BOOK REVIEW:
Fantasy

Katherine McLoone

In late 2020, *Time* magazine published a list of "The 100 Best Fantasy Books of All Time" as judged by such current luminaries and bestsellers as N. K. Jemisin, Neil Gaiman, Marlon James, and George R. R. Martin, among others. It is a problematic list, as such lists always are. But its greatest strength is its diversity, especially in contrast with the "Your Picks: Top 100 Science-Fiction, Fantasy Books" published by NPR in 2011, which had only one non-Anglophone author (Jules Verne) and was entirely white. The *Time* magazine list includes authors of color as well as works from beyond the Anglophone world; although there is an unsurprisingly outsized focus on 20th- and 21st-century texts, the list acknowledges the fantastical past as well.

I mention this list not for its ultimate significance, which is minor, but because it is representative of the current state of fantasy – a state that includes current publishing trends and aspirations for the future of fantasy. Fantasy as a genre or mode is not exclusively white, or male, or Anglophone. But fantasy, particularly as a publishing category in the post-WWII era, has often been perceived, rightly or wrongly, as being all those things and nothing more. Only in the past two decades has there been a concerted effort both to publish more diverse speculative fiction in the present, and to rediscover precisely how diverse speculative fiction has been in the past.

That representational and aspirational work emerges in a variety of recent publications. To give just two examples: *The Big Book of Classic Fantasy* (2018) boasts that "almost half of the stories in this anthology are translations, representing twenty-six countries" (xix). In that volume, editors Ann and Jeff VanderMeer chose to portray fantasy's past diversity as a way of contributing to the conversation about present-day (and future) diversity. A second example

comes from a companion text to the work under review: the second edition of the Routledge Critical Idiom volume *Science Fiction*, by Adam Roberts (2006), which contains chapters on gender and race in SF.

Lucie Armitt's *Fantasy* ignores this conversation entirely, providing instead a survey of white, Anglophone, and mainstream fantasy, broadly conceived. The breadth of that definition emerges in the first chapter, "Defining Fantasy", where Armitt positions fantasy in opposition to the mimetic (that is, the representation of the real). She does not claim fantasy is *unreal*: rather, it is the mirrored real; it is the other; it is the imaginative and sometimes uncanny *locus* from which we must return either within the text (such as Alice returning to the riverbank from Wonderland) or upon closing the text ("and they all lived happily ever after"). This is not Auerbach's mimesis; he portrayed scenes from Dante's *Inferno* as the beginning of a cultural turn towards realism, since Dante's characters were distinct from one another.

But Armitt would describe Dante's *Inferno* as fantastic, as it fits with her "competing-worlds approach to fantasy" (7), a definition that runs the risk of conceptualising *all* fantasy as "portal fantasy". And not just the typical portal fantasy we might think of – which Farah Mendlesohn, cited by Armitt, describes as a "point of entry" for the characters (13). Rather, Armitt argues that portals can exist within a text for characters, or outside of the text for the reader. For instance, J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series qualifies as a fantasy not because it has magicians but because it is a portal fiction (entry to Hogwarts); Terry Pratchett's Discworld series "constitutes a separate world of its own" that the reader enters when they begin to read (22).

That distinction relies on a specific positioning of and between the author, reader, and text, as fantasy (unlike mimetic literature) explores the "juxtaposition of competing worlds, wherein one world, purportedly representing 'reality', is left behind in preference for another which is unknown and 'foreign' in the sense of being strange, fabulous or grotesque" (2). This definition risks blurring the lines between fantasy and fiction in general: if I open a novel by Jonathan Franzen, aren't I transported to the realm of upper-middle-class Midwesterners in need of therapy? What about Chimamanda Adichie's coming-of-age novel *Purple Hibiscus,* set in Nigeria? Our own backgrounds determine whether we might consider one of those to be "foreign" or "strange", although both are mimetic rather than fantastic works.

Armitt does acknowledge this tension: "all imaginative work is fantastic: creativity put through a filter of everyday experience. What differentiates fantasy from realism are the *assumptions* made about the fictional world portrayed" (24, emphasis mine). What may be lost in that distinction, though, is the sense of which assumptions are shared between text and audience: to read an ostensibly mimetic work from the distant past – or simply from a present-day culture quite unlike one's own – is to encounter a reality about which one may not have many accurate assumptions.

Viet Thanh Nguyen, a Vietnamese-American scholar and novelist, writes about – and against – American academic writing workshops to argue that the American publishing literary-fiction establishment "pretends that 'Show, don't tell' is universal when it is, in fact, the expression of a particular population, the white majority, typically at least middle-class and often, but not exclusively, male .... Like all privileges, this identity is unmarked until it is thrown into relief against that which is marked, visible and outspoken, which is to say me and

others like me". In other words, both literary fiction (such as Nguyen's novels) and the speculative-fiction genres (as addressed above) are undergoing a reckoning of which "assumptions" may be assumed.

This is not just a quibble about whether we define fantasy as a genre or mode. (I actually quite like Armitt's "competing worlds" idea and wish she'd explored it further.) Rather, the unexamined nuances of assumptions, foreignness, reality, and the "strange" lead to a problem that emerges throughout this book, as the breadth of Armitt's definition of fantasy, and the number of works she includes in her chapters, results in an illusion of depth that nonetheless promotes a vision of fantasy that is almost exclusively white, Anglophone, and possessed of a set of cultural references that I can only assume are identical to Armitt's own.

In *Fantasy,* Armitt cites a total of 39 primary-text authors, although she mentions many more in passing. Among that number, only five (Ovid, Hans Christian Andersen, Jules Verne, Jean de Brunhoff, and Charlotte Roche) wrote in a language other than English. None are from Latin America, Asia, Africa, or even eastern Europe. The film selection is slightly more diverse, with a smattering of early French cinema. The television shows addressed are all either British or American.

Armitt's broad definition allows her to include *Toy Story* and *Game of Thrones,* Tolkien and Rosetti, *The Nutcracker* and the Grail legends, comic books and J. G. Ballard's novel *Crash*. But Armitt does not include video games, Dungeons and Dragons, popular music such as heavy metal, or Norse mythology. The sole reference to magical realism comes in the introduction, when Armitt recommends readers read a volume on that topic from the same New Critical Idiom series. Salman Rushdie does not appear, nor any Russians. Nor do we get any mention of the vibrancy of fantasy novels emerging from sub-Saharan Africa, or among marginalised populations in North America and the United Kingdom.

Perhaps more troublingly, it is unclear which audience she had in mind for this work; all New Critical Idiom texts are meant to be "introductory guides designed to meet the needs of today's students". When tracing the history of fantasy in the second chapter, Armitt says of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that the "English language version most of us read today [… is the one] translated by Arthur Golding in 1567" (29). Of whom does she speak here? Who is this "us"? My first encounter with the *Metamorphoses* was A. D. Melville's 1986 translation for Oxford University Press; I doubt I am unique, and I know my students read Melville rather than Golding, because that is what I have them read.

Throughout, Armitt seems to assume that her audience comes from a background (both personal and literary) similar to hers; her reference point is her own cultural experience and not those inhabited by others. That is why a section on *The Thousand and One Nights* emphasises not the work itself, but its influence on Coleridge and its popularity in 20th-century cinema, including Disney's animated and live-action versions of *Aladdin*.

To be fair, Armitt acknowledges the "several uncomfortable Orientalist touches" in the Disney film, and acknowledges the political stakes of setting it in the fictional city of Agrabah (37). Yet the result is still a reading – in a chapter titled "A Historical Overview of Fantasy"! – of *The Thousand and One Nights* that explores its Anglophone reception rather than the work itself, much less its

influence on recent fantasies by creators who are not (white) American or European. Similarly, a section on animal tricksters (in Chapter Three) mentions briefly that the Uncle Remus tales were "first derived from African folklore, and thought to have travelled to North America along with the slave trade" but does not address that folklore (65).

This is not, therefore, a book on fantasy, no matter how we define that category. It is a book on Anglophone (mostly American and British, mostly white) fantastical works that sometimes looks at how they engage with and transform older, non-Anglophone texts such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and *The Thousand and One Nights*.

Those parameters can be their own goal, but Armitt's narrow focus results in some drastic lacunae. In the fifth chapter, "Fantasy and Politics", she explores the political through the lens of children's literature; comic books (including the Japanese influence on American productions in the realm of both mid-century cinema and anime); and utopias and dystopias such as *1984, The Handmaid's Tale,* and others. (Thus, interestingly, she incorporates what I might classify as SF into this definition of fantasy.)

In that chapter, Armitt does address the anti-Irish, anti-Welsh, and anti-Black sentiment of Kingsley's 1862 novel *The Water Babies*, as well as the "controversies" over de Brunhoff's Babar (1931) and Enid Blyton (actively writing from the 1930s to 1950s). Yet, by situating the "controversial" only in the past, Armitt neglects to address the politics in post-WWII fantasy, such as how Tolkien channeled the horrors of the First World War into *Lord of the Rings*, C. S. Lewis's stomach-churning Orientalism in *The Last Battle,* the racism of HBO's *Game of Thrones* (she does address the sexualised violence of that show in another chapter), or even the whitewashing of Hermione in the film adaptations of the *Harry Potter* series.

Failing to address those issues means Armitt allows herself no opportunity to look at how fantasy has adapted to its problematic past, such as N. K. Jemisin's record-breaking three Hugo Awards for her *Broken Earth* series, or even Disney's attempts at diversity with films like *Coco* and *Moana*. In her description of *The Water Babies*, Armitt points out that "what is elsewhere implied covertly is made explicit here: Kingsley's implied child reader is both English and Anglophile in his/her politics" (113). We might say the same of her work.

However, there is potential here. The third chapter, "Animal Fantasy for Children", explores Disney movies, *Black Beauty*, the *Uncle Remus* stories (as adapted by Loony Tunes), Winnie-the-Pooh, Paddington, Beatrix Potter, Kenneth Grahame, and *Charlotte's Web*, to name only a few of the texts and authors addressed. Armitt shifts between psychological, psychoanalytic, and cultural studies to examine these works in precisely the way we would expect; this chapter could be useful for a course on children's literature.

Within that chapter, the praxis of a "competing worlds" definition of fantasy emerges, albeit sometimes haphazardly: a section on animal characters explains that the Paddington (the bear) stories were originally rejected because Paddington was described as an African bear (but there are no bears in Africa); his provenance was therefore changed to "darkest Peru". A few lines later, Armitt quotes an animal psychologist on our growing understanding of the interior lives of domestic animals. Verisimilitude of bear origins, and the psychology of domestic animals, bump up against the fantastical nature of the

Paddington stories, but Armitt doesn't belabor, or even address, the ways in which she juxtaposes the commercial and the scientific (which is to say, the *real*) with the fantastical in this or other sections. (Later in the same section, she explains, in reference to the movie *Babe*, that pigs can cry when grieving; her citation for that fact is the website minipiginfo.com.)

But the fast pace of the work results in disconnected ideas. Yes, Cinderella is problematic because of "Western patriarchal capitalism" (58). And it is hard to argue with the statement that "[e]specially attractive to young children are baby animals" (62). But there is little follow-through on those ideas: I found myself wanting a deeper articulation of how fantasy, in general, might struggle with such concepts as "Western patriarchal capitalism" or child psychology in relation to Disney films (or anything, really), but Armitt moves so quickly from text to text that there is little opportunity for the true engagement that would result in a comprehensive theory of fantasy.

The fourth chapter, on quests, is indicative of the work's scope, as well as the limitations of compressing that scope into about 170 pages. That chapter addresses the fantastical element of the Grail legend (including Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chrétien de Troyes, Malory, Tennyson, Twain, T. H. White, Mary Stewart, *The Sword in the Stone* [the Disney animated film], *First Knight* [the 1995 film], and *Merlin* [the TV series]); the landscapes in the *Lord of the Rings*, *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and the *Gormenghast* trilogy, as well as the real-life geography of *The Water Babies*; the idea of knowledge in *The Water Babies, Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea, A Christmas Carol*, and George MacDonald's *Phantastes: A Faerie Romance*; death in that same text, as well as numerous fairy tales and *Peter Pan*; totemic objects in *The Lord of the Rings* and Harry Potter; monsters in the *Metamorphoses*, *The Faerie Queene*, the television show *Merlin*, and *Harry Potter*. All of that is filtered through relevant theorists (Freud, Kristeva, etc.), and it all occurs in just 25 small pages. It is comprehensive, within the limits discussed above, but this chapter could be its own book. It could be a dozen books.

The best chapter is the final one, on "Fantasy and the Erotic". Here, Armitt looks at eros in fantasy (think: "Goblin Market") and at erotic fantasies (think: a person engaging in imaginative lust, or a character lusting after another character). What stands out is not the theory behind those concepts, but the strong close readings of works from Rosetti's poem to J. G. Ballard's novel *Crash* to Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* and Marian Engel's *Bear*, among others. Armitt demonstrates a nuanced understanding of textual analysis (in light of relevant critical theories, including gender theory, queer theory, and disability theory). Although the focus of this chapter is on gender, sex, and eros rather than "fantasy" as many would define it, it is the most cohesive and interesting section of the book.

And, indeed, this book is *interesting*. It confounded my expectations at every turn, in ways both frustrating (as described above) and charming. Minor misrepresentations popped up occasionally. For instance, Armitt's portrayal of Ovid's version of the Orpheus story is disingenuous at best: "Before Ovid," she claims, "the origins of 'Orpheus and Eurydice' lay in oral storytelling" (28). Plato and Virgil might take issue with that claim! Elsewhere, she says that although in "allegorical terms, Aslan is a symbolic embodiment of Jesus Christ, Lewis never allows that metaphorical function to detract from his existence as

King of the Beasts" (63). Allegory and metaphor are not the same, and Lewis explained, more than once, that Aslan was not allegorical.

The glossary may represent, in brief, how this book does both too much and too little. It consists of only 18 terms: anthropomorphism, cartography, chronotope (a term which does not appear elsewhere in the work), dystopia, eucatastrophe, fairy-lore, fairy story, fantastic [Todorov], folktale, the marvelous, medieval dream vision, myth, pornotopia, portal fantasy, nonsense, secondary world, trickster, utopia. Our students need more.

But the little moments – the ones least relevant to a book review but most pleasing to a reader – abound. Armitt briefly links Winston's dreams (in *1984*) to the medieval dream-vision tradition (124). She goes from a mention of "bog people" in *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* to an offhand reference to Seamus Heaney's poetry (15). She emphasises Monique Wittig's implication, in *The Lesbian Body*, that Eurydice was scoping out Orpheus's body as they traveled out of the underworld (158). At times Armitt implies these moments are causational (the past influencing the present); at others she implies an inspired coincidence circulating in and among the texts she delineates as fantasy. There is a tantalising idea lurking here somewhere.

Do those little moments compensate for the gaps? For a casual reader interested in one person's take on a broad genre, perhaps. For a *user* of the book, however – someone who comes to the New Critical Idiom series expecting that it will provide an introductory, student-friendly guide to a topic, its terms, and its contexts – *Fantasy* fits one of Armitt's own assertions about "what appeals to us about fantasy: we have a sense of having lost something we cannot quite grasp" (53).

> *Biography*: Katherine McLoone is a lecturer in the Comparative World Literature Program at California State University, Long Beach. A medievalist by training, she is a generalist by circumstance, teaching courses on mythology, fairy tales, fantasy, science fiction, and comedy. In her spare time, she grades papers.

Works Cited

Nguyen, Viet Thanh. "Viet Thanh Nguyen Reveals How Writers' Workshops Can Be Hostile." *The New York Times*. 6 April 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/04/26/books/review/viet-thanh-nguyen-writers-workshops.html. Accessed 30 May 2021.