

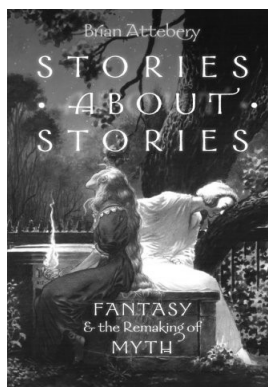


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A Book review:

Brian Attebery – *Stories about Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth*

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Attebery, Brian: *Stories about Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. ISBN: 978-0-19-931607-6.

Fantasy, as we know, draws heavily on earlier mythological traditions. The various connections between fantasy and myth(s) have been thoroughly explored during the past decades, in philosophical explorations discussing the ontology and epistemology of fantasy, as well as in literary influence studies charting intertextual relations between earlier traditions and contemporary works. Indeed, most general studies of fantasy are likely to point out the relationship between fantasy and myth. Is there thus anything novel left to say about fantasy and myth? There is, as Brian Attebery's *Stories About Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth* demonstrates. Even though the project is characterised as a “history of fantasy as a history of mythopoiesis, modern myth-making” (4), *Stories About Stories* is not a philosophical speculation about fantasy *as* myth. It is also not a meticulous analytical exercise to note down all intertextual references to various mythological sources in specific works of fantasy during specific historical moments, but hovers somewhere in between these two approaches. *Stories About Stories* investigates “the way writers use fantasy to reframe myth: to construct new ways of looking at traditional stories and beliefs” (2–3) and does this by closely examining narrative strategies of rewriting in works of fantasy mainly from the past century. Apart from narrative strategies, the focus is on the functions and effects of rewriting: how are myths reworked and recontextualised in fantasy and to what effect? Thus, the book aims to illustrate how fantasy connects us with the myths of the past to understand the present – a very worthwhile endeavour.

As Attebery suggests, the book could be classified either as a literary study or a cultural history, or possibly both. It is definitely both as far as fantasy is concerned. However, while *Stories About Stories* is a brief cultural history of fantasy as a form of myth-making, or, perhaps, myth-breaking, the book is not a cultural history of myth, nor does it claim to be, even if at the beginning myth is defined very broadly “to designate any collective story that encapsulates a world view and authorizes belief” (2). In its broadest sense, this definition would, in my view, include a range of

contemporary and historical myths constructed in more or less realistic discourse, not only religious or fantastic narratives. Among other things, contemporary economic narratives of unlimited growth and endless progress or popular scientific stories about gender development often function like myths and, moreover, are myths reworked and challenged in many a fantasy and science fiction narrative. These are not, however, dealt with in *Stories About Stories*. Most of the time when Attebery is discussing the ways in which fantasy reweaves myths into new stories, he is referring to the rewriting and recontextualising of past and contemporary myths associated with religious or spiritual traditions. While the definition of myth is thus narrowed down, the range of genres included as potential mythological source materials for fantasy is broad: apart from religious narratives such as creation myths and stories of deities, these include legends, ballads, folk and fairy tales. In this sense, Attebery's study is a fairly conventional approach to rewriting of myth in fantasy – and as such it works excellently.

Similarly to Attebery's earlier well-known works, *Strategies of Fantasy* (1992) and *Decoding Gender in Science Fiction* (2002), *Stories About Stories* is an ambitious study that covers a broad range of literary fantastic works, examined through a critical framework combining insights and concepts from various traditions, ranging from literary philosophy and structuralist narrative theory to feminist and postcolonialist criticism. In a way, *Stories About Stories* is a sequel to *Strategies of Fantasy* – both rely on the logical-philosophical notion of the genre of fantasy as a “fuzzy set” and examine the various narrative strategies that are typically employed in works of fantasy. What *Stories About Stories* adds to the earlier work, apart from a range of more recent fantasy narratives, is a more intricate analysis of narrative strategies of *rewriting* and closer attention to the cultural context in which the rewriting takes place – unlike the previous book that was mainly a literary study, this one is truly also a cultural history of fantasy. *Stories About Stories* runs through a versatile selection of cases to illustrate key developments in fantasists' approaches to mythological source materials throughout the past two centuries, although the focus is on the late twentieth century. The corpus of primary texts ranges from nineteenth-century classics to contemporary works and includes both famous and less-known fantasists, such as the Inklings group and their contemporary Hope Mirrlees. All the texts discussed in detail come from the English-language tradition. The mythopoeic strategies of fantasy might look somewhat different if other language and cultural areas were included not only as source materials for English-speaking fantasists, but also active producers of their own fantasy works – this is not a concern of this study, however.

The book consists of eight chapters discussing the relationship between fantasy and myth at crucial historical points, and two brief interludes, the first dealing with generic distinctions and the second depicting fundamentalist Christian reactions to contemporary fantasy. The first chapter and the taxonomic interlude clarify the various concepts and terms, including “fantasy” and “myth”, and offer a concise historical account of the origins of fantasy as a genre in the nineteenth century. The rest of the chapters focus on the twentieth century, starting from the comparisons between the employment of the “mythic method” (43) among modernists and the Inklings, as well as between approaches to Christian mythology by C. S. Lewis and his nineteenth-century inspiration George MacDonald, and ending with developments occurring towards the end of the century: the growing popularity of angel stories, attacks on fantasy by Christian readers who interpret it literally, postcolonialism, and postmodernism. In between we read about the main trends in post-Tolkien fantasy during the 1960s and 1970s that in its myth-making and myth-breaking was relying heavily on the genre of romance (whether as a story of erotic desire, of an exotic adventure narrative, or of a discovery of one's hidden identity) and a Campbellian, colonialist approach to world mythologies. The main argument about fantasy as a versatile tool for modern myth-making builds up throughout the work – as the list above suggests, the strategies, purposes, contexts and outcomes of rewriting myths in fantasy have varied greatly through time, and even at any particular moment in history. It

is perhaps due to this versatility that each main chapter can also be read on its own as a specific case study. This is good news for those readers who are primarily interested in a specific historical moment, theme, or approach. However, there is also a feeling that sometimes the ties between the chapters are fairly loose; it is clear, for instance, that feminist, postcolonialist and postmodernist approaches to rewriting myths in fantasy have been occurring simultaneously and been intertwined, yet here these approaches are mainly treated separate from each other in different chapters.

Instead of trying to capture the variety of the examples and strategies that Attebery covers – for that I refer you to the book itself – I will put forward four main notions that I was left with after finishing the book. First, unlike the Campbellian idea of the monomyth suggests, all myths, all stories, and all fantasies are not the same. As Attebery demonstrates, it is often precisely the small details and cultural fine-tuning and (re)contextualisation that make all the difference; the very conscious *play* with strategies of *rewriting* and making old stories anew are employed to ensure that we are *not* reading the same myth or fantasy all over again. Neither is the purpose of rewriting always the same: myths can be rewritten to entertain, put forward religious views, present political satire, explore selfhood, present minority voices, reimagine gender or ethnicity, or just to ensure that the old stories are not forgotten. Second, even though this is a cultural history of fantasy, the progress of time does not necessarily neatly equal progress in fantasy as a genre – as in narrative strategies becoming more complex or in a growing political awareness about the cultural context in which stories are written. Attebery does end his discussion with works from the past few decades that employ either postcolonialist approaches or strategies of disruptive rewriting that some have labelled postmodernist but he terms “situated fantastic”, a concept inspired by Donna Haraway’s notion of “situated knowledge” (8; 187–188), and describes these as complicated and sophisticated forms of fantasy. Yet changes do not always occur in a one-way line. This is evidenced by Attebery’s own refusal to use the term postmodernist of strategies that “predate the current era” (8) and, for instance, by his comparison between the representation of women in progressive MacDonald and conservative Lewis. Thus the patterns of change may also be less predictable and chaotic – at least before someone connects selected dots to construct a history of development.

The two final notions have to do with cultural context. As playful and creative rewriting myths may be, fantasists do not create their works in a cultural vacuum – myths and stories do not come out of nowhere, nor do they disappear in the air after consumption without any consequences. This may seem pretty obvious. However, as Attebery illustrates through the case of Patricia Wrightson and her work appropriating Aboriginal motifs that was first met with international praise, followed by severe criticism and silence, storytellers, critics, and readers are hardly unanimous about in their opinion on where the lines of cultural appropriation and social justice and the borders of individual creativity lie. This is linked to my final notion: when discussing cultural context in which fantasy – as well as myth – is produced and interpreted, the context is often perhaps too readily assumed. The term “consensus reality” introduced by Kathryn Hume is now widely used when defining fantasy as a departure from it, yet, as Attebery points out, it is by no means clear that people living in the same culture at the same time will share a consensus of what is real. If 75 per cent of Americans believe in angels (p. 141), should we not be classifying the recent, popular stories of angels as realist fiction? This dilemma not only highlights challenges in drawing generic distinctions but also shows how fantasy and myth may completely overlap; someone’s fiction is another person’s firm belief, as evidenced by Attebery’s examples of fundamentalist Christian book censors and those members of Native American tribes who experience their myths living rather than dead. This overlap is also reflected in the incorporation of the narrative type of *memorate* – “a firsthand account of an experience, usually a supernatural or paranormal one, that links the teller to a traditional belief or legend” (p. 35) – to rewritings of myth in fantasy: by representing encounters with supernatural creatures or events through the perspective of an ordinary, contemporary character, mythological elements both disrupt and are incorporated into the everyday experience.

The pull of contemporary fantasy may have to do with the fact that it plays with the shifting notions of real and brings the impossible, supernatural or mythical close to us by mixing ordinary with extraordinary, and personal with cultural. However, in his discussion of the uses of memorate in fantasy, Attebery maintains that, unlike myth that aims at making us believe, fantasy, in its explicit fictionality, often allows its writers to “engage in a form of cultural criticism” (p. 116) and to show the constructedness of all myths and stories and the situatedness of knowledge and beliefs (cf. p. 188). Yet, at the same time, the act of rewriting mythological materials and weaving them into contemporary experiences and perspectives speaks of the importance of telling those stories, of the continuing significance of myth-making.

Attebery’s book is essential reading for all scholars interested in the history of literary fantasy. The accessible writing style that illustrates complex theoretical notions by close readings of specific works and personal anecdotes also makes it an easy entry point to the field for students. For those well versed in theories of fantasy, many parts of the book offer little new – yet it is perhaps exactly this sense of familiarity that makes Attebery’s fresh insights into the complex relationship between fantasy and myth even more prominent. It takes skill to start with a rather prosaic notion that “Fantasy is fundamentally playful – which does not mean that it is not serious” (p. 2) – and then use the rest of the book to demonstrate how looking into the playful seriousness of fantasy may work as an excellent strategy to explain the various functions and meanings of fantasy in exploring the human condition, be it in stories of goblins or gods, angels or aliens. A key feature of fantasy, as Attebery argues, is that it does not hide its fictitiousness. Unlike other discourses constructing (contemporary) myths ranging from religions to economic theory, fantasy does not put itself forward as literally true or authoritative. Herein lies the subversive edge of fantasy: in its rewriting, remaking and (re)breaking of myths, fantasy offers possibilities instead of absolute truths. *Stories About Stories* offers plenty of chances to be inspired by the possibilities of fantasy (again) and appreciate the importance that fantasy has in our cultural consciousness.