snake Oli who travels into the human world to save his toad friend Ami. In the process, Oli reestablishes a connection with the Apache girl Nina and other Indigenous guardians of the sacred points where the two worlds intersect and nourish one another. Oli's quest, it turns out, aligns with Nina's challenge to protect her ancestral heritage and connection to the land. The book ends in creating an interspecies coalition that stands up to forces of destruction to protect all life.

A similar quest, with beings from two worlds helping one another protect the source of the life force that feeds vitality and biodiversity in both worlds, drives the plot of Katherine Rundell's *Impossible Creatures* (2023). When the protagonist, a girl called Mal, remembers her true nature as "the Immortal" – a protector of magic and wonder in the world – she is at once crushed by the weight of the world's suffering and elevated by its beauty. After describing the sorrows, Mal tells the other protagonist that there is so much more:

I have seen red dragons fly over mountains in the falling sun. And I have seen people offer up their lives to save one another, as if it were as natural as breathing. I've known lovers find each other in war and famine. I've seen promises made and kept for entire lifetimes, unswervingly, as if it was easy. ... I have seen wonder on wonder on wonder. I have seen how the world shines. I have seen people struggle to learn – painting, gardens, language, hand skills, foot skills – and I have seen them triumph. I have seen kindness large and wild enough to transform you. I have heard the best jokes in the world and music so sweet, I thought I might fall down because of it. I have seen so much done for love, over and over. I have seen people die for love and live for love. ... I have known such joy. The *joy*, Christopher. (310–11)

Many more works of speculative fiction could be listed here, but they all remind the reader that despite all disappointments, greed, and callousness that are so easy to notice, even a broken world is still a place of beauty, wonder, and love. Even a broken world engenders what adrienne maree brown calls “moments of collective genius” (196) that move us forward. The future is yet unwritten. Fantasy today is the key space where visions of what that future might be – and why it is worth fighting for – are being dreamed into being.

This unique capacity of fantasy for anticipatory dreaming – dreaming unconstrained by surface fidelity of realism – matters so much today because we need reliable guideposts to see the way forward. In the opening chapter of *Fantasy: How It Works*, Attebery takes up the tricky question of how fantasy tells truth. He proposes that fantasy can be true in three ways. It can be true mythically, “true to the traditional beliefs and narratives through which people have long understood the world and ourselves” (9). Fantasy can also be true metaphorically, prompting the audiences to use “one entire realm of experience to puzzle out another.” In an open-ended fashion – that is, without claiming the source and target domains being identical – the metaphor carries us “across the gap between the known and unknown” and depends “not only on our recognition of the aptness of the comparison but also on the incompleteness of the equation” (10). Lastly, fantasy can also be structurally true: representing “the shape of the world, and especially the shape of change” (12) that helps us locate ourselves “in time and in the universe” (13).

Many works of fantasy for the Anthropocene ring true on multiple levels, sometimes even all three. Like *The Wild Robot* trilogy, *A Snake Falls to Earth*, and *Impossible Creatures*, they center an emergency that requires a thoughtful response, new adaptive strategies, and clarity about the larger objectives of our actions. One classic work I have recently been exploring with my students is Pixar's award-winning *Monsters, Inc.* (2001). Although the original concept behind the story was to turn the notion of monsters on its head – to humanize the monsters by making them funny, sympathetic, friendly, and reliable – today the film also lends itself really well to exploring the metaphorical and structural truths about the energy crisis, energy transition, clean versus dirty energy, the cost of extractivism, and what it takes to enact a systems change that is as relevant to the survival of Monstropolis as it is to our world. When prompted to rewatch the film through this lens, my undergraduate students had no problems finding energy-related concepts and extrapolating questions these concepts raise for today's audiences.

Like other inhabitants of Monstropolis, monsters Sully and Mike believe that humans children are toxic. Their only purpose, common wisdom holds, is

to serve as a resource for harvesting fear screams which power the Monstropolis world. This belief is shattered when a human child Boo attaches herself to Sully and becomes his friend. Meeting Boo, a creature from another world, forces Mike and Sully to become aware of the structural violence that sustains their world and is embedded in its institutions, values, and belief systems. As they discover, extracting human fear is not the only avenue going forward. The alternative energy of laughter is not just morally and materially cleaner. It enables a completely different relationship between the monster with human worlds. Confronted with complicity, lies, and abuse, Sully and Mike are successful in overcoming the system's resistance. They transform Monstropolis into a world that is sustained by partnership and the energy of children's joy and laughter.

The metaphorical and structural truths my students noticed include externalities of energy production – its unseen or hidden costs – which they then connected to our use of fossil fuels that drives the climate emergency. In the vast majority of cases these observations also led students to reflect on the concerns of climate justice – considerations of climate change vulnerability relative to responsibility. They saw the film as an accurate portrayal of corporate pushback against energy transition in an effort to maintain the fossil fuel dominance *status quo*. They also commented about hope for meaningful change and personal agency they saw represented through Sully and Mike. Students discussed Sully and Mike's roles in changing the system and wondered what the plot tells the audiences about the power of individual actions in challenging an unfair system. Although none of these ideas are explicit – nor were they intended to be – the issues concerning energy and energy transition come to the fore as the film's metaphorical and structural truths for today's audiences.

An example that showcases an existential threat and a creative response to it more explicitly is Brian Selznick's graphic novel *Big Tree* (2023). Its characters are two Sycamore seeds, Louise and Mervin, who live 66 million years ago. They travel the world, meet different life forms – including the mysterious “Old One,” Planet Earth – and are eventually confronted with a choice they each have to make in the face of the impending Cretaceous/Paleogene extinction event. For contemporary audiences their adventure rings true metaphorically and structurally: we too are on a learning journey, and our world too is facing a host of existential challenges. One particular aspect of *Big Tree* – a theme woven throughout the novel – is the seemingly grandiose notion of “saving the world.” Selznick develops it at multiple points, including through a conversation between Mervin and Planet Earth. When Mervin asks what was meant by Earth's warnings passed to Louise and the notion that they are supposed to “save the world” (274), the Old One admits: “*I wasn't only sending out the message to Louise. I've been sending out the message to everyone. But so few have been able to hear it. ... They all had their own distractions*” (433, original italics). Feeling he was one of the distracted ones, Mervin declares he is ready.

“I know I'm alone now, and I'm very small, and I'm stuck in a ravine without any fluff at all, but I want to help.”

“*You're very small, but small things can grow. And you can work with others. That's called a community ...*”

"And we can figure out how to save the world together," said Mervin.  
"That's the only way to do it."  
"Do you really think we can save you?"  
"Mervin, I'm not sending out the message for myself."  
"You're not? But aren't you the—"  
"Yes, but I will survive. I have survived since the beginning. I've survived fires and floods and eons of ice. A billion years goes by pretty quickly for me. No, I'm not in danger."  
"But if you're not in danger, who is?"  
"You are, Mervin. All life is in danger. Remember, life began as a gift, and it must always be treated as such. No matter how unstoppable the danger seems, no matter how unavoidable, there's always something you can do."  
(433–35)

The metaphorical and structural truth of the need to confront the threats we face, as well as to figure out what we can do – as individuals and communities – lies at the heart of the cultural work of this novel. For Mervin, the warning is about the impending asteroid collision. For the moder reader, the warning is about something else. When he gets the message, Mervin is transformed.

In that moment, Mervin felt a kind of peaceful vibration he'd never felt before. It moved through his whole body and grew so powerful that it traveled beyond him and rang through the planet like a musical note, connecting Mervin, with invisible roots, to the entire world. (435)

In representing how personal transformative experiences translate into sustaining the wonder of a living word, fantasy for the Anthropocene helps today's audiences remember our right to transformative experiences too. It asserts that we have the agency to be the shapers of our tomorrow. And it offers examples of how change happens. In *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (2011), Jared Diamond names four nodes for success or failure in a civilization's decision-making: 1) anticipating or failing to anticipate the problem before the problem arrives; 2) perceiving or failing to perceive the problem when it arrives; 3) trying or failing to try to solve it after the problem is perceived; and 4) solving the problem or failing to solve it despite trying (421). Mervin and Louise do not solve the problem of the meteor hit, yet they do all they can to ensure the survival of life in the aftermath – as the ending of the novel clearly communicates. Sully and Mike, on the other hand, resolve the emergency of the energy crisis by coming up with an innovative system-changing solution.

Where are we in this trajectory? Like the citizens of Monstropolis, we are now complicit in a civilization built on an extremely destructive form of energy. Like Sully and Mike, we are implicated in ecocide and we participate in an extractive system that destroys the planet. But it does not have to be this way. There is a different future we can choose, and it is clear that we need a system-changing solution too. If we are serious about this goal, literature, film, games, and art for young people are the most important avenues for raising awareness and mobilizing social capital needed for the success of this unprecedented civilizational transformation.

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