Book Review:
Patricia A. McKillip and the Art of Fantasy World-Building

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Taylor, Audrey Isabel. *Patricia A. McKillip and the Art of Fantasy World-Building*. McFarland, 2017, www.mcfarlandbooks.com. ISBN 978-1476665160.

Audrey Isabel Taylor's *Patricia A. McKillip and the Art of Fantasy World-Building* is the first book-length examination of McKillip's fantasy works. This is a surprising gap in fantasy scholarship, considering McKillip's accomplishments in the genre; as Taylor says in her preface, "McKillip *ought* to need no introduction" (1, emphasis added). McKillip won the first World Fantasy Award in 1975 for *The Forgotten Beasts of Eld*, and she is one of only five authors to win Best Novel twice, not to mention other awards including the Locus and Mythopoeic. Additionally, as Taylor points out, "McKillip unites critics, fellow authors, and fans in respect for her craft" (2), citing praise from noteworthy author Stephen R. Donaldson and critic John Clute. Taylor's book reflects her ambitious goal to inspire greater scholarly attention for McKillip's work, and certainly future studies of McKillip will lean heavily on this volume. If we see an increase in scholarly attention of McKillip's work in the coming years (and we should), then Taylor will have achieved her primary objective.

To redress the dearth of scholarship on McKillip, whom Taylor describes as "understudied" (1), Taylor examines one of the most basic components of fantasy fiction: world-building, specifically as executed by McKillip. Taylor's new approach, which she terms "critical world-building", considers components in a fantasy world "beyond landscape ... to see what setting combined with other facts and elements can tell us" about the story (11). Her main interest lies in how readers construct the world of the story in their own minds, both with regard to what is expressly presented within the text and what is left out. She emphasizes that every aspect of a story – "constructions, with ideas, plot, narrative, characters and other elements all interacting in varying and engaging ways" (12) – informs how the reader understands and experiences the tale. A medieval castle, an endless desert, or a modern city: each

of these and countless others invoke the reader's expectations about the sort of social structures, characters, and plot conventions they might encounter. An author can either play these straight, subvert them, or engage a mixture of both so long as the story holds together. Furthermore, the types of characters represented, the legends told and believed within the storyworld, locations visited, and more constitute a reader's vision of the world. For Taylor the goal is to present a holistic approach to world-building, one that looks at the intersection of settings, characters, and histories to apprehend the vitality of the story's world.

Discussions of world-building have long played a part in fantasy scholarship, but Taylor expands the matter by demonstrating how world-building can work in the critical discourse. Importantly, she draws distinctions between what she terms writerly world-building, readerly world-building, and critical world-building. The first refers to the way writers create meaning, which has a history of discussion from as far back as George MacDonald up to today's manuals on writing fantasy. Readerly world-building looks at how general readers construct the world of the story within their own minds by responding to narrative indicators deployed as part of writerly world-building. Critical world-building is Taylor's unique thrust, which combines readerly world-building with the analytical tools of the critic to approach a text, such as an awareness of trends in the genre and how authors might respond to their influences. Moreover, as Taylor puts it, a "critic will naturally be more interested in particular details" (21) than a general reader. Taylor does not mean to disparage non-scholarly readers nor to elevate critics, but rather she acknowledges that these different parties approach texts from specific backgrounds and wishes to enhance the academic experience. Elements she examines include trends and tropes apparent in fantasy literature, character types, locations, and so forth.

Pointing to McKillip as a particularly sophisticated world-builder, Taylor astutely includes oft-overlooked categories of world-building. Because critical world-building is holistic, it emphasizes how items that may appear as background still teach us about the world and therefore can inform how a reader approaches the text as a whole. While Taylor's index of world-building items is impressive, I will highlight just two: character ages and the role of myths and legends within the story. Taylor points out that McKillip skillfully manipulates these categories without overtaking the narrative. A wide spectrum of character ages, Taylor points out, allows "older characters a place in the world" and endows "characters with flaws natural to their age" (66). Similarly, a reader typically expects that legends and myths within the storyworld serve as a clue about the structure of the book they're currently reading. In this way, these embedded narratives function more like prophecies which enhance the current novel and less about enhancing the world itself. Taylor also uses McKillip as an example of how legends and myths within a fantasy novel can simply add history, depth, and tactility to a text. Critical world-building suggests an alternative way to evaluate and consider the temporal, social, and cultural spheres that make up a story by evaluating how they interact with each other.

Taylor's writing displays her admiration for McKillip, as it reads cleanly without getting dense in theory. In fact, the majority of theory presented appears in chapter one ("Worlds and World-Building"), and the remainder of the book fleshes out those basic concepts from different angles of application. Readers will not find much that is groundbreaking in the critical world-building approach, but it is a useful reminder about the importance of world-building that refocuses and redistributes our scholarly apparatuses. Those with a basic grasp of current narrative theory will find themselves

the best equipped to understand and apply Taylor's methods, though the book is so accessible that anyone familiar with literary criticism should find it usable.

In addition to the quality of her writing, Taylor's examples are accessible, illustrative, and instructive. For example, she cites the opening scene of McKillip's *Kingfisher* for its subtle displays of magic and notes how characters respond, such as a human knight whose shadow is winged. Protagonist Pierce is not surprised by the appearance of a knight nor that the shadow is supernatural, but he puzzles over the fact that the knight does not levitate. Taylor uses this scene to demonstrate how critical world-building works, extrapolating from the setting, the knight, and Pierce's response to demonstrate how small clues lead to complex constructions in the reader's mind. Taylor's ability to balance summary and analysis in her examples means that even readers less immersed in McKillip's literary corpus should still be able to ascertain the basic principles of critical world-building.

At the same time, unfortunately, Taylor's enthusiasm for McKillip's work seems occasionally to overshadow the main thrust of her theory. At times her efforts to illustrate examples of world-building unique to McKillip seemed to make questionable whether critical world-building could apply to any other author. This bias is seen in comments such as "I devised this style [of critical world-building] specifically to enable a full investigation of McKillip's worlds" (22). The book seems a bit torn between its two express purposes of drawing attention to McKillip and instructing readers in critical world-building.

That being said, *Patricia A. McKillip and the Art of Fantasy World-Building* emphasizes some of the primary joys of fantasy literature: exploring imagined landscapes, the power of myth and magic to inspire and thrill readers, opportunities to befriend and adore wonderful characters, and the exhilaration of loving our chosen authors. At the same time, Taylor avoids pandering to populist reading by rooting her theory in principles of narratology and structuralism. Experienced scholars can here find simple but effective ways to dig into the world-building which underpins their favorite books, and younger scholars can develop a stronger feel for analyzing fantasy literature on its own terms. While many other reference texts understandably concern themselves with the genre's history or with social and political criticism, Audrey Taylor encourages her readers to engage with fantasy literature *as* fantasy, by which I mean as a construct of our own wishful thinking.

> *Biography*: Paul Williams received his M.A. in English from Idaho State University in spring 2018. A former high school English teacher, his interests include narrative theory, alternative history, religion, and any other topic he can fit under the umbrella of fantasy literature. He is now a doctoral candidate at ISU where he also serves as Editorial Assistant for the *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*.