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Editorial 1/2025

*Merve Tabur, Elise Kraatila, Jessica Norledge
& Jari Käkälä*

Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research's first issue of 2025 welcomes midsummer with a blazing selection of cutting-edge speculative fiction research, essays, and book reviews.

We extend our special thanks to Marek Oziewicz, Professor of Literacy Education and Chair of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Minnesota, for his timely prefatory, “The Cultural Work of Fantasy in the Anthropocene.” Oziewicz gives us a sobering yet hopeful outlook to the grand task fantasy storytelling is called upon to perform in this era of a multitude of global crises with existential stakes. Celebrating the genre’s potential to provide new models and patterns of thinking to counter the ecocidal status quo, he makes a strong case for the importance of fantasy in educating democratic citizens.

The peer-reviewed articles continue weaving the ecocritical thread introduced in the prefatory by addressing questions concerning the rhetoric of solastalgia in the Anthropocene and the role speculative fiction plays in moving beyond anthropocentric environmental discourses. In “‘Attuned to Loss’: Rhetoric of Solastalgia in Richard Powers’ *Bewilderment* and Emmi Itäranta’s *The Moonday Letters*,” Radvilė Musteikytė offers a nuanced comparison of the texts’ key themes and functions, from their Earth-centeredness through to their depiction of environmental crisis. In so doing, Musteikytė applies James Phelan’s rhetorical theory of narrative to examine the ways in which each text invites solastalgia and attunes readers to environmental loss. Moving on to a discussion on anthropocentrism, Peter Melville’s “Ecocritical Perspectives in Naomi Novik’s *Uprooted*” offers an insightful critical reading of the celebrated novel’s environmental themes. Distinguishing between the intertwined concepts of anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism, Melville interrogates the potential of fantasy to transcend human-centered viewpoints in its depictions of nonhuman perspectives.

The issue’s first essay, “Satire in Egyptian Speculative Fiction: Short Stories as a Borderline Case Study” by researcher and author Emad El-Din

Aysha brings critical attention to an understudied topic in speculative fiction studies. This essay offers a comprehensive survey of the function of satire in contemporary Arabic speculative fiction, focusing on examples of SF short stories by Egyptian authors. Furthermore, Jyrki Korpua's Finnish-language essay, "Hengellisyys J. R. R. Tolkienin fantasiafiktiivisessä: johdatus ja rukoukset," presents a perspective to the religious undercurrents of Tolkien's oeuvre, exploring the significance of the author's writing to catholic thinking, and especially that of Pope Francis.

The issue's book reviews section, curated by our dedicated Reviews Editor, Jari Käkälä, is packed with an eclectic selection of thirteen insightful reviews. In the area of science fiction research, Paula García-Rodríguez reviews Jesse S. Cohn's *Hot Equations: Science, Fantasy, and the Radical Imagination on a Troubled Planet*, which examines the strategies science fiction, fantasy, and horror works present for both reflecting and resisting contemporary ecological and political crises. Maintaining the ecological focus, M. E. Boothby reviews the collection *Animals and Science Fiction* (edited by Nora Castle and Giulia Champion), which offers diverse perspectives on the role science fictional imaginaries play in shaping conceptions of animality, nonhuman agency, and human-nonhuman relationality. Shifting focus to historical approaches in science fiction studies, Zichuan Gan reviews *Chinese Science Fiction: Concepts, Forms, and Histories* (edited by Mingwei Song, Nathaniel Isaacson, and Hua Li), which provides a comprehensive overview of the genre's development in China while situating Chinese SF within broader global literary trends. Patricia Coloma Peñate reviews another historically informed study, *Black Speculative Feminisms: Memory and Liberated Futures in Black Women's Fiction* by Cassandra L. Jones, who adopts a feminist approach to discuss how Black women authors engage speculative fiction to explore memory as a tool for liberation. Finally, Jaime Segura San Miguel reviews Carroll S. Jordan's *Speculative Whiteness: Science Fiction and the Alt-Right* – a timely study that continues the recent trend of analyzing the alt-right's connections to and (mis)appropriation of science fiction for right-wing ideological purposes.

From recent publications in fantasy research, Maryem Ben Salem reviews *Female Heroes in Young Adult Fantasy Fiction* by Leah Phillips who examines how young female characters in YA fantasy can operate in heroic roles that challenge conventional heroic narratives. In the specific field of Tolkien studies, Paula Lobato Díez reviews *The Romantic Spirit in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien* (edited by Will Sherwood and Julian Eilmann), which brings together articles exploring the affinities of Tolkien's work with Romanticism. Another review of Tolkien scholarship comes from James Hamby, who reviews Hamish Williams's *J.R.R. Tolkien's Utopianism and the Classics*, which argues that Tolkien's dialogue with antiquity makes it possible to assess his importance as a utopian thinker amid 20th-century fiction authors. Reviewing a more biographical strand of Tolkien studies, Kristine Larsen discusses the essay collection *Celebrating Tolkien's Legacy* by Nancy Bunting, Seamus Hamill-Keays, and Tody Widdicombe who take a largely biographical-psychological look on the life of Tolkien in relation to his fictional works. Additionally, David A. Brewer reviews Anahit Behrooz's *Mapping Middle-earth: Environmental and Political Narratives in J.R.R. Tolkien's Cartographies*, which explores the political dimensions of Tolkien's maps, arguing that they become more than

illustrations to his stories. Zooming out from Tolkien studies to a broader discussion on contemporary fantasy literature, Robert Finnigan reviews *Imagining the Celtic Past in Modern Fantasy* (edited by Dimitra Fimi and Alistair J.P. Sims), which examines the use of Celtic motifs and traditions in contemporary fantasy literature, from Celtic elements as narrative intrusions to the way they have been commodified in popular culture.

Closing the issue are two reviews of PhD dissertations. Nicholas Wanberg reviews Smita Dhantal's *Identifying Self through Society: A Socio-psychological Perspective of A Song of Ice and Fire*, which takes a novel approach to the analysis of fictional characters, and Smita Dhantal reviews Wanberg's *The Human Race Vs. the Minorities: Racism, anti-racism, and intelligent non-humans in the world architecture of speculative fiction*, which explores new ways of looking at how works may encode racism also on the level of their world-building.

May this midsummer issue be a thought-provoking companion, inviting moments of contemplation, insight, critique, and hope. From the lair of Fafnir, we wish you all happy reading!

Merve Tabur, Elise Kraatila, Jessica Norledge, Editors-in-Chief

Jari Käkälä, Reviews Editor

Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research



The Cultural Work of Fantasy in the Anthropocene

Marek Oziewicz

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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“Attuned to Loss”: Rhetoric of Solastalgia in Richard Powers’ *Bewilderment* and Emmi Itäranta’s *The Moonday Letters*

Radvilė Musteikytė

Abstract: This article analyzes two contemporary novels that reflect on the devastation of the Earth: *Bewilderment* by American author Richard Powers (2021) and *The Moonday Letters* (2020) by Finnish author Emmi Itäranta, arguing that both novels invite readers to engage with solastalgia – a distress caused by witnessing environmental changes. The evocation of solastalgia (as an environmentally-attuning readerly affect) is discussed by employing James Phelan’s rhetorical theory of narrative, particularly his and Matthew Clark’s model of three narrative components. Accounting for both content and form, the threefold analysis touches on the many similarities of the seemingly different novels: their Earth-centeredness, the theme of loss and how it is rescaled from personal to environmental, as well as storyworld-internal worldbuilding that repeatedly interrupts the progression of narratives. This reading contributes to discussions about the functioning and functions of fiction in the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Anthropocene fiction, Emmi Itäranta, Richard Powers, solastalgia in literature, rhetorical theory of narrative

1. Introduction

Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer’s “Anthropocene” (2000), though widely used, is not the only concept that emerged at the turn of the century to call attention to the interrelations between humans and the natural world. Introduced in 2003, “solastalgia” denotes the distress caused by experiencing environmental change, especially negative changes to a familiar place. Linking

the wellbeing and mental health of humans with ecosystem health, the Australian environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht invented the term to refer to “the pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault (physical desolation)” (“Solastalgia” 45). Encouraged by his own “emplaced” pain, helplessness and other negative emotions, he started tracing such sentiments in the experiences of others, as well as in cultural production. In *Earth Emotions* (2019), Albrecht locates solastalgia within a larger emotional terrain – his “psychoterratic” typology maps out confluences of the emotional (psyche) and the ecological (Earth, terra). This classification of various emotions aims to empower his readers to articulate the emotional effects of life-teeming natural environments, or alternatively, of human-inflicted damage.

Such conceptual frameworks for relating to the natural world are necessary for changing the current environmental situation, which Albrecht calls “the age of Solastalgia” (*Earth Emotions* 10). Not only can language raise more awareness of one’s surroundings but Albrecht also advances an argument that the concepts denoting positive emotions can inspire love-fueled reparations of the environment. His work aligns with posthumanist thinker Donna Haraway, who in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) calls for new concepts, alternative ways of thinking and anti-anthropocentric practices, like creating, crafting, researching and making informed choices; storytelling is one such practice. Haraway seeks different stories in place of prevailing ones that are furnished by male heroes who triumphantly conquer nature; new “stories of becoming-with, of reciprocal induction, of companion species” (40) should aim to recognize nonhuman others and their entanglements with the human, and through this confront “the climate crisis, [which] is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (Ghosh 9).

Storytelling both reflects and shapes the “cultural matrix” (Ghosh 10) that informs prevailing conceptual frameworks; therefore, both ‘the what’ and ‘the how’ of literary representations matter. Jennifer Wenzel (2020) discusses the not necessarily positive effects that representations have on how humans understand, relate to and delineate nature. She conceives of (literary) mediation, representation, imagination, understanding and “acting upon the world” (6) as interrelated. This is why reading has something to do with – and to do for – the unevenly distributed environmental crisis; it can help move “from near to there: between specific sites, across multiple divides, at more than one scale” (2). Stories and narrative configurations have the power to break the “habits of mind that render distant crises unimaginable” (18).

One of the most thought-provoking questions within the field of environmental literary studies regards the possibility of representing the Anthropocene. However factual, this global processual phenomenon (stretching across time, space, and enveloping various facets of human and nonhuman existence) resists the grasp of practical everyday intelligence and poses a representational challenge with which contemporary literature must grapple (see Caracciolo; T. Clark; Heise; Ghosh; Trexler). Taking on the more familiar political, social, cultural, and economic realities that also constitute the Anthropocene can bring environmental issues closer to the reader. The novelistic mode does not shy away from such a broad scope. Having analyzed a

vast corpus of Anthropocene fiction,¹ Adam Trexler (2015) contends that the novel is, in fact, capable of “interrogat[ing] the emotional, aesthetic, and living experience of the Anthropocene” (6), as it extends across the past and present, the personal and public, the global and local, human and nonhuman without significant simplification.

With a broader aim to participate in the ongoing discussions about literature in the face of the environmental crisis, this article conducts a comparative reading of two Anthropocene fictions: American writer Richard Powers’ thirteenth novel *Bewilderment* (2021) and Finnish writer Emmi Itäranta’s third novel *The Moonday Letters* (first published in 2020 as *Kuunpäivän kirjeet*). Drawing on Albrecht’s observation that cultural production is capable of “transmit[ing] the very idea of solastalgic loss to the reader” (*Earth Emotions* 68), the analysis is driven by an interest in the intersections between lived experiences of solastalgia and contemporary fiction and examines what literary techniques can be used to craft an experience of this sentiment for the reader. It is important to underline that this article is not concerned with the portrayal of characters’ negative environmental emotions;² instead, it aligns with earlier studies of Anthropocene fiction that address the accord of form and content in the evocation of readerly affect. One such example is Karoline Huber and Geoff Rodoreda’s (2024) discussion of sudden suspensions of character development (“arrested narrative”) which, as a narrative strategy, parallels and “enhance[s] a deep sense of loss and distress over human-caused, environmental disruption and destruction that is portrayed at the story-level” (145). Attributing general affective power to literary configurations of environmental degradation, this article argues that as readers work through the selected narratives, they are gradually subjected to a solastalgic longing for their present moment in advance, especially because environmental losses are depicted as already taking place within the storyworlds of the novels.

Preoccupation with the Anthropocene, its representations and their possible effects indicates an ecocritical aspiration of the present article. Ecocriticism, the “earth-centered approach to literary study” (Glottfelty xviii), subsumes a broad variety of inquiries concerned with nature, culture and the global environmental crisis, and ascribes an environmentally-oriented “consciousness raising” (xxiv) function to literature and literary scholarship. Originally discussing realist representations or nature writing, ecocriticism has gradually become more inclusive as well as formally oriented (James 4; 12). More recent interest in human responses to environmental degradation has brought about affective ecocriticism, which probes various literary means and narrative strategies for inducing affect, for the sake of raising readers’ environmental awareness (Gaard 225).

¹ “Anthropocene fiction” is Trexler’s suggested alternative to “climate fiction”. It refers to literature that puts into focus the experiential and emotional realities of climate change, the incomprehensible scope of the climate catastrophe, its complex timeline and multifarious implications. Trexler prefers the term “Anthropocene”, as it connotes tangibility and scientific verifiability, in contrast to the widely used “climate change”, the debates on which are concerned mostly with “issues of evidence, representation and belief” (3–4).

² For an example analysis of environmental character emotions (such as solastalgia) depicted in contemporary Finnish fiction, see Isomaa and Kortekallio (2024).

Ecocriticism is an interpretative framework rather than a method for analysis and so, in order to investigate the selected novels, this article takes the rhetorical approach to literature. Markku Lehtimäki (2013; 2019) suggests that this approach (endowed with insights from cognitive narratology) is a way to marry seemingly conflicting Earth-bound ecocritical and text-centric narratological interests. The rhetorical theory of narrative cultivated by James Phelan acknowledges the power of literature to have aesthetic, emotional and ethical influence on its readers (Clark and Phelan 19–22; Phelan 3–14). Narratives are handled as purposeful rhetorical acts designed in particular ways to communicate knowledge, ideas and values, and as such they can “say something worthwhile about environmental issues” (“Narrative Communication” 92). Phelan conceives of narratives as having three kinds of components. Although “simultaneous and interdependent” (Clark and Phelan 11), these components can be more or less foregrounded throughout the progression of a narrative. Progression corresponds to readerly engagement – different arrangements create dynamics that invite different emotional responses, ethical judgements or aesthetic appreciation (Phelan 5–6; Clark and Phelan 7–8). In line with these notions, bridging the distinction between form and content, all three kinds of analysis (mimetic, thematic, synthetic)³ are conducted.

Published one year apart and explicitly grappling with environmental crisis, *Bewilderment* and *The Moonday Letters* (henceforth *ML*) are eminently dissimilar novels. The story of *Bewilderment* unfolds in the backdrop of the recognizable, yet slightly altered American milieu; among other things, the climate situation has worsened, while mind-mapping AI-powered “neurofeedback” technologies have advanced. A single plotline is developed through the first-person point of view of a scientist named Theo. He is the only caretaker of his preteen son Robin, who has behavioral challenges. The boy is captivated by the “living planet” (Powers 141) but also deeply troubled by environmental degradation. Unlike the realist setting of *Bewilderment*, Itäranta’s *ML* takes the reader to the year 2168. Earth’s environmental collapse has led humans to colonize the solar system. In search for her Mars-born missing spouse Sol (an ethnobotanist who has dedicated their life to “fix Earth”), shamanic healer Lumi Salo physically travels the various planets of the solar system, exercises “soul travel” and “walk[s] on the paths of the past, moving memories around” (Itäranta 177–8). Intimate, full of impressions, reflections, accounts of recent events but also reminiscences, Lumi’s diary-like letters to her missing spouse ponder their relationship, as well as Lumi’s childhood on the devastated Earth. The Earth-born protagonist’s reflections always circle around and back to her home planet – “at the center of the novel’s grander narrative, implicitly overarching the story of Lumi searching for her missing spouse, is indeed one about saving Earth” (Kraatila 38).

Produced by authors of different nationalities, these particular novels have been selected because of their different ways of offering “confrontation

³ First introduced by Phelan in 1989 to examine the roles of characters as literary elements, this idea was further developed to discuss narratives in general. As a threefold model for analysis (“MTS”), it was revised in the joint efforts of Phelan and Matthew Clark, where the latter critic argued for a more text-focused reconceptualization, suggesting that one can conduct three different kinds of analysis.

with environmental disturbance” (*Earth Emotions* 45). Discussing narrative strategies of Anthropocene fictions, Marco Caracciolo (2021) drafts a threefold distinction, according to which *ML* and *Bewilderment* represent different categories of Anthropocene fiction: Itäranta’s genre blending work clearly belongs to the category of speculative fiction, whereas Powers is listed among Caracciolo’s examples of major novelists who explore “human-nonhuman entanglements in a realistic setting” (143). The selection of these novels is therefore significant because, as this article displays, despite their differences in genre and form, they employ similar strategies to elicit environmentally-attuning “(emotive, ethical, and aesthetic) engagement” (Phelan 10). Understood as “rhetoric”, the specific techniques deployed by Itäranta and Powers to evoke solastalgia (an environmentally-attuning readerly affect) will be considered in line with Phelan’s interpretative model (“MTS” – mimetic, thematic, synthetic). Drawing parallels between the novels, the evocation of solastalgia will be accounted for by investigating the three components separately, and then discussing their dynamic on which the potential effects on readers rely – in this case, the raising of environmental-awareness through “psychoterratic” emotions. Drawing on Phelan’s idea that readers’ experiences correspond to the ways in which narratives unfold, “evocation” here refers to the “patterning of emotional experience” that correlates with how story-content is modulated by narrative form (Caracciolo 6). Arguably, this analysis can shed light on the means and ends of genre-spanning Anthropocene fiction that is rising in prominence.

The general premise that the narratives “transmit” a sense of solastalgia to their readers is grounded in previous academic accounts of the novels. For example, in their discussion of *Bewilderment*, Kanza Fatima Mirza and Rehan Ahmad (2024) investigate portrayals of environment-related emotions: biophilia (an “intrinsic affinity [to] nature and all living beings” (80)), as well as negative dimensions such as solastalgia and eco-anxiety (the “uneasiness and fear related to degradation” (79)). The novel’s characters and the depictions of their responses to ecological changes are used as a springboard to discussing the psychological wellbeing of actual people amid the climate crisis. In a review of Itäranta’s novel, Kaisa Kortekallio (2020) makes a brief case that it produces solastalgia – nostalgia felt by readers in and for the present, a feeling caused by the anticipation of future loss (48). Theorizing grand-scale speculative worldbuilding, Elise Kraatila reads *ML* as a heuristic tool that is “geared towards building grand-scale theories about the universe and humanity as part of it” (34). Relevant to this article is Kraatila’s claim that by enacting some relevant tensions, *ML* joins the debate on the purpose of stories in the Anthropocene. This article affirms and extends Kraatila’s argument by interrogating the ways in which fiction can evoke solastalgic appreciation of the natural world, taking a step towards restoring the idea of “deriving happiness from our relationship to the environment” (*Earth Emotions* 45).

2.1 The Mimetic Component

Mimetic analysis is concerned with characters and their storyworlds, and how readers respond to them emotionally (Clark and Phelan 11–13).⁴ Phelan's discussion of the mimetic component can be complemented by econarratologist Erin James' (2015) insights.⁵ James builds on cognitive-narratological research to argue that by tracing textual cues to reconstruct a storyworld, readers "transport" themselves to particular configurations of space and time – a process that can raise environmental awareness. Used interchangeably throughout *The Storyworld Accord* (2015), verbs such as "transport to", "inhabit" or "immerse" refer to a cognitive procedure whereby readers negotiate between their understanding of the actual world and a storyworld projected by narrative progression (xii; 19–23).⁶ In this process, the knowledge and values of individual readers are also at play, and so there is a possibility for an environmentally-positive "change in beliefs, values, and behaviors among readers" (254). This solastalgia-oriented mimetic analysis investigates the storyworlds of the selected narratives by looking at the meanings ascribed to these versions of the world by the first-person narrators.

The down-to-earth family realities of *Bewilderment* are colored by the characters' preoccupation with nature. Theo is an "extremophile" astrobiologist who creates models of possible lifeforms on other planets. Through his observant and biology-versed point of view nature is depicted vividly, often elevating simple things into artworks (Powers 21; 172). His reflections and conversations with Robin mostly center on life or its absence: animals, plants, extraterrestrial life. Underscoring the richness of the biosphere, representatives of all kingdoms are listed throughout the novel (21; 32). At the same time, on multiple occasions the characters explicitly reflect on climate issues, especially on biodiversity loss. Nature, both father and son's refuge from society (36), is endangered because humans are "breaking the whole planet" (229). Framed by the characters' life-centered worldview, nature emerges as solace, yet their affinity for all nonhuman life is tinged with painful awareness of environmental degradation.

Stripped of its abundance, the Earth in *ML* is depicted as a lost home. The novel extrapolates the consequences of the topical problems of the actual world (Kraatila 34–6). Though still sparsely inhabited, Lumi's home planet is devastated, it is polluted, ridden with wars, poverty, famine, illnesses and pandemics (Itäranta 107–8; 193). Due to environmental degradation, humans

⁴ In this article, "mimetic" is disentangled from "realistic". Matthew Clark broadens Phelan's initial model to include SFF (Science Fiction and Fantasy) (5–13; 53–64); the external possibility of events, to which Phelan initially referred, is less important than the belief-inducing coherency harnessed by SFF.

⁵ Although maintaining her initial focus on storyworlds, in her recent study *Narrative in the Anthropocene* (2022) James has too embraced Phelan's rhetorical definition of narrative, moulding it into "somebody telling someone else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened in some world" (19).

⁶ Marie-Laure Ryan discusses similar cognitive procedures as the "principle of minimal departure". She argues that since storyworlds are always incomplete, limited by the textual information provided, readers by default take the actual world as a prototype and fill in the gaps by drawing from their own experience; this means that the fictional world is imagined as in all ways corresponding to the actual world, unless it is explicitly indicated otherwise. See Ryan; James 251–252.

have sought to settle elsewhere in the solar system. The speculative storyworld of the novel hosts a variety of space settlements, but although adapted for habitation, outer space is ill-suited for humans. The protagonist recurrently points to the hostility of space and the artificially crafted settlements are compared to the Earth (22–3; 26; 110). Acute homesickness is a problem among the settlers: “People who were born and grew up on Mars long for Earth. For the horizon, the open sea, the sky and the sun ... A longing like that can ... eat a person from within” (193). This “birth-home syndrome” (ibid.) configures Earth as the ultimate home – not only for Lumi, but for the human species; yet, the home planet is lost due to destructive human activity, environmental degradation and resulting sociocultural problems.

Genre differences aside, both narratives are characterized by Earth-centeredness and explicitly point to destructive human activity. The protagonists of *Bewilderment* actively witness the richness of the realistically rendered American nature. Recognizing themselves as just one small part of Earth’s living organisms, Robin and Theo explicitly express their concern for the worsening environmental situation. Through the point of view of the narrator, the readers get to immerse themselves in wonder but also worry, for preteen Robin and for the Earth. Likewise, employing first-person accounts, Itäranta’s speculative future vision harvests the grimness of space colonization. The Earth-born, spacefaring protagonist perceives space settlements as inferior to the original home of humanity. Drawing on James, it can be argued that such storyworlds presented through the point of view of Earth-conscious narrators invite solastalgic appreciation for the home planet, its conditions and biodiversity that is under threat in the Anthropocene.

2.2 The Thematic Component

Thematic analysis investigates the ideological, philosophical or ethical issues and ideas that the narrative brings about or that characters, as representatives of different classes, embody. Thematic analysis also concerns meanings “direct and indirect, intended by the author or not” (Clark and Phelan 11). Powers’ and Itäranta’s novels exhibit an obvious environmental preoccupation (Mirza and Ahmad; Kraatila); arguably, concern for the environment is communicated not only directly, but also covertly, with the subtle movement from “near to there” (Wenzel 2), which can be traced back to a shared thematic emphasis – loss.

As much as *Bewilderment* revolves around life, throughout the narrative progression extinction becomes its thematic center. Repetition of events underscores thematic importance (Clark and Phelan 31–3), and the event of loss is indeed reiterated many times in the novel. Theo characterizes his son as “a boy attuned to loss” (Powers 9) in the context of Robin’s perplexment over the emptiness of the cosmos, and also because his mother Alyssa has died. Just like her, Robin prioritizes nonhuman life over his own, and so the novel concludes with Theo losing Robin. These and other events of loss are complemented by Robin’s awareness of the dying out of species, and his desperation to act on biodiversity loss. The novel’s thematic dimension is dominated by extinction – of species, but also of Theo’s family.

Caracciolo (2021) traces metaphorical patterns in Anthropocene fictions and argues that metaphorical language is a powerful tool in aiding the

understanding of very different yet intermeshed human and nonhuman agencies (139–177). Drawing on this discussion, it can be noted that Theo's personal losses come to be rescaled from the personal to the environmental by making use of thematically significant parallels between individuals and other forms of life. The names of characters are explicitly linked to certain species. Robin, for instance, is named after his parents' "favorite bird" (Powers 13), a connection which retains its significance throughout the narrative, while Alyssa's name refers to a flower (173). The surname of the family is "derived from Bran – raven in Irish" (15). What is more, Theo often regards others as planets (200; 239). This recurring metaphorical link is powerfully harnessed in the final page of the book:

this planet was a good one. And we, too, were good, as good as the burn of the sun and the rain's sting and the smell of living soil, the all-over song of endless solutions signing the air of a changing world that by every calculation ought never to have been. (326)

The scientist seems to refer here to the Earth and to the formation of its life that remains as a scientific enigma pondered by Robin. An equally probable interpretation is that he is reflecting on his unexpectedly conceived son – especially because of the past tense in an otherwise present-tense episode. Theo's ambiguous last words illustrate how the metaphorical coupling of individuals with the nonhuman moves the theme of loss away from the personal towards the environmental. As the narrative culminates with Robin's death, his unique species is made extinct, he as a whole planet is lost, and so Theo's grief for him is woven into the overarching sense of environmental loss.

Anticipatory grief for future environmental losses is made even more prominent by the novel's explicit focus on contrasting emotions. Desperate to help Robin without pharmaceuticals, Theo submits him to an experimental AI-powered biofeedback treatment, DecNef, "an empathy machine" (169) that trains patients to feel and replicate the emotions of others. Working with the recording of his mother's feeling of ecstasy, Robin gradually becomes more positive, serenely observant, and aware of the interconnectedness of all living organisms. His statement that "everyone's inside everyone" (226) can be compared to Albrecht's "merging of subject and object" (*Earth Emotions* 142) called "eutierria" – a "deep sense of peace and connectedness" (199) – especially as Alyssa's ecstasy is traced back to her deep reverence for the nonhuman. Theo eventually realizes that nature is the ultimate training resource (Powers 311), helping Robin to manage his behavior. However, having gained thematic significance, at the culmination of the novel the nature-derived sense of serenity is effectively inverted into its negative opposite, grief, defined by Theo as "the world stripped of something you admire" (107). The scientist's admiration is directed towards his son and wife, who Theo loses because they put the natural world first. Such dynamics of ecstasy and grief (especially as nature is rendered the ultimate source of unmediated blissful ecstasy) signals that large-scale planetary loss entails grief, as does the private loss of a loved one.

Likewise enveloping both the personal and the environmental, the theme of loss in *ML* is brought forth by its epistolary form. The letter form, as noted by Janet G. Altman (1982), predetermines certain narrative techniques and also exerts thematic pressure; among other things, she argues that

epistolary novels tend to thematize either absence and estrangement or coming together (13–15; 186). In the case of *ML*, epistolarity builds on absence and longing. When writing her letter-like notebook entries, Lumi states her wish to bridge the spatial and temporal gap between her and her spouse:

Let me prepare everything for you, Sol: set the stage and open the curtain, so in your thoughts you may settle next to me and be with me in this moment. You said once that writing is journeying beyond infinite distances; with these words I transport you to me across time and space. (Itäranta 17)

Lumi writes because of the lost presence of her spouse, and a clear intention of transcending distance puts thematic emphasis on absence-induced longing.

Longing is also overtly linked with the loss of home, where “home” comes to stand for multiple things. Brought in already by the novel’s dedication to “all those who have lost their homes,” the link between loss of home and loss of Earth comes to life with narrative progression. Throughout *ML*, numerous instances of loss punctuate the plot: the unexpected change that puts the whole narrative into gear is from Sol’s presence to absence. Embodying solace, Sol is the personification of homeliness: in their arms Lumi feels like they are “far away from home yet home” (179). Lumi also constantly recalls her and Sol’s first shared home that was destroyed, and her story climaxes with yet another loss of home – with the terrorist attack she loses Earth, as travel there is indefinitely forbidden. These losses of homes, or more generally, of sources of solace, point back to the idea of Earth as ultimate home.

The narrative is imbued with a sense of nostalgia. “Nostalgia” combines two Greek words: *nostos* (return to one’s native land), and *algos* (pain); having denoted “the sickness caused by the intense desire to return home when away from it” (*Earth Emotions* 29), it gradually came to signify “a sentimental desire to be connected with a positively perceived period in the past” (30). In *ML*, nostalgia in its original meaning stems from Lumi’s impossible wish to come home. Journeying through space, she longs for her home planet: “The longing. Like breathing. Most of the time I don’t pay attention to it, but sometimes it clogs and hitches and tightens into a knot” (Itäranta 193). What is more, her nostalgia is connected to memory. Another significant thematic emphasis, memory also has to do with the epistolary form – typical to letter novels is a preoccupation with the past, towards which the present moment of the writing act is oriented (Altman 124–8). Lumi longs for a feeling of home, and memory is where her lost homes are still accessible. Yet, as Altman puts it, memory cannot be re-presented (made present again), even by the act of writing (138). Because of this gap between what is present in memory but presently absent, the constantly reminiscing protagonist experiences nostalgia. It is multipart – nostalgia in the nowadays common temporal (no longer accessible past), the verbatim (Earth as the home Lumi cannot return to), and the personified sense (missing spouse who embodies homeliness). Readers of *ML* tap into a deep longing for what is lost with which Lumi’s letters are permeated.

Loss, a theme introduced by narrative progressions, is translated between different planes of experience. In *Bewilderment*, individuals are tied to the natural world by means of metaphorical language; *ML* merges the personal and the environmental in the notion of home, which comes to stand for both the Earth and the absent spouse. An intricately constructed thematic

focus of both narratives, the environmentally-charged preoccupation with loss is enhanced by other prominent themes such as emotions and memory. As the generally far-flung realities of the natural world are brought closer with the help of familiarity with personal loss, the typical human emotional responses to loss – grief and nostalgia – are rescaled to become linked with the environment. Through their thematic emphases, established by both form and content, Powers' and Itäranta's novels attune readers to the anticipated loss of their home planet and its biodiversity.

2.3 The Synthetic Component

Analyzing the synthetic component entails looking at a narrative's construction, from individual sentences to plots, all of which build the foundation for storyworlds and themes. While Phelan initially associates the overtly synthetic with the metafictional (in opposition to mimetic as realist), Clark sees all narratives as inherently synthetic (Clark and Phelan 19–24). Arguably, the artificiality of even the most “transparent” realist narratives can be foregrounded in certain instances, by particular narrative devices. This part of the article looks into one overly synthetic device that is part of the larger environmental awareness-raising communicative strategies of both novels.

Both first-person narrators indulge in plot-wise insignificant telling – vivid descriptions that are meant not to describe something within the storyworld, but to conjure up imaginary places. In *Bewilderment*, Theo invents planets and their lifeforms for his son's bedtime tales. In *ML*, the couple builds Moonday House, a conceptual place they imagine meeting in when thinking of each other. Such storyworld-internal thought experiments developed by character-narrators dispel the mimetic illusion of the narratives and bring forward the idea of their artificiality. It is so because they expose worldbuilding operations central to fiction. Discussing the rhetoric of speculative fiction, Hanna-Riikka Roine (2016) notes that speculative worldbuilding is a way to develop thought experiments, synthesize certain ideas or issues and put them forth for the reader to consider. She argues that in order to take in those ideas brought forward in and by SFF, readers need to imaginatively engage with narratives as mimetic illusions and as artificial devices at the same time. To phrase this in Phelan's terms, when both the synthetic and the mimetic components are foregrounded, readers are prompted to take in and reflect on the themes and ideas developed throughout a narrative.

Brian McHale (2018) sees SFF as a highly self-reflective genre. Developing the influential idea about the literalization of metaphors,⁷ he argues that alongside poetic images, works of SFF tend to literalize narratological terms, narrative devices and structures, including the imaginative and intellectual processes of constructing a narrative world (327–9). Drawing on this notion, the storyworld-internal conjurations of the Moonday House and of alternative planets can be read as mirroring (and in this way exposing) the

⁷ Understanding SFF as inherently mimetic, in *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?* (2010), Seo-Young Chu proposes that the science fiction genre tends to make various poetic figures literally functioning in and even characterizing storyworlds.

authorial process of constructing a narrative and its storyworld, which remind readers of the artificiality of the novels.

Both the “bedtime stories of alien life” (Powers 163) and the Moonday House highlight the process of sharing personal experiences and making abstract ideas tangible via worldbuilding. There is an obvious correspondence between Theo’s emotionally turbulent life and his imaginative planets, which means that even when drawing on scientific data from planetary models programmed for work, the scientist is conceptualizing his experiences and challenges, inconspicuously relaying them to Robin. As shareable configurations of occurrences and emotions, Theo’s planetary models also point to the processes and purpose of speculative worldbuilding behind *Bewilderment* itself. Similarly, in *ML*, the Moonday House reflects Lumi’s emotional states, for example estrangement (Itäranta 255). It also enacts the authorial procedures of establishing a storyworld with the help of textual cues. The conjuration of the constantly developing Moonday House requires detailing marked by spatial deixis (95); the same is true for the authorial procedures of inventing a narrative world. *ML* is in itself an example of grand-scale worldbuilding which helps readers to grasp difficult phenomena such as climate change (Kraatila), and at the same time, storyworld-internal worldbuilding highlights the evocative power of descriptions – they are clusters of textual cues that allow the readers to imagine a storyworld’s environments, objects, and persons.

In both cases, the imaginative practices of the protagonists set into motion the mimetic–synthetic dynamic of SFF described by Roine: on one hand, the shared conversational routines make the storyworld more complex and vivid, potentially prompting immersion because they make the narrators’ sentiments more substantial; on the other, exposing procedures related to worldbuilding puts a spotlight on the synthetic component of the narratives. Such a double perspective (Roine 33–34; 61–70), entailed by storyworld-internal worldbuilding, self-reflexively points to the fact that the storyworlds of the novels are themselves carefully crafted thought experiments, in which readers also participate.

2.4 The Effect

The mimetic–synthetic dynamic explicated above brings forward the thematic component, which establishes the solastalgic resonance of the novels. Both Moonday House and the alien planets reflect things that are significant to the protagonists but which are threatened or already lost. The characters of *Bewilderment* are preoccupied with life and haunted by an awareness that the “endless gift of a place is going away” (Powers 241), so they invent planets for alternative lifeforms to thrive, this way escaping the grief of ongoing environmental degradation. The protagonist of *ML* is dealing with an acute homesickness that stems from travelling in unhomely space, being far away from her home planet and her spouse. What is lost or unavailable can be accessed in memory, which induces nostalgia, but in the act of writing about the Moonday House, she creates for herself a sense of homeliness in the present moment. These conversational routines point back to the environmental concerns underlying both narratives, as environmental issues are the source of

their lacking solace. As such, in the larger rhetorical designs of the novels, the storyworld-internal worldbuilding ties back to the novels' overarching environmentalism.

The novels also offer a commentary on the role of storytelling "in the middle of a vaster catastrophe" (Powers 153). In both cases, storyworld-internal worldbuilding allows the protagonists to process their experiences and even turn negative emotions (in this case grief and nostalgia) into something else: hope and awe, or a sense of being at home. This can be said to apply also to fictional storyworlds. As with the characters' conversational routines, storyworlds require engagement and interpretation; this makes reading a transformative activity. Reading allows readers to tune in to the experiences of fictional others, trying on their feelings and outlooks, which can have influence on their values and behavior in the actual world (James 14–5; 41–50). Then, reading too is "emotional telepathy" (Powers 108), because readers are "training on" the experiences and emotions of others: eutierria, but also a sense of loss, nostalgia and grief. This makes up the rhetoric of solastalgia – engaging with stories of loss told by Earth-conscious narrators might elicit distress, but also simultaneous appreciation for the endangered home planet.

3. Conclusions

Adopting Phelan's conception of narrative communication as being able to both inform and affect, this article explored the rhetoric of solastalgia by looking at the mimetic, thematic and synthetic aspects of *Bewilderment* and *ML*, arguing that in their dynamic, these aspects attune readers to environmental loss. Although representing different genres, both novels feature similar strategies to allow readers to experience a sense of the "homesickness you have at home" (*Earth Emotions* 27). Itäranta's and Powers' narratives project immersive storyworlds that put the Earth into focus. *Bewilderment* spotlights the still available but threatened abundance of Sol 3, whereas *ML* depicts the human-caused absence of this abundance. Firstly, involvement with such storyworlds guides the readers' attention and concern towards the human-suited home planet in its current state. Secondly, these "literary imagining[s] make environmental crisis legible" (Wenzel 18) by making it personal. The narrative strategies of both novels expose readers to the pain of personal loss, turning it into a springboard to contemplate biodiversity loss or the destruction of the home planet. The novels also reflect on the emotional consequences of loss, and as the characters recurrently conjure up substitutes for the lost source of hope, awe or homeliness, the environmental issues behind the protagonists' negative emotions are brought forward. In this way, environmental issues become related to the lack of solace in the characters' narrative present. At the same time, recurring instances of storyworld-internal worldbuilding invite readers to contemplate the narratives as artificial constructs that are designed to put something forth for them to simultaneously engage with emotionally as well as intellectually. In doing so, *ML* and *Bewilderment* evoke a sense of solastalgia – a pre-sentiment of what it means to lose the richness of the natural world. As this richness is still available in the readers' here-and-now, the novels transmit an "idea of solastalgic loss" (*Earth Emotions* 68) without ever mentioning it directly.

In exploring social and emotional bonds to others as well as the Earth, the novels analyzed in this article invite readers to tap into the appreciation, grief or nostalgia felt by the protagonists. Both novels can be read as actively participating in the same fight for foregrounding and refiguring environmental degradation as a matter of personal importance. In this attempt, Powers and Itäranta respond to Haraway’s call for a new kind of stories – stories that, without turning away from the issues, limitations and paradoxes related to the human-centered literary medium, teach readers to “feel their way across the species line” (Powers 131), because they productively underscore the interconnected threads that make up the personal, the societal, the cultural and the environmental. In doing so, these novels grapple with the comfortably “unimaginable” (Wenzel 18) – the overwhelming scale-spanning realities of the Anthropocene; at the same time, they self-reflectively touch on the role of storytelling in “crack[ing] the established disorder” (Haraway 130). With their solastalgic resonance, *Bewilderment* and *ML* “clarify, nuance, and subvert dominant ways of thinking about human-nonhuman relations” (Caracciolo 19), and thus invite readers to “stay with the trouble” (Haraway) of environmental crisis.

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Ecocritical Perspectives in Naomi Novik's *Uprooted*

Peter Melville

Abstract: Eco-fantasy critics often celebrate what Gry Ulstein calls fantasy's "intrinsic exploratory potential for ecocritical ideas." It is, however, equally important to acknowledge the possibility of failure that a rhetoric of potentiality necessarily implies. As Ulstein admits, fantasy can reinscribe anthropocentric messaging just as easily as it presents ecological perspectives. Naomi Novik's environmental fantasy novel *Uprooted* (2015) offers an example of a text that incorporates elements from both ends of fantasy's spectrum of ecocritical potential. Specifically, it dramatizes a shift in perspective from an initially negative, human-centered depiction of nonhuman environments toward a vision in which humanity appears considerably less central or important. Capitalizing on fantasy's capacity to focalize nonhuman points of view, *Uprooted* evokes philosopher Timothy Morton's ecological concept of coexistentialism, a key principle of which maintains that within the course of negotiating relations between human and nonhuman beings, sometimes "the only thing to do is to treat beings as people, even if they turn out not to be." Anthropomorphic gestures of this kind critically challenge assumptions of human exceptionalism and elevate the value of nonhuman life-forms, which in Novik's novel includes the "heart trees" and magical creatures of the ever-expanding dark forest, whose reverse reclamation of human territories provides the principal antagonistic force of the narrative.

Keywords: fantasy, ecocriticism, anthropocentrism, anthropomorphism, Naomi Novik

1. Introduction

Fantasy critics have long stressed the importance of ecocritical perspectives within the genre. Among the first to do so was Don D. Elgin, whose 1985 book-length study on the topic argues that the fantasy novel “offers humanity a way to reintegrate itself into the natural world” (269). Brian Attebery would go so far as to quip that by the end of the twentieth century, one could easily imagine a recipe for formulaic fantasy whose main ingredients included “a problem, something more or less ecological, and a prophecy for solving it” (10). In the early 2000s, Ursula Le Guin notably shifted the focus of eco-fantasy criticism from themes of reintegration and ecological restoration toward fantastic representations of the nonhuman. What sets the genre apart from realist fiction, she claims, is its tendency to be drawn “away from” rather than towards anthropocentrism: it “verges on and partakes of actual realms in which humanity is not lord and master, is not central, is not even important” (87). Enthusiasm for fantasy’s exceptionality in this regard has not waned in recent years. Chris Brawley, for instance, confidently wagers that by “making trees walk and animals talk, mythopoeic fantasy is perhaps the most subversive art there is” (23); Gry Ulstein similarly concludes that “fantasy fiction, more than other literary genres, has an intrinsic exploratory potential for ecocritical ideas” (7). This essay aims to extend this line of ecocritical thought through an earth-centered reading of Naomi Novik’s 2015 fairytale-inspired fantasy novel *Uprooted*. The climax and conclusion of this overtly environmental novel, I argue, effectively demonstrate the promise, but also some of the limitations, of fantasy’s propensity to anthropomorphize non-anthropocentric viewpoints as a central aspect of the genre’s ability to promote ecocritical ideas.

Ulstein’s assessment of the fantasy genre is especially useful in this regard not only because it captures the enthusiasm other eco-fantasy critics have for fantasy fiction, but also because her shrewd framing of the genre’s ecocritical potential acknowledges rather than avoids the possibility of failure that a rhetoric of potentiality necessarily implies. Anthropocentrism, she admits, “is just as easily found in [fantasy] as ecocentrism” (15). For this reason, it is important not to ignore fantasy’s ecocritical failures but to consider those failures alongside more successful examples of ecocritical fantasy. The genre’s expressions of anthropocentrism may disappoint, but they also have the potential to draw attention to unexplored ways of thinking about worlds inside and outside fantasy texts, or about the representation of nonhuman beings who are villainized or sacrificed to maintain a text’s human-centered focus.

Take for example the monster Grendel from the Old English poem *Beowulf*, perhaps the first fantastic figure within the English literary tradition. As a bona fide swamp monster of the “desolate fens” (*Beowulf* 106), Grendel represents dangers both real and imagined that lurk beyond the borders of human settlement. This demonization of nonhuman nature does more than conjure a sense of human community through a shared set of anxieties about the unknown. It also portrays life and lands beyond the built environment as justifiable targets for human domination. As environmental critic Rod Giblett contends, the *Beowulf* poem perpetuates a “pejorative Christian view” of marshlands that has been “largely responsible for the destruction of wetlands in the west for the past millennium” (132). *Beowulf*’s violent encounters with Grendel betray to the modern reader an early cultural template for representing

forms of nature in English fantasy as adversarial, a template that Giblett insists is given renewed emphasis in J.R.R. Tolkien's ominous depiction of the Dead Marshes in *The Lord of the Rings* (132). This fantastic legacy of adversarial nature continues (quite obviously at times) in contemporary popular fantasy texts, including Peter V. Brett's *Demon Cycle* (2008–2017), where swamp demons and other monstrous creatures associated with hostile environments seek to consume human civilization.¹

Figures of demonized nature offer glimpses into fantasy's troubled history of failing to achieve its ecocritical potential, but successful examples that write against this legacy also abound. One subgenre of fantasy that is surprisingly productive in this regard is paranormal urban fantasy, where magical figures typically associated with rural settings (such as fairies, witches, and animal shapeshifters) lurk in the hidden pathways of city life. Representing a blending of human and nonhuman sensibilities, the paranormal creatures of urban fantasy evoke ideas of interrelation rather than strict hierarchical separation between beings. Uneasy but fruitful engagements with animal shapeshifters depicted in urban fantasy texts such as Patricia Briggs's *Mercy Thompson* novels (2006–) or Anne Bishop's *The Courtyard of the Others* series (2013–2017) offer insights into forging less anthropocentric coexistence with nonhuman beings.² These are but two examples within its various subgenres where fantasy delivers on its promise for ecocritical ideas. Robust histories of ecocriticism already exist in Tolkien studies and scholarship on epic fantasy in general, but recent work in eco-fantasy criticism has moved in the direction of other promising subgenres as well, including YA fantasy and weird fiction.³

Having already attracted positive and negative ecological commentary, Novik's *Uprooted* offers an example of fairytale fantasy that purposefully incorporates elements from both ends of fantasy's spectrum of ecocritical potential. Specifically, it dramatizes a shift in perspective from an initially negative, human-centered depiction of nonhuman environments toward a more productive vision in which the human (to paraphrase Le Guin) is neither central nor even that important. Capitalizing on fantasy's capacity to focalize nonhuman points of view, *Uprooted* effectively promotes philosopher Timothy Morton's ecological concept of coexistentialism, a key principle of which maintains that within the course of negotiating relations between human and nonhuman beings, sometimes "the only thing to do is to treat beings as people, even if they turn out not to be" (74). Anthropomorphic gestures of this kind critically challenge assumptions of human exceptionalism and increase the perceived value of nonhuman life-forms, which in Novik's novel includes the "heart trees" and magical creatures of the plainly named "Wood," an ever-expanding dark forest whose reverse reclamation of human territories provides the principal antagonistic force of the narrative.

In the spirit of critical realism, however, it is important to note that while Novik redeems a Wood-centered view of the world at the close of her novel, her narrative restricts its ecocritical potential to a vision of coexistentialism that is

¹ For more on Brett's *Demon Cycle*, see Melville, "Demonizing Nature."

² I explore this topic further in Melville, "Urban Fantasy."

³ Notable examples of such criticism include Alice Curry's "Traitorousness, Invisibility and Animism," Carrie Spencer's "Young Adult Fantasy to Save the World," and Andrew Strombeck's "Inhuman Writing in Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* Trilogy."

ultimately negotiated in human terms. The nonhuman is acknowledged and even appeased to some degree but remains subject to human control. Even though the novel's protagonist Agnieszka becomes an ecologically enlightened custodian of the Wood, her environmentalism is appreciably undercut by metaphors of human mastery and cultivation as she works to subdue the Wood's more threatening and undesirable elements. This includes the intolerable presence and spread of rot, which the novel encodes as a sign of magical or moral (rather than purely organic) corruption within the nonhuman. In other words, even as it dramatizes a shift in ecological perspective, *Uprooted* likewise exemplifies the stubborn persistence of an anthropocentric discourse within fantasy that works against the novel's otherwise progressive environmentalist message.

2. Ecocritical Responses

While the novel's concluding transition from an anthropocentric viewpoint to an earth-centered perspective remains the primary focus of this essay, it is useful to provide a brief overview of the novel's storyline as well as an account of existing ecocritical responses to its environmentalist vision. Inspired by Polish folklore Novik remembers from childhood, the plot of *Uprooted* involves a good deal of palace intrigue and competing interests among the kingdom of Polnya's ruling classes, while also following the fairytale antics of the kingdom's superstitious country folk, particularly in Agnieszka's home village of Dvernik. Agnieszka is chosen at a young age to train under a powerful wizard named the Dragon who lives in a tower overlooking the lands adjacent to a dark forest known as the Wood. Though there is much tension between them, Agnieszka joins the Dragon in his mission to protect surrounding villages from the Wood's "incursion" and corrupting influence (131). When Agnieszka cures her friend Kasia of Wood-sickness (an illness that effectively turns people into Wood-controlled zombies), Kasia's recovery inspires Polnya's Prince Marek to enter the Wood to rescue his mother the Queen who has been trapped in the Wood for twenty years. The Queen's return to the Polnyan court leads to political unrest that culminates in a military assault on the Dragon's tower. Combining their magic to fend off the attack, Agnieszka and the Dragon decide to enter the Wood and confront the so-called "Wood-queen," who has been controlling Wood-corrupted citizens (including the rescued Queen) to do the Wood's bidding across the kingdom. During their altercation, the Wood-queen overpowers the Dragon and traps Agnieszka in the trunk of a "heart-tree" where she has a vision of a distant past when the Wood-queen experienced a great betrayal.

The details of Agnieszka's vision (to which I will later return) are less important than the effect the vision has on her, as it enables her to witness the history of the land from a Wood-centered or nonhuman perspective. Upon awakening, Agnieszka escapes the heart-tree and greets the Wood-queen with compassion rather than further conflict. She convinces the Wood-queen to abandon her pursuit of vengeance and morph herself into a slumbering heart-tree that can remember "how to grow" instead of "how to kill and how to hate" (419). Having calmed the Wood-queen's misanthropic rage, Agnieszka vows to

spend the rest of her days as a sylvan custodian, rooting out corruption and encouraging healthy growth throughout the forest.

Given this concluding pivot toward conservationism, it is not surprising that scholarship of *Uprooted* has been drawn to the novel's ecocritical import, though not always in a favorable manner. In an essay on "Deep Dark Forests and Literary Horror," Elizabeth Parker includes the novel in her list of "arboreal horror texts" that portray woodlands as "the dangerous antithesis and potential destroyer of civilization" ("Who's Afraid" 278). In her follow-up book-length study on the same topic, Parker admits that the malevolent Wood's origin story featuring the Wood-queen as a "she-devil in the wilderness" contains a promising "tale of ecofeminist revenge" (*The Forest* 124, 125). She nevertheless insists that the Wood-queen's fate of morphing into a heart-tree presents readers with a "thoroughly impressive example of the monstrously animate forest" reduced to "*inanimate* Nature," a move that Parker aligns with "old reductive identifications of women with *passive* nature" (126, original emphasis). The novel thus concludes not with eco-enlightenment so much as patriarchal containment of feminist defiance.

Eilis Lee elaborates on the novel's potential as ecofeminist revenge fantasy by suggesting that "the Wood's dark ecology becomes a supremely effective cypher with which to express the power of female rage" (28). Lee's take on the novel is more optimistic than Parker's and goes so far as to suggest that *Uprooted* "ends on a near-utopian vision" (29). Lee places emphasis on the character of Baba Jaga, a mythical witch based on the figure of the same name from Polish folklore, with whom Agnieszka identifies and whose intuition-based methods for wielding magic Agnieszka aims to revive. With the example of Jaga before her, Agnieszka is not just another wizard performing magic within the confines of an established patriarchal status quo. She is instead a figure of magical alterity who convinces the Dragon of the value of suppressed feminized forms of magic. Characters like Agnieszka, Jaga, and the Wood-queen embody what Lee sees as the novel's underlying progressive message: "Through vigilante feminism and inhuman strength *Uprooted's* women can destabilize archetypal patterns and modes that encode women as objects to be stolen and consumed" (29).⁴ Like Parker, Lee expresses concern over the novel's success as ecofeminist revenge fantasy and points to "ideological confusions" that limit its "feminist intervention into troubling folkloric narratives" (29). Such intervention, she insists, "only stretches so far" (29). In the final analysis, "the Wood is intrinsically connected to female immorality and remains the punishment-site for female desire" (29).

My reading of the novel is sympathetic to Parker and Lee's critical assessments, especially in terms of the novel's conflicted feminist messages, but I would propose that Novik's environmental vision stretches further than either critic allows. The contrast Novik draws between the toxic anthropocentric viewpoint that runs throughout most of the novel and its final widening into a Wood-centered perspective makes a spectacle of human arrogance and cruelty toward nonhuman life. This gesture reverses the process by which nature is typically demonized and promotes instead an image of the nonhuman as an object of empathy and care. The Wood-queen is not punished so much as she is

⁴ Although I engage Lee on these points, Mónica Rusvai makes similar observations about the gendered differences between the Dragon and Agnieszka's uses of magic ("Vegetal Magic").

relieved of an age-old injustice when Agnieszka abandons long-established patterns of human domination in favor of an environmental ethos rooted in compassion for inanimate and animate forms of nature.

3. Anthropocentric Viewpoints

As Parker suggests, the Wood is initially characterized as irredeemably negative: a place no human may venture into and come back unchanged. Those lured into the Wood are often “corrupted” in some manner, visibly changed so as to be no longer recognizably human. Agnieszka’s friend Kasia is a prime example. Though Agnieszka and the Dragon cleanse her of the Wood’s controlling influence, Kasia’s external form (her trunk-like legs and limbs) remains unnatural to human eyes. Some critics of the novel view Kasia as a productive blending of human and nonhuman attributes (Rusvai 93, Lee 25), but her fate does not have a lasting impact on the kingdom’s dominant anthropocentric attitude. The people of Polnya persist in imposing strict delineations between the Wood and human life, and Kasia represents more than anything a violation of such divisions. To be sure, Agnieszka and the Dragon’s acceptance of Kasia’s transfiguration is interpreted by others as proof that they have veered from their mission to safeguard the kingdom, and may even be corrupt themselves.

Antagonism between the people and the Wood runs so deep that the Wood is regarded as a cunning inhuman sentience whose sole objective is the destruction of humankind. “The power in the Wood isn’t some blind hating beast,” we are told; “it can think and plan, and work towards its own ends. It can see into the hearts of men, all the better to poison them” (295). Despite suspicions to the contrary, the Dragon devotes his whole existence to battling the Wood’s encroachment and protecting the kingdom from what Agnieszka calls “the full force of its malice” (181). His highest purpose as the most powerful wizard in the land is to ensure that the Wood and its human-focused rage remain at a distance, securely contained within a set of human-imposed borders. Novik rehearses the imposition of such distinctions between human and nonhuman environments only to dismantle their artificial separation by the end of her tale. The history and present disposition of the nonhuman are more entangled with the human than readers are first led to believe. Novik reveals this entanglement, as I have suggested, through a brief but illuminating change in narrative focalization from the novel’s protagonist Agnieszka to its presumed antagonist the Wood-queen.

Even though critics celebrate Agnieszka for practicing a form of magic that is “deeply rooted in nature” (Rusvai 92), she holds noticeably anthropocentric viewpoints prior to her encounter with the Wood-queen. It is her idea, for instance, to confront the Wood-queen and put an end to her malice. Recognizing that the Dragon’s attempts to “hold the Wood back” have failed, she implores him to join her in seeking a more permanent solution: “We have to stop it for good. We have to stop *her*,” she urges him, even if it means “burn[ing] the Wood [down]” (394, 402, original emphasis). Her point of view is limited for the most part to a human perspective that prioritizes the needs of the kingdom over and against a persistent nonhuman reclamation of human-settled territory. She may be a lover of nature with a fondness for “climbing

trees and tearing through brambles” (18), but her appreciation of nature falters when the nonhuman presents itself as an obstacle to the project of human civilization.

It is not until the Wood-queen captures her within the trunk of a heart-tree that Agnieszka’s anthropocentric focalization recedes to allow a nonhuman narrative perspective to emerge. Lulled by the heart-tree’s anesthetizing influence, Agnieszka has a vision in which she observes events of a distant past from the vantage point of the Wood-queen’s sister, who watches a group of Polnyans’s ancestors escort the Wood-queen to their tower to marry their king. The marriage is intended to bring peaceful coexistence between the tower-people, who are newcomers to the land, and the Wood-queen’s own “wood-people” who have a “look of tree to them” and whose voices sound like “drumming on a hollow log” (410). When the vision accelerates to indicate the passage of time, Agnieszka finds herself “full of tears” as she witnesses the wood-people seeking refuge from the tower-people’s treachery (412). She learns that an ambitious young man has usurped the tower-king and imprisoned the Wood-queen, and intends to uproot the wood-people and claim their lands. The wood-people transform themselves into heart-trees to evade capture, but the vision accelerates once again to show the Wood-queen returning to the newly formed heart-tree grove, where she finds two men cutting down one of the trees. Desperate to save her half-felled compatriot, the Wood-queen kills one of the men and presses the other into the dying heart-tree so his body can be grafted onto the trunk to provide sustenance for the tree to heal. Rather than leading to healthy growth, this vengeful act of botanical preservation marks the origin of the Wood’s corruption: the Wood-queen’s anguish over her people’s mistreatment seeps into the soil, polluting the forest with an enduring hatred for humankind.

Apart from allegorizing the devastation humanity wreaks on nonhuman environments, Agnieszka’s vision exemplifies the effectiveness of anthropomorphic storytelling. Momentarily suspending its human focalization to tell the story of the wood-people’s ill-fated encounters with humankind, the novel widens its perspective to accommodate a point of view in which Agnieszka’s nemesis the Wood-queen becomes the protagonist of her own tragic tale. Acting as a kind of nonhuman narrative proxy, the Wood-queen’s sister turns to Agnieszka and invites her to witness the wood-people’s history through her own arboreal-focused set of eyes (410). In this respect, *Uprooted* recognizes and exploits the ecocritical potential of what narrative theorist Gérard Genette calls “variable internal focalization,” which occurs when the “restricted field” of a primary focal character’s viewpoint is offset by that of another character before returning to the primary perspective once again (191, 189). While this technique effectively highlights subjective differences between and across disparate human points of view in more realistic fiction, fantasy has the imaginative capacity to extend the range of that variability to include nonhuman perspectives that pointedly offset and expose anthropocentrism itself as a “restricted field” of view. Interrupting the focalized perspective of one human character with an anthropomorphized nonhuman viewpoint, in other words, not only expands the novel’s narrative field of perception; it also prompts humanity to confront its own structured view of reality.

Novik’s novel does not merely shift into anthropomorphism in providing access to the Wood-queen’s sister’s point of view but purposefully dramatizes

the transition as an event that impacts Agnieszka and the reader at the same time. The invitation to witness that transition summons both to open their imaginations to a Le Guinian realm in which humanity is neither central nor important outside its role as antagonist to the survival of nonhuman beings with prior claims on the land. Exposure to this realm shaped by painful memories of arboreal trauma engenders empathy for previously unsympathetic figures of nonhuman otherness. Agnieszka and the reader are shown the Wood-queen in a distinctly compassionate light that reveals motivations rooted not in malice so much as grief over loved ones lost. No longer a stereotype of insensible fairytale malevolence, the Wood-queen is revealed to be a devoted sovereign devastated by her inability to save her people from existential harm.

The Wood-queen's fate moves Agnieszka to "pity and sorrow and regret" (419), even as she is horrified by the Wood-queen's acts of murderous retribution against the tower-lord and his soldiers. As someone who was herself uprooted from family and friends at a young age, she begins to appreciate how the Wood's corruption stems not from a source of intrinsic wickedness but was cultivated in the "roots" of the Wood-queen's misery and has "fed that misery onward" to the present (419). She believes the heart-tree in which she was trapped "found these [lost] memories" in an appeal to help mend the relationship between the Polnyan people and the Wood (414). Recalling the Wood-queen's aspirations for peaceful coexistence with humankind, Agnieszka wonders: "I might have been the daughter she'd hoped for, the child halfway between the tower-people and her own" (420). Empathy for the Wood-queen's point of view promotes feelings of proximity rather than distance as Agnieszka recognizes kinship in the shared dream of cooperative future sustainability.

If Kasia represents the blending of human and nonhuman characteristics in one body, then Agnieszka represents a blending of the same in a single mind suddenly capable of apprehending what Morton (4) calls the "ecological thought," a mode of thinking that prompts human consciousness to imagine "interconnectedness in the fullest and deepest sense." Emphasizing relationality over separation, the ecological thought unsettles coherent binaries that distinguish human environments from a concept of nonhuman "Nature" that resides elsewhere "over yonder" (3). As Agnieszka learns, environments both human and otherwise are immanently entangled. The tower-people's past betrayal of the wood-people affects the Wood's spiteful aggressions toward the people of Polnya in the present, just as Agnieszka's growing awareness of the former alters her perception of the latter. For Novik, everything – including the Wood, humanity, the past, and the present – is intimately and reciprocally interconnected. Denying this relationality only leads to further animosity and suffering.

4. Treating Beings as People

Regrettably, the people of Polnya fail to recognize their entanglement with the nonhuman – the fact that they are implicated in the harm they inflict on the environment as well as the harm it inflicts on them. Unable to think beyond their own anthropocentric narcissism, they view the Wood as an impediment to their desire to settle lands and expand their kingdom. Agnieszka's visionary experience within the heart-tree exemplifies the potential of anthropomorphic

discourse to challenge the limits of such anthropocentrism. The pathos the vision cultivates for the Wood-people's nonhuman point of view recalls Tolkien's much-discussed characterization of the Ents, the anthropomorphized tree folk from *The Lord of the Rings*.⁵ Portraying arborescent lifeforms with varying degrees of human characteristics literalizes Morton's call to "treat beings as people, even if they turn out not to be" (74). Coexistentialism may well depend on such gestures with the capability to raise the value of nonhuman lifeforms from a human perspective. Though it misrecognizes the nonhuman on its own terms, anthropomorphism can draw the nonhuman within the reach of human compassion and promote feelings of interconnectedness over preconceived notions of human exceptionalism. A tree with legs or a face may no longer be a tree as such, but its anthropomorphized features have the capacity to call humanity to accept responsibility for its crimes committed against otherwise faceless forms of nature.

Agnieszka models a positive response to such a call. In the distraught face of the Wood-queen, she apprehends her own responsibility for past actions against the Wood and pledges her life to nurturing growth within the forest. Her first act of care is to help the Wood-queen transform into a heart-tree that entwines itself around her sister's heart-tree, which was wounded in the violence preceding Agnieszka's vision. She feeds the Wood-queen a mixture of heart-tree fruit and spring water while uttering a transformation spell, and watches as "the new heart-tree tangled with the old one, bracing it up, sealing over the jagged scar" (421). This touching scene of cooperative healing and entanglement signals a path toward coexistentialism. The two heart-trees reflect an interconnectedness comprised not only of a shared system of roots and peridermal tissue, but also Agnieszka's compassionate embrace of the Wood's right to life.

The final chapter of *Uprooted* captures Agnieszka's commitment to this newfound ethic of cooperation and care. While the Dragon returns to the Polnyan court "to clear out the corruption from the capital" (422), Agnieszka takes up residence in the Wood and gains the trust of the Wood's giant stick-bug "walkers" who urge her to teach them how to care for sickened heart-trees (424). Together, Agnieszka and the walkers work toward cleansing the Wood of corruption left over from the Wood-queen's anguish. This work is gradual but steady and is complemented by visits Agnieszka makes to surrounding villages to change people's perceptions of the Wood and the creatures that dwell within its borders. To recall Lee's words, the novel's conclusion gestures toward a "near-utopian vision" as hostilities between the people and the Wood give way to more promising signs of sustainable coexistence.

5. The Persistence of Anthropocentrism

According to Rusvai, Agnieszka's efforts to affect "slow change" in the people's attitudes is "geographically limited" to villages surrounding the Wood. She laments that the novel "refrains from offering a solution extended to the entire society" (96). Even Agnieszka's mentor the Dragon holds doubts about the

⁵ For compelling ecocritical readings of the Ents in Tolkien, see Ulstein ("Hobbits, Ents, and Dæmons") but also Matthew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans' *Ents, Elves, And Eriador*.

Wood's prospective recovery from malice. As Agnieszka quips, he flees to the Polnyan capital to "find himself some new stone walls to hide behind" (423). Those who live closest to the Wood similarly struggle to overcome old prejudices: "Not many people were ready to eat a heart-tree's fruit yet" (432). Nevertheless, it would be unrealistic, even in fantasy, to expect rapid widescale changes to a people's long-held system of beliefs. It takes time for new ideas to take root. Some Polnyans continue to feel uneasy about the Wood, but Agnieszka commits herself to sowing the seeds of change in the hope that her actions will bear fruit for future generations to enjoy.

Patient readers of *Uprooted* would do well to worry less over the speed at which Novik's "near utopian vision" takes shape than about metaphors of human mastery that trouble the novel's ecocritical conclusion. In her attempt to assuage people's lingering fears of the Wood, Agnieszka assures them that "the Wood had been defeated, defeated for good" (431). Though she implicitly refers here to the agency behind the Wood's malice rather than the whole forest as a complex ecosystem, Agnieszka's militaristic choice of words betrays an underlying anthropocentrism that imagines a resolution to environmental crisis in which humanity stands victorious while nature is subject to domination. This is, I argue, no mere slip of the tongue. Agnieszka's efforts to restore the Wood to an imagined state of health prior to the Wood-queen's corrupting influence effectively amount to suppressing aspects of the Wood that are undesirable from a human point of view. Despite her own assurances over its defeat, Agnieszka still views the Wood as a place "full of monstrosities and corruption" (423). These monstrosities do more than remind her of humanity's past engagements with the nonhuman; they also test the limits of her tolerance of nonhuman elements that have no place in her vision of cooperative coexistence with the Wood.

In many ways, Agnieszka's stewardship of the Wood consists of weeding out unwelcome forms of corruption. Her efforts range from nursing sickened wildlife back to health to battling giant mantises still deranged by the Wood-queen's "driving rage" (424). These actions seem helpful enough in the context of the Wood's return to vitality, but there is a lack of precision in the novel's emphasis on "corruption" as a thing from which the forest must be freed. Novik's narrative often conflates the idea of corruption as an infectious pathological drive to carry out the Wood-queen's wrath with a broader biological understanding of corruption as a process of organic decomposition, more commonly known as rot. There are several instances when rot doubles as a metaphor for corruption: Agnieszka considers using a "rot-finding spell" (originally crafted to identify spoiled foodstuffs) on Kasia to "find where corruption ... had taken root in her" (120); a Wood-corrupted book that spawns a monster is said to have been lurking in the King's library for years "like a rotting apple" (308); and the corrupted Queen of Polnya is shown to be "rotted out from the inside" (382). This last example is particularly troubling because the Queen's spoiled interior is revealed through a truth-summoning spell that Agnieszka and the Dragon cast on people suspected of corruption, as though decomposition was somehow synonymous with falsehood or deception. While the sight or smell of organic rot is repellent to human sensibility, particularly as it indicates the presence of something potentially harmful to human subsistence, decomposition is an essential process within forest ecosystems. Conflating this process with an absence of truth is symptomatic of a human-

centered perspective. It blurs the lines between nurturing healthy growth and purging elements of nonhuman nature that are inimical, or just plain offensive, to human existence.

6. Conclusion

Skewing its “near-utopian” environmentalism in favor of humankind, *Uprooted* calls attention to the persistence of anthropocentric discourse even within fantasy that promotes environmentalist perspectives. This fact alone makes it a representative, or *realistic*, instance of ecocritical fantasy. After all, when Ulstein privileges fantasy for its environmentalism, she does not mean to suggest that the genre promises an end to anthropocentrism once and for all. Rather, she merely celebrates the genre’s “exploratory potential” for presenting ecocritical ideas (7). One idea that *Uprooted* presents quite convincingly is the usefulness of anthropomorphic storytelling to imagine nonhuman points of view. Anthropomorphism (itself a product of anthropocentrism) does not eliminate human-centered viewpoints so much as it offers imaginary counter-perspectives in which nonhuman nature appears empathetic and deserving of respect. As is the case with *Uprooted*, anthropomorphism has the potential to highlight the interconnectedness between human and nonhuman beings who share a past that shapes the way they interact in the present. Shifting the narrative perspective from human to nonhuman viewpoints enables a better appreciation of this interconnectedness. It exemplifies fantasy’s Le Guinian capacity to imagine realms in which humanity’s prominence over nature is not as justifiable as it first appears.

Few fantasy novels have attracted as much ecocritical attention as quickly as *Uprooted* has since its publication in 2015. While critics disagree over the extent to which *Uprooted* offers productive environmentalist messaging, it is worth recalling Morton’s point that thinking about interconnectedness “isn’t snug and cozy,” nor is it full of “predictable, warm fuzziness” (31). Representing nonhuman points of view is messy business. *Uprooted*’s greatest ecocritical asset might be its ability to elicit varied responses to its environmentalist vision. If entanglement is the object and purpose of thinking ecologically, as Morton suggests, then a novel whose environmentalism is ensnared by its own anthropocentric shortcomings captures, perhaps better than most, the promise but also the realism of fantasy’s ecocritical potential.

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Satire in Egyptian Speculative Fiction: Short Stories as a Borderline Case Study

Emad El-Din Aysha

“It is with deep sorrow that we pause to announce the total destruction of Acapulco. This flash comes to you courtesy of Interworld Transport, Proprietary, the Triple-S Lines: Speed-Safety-Service.” (Robert Heinlein, *Friday*)

“An exaggeration is a truth that has lost its temper.” (Khalil Gibran, *Sand and Foam*)

Satire is as old as the speculative arts. The 2nd century satirist Lucian of Samosata authored one of the oldest recorded works of science fiction, *A True Story*, with swashbuckling adventures set between the planets to make observations about life down on this planet. Arabic literature itself has a long and proud history of satire coupled with the fantastic, and even ardent realist authors in our history, such as Naguib Mahfouz, hid their political criticisms in literature through a mixture of period drama, symbolism, and surrealism. Egyptian literature serves as a special case study for Arabic satire given the unique problems and opportunities that exist in the Egyptian literary and cultural spheres, in addition to the more obvious political issues. While it is true that Egyptians love comedy and have always used it as a safety-valve and a tool for criticism, older techniques that relied on fantasy have fallen by the wayside over the years due both to censorship and, interestingly, the imperatives of literary modernization. Fortunately, contemporary authors of science fiction and fantasy in Egypt have been reviving some of these older traditions and blending genres to produce new and compelling works of satire.

Satire in the Egyptian SF novel has already garnered a great deal of international attention after Ahmed Khaled Tawfik’s dystopian *Utopia* (2008) ushered in a new era of dystopian novels, which have been translated, celebrated, and studied in the Arab Spring’s tragic aftermath: most notably, Basma Abdel Aziz’s *The Queue* (2013), Mohammad Rabie’s *Otared* (2014), and

Ahmed Naji's *Using Life* (2014). Tawfik's *Utopia* was written and published before the 2011 Egyptian revolution and tells the story of a young, privileged resident of a gated community who is so sick of the easy life of decadence – drugs, sex, alcohol – that he ventures out into a “bad” neighborhood to hunt for the poor. He sees the poor, whose body parts he collects as trophies, as animals, not his fellow countrymen. Not coincidentally, this gated community, named Utopia, is guarded by US Marines – a motif for cultural colonization. The protagonist is also depicted as being so westernized that he can disregard cultural taboos around drug use and disrespecting one's father. As I will demonstrate below, this recurrent warping of the personal and the political in Arab and Muslim traditions of satire stem primarily from moral and spiritual concerns with a clear emphasis on family life.

Shorter works of fiction, however, have fallen by the critical wayside. This is unfortunate because there is a substantial amount of satire in Egyptian short fiction, and it is not circumscribed to dystopia. Fortunately, residing in Egypt and being a member of the Egyptian Society for Science Fiction (ESSF) and the Egyptian Writers' Union, I have direct access to short fiction authors whose works are overlooked. I regularly conduct interviews and reviews or translate their short stories and novellas. In what follows, I will first provide a basic introduction to satire in science fiction and an account of satire in Arabic literary history, focusing on the unique set of problems facing Egyptian authors. Then, I will offer a survey of authors and stories, demonstrating how they share a common concern with personal ethics and the sanctity of the family, as well as a borderline sensibility to writing SF with a fantastical or surreal feel. Finally, I will evaluate the progress made so far and discuss lingering problems in the Egyptian literary context. My conclusion is that satire in the hands of Egyptian SFF authors serves as a tool of decolonization, allowing us to critique our social and political systems with our own jokes and on our own terms. But we still have a long way to go, as we shall see.

1. Satire in Western SF and Arabic literature

Satire is not mere comedy; the objective is not cheap laughs. It is *critique*, pure and simple, and often depends on “cognitive estrangement” (Borgmeier 7; Suvin 12, 61, 238) – a defamiliarized view of reality that differs from the way we normally see things in everyday life. Cognitive estrangement exaggerates salient features of reality that were there, hiding in plain sight, to the point that they become galling and disturb the audience, leading them to realize what was wrong all along. The term is borrowed from theater, Bertolt Brecht more specifically, but is quite comfortable in the world of SF (Campbell 2).

For a concrete illustration, we have Terry Gilliam's post-apocalyptic epic *12 Monkeys* (1995), where humanity resides underground after an airborne virus that is lethal only to humans is released. The hero, James Cole (Bruce Willis), is a prisoner who literally resides in a birdcage (chicken wire instead of bars), with cells stacked on top of each other in the underground caverns. The underground prisoners are “antisocials” who have violated the permanent emergency code, which temporarily allows for summary arrests and the quashing of civil liberties during a war or natural disaster. (This is a term we are all too familiar with in countries like Egypt with no legal change since the

assassination of Sadat in 1981). All the inmates are clean shaven for fear of hair lice, and the new rulers of this world are scientists dressed in lab coats who see people as guinea pigs. Cole has to “volunteer” to go topside and then go backwards in time to study the course of the virus, with endless quarantine procedures. When he reaches the present-day world and starts talking about viruses and human extinction, he is thrown into a lunatic asylum, ending up in the same position as before. He has to be forcefully washed and “deloused” (despite being completely hairless) and put in front of a panel of experts – psychiatrists in white lab coats. In the end when Cole is gunned down, his arms are spread outwards in Christ-like fashion; even the name James Cole or JC is a veiled reference to Jesus Christ. In a key scene, one of the psychiatrists tells Cole’s doctor that they are the new priesthood because they know what is real and what is not, parodying science becoming the new religion. The satirical force of *12 Monkeys* comes from the fact that it is not about the future at all but the world of today, where truth is up for grabs, and the elites have the final say because the masses have given up the right to think for themselves, becoming TV-addicted passive consumers instead. (The hero even has barcode tattoos on his neck and is scanned like a product at a grocery store). But, again, we would not realize these salient features of contemporary reality, how things happen *behind* the scenes, if we were not presented with an alternate world where these hidden realities are made explicit through exaggerated scenarios.

This is an example of speculative world-building, where the metaphorical or the figurative is made literal – an amazing tool sci-fi and fantasy writers have in their satirical armory, in addition to the more usual techniques like irony, lampooning, and dark comedy. *12 Monkeys* is doubly important, as it also illustrates how hard sci-fi itself can borrow from other satirical subgenres, such as surrealism, which emphasizes blurring the boundaries between dream states and conscious reality to make people question the consensus reality and what they consider to be certain. For example, the adult James Cole is haunted by a childhood memory of watching a man being gunned down at an airport. The memory alters slightly every time he dreams, in line with the people he encounters on his mission. This unstable memory makes him doubt his sanity and want to remain in the present. Little does he know that, as a child, he was witnessing his future self being slain on the altar of intellectual elitism. This scene ties into the Christ motif (JC dies but is resurrected) but is also meant to make us doubt what people tell us and encourage us to find our personal truths.

Philip K. Dick, an author who was an inspiration for Gilliam himself, was also interested in blurring the boundaries between SF and surrealism by playing mind-games with both the characters and the readers and making them doubt what is real and what is not. His novel *Lies Inc.* (1984), for instance, is named after a private sector police agency with a computer mainframe programmed to broadcast lies to everybody. One day, it sends out truthful information to an unwitting citizen, subliminally, and the engineer in charge cannot ask the machine why, since it is programmed to lie even to the agency. In *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said* (1974) a TV megacelebrity is catapulted into a world where nobody knows who he is, even friends and former lovers. Later the audience learns that a central character in the story snatched him out of his frame of reality after she took a lethal dose of psychedelic drugs, which led to

the dissolution of the boundaries between subjective and objective realities. Dick used these surrealist ploys to make his characters doubt themselves and to encourage the reader to question their own identity and what makes us human. Dick wrote most prolifically in the 1960s-70s, at the height of the drugs culture and Vietnam War protests, and he often set his stories in dystopian police states to lampoon Cold War paranoia and surveillance, with drugs being both a mode of rebellion and a way of medicating the masses.

Now we turn to Arabic literature and Egyptian satire. Arabs have developed an extensive body of literature and literary criticism on comedy and satire since the heyday of the Abbasids in Baghdad, which produced notable scholars, writers, and poets such as Al-Jahiz (776-868) and Ibn Al-Rumi (836-896). Al-Jahiz famously wrote his 9th century classic *Al-Bukhala* (868/9; The Misers) to catalogue the habits of the miserly in his day and with the express intent of lampooning them, as Arabic culture and Islam promoted charity and generosity. Ibn Al-Rumi likewise used satire to lampoon the vices of drinking alcohol. This is the first distinguishing feature of our satire: Its emphasis historically is not on political critique but on improving religious virtue. Satire, as such, was a tool of moral and social reform (Abū Al-Sa‘ūd 62-63, 65). This religious imperative comes straight out of the Quran, a kind of bottom-up approach that sees morality-building at home as the key determiner of the fate of a nation: “... Indeed, Allah would never change a people’s state ‘of favor’ until they change their own state ‘of faith’ (إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُغَيِّرُ مَا بِقَوْمٍ حَتَّى يُغَيِّرُوا مَا بِأَنْفُسِهِمْ) (Quran 13:11).” One can quibble over interpretations of course, but the point is that Arabs do not enjoy the same rich political tradition of rhetoric stretching back to the Roman republic and Athenian democracy. Consequently, in Islamic history, personal morals, education, and upbringing were always understood to be the main drivers of societal progress or decline. *1001 Nights*, while not strictly a work of satire, is a case in point since the heroine of the tale, Scheherazade, agrees to marry the tyrant Shahryar to reform him in the private sphere, and specifically through stories – the moral punchline.¹

This moral emphasis is equally true of satire in Egyptian history, a part of the Arab world that played a particularly important role in the development of satire, with an almost unbroken tradition stretching from the Fatimids (909-1171) and the Mamluks (from the 13th to the 16th centuries) to the modern era (Dayf). Another distinguishing feature is that our satirical traditions tend more towards song and poetry than prose and storylines. The novel is a modern invention and even more modern an import into Arabic literature, and most prose satire in Arabic before the novel was written in the form of rhythmic prose, known as the *maqāmāt* (originally parables spoken at social gatherings). With time, they extended into entire works the size of a novel or play. Such parables in Islamic history also include fantasy, a tradition that lived on into the modern period in the form of a work such as *Hadith Isa bin Hisham* (The Narrative of Isa Ibn Hisham) – an Egyptian text dating back to 1898 which was published in book form in 1907. It follows the trials and tribulations of an Ottoman official who has risen from the dead, forced to endure the miserable state of Egypt falling under the purview of Western imperialism (Cooperson

¹ A Farsi-speaking Afghani friend once explained to me that Shahryar means “ruler of the city” whereas Scheherazade means “friend of the city,” so the whole tale is a dialogue between the ruler and the ruled.

2008, 420, 441-443). While technically a novel, this work is self-consciously written in the style of the *maqāmāt*, with the title character, Isa bin Hisham, being the narrator-hero from the classic *maqāmā* of Badi' al-Zaman al-Hamadani (969-1007) and dialogue written in a rhythmic style. (This rhythmic prose style is a common feature of Arab-Islamic storytelling and can also be found in *1001 Nights*.)

Sadly, these older fanciful genres, including the *maqāmāt*, went into decline in 20th-century Egyptian literary circles while the novel form, with its linear prose format, was adopted to meet “modern” standards (Brugman 64, 67, 380-381). Fortunately, other forms of satire flourished with the advent of the printing press. Satire took on biting political criticisms in addition to the older moralistic concerns: the plight of the peasant, corruption in political circles, and the British occupation, among others. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many attempts to silence newspapers, magazines, cartoonists, and poets failed as authors could go abroad and write under assumed names (Dayf 134-135). The country had a thriving civil society and parliamentary life too, with a legal and political elite fighting against the authority of the crown when it came to press freedoms. However, a sea change took place in the Nasserist era (1952-1970), which introduced a far more systematic clampdown on freedoms, with the parliament turned into a rubberstamp organization alongside the nationalization of media and publishing industries. This suppression forced Egyptian satire in particular to go underground (Rāghib 32, 37-38).

The Nasserist era also witnessed a major cultural rupture with the few remaining songwriters (Frankford), cartoonists, and essayists in newspapers producing satirical texts in colloquial Arabic (Rāghib 38-39). This shift from classical to colloquial Arabic led to the dwindling of critical attention to satires in a period marked also by the deliberate elevation of socialist realism, which supplanted fantastical and romantic literature. Literary forms ranging from satire and surrealism to Sufi literature suffered as well (‘Uṣfūr 35-36, 38-39, 41). Reading compendious Egyptian texts on satire, one finds only a few chapters on Arabic satirical traditions, with the majority of texts focusing on Western theater and literature. Even in the nonmainstream realm of genre literature, which finally took off in the 1990s, the only Egyptian case study on satire I have been able to find was about Ahmed Khaled Tawfik (Hamzah).

It seems that, in the wake of the twin crackdowns on artistic creativity and journalistic freedom in the Nasserist era, intellectual circles developed a growing inferiority complex about satire. For example, in modern Egypt, poetry was seen as “serious” literature whereas anything satirical was perceived as nonsensical (Ramadān 20). Even a noted Egyptian satirist and leftist, Jalaāl ‘Āmir (1952-2012), argued that satire should be kept out of novels because it would *trivialize* literature, and preferred to write satires only in essay form. This is all the more paradoxical when one bears in mind that ‘Āmir was a self-professed surrealist (‘Āmir 12). Browsing through the library bookshelves in Egypt one will find numerous works of satirists, such as Ibrahim Abdel Qadir Al-Mazini (1889-1949) or Mahmoud Taymour (1894-1973), but very few scholarly studies (outside of journalism) of these accomplished authors and the genre they wrote in. As said above, even Naguib Mahfouz dabbled in a little surrealist satire, as evidenced by his story “The Norwegian Rat” (1984), where

the government tries to scare people into thinking all their problems come from abroad. The story depicts a foreign species of rat that is threatening to eat away the Egyptians' food, whereas in reality it is the government official who turns into a rat-like creature to gobble away people's stocks.² Alas, this style of writing was a fad and did not catch on; Mahfouz reverted to social realism and most authors follow his lead to this day.

This lack of critical attention to satire is tragic also because a distinguishing feature of Arabic science fiction is that it is situated on the borders of genres, often overlapping with surrealism and fantasy. Arab authors are schooled in epic tales and Arabic folklore, along with fairytales, myths, and modern fantasy literature from the West, and they draw on all these influences when they write, not least in satire. For example, Dr. Khalid Tuwkal's satiric "The President and the Clones" (2012) depicts a father struggling with bureaucrat after bureaucrat only to discover they are all clones of the president. Then, at home he is attacked by his wife, who is a clone herself, and finally wakes up to discover it was all a dream. This satiric story, while not explicitly science fictional, blends elements of surrealism and SF through the dream motif often found in such narratives. This is an all too familiar technique used by Egyptian SF authors, such as in Muhammad Naguib Matter's utopian short story "The Dream" (2022). A disgruntled father travels by night to get away from his materialistic family, only to get into a small car accident and find himself in a posh but hospitable neighborhood, where he is invited to freshen up and have dinner in the residents' spacious, lush gardens. Later he goes shopping for groceries in the neighborhood and finds the produce is for free, paid for by the state from ample agricultural export revenues, only for him to wake up the following day in a hospital bed. Was it real or a dream? The narrative hints that it is a dream because the protagonist keeps encountering people who look the same, but the story could also be real according to Arabic folklore, which harbors many legends of utopian cities that disappear for hundreds of years, only for hapless wanderers to encounter them (Aysha, "Interviewing Abdel Aal"; Aysha, 2019: 28).

Finally, Egyptian satire has many cultural sources, one of which is the people's bittersweet sense of humor, often lacing cynicism and sarcasm with hope for the future. Satirical narratives always give a sense of the *sturdiness* of the Egyptians in the face of everything the world throws at them, whether it be poverty, injustice, or cruelty. This is exemplified by the closing scene of a comedy movie titled *Mixedupness* (*Khaltabīta*, 1994). The story, clearly modeled on Kafka's *The Trial*, depicts a lonely desk jockey being pursued by some unknown department in the ministry of interior, with nobody (even the court-appointed lawyer) telling him what he is being charged with. While the hero is on the run, the viewer is introduced to a surreal present-day Egypt that is still ruled by aristocrats, with icons from the old monarchical period evident everywhere. He eventually gets accused of murdering an aristocrat (due to being in the wrong place at the wrong time) and is released from prison to be assassinated. First bullets and then cannons are fired at him, but nothing happens. He is the Egyptian man, the populace, who always perseveres.

² For an online English version, please consult:
<https://web.mit.edu/norvin/www/somethingelse/mahfouz.html>.

One finds this kind of tenacity also in many Egyptian SF texts (particularly time travel literature), which often foster a “sense of hope” and “nervous self-assurance” stemming from a faith in the “timeless” or “trans-historical Egyptian character” who is flawed but nonetheless one of the good guys (Cooperson 1998, 185). Such stories are fundamentally moral parables that use speculation and cognitive estrangement to catapult somebody across worlds to make a point about our world.

2. A Thematic Survey of Satire in Contemporary Egyptian Speculative Short Fiction

In this section I will provide a thematic survey of satirical SF stories that are published by the Egyptian Society for Science Fiction (ESSF), one of the first intellectual gatherings of SF writers in Egypt and formed in 2012, immediately in the wake of the Arab Spring. These stories cover a wide range of subgenres and SF tropes including parallel dimensions, mind surveillance, alien invasion, and environmental SF. They are all post-Arab Spring stories, focusing on themes of social conditioning and political corruption, but with an internal moral focus that refuses to exonerate us from the responsibility of being the authors of our fate. Much satirical SF in Egypt since the 2011 Revolution has turned dystopian or post-apocalyptic, yet, as grim as many of these stories seem, most are in fact optimistic and complicate the category of dystopia.

A good example of this post-Arab Spring satirical SF trend is “Parallel Universes” (2013), written by the ESSF’s founder and director Dr. Hosam Elzembely. This humorous story follows an Egyptian nuclear physicist who discovers the secret to travelling to a parallel Egypt in 2020. After he makes his trip, a Scientific Intelligence team shows up on his doorstep and explains to his wife the exact nature of his research and how they had been trying to get him to cooperate with them. That is when the reader learns what prompted the physicist’s departure: the sorry state of his country, which is now divided into several countries. Then the storyline cuts to the scientist in the parallel Egypt – a country that is beautiful, green, and prosperous. The physicist gets picked up by (very polite) cops, and when he queries them, he discovers that the date and time is the same and that this parallel Egypt had also experienced an Arab Spring revolution beginning in Tunis. The only difference is that their despot was called Mabrouk, instead of Mubarak. More important still is that the parallel country remained united, and even united with other Arab countries, despite the divisions and chaos the country witnessed after the January 2011 revolution. The trick was the novum of “attitude changer” – a wrist band invented by a group of social scientists and human development experts after realizing what was driving people apart was their inability to respect each other’s views. The closing scene depicts the scientist’s wife rummaging through her husband’s belongings to find a message he had scrawled down, promising that he would return. This final optimistic scene implies that the scientist will bring the attitude changer back with him to fix the current state of his Egypt.

The “polite” policemen, a virtual impossibility in Egypt, along with greenery and clean streets signals that cognitive estrangement operates in positive mode in this story. Contemporary Cairo is a city lacking proper urban planning and adequate infrastructure, marked a widespread garbage problem

and the felling of trees. The story presents a view of Egypt that functions as a form of shock therapy to highlight what Cairo *could* be, if people took responsibility and devised a novum (the attitude changer) that works almost like a magic wand or a spell in a fantasy story. The parallel dimension trope is used here as a ploy for what is essentially a morality play. Not coincidentally, Dr. Elzembely is a trenchant fan of *1001 Nights* and frequently combines riddles and moral exposition with SF tropes in his stories. In this story the scientist is portrayed almost like a sorcerer, holding a glowing orb in his hand that expands till it opens a portal, and he climbs in, engulfed by the light. No explanation is given in this opening section, deliberately, to befuddle the reader. The Scientific Intelligence unit also explains to his wife that the scientist had discovered the language of existence, the secret code that holds the universe together and allows for travel across parallel dimensions. While the story is deeply political, the onus again is more personal: how *we* destabilized our nation by our bad habits and how we have a responsibility to rectify what we as individuals did wrong.

This strategy of combining SF tropes with the concerns of a morality play can also be found in Muhammad Naguib Matter's (Dr. Elzembely's second in command at the ESSF) Arab Spring story "The Game of the Revolution" (2013), which mobilizes the science fictional trope of mind surveillance through advanced technology. The narrative revolves around a policeman investigating the harrowing violence that takes place during a football match between the red team and the white team – a clear reference to the famous Ahli and Zamalik football clubs in Egypt. (These clubs are often used as a tongue-in-cheek reference to the government and the opposition). The cop gets transferred because of his investigation but does not give up and eventually learns that the ministry of information was using a special device to transmit subliminal signals (images and sounds of violence and bloodshed) to manipulate the crowds of football fans. The device comes from Israel, but people on the inside are doing the dirty work, and the policeman narrowly prevents another bloodbath from happening when the 25th of January 2011 protest marches begin. (This is Police Day in Egypt, and in 2011 young people used the occasion to protest police brutality, which had resulted in the death of an internet activist.) In the story there is a clear call for national unity in the face of foreign (and not so foreign) threats, exemplified in the person of the policeman who is doing his duty, and the Egyptian youth who are torn between factions (the rival football fans). The title is the ultimate satirical instrument here since it means that the Arab Spring is not something trivial like a (football) game, and the people's will is not to be *toyed* with (the Arabic word for game *lu'ba* also means toy). Here the science fictional novum (the device that transmits subliminal signals) operates within a very realistic and highly moralizing framework to satirize Egypt's contemporary reality.

Another SF story by Muhammad Naguib Matter, "Hole in the Head" (2017) tackles the theme of mind surveillance through a surrealist play with dreams. The story depicts an engineering student who is woken up from a sound sleep by strangers to be told that they will drill a hole into his head so that they can pour the entire curriculum into his skull. This brutal scene which satirizes the Egyptian education system with its emphasis on endless memorization, makes the metaphorical act of cramming literal through a science fictional technology. When he objects, saying that this will deprive him

of his creative freedom, the strangers tell him that he will at least have the freedom to choose which direction the wind flows in his blueprint designs. The story also plays with the readers' perceptions as the student wakes up at the end, wondering whether it was all a dream (recollect "The President and the Clones" from above, or *12 Monkeys*). In yet another story, "Fingerprint" (2017), Matter envisions a device that picks up the sign waves emitted by the brain when one is dreaming. In the middle of one night, the police wakes up a hapless person and bring him in for questioning. The charge is not subversion but *dreaming* of subversion as the hero had dreamed about joining a protest march – something he would never do while awake. This dystopian world in which even the contents of one's head are no longer private due to advanced technology satirizes the abysmal state of our country where we are not even allowed to dream of a better future, let alone make it a reality. This is a common Egyptian sentiment, even beyond politics, with families teaching their kids not to have aspirations. He who looks up (has ambitions) gets tired, as the Egyptian saying goes!

The theme of social conditioning through advanced technology ties into the classical science fiction trope of alien invasion in Lamyaa Al-Said's Arab Spring story "The Rebels" (2013). The story begins on an advanced alien world populated by intelligent reptilians. This is a world of total technological and social control. As with the abovementioned stories, even sleep is monitored (this time with drugs), and electroshock therapy administered if one does not get their allotted quota of rest. A handful of rebellious youngsters, who are fed up with their lives of rigid certainty, decide to escape like their brave predecessors who left for this primitive planet we call Earth. On Earth, the aliens disguise themselves as human beings and try to blend in, having chameleon-like qualities, but the advanced Western world with its endless rules and procedures reminds one of them too much of their home world. (This is a euphemism about democracy since this alien wants to usurp power on Earth.) So, he sets his eyes on "the East," where people are naive and follow their emotions. He thinks these are lands accustomed to tyranny, not science, reason, and democracy. The alien takes a particular interest in the greatest Eastern country of all, which the reader can tell is a reference to Egypt, and finds the TV set is the ultimate weapon for manipulation. He therefore plants fellow reptilians as TV presenters to rile people up against their rulers and then drive them against each other.

Towards the end of the story, the reader is introduced to two young scientists, Yasmin and Youssef, lamenting the outcome of the revolution and the political division that exists even among family members. In a key scene, the leader of the reptilians brags that these Orientals behave as if they have no minds of their own, while Yasmin herself suspects some external force is sinking the country into chaos and mass hysteria – someone like the devil who can only whisper into someone's ear (but cannot directly control them), albeit on a much grander scale here. Fortunately she specializes in reptiles, and a detection device she had built previously emits an alarm sound when the TV is turned on. With her fiancé and some scientist colleagues, they finally neutralize the aliens' chameleon powers and force them to flee Earth.

The aliens here resemble the Orientalists and Western adventurers attracted to the allure of absolute power that can only be attained in the East, with their home world being a clear parody of the First World. This parodical

aspect becomes even more explicit in a penultimate scene where the reptilian leader is advised not to modernize these Oriental countries, or else they will become like his original home world. These narratives play into the Arab fear of conspiracy, particularly imperialist penetration, but also involve a harrowing self-critique of Egyptian society. They suggest that we are the ones who have opened ourselves up to foreign infiltration by our egotism, suspicions, and rejection of reasoned dialogue – again, an example of personal morals driving social decline in Arab satire. Moreover, it is not a coincidence that a pair of Egyptian scientists and a home-grown invention save the day. The symbolism is all too familiar to Egyptians: the family as the bedrock of society – a symbol of national unity – and with that, science or knowledge (in this case, awareness of foreign plots) as our armory. Recollect the abovementioned example of Ahmed Khaled Tawfik's *Utopia*, which problematizes cultural colonization not only through the figure of US Marines serving as guardians of wealthy gated communities in Egypt, but also through the depiction of a disrespectful, "Westernized" youth. Such narratives regard the family as the emblem of the nation. What we learn from "The Rebels" is that contemporary Egyptian SF is adhering to older satirical traditions in defending the country's identity (in the past, against the British Empire) as well as Egyptians' moral and religious concerns, exemplified by the concern with family values.

Another alien invasion story that perfectly illustrates this lesson is Mustafa Seif Al-Din's minor masterpiece "The Dark Square" (2013), which depicts two detectives hot on the trail of an invisible serial killer who murders women. By following the breadcrumbs (mysterious half captured images in photos), the detectives make their way to a magician and a young couple, who are his "invisible" assistants and do the old sawing-a-woman-in-half act, just without the box. This couple confesses that they are humanoid aliens who come from a distant, dark planet, full of harsh hearted individuals hell-bent on conquest. The planet sends out to other worlds a male and female pair who are tasked with selecting and murdering four women with "pure" hearts. Once they are slain, a beam of pure light emerges, forming a square, and a pan-dimensional door opens that allows the armies of their world to invade. The son of this humanoid alien couple tries to carry out his people's mission and picks out girls who represent the four corners of "happiness:" acceptance, love, wealth, and honesty. Like a typical Egyptian, the detective comments on how it is impossible to find happy people anymore, especially people who are unselfish, romantic, accepting, and completely truthful. Then his partner remembers the famous case of a girl who exposed corruption in the health sector, a girl who refused to change her testimony in court. They make a wild dash to where she works and gun down the young couple's son while he is attacking her but fail to save the girl. And yet, no dark portal opens heralding an alien invasion. When they query the humanoid parents afterwards, the father explains that the "darkness" humans have inside protects them since no one is completely pure, honest, or unselfish – a fact he and his wife learned when they first began slaying victims on their mission of conquest. In the process they gave up and learned to befriend earthlings and dedicated their lives to making them happy through their so-called magic act – using their scientific powers to mimic magic routines. Sadly, their son could not relate to the humans and isolating himself, he reverted to form.

All of this is satire, lampooning the world of today, with social commentary galore. But, more to the point, the story has a very strong fairytale disposition, in line with what we saw above in “Parallel Universes.” Portals and dimensions lie on the borders of what is scientifically possible and the supernatural, but the beauty of these stories lies in the way they embody and ground moral precepts that, otherwise, would be ethereal and abstract. So, a moral lesson is imparted on the cops and the reader, as cynical and jaded as we all are: Innocence does in fact exist and is to be celebrated wherever you find it, and it triumphs in the end. Otherwise, the humanoids would not have redeemed themselves. Oh, and a little darkness (or cynicism) never hurts anybody; it toughens one up for the road ahead.

I end my survey of satire in Egyptian SF with examples from environmental SF, such as “Blind Spot” (2013) by Ahmed Badran. The story begins in a dentist’s clinic, with an anxious patient rummaging through the yellowed newspapers and starlet magazines in the waiting room. He finds a magazine called *Blind Spot*, and his eyes fall on an article that talks about an incident that occurred in a certain district of Cairo where toxic industrial fumes from an accident hurt children and pregnant women living in the area. This situation gets him worried for his wife – he had just left her there with her family – and so he calls them, and they insist nothing has happened. The following day, however, the exact same accident happens, and his wife is affected. He makes his way to the office of the said magazine, located in a posh part of town, and when he gets nowhere with the editor-in-chief, he says he will go to the police and accuse them of being connected to the accident, having foreknowledge in print. The editor owns up and explains that one of his journalists overstepped his bounds, making an explicit news report instead of just making a vague generalization to help people prepare for the future. Their policy at the magazine is never to explicitly state what will happen, because talking about the future will alter it. This means, according to the hero, that these mysterious individuals are from the future. After this realization, he gets zapped and wakes up in the dentist’s clinic. He checks the magazine, and it is exactly the same except for that report. He contacts his wife to make sure she goes back to his place, and the industrial accident does occur. He then makes sure to always check out this magazine to help avoid possible accidents in the near future – most occurrences caused by neglect or corruption.

As Egyptians we are always worried about environmental toxins, the supermarket food with preservatives and hybridization (which are still new to us), and bad sanitation in traditional fast-food joints and local cafes. The issue of polluted air addressed by this story is another anti-modern phobia, standing in stark contrast to the utopianism of the clean neighborhood and lush gardens depicted in Matter’s abovementioned story “The Dream.” It should be noted that the dialogue about the function of the magazine, where they only refer to corruption indirectly, is itself a tongue-in-cheek reference to the function of the media in Egypt. As a former journalist myself, I can confirm that we always talk in generalities and “hide” information between the lines to avoid getting into trouble with the authorities, while still trying to help and serve as a check and balance on the abysmal state the country is in. The same goes for reporting about pollution, incidentally.

One final example of environmentally conscious satirical SF is “Journey into Space” (2022) by Majid Abdel Allah Mattar. Imagine the Earth as a planet

of poor people, like the destitute neighborhood in Tawfik's *Utopia*, with other posh planets functioning like gated communities. The story depicts a medical doctor journeying from Earth to his workplace on Saturn, bragging about the ring road between Earth and Mars. (Ring roads are a constant complaint in Egypt, specifically in an overcrowded city like Cairo numbering at 19 million). Sadly, for him, people from the Earth are considered middle class, with high-class people residing on Saturn and Neptune, which makes it difficult for him to marry. His salary will not cover the rent of a dream home, while parents are mindful of immigrants who try to become permanent residents through marriage. Finally, the doctor explains that everybody in the solar system hates Earth because of the plagues that originated there and wiped out most of mankind. Egypt is depicted as surviving these plagues because the foods they eat have toughened up their immune systems and poised them to colonize the solar system. Dirty foods are indeed an in-house joke in Egypt. A famous comedy movie from the 1980s had a corrupt businessman responding to complaints that his canned meat goods were full of germs by retorting that Egyptians are a people who practically eat rocks, so they are already full of microbes! Combining environmental concerns with class struggle and projecting them onto entire planets is satire through world-building, but it is also cognitive estrangement. As explained above, our humor is bittersweet, lamenting our inability to change things. The important thing for Egyptian satirical SF is to vent frustrations and give hope for the future.

3. Conclusion

The proliferation of such satirical SF narratives in Egyptian literature bodes well, but there are limitations, most importantly in language. I clarified above that a rupture took place in contemporary Egyptian history between classical and colloquial Arabic when it came to satire. I have read many novels by the abovementioned authors, and they either rely on staunch classical Arabic, which does not allow for modern slang swear words in Egyptian Arabic, or use phrasings and expressions that simply do not sound right in (any kind of) Arabic. They are one-liners translated from Western SF, thriller novels, and action movies.

These problems are not nearly as pronounced in science fiction and satire in the rest of the Arab world. One good example is the work of Dr. Faycel Lahmeur, an Algerian author who specializes in SF and philosophical stories and has published his own satirical masterpiece, *Amin Al-Ulwani* in 2009.³ The novel is about a future author-blogger who finds a biographical novel written in the past about someone with his exact name – Amin Al-Ulwani. What impressed me from the outset about this novel was not so much the story, which is great and satirical, but the style of writing. It was written in impeccable classical Arabic – no colloquialisms and slang – but it was also very modern in its relaxed style of sarcasm. It did not feel dry or verbose at all, which is often the case with classical Arabic. It felt like reading John le Carré. Dr. Faycel also has an unpublished story, “The Rapist of Baghdad,” where a scholarly jurist in classical Baghdad encounters a time-traveler from the future who gives him a

³ For Dr. Faycel's own comments on his story, please see Lahmeur, 36-38.

copy of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), hoping this will change the theocratic future the traveler (an actual descendent of the soon-to-be-doomed jurist) comes from. The amazing thing is that Dr. Faycel wrote this story in French and had it translated by a friend into English, and yet it feels like it was written originally in Arabic – old Arabic from the time of the jurist narrator. That is how linguistically skilled Dr. Faycel Lahmeur is. The kind of rupture that took place in language circles in the Egyptian satirical tradition clearly did not take place in Algeria. The same can be argued for Iraq, Palestine, Jordan, Mauritania, and Syria, from my experience of reading their literature.

In short, we are still not out of the woods, and that is not discounting the fact that even an author as skilled as Dr. Faycel Lahmeur still cannot match the older satirists in Arabic literature, who used the *maqāmāt* rhythmic format for their stories, including fantasy stories such as *Hadith Isa bin Hisham* (ironically, an Egyptian text). We are still too concerned with the novel and living up to modern literary standards. We still need to recapture our own satirical heritage, dust it off, and upgrade it for the modern world while being true to ourselves.

To date, the only novel I have read where older satirical storytelling techniques are used is Emad Bakr's *The City of Honka Ponka Combats Atheism and Corruption* (2015). It is a meta novel set in an unnamed city, which is not a utopia by any means, and where two heroes are introduced by the narrator: one cynical and one naïve. They are on a quest to root out the source of all evil in the city, with many an adventure from the poverty-stricken streets to the corridors of wealth and power, till they find a married couple who are embodiments of the cosmic forces of good and evil lurking behind the scenes. This pairing of the two heroes is based on the model of the Sufi parable of *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, which tells the story of a skeptical rationalist philosopher and a naïve and pious textual literalist (Aysha 2024, 57-58). I mentioned above that Sufism was discouraged by socialist realism, and that is another historical albatross we still have not fully overcome here in Egypt (Aysha, "Conferring on the"). Bakr's novel itself is self-published, with hardly a review online.

Nonetheless, we have made considerable progress. The authors cited above are asserting their identities as Arabs, Muslims, and members of the Global South in their critique of both imperialism and local elites. The authors mentioned in this survey still have not broken out of the mold of the novel or completely bridged the gap between colloquial and classical Arabic, but they are, at the very least, overcoming the obsession with literary realism and bringing back older traditions of fantastic storytelling and fairytales, and blending them with SF elements. Introducing foreign audiences to the Egyptian sense of humor alone is enough, if you ask me!

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Hengellisyys J. R. R. Tolkienin fantasiafiktiossa: johdatuksesta ja rukouksesta

Jyrki Korpua

Kovien arvojen vuonna 2025 hengellisyys ja fantasia tuntuvat virkistäviltä poikkeuksilta toinen toistaan synkempien uutisten keskellä. Ovathan hengellisyys ja fantasia omalla tavallaan molemmat *eskapistisia*, kylmän realistisesta maailmasta pakenevia todellisuuden tulkinnan käytäntöjä. Katolisen kirkon johtaja Paavi Franciscus (oik. Jorge Mario Bergoglio, 1936–2025) menehtyi pääsiäisenä 2025 ja jätti jälkeensä sangen hyvän maineen köyhien puolustajana. Hän myös ainakin yritti uudistaa konservatiivista ja kankeaa katolista kirkkoa. Franciscus tunsi tietenkin hengellisyyden, olihan hän paavi, mutta hän oli myös fantasiakirjallisuuden tuntija. Ainakin hän tunsi katolisen fantasian mestarin J. R. R. Tolkienin tekstit. Jouluaattona 2023 Franciscus siteerasi Tolkienia suurelle kuulijakunnalle pidetyssä *homiliassaan* eli *Raamatun* tekstin luenta- ja tulkintatilanteessa:

Kuten suuri eppisten kertomusten kertoja kirjoitti aikoinaan pojalleen:
”Asetan eteesi yhden suuren asian, jota rakastaa: siunatun sakramentin. ... Ja siitä tulet löytämään romanssin, kauneuden, kunnian, uskollisuuden ja kaikki oikeat tavat rakastaa tässä maailmassa.” (Paavi Franciscus, käännös Korpua)

Paavi Franciscus viittasi puheessaan J. R. R. Tolkienin maaliskuussa 1941 kirjoittamaan opilliseen kirjeeseen pojalleen Christopher Tolkienille, joka on julkaistu numerolla 43 Tolkienin kirjeiden kokoelmassa *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (1981, toim. Humphrey Carpenter). Hengellinen kirje osoittaa Tolkienin tukea juuri tuolloin toisessa maailmansodassa brittien ilmavoimissa palvelleelle pojalleen, josta tuli isänsä kuoleman jälkeen hänen jälkeensä jääneiden papereidensa julkaisukuntoon toimittaja ja isänsä lailla Oxfordin yliopiston kirjallisuuden professori. Sakramentti, pyhä toimitus, oli Tolkienille tärkeä elämän sisältö ja hän tahtoi jakaa tämän uskon pojalleen.

Paavi Franciscus ei puheessaan viitannut Tolkieniin sattumalta, sillä Tolkien on maailman tunnetuimpia katolisia kirjailijoita ja hänen hengellisyytensä on hyvin sekä fantasian tutkijoiden että monien Tolkienin tekstien faniensa tiedossa. Tolkien oli syvästi katolinen ihminen, jonka kirjallisuudessa kristinuskolla ja ylipäänsä uskonnollisuudella on oma merkittävä, joskin osin piilotettu, osansa (Tolkienin uskonnollisuudesta ks. Korpua, ”Kristillisplatonismi”). Toisaalta Tolkienilla on uskonnollisten näkemystensä vuoksi pieni osansa myös 1900- ja 2000-lukujen teologiassa. Muun muassa professori Alister E. McGrath esittelee keskeisessä oppikirjassaan *Christian Theology: An Introduction* Tolkienin näkemyksiä kristillisestä toivosta ja riemusta eli *eucatastrophe*stä, niin sanotusta ”hyvästä katastrofista” (314). Tolkienin teoksissa mahdottomalta ja toivottoman synkältä tuntuva uhkaava tilanne saa usein ihmeellisen käänteen ja muuttuu riemuisaksi, mutta ei epäuskottavalla antiikin *Deus ex machina* -käänteellä, vaan armollisemmin ja henkilökohtaisten uhrausten ja ponnistelujen kautta. Toisaalta Tolkienin teoksissa katolinen usko luo myös sangen pessimistisen vireen, jossa elämää kutsutaan ”hitaaksi tappioksi” (”long defeat”) (*Taru sormusten herrasta* 305). Maailma haipuu, eikä todellinen onnellinen loppu ole koskaan mahdollinen ennen maailmanloppua ja kaiken pahan korjaamista (ks. Korpua, *The Mythopoeic Code of Tolkien* 117–119).

Tolkienin kirjekokoelman tunteminen on sekin sinällään harvinaista tämän lukijoiden parissa, mutta paavi Franciscus ei myöskään viitannut kirjailijaan ensimmäistä kertaa. Jo italiankielisessä teoksessaan *La Tessitura del Mondo* (2022), jonka voisi kääntää ”Maailman kudokseksi”, paavi siteeraa loppusanoissa Tolkienia. Tuolloin hän viittasi Tolkienin tunnetuimpaan teokseen, *Taruun sormusten herrasta* (*The Lord of the Rings* 1954–55, tästä lähtien *Taru*) ja sen keskeiseen henkilöhahmoon Frodo Reppuliin. ”Kuten Frodo sanoo ..., tarinat eivät lopu koskaan”, paavi kirjoittaa (Mares). Tämä on viittaus *Tarun sormusten herrasta* lukuun ”Cirith Ungolin portaat”, jossa epätoivoisessa tilanteessa pahan valtakunnassa Mordorissa hobitti Sam Gamgi, kysyy ”Eikö suuret tarinat lopu?” ja Frodo vastaa: ”Eivät, ne eivät koskaan lopu tarinoina ... mutta henkilöt tulevat ja menevät, kun heidän osansa on päättynyt” (Tolkien, *Taru* 606). Tämä on hyvä esimerkki Tolkienin uskosta, jonka mukaan kuolevaisten ihmisten (ja hobittien) on elettävä elämänsä osansa maailman suurta kertomusta. Suuri osa Tolkienin teosten hengellisyttä näkyy tietynlaisena kohtalon johdatuksena ja ”sattumana”. Tämä ei ole itsestään selvää uskonnollisuutta tai hengellisyttä kaikille lukijoille, mutta Tolkien piti sitä keskeisenä kirjoittaessaan teostensa olevan ”perinpohjaisen uskonnollisia ja katolisia teoksia” (*The Letters* 172), ja Paavi Franciscus ilmeisesti näkee asian samoin.

1. Johdatus ja ”sattuma” Tolkienilla

Jumala (tai jumalat) eivät ole roolissa Tolkienin tunnetuimmissa fantasiateoksissa *Taru sormusten herrasta* tai *Hobitti* (*The Hobbit, or There and Back Again* 1937). Maailman luomisella ja teologisella rakentumisella on toki roolinsa hänen postuumisti julkaistussa teoksessaan *Silmarillion* (*The Silmarillion* 1977), jossa kerrotaan hänen fiktiivisen maailmansa Eän (ja sen olevaisen luodun maailman Ardan ja keskeisen kuolevaisten osan Keski-Maan)

luomistarina. Teoksen ainoan jumalan eli Eru Ilúvatarin kerrotaan olevan kaiken luomistyön takana ja ensimmäinen olemassa ollut olento. Eru Ilúvatar vertautuu näin suoraan kristilliseen Jumalaan. Tolkienin maailmassa kaikki saa alkunsa Eru Ilúvatarin kautta, myös toiset jumalalliset henkiolennot eli ”ainur”, joista Ardaan ”laskeutuneet” jakautuvat vielä korkeampaan lajiin valariin ja alempiin henkiin eli maiariin. Valarin ja maiarin roolit näkyvät vielä osin Tolkienin keskeisissä teoksissa, sillä *Hobitissa* ja *Tarussa* muita hahmoja johdattava velho Gandalf on (todennäköisesti) osa maiaria, kuten myös jo *Hobitissa* ”Noitana” esitelty pahan valtiass Sauron, jonka lopullinen kukistaminen on *Tarun sormusten herrasta* ”vapaiden kansojen” keskeinen tavoite. Kuolemattomiin henkiin viittaa useampikin muu vihje teoksissa, mutta keskeisimmissä rooleissa ovat ”luodut” olennot eli maagiset haltiat sekä ihmiset, hobitit ja kääpiöt.

Valveutunut lukija voi kuitenkin ajatella, että Jumalan eli Eru Ilúvatarin ja enkelimäisten valarin vaikutus näkyy myös tunnetuimmissa teoksissa ihmeellisen sattuman ja johdatuksen kautta. Yksi varhainen esimerkki nähdään *Tarun* alkumetreillä kohtauksessa, jossa velho Gandalf kertoo Sauronin luoman Suurimman Sormuksen tarinan Frodolle. Gandalf selittää, kuinka Sormus on joutunut juuri Frodon käsiin:

Se oli Sormuksen tähänastisen historian merkillisin tapahtuma: se että Bilbo tuli juuri silloin ja laski pimeässä sokeasti kätensä Sormukselle.

Siihen vaikutti useampi kuin yksi voima. Sormus pyrki takaisin herransa luo. ... Nyt kun Sormuksen herra oli taas hereillä ja säteili mustia tuumiaan Synkmetsässä, Sormus hylkäsi Klonkun. Ja osui sitten kaikkein epätodennäköisimmän olennon poimittavaksi: Konnun Bilbon!

Siinä toimi jokin muu voima, joka oli Sormuksen tekijän suunnitelmien ulkopuolella. En osaa sanoa sitä sen selvemmin kuin että Bilbon oli *tarkoitus* löytää Sormus, ja että tarkoitus *ei ollut* lähtöisin Sormuksen tekijästä. Missä tapauksessa sinunkin oli *tarkoitus* saada se. Ja tämä saattaa olla rohkaiseva ajatus. (52–53, kurssiivit alkuperäiset)

Frodon oli tarkoitus löytää Sormus, eikä tämä tarkoitus ollut lähtöisin Sauronilta. Sattuma vaikuttaa näin teoksessa ohjaavan niin sanottuja vapaita kansoja taistelussa orjuuttavaa ja alistavaa pahuutta vastaan. Se on totta kai teoksen juonen kannalta helppo (tai helpottava) ratkaisu, mutta epäilemättä Tolkien myös haluaa kertoa tällä jotain: maailma ei ole lähtökohtaisesti paha, vaan hyviä asioita tapahtuu hyvälle olennoille. Johdatus ohjaa myös Keski-Maan kulkijoiden elämää, kuten Tolkien uskoi omassakin elämässämme olevan asian laidan.

Myöhemmin teoksessa epätodennäköiset ”sankarit” eli hobitit joutuvat kuolevaisia vaanivassa Vanhassa Metsässä Vanhaksi Halavaukoksi kutsutun pahan puun pauloihin. Ainoastaan Frodo pääsee pakenemaan ja huutaa epätoivoisena apua keskellä (näennäisesti) asumaton aarnimetsää. Metsän keskellä hän kuitenkin, sattumalta, kohtaa mystisen Tom Bombadilin, jonkinlaisen metsän- tai maanhengen, joka vartioi omaa pientä tilkkuaan Keski-Maan keskellä. Tom Bombadil pelastaa hobitit, minkä jälkeen Frodo tiedustelee häneltä: ”Isäntä, kuulitteko minun huutavan, vai toiko pelkkä *sattuma* teidät meidän luoksemme juuri sillä hetkellä?” (Tolkien, *Taru* 109, kurssiivi minun). Bombadil vastaa tähän arvoituksellisesti: ”Sattuma toi minut sinne, jos tuo nyt sattumasta käy” (ibid.). Bombadil edustaa todennäköisesti

kuolemattomia maiar-henkiä tai ainakin hänen voimansa ovat teoksen kuolevaisia selvästi mahtavampia: Suurin Sormus ei vaikuta häneen, hän näkee näkymätöntä ja on omilla maillaan käytännössä voittamaton. Hän osoittaa voimansa laulamalla Vanhan Halavaukon uneen ja vapauttamalla myöhemmin hobitit myös epäkuolleiden haudanhaamujen vankeudesta. Myöhemmin velho Gandalf, jonka suulla Tolkien kertoo teoksessa usein korkealla auktoriteetilla asioita maailman todellisesta luonteesta, kertoo Bombadilin roolista:

Sormuksella ei ole valtaa häneen. Hän on oma herransa. ... Ja nyt hän on vetäytynyt pieneen maahan, itse asettamiensa rajojen sisäpuolelle, vaikka noita rajoja ei kukaan näe – eikä hän astu noiden rajojen yli.” (Tolkien, *Taru* 227)

Gandalf myös arvelee Bombadilinkin voimien lopulta romahtavan Musta ruhtinas Sauronin mahdin edessä: ”Pystyisikö Bombadil yksinänsä sitä uhmaamaan? En usko. Jos kaikki muut voitetaan, kaatuu lopuksi Bombadil, Viimeisenä Ensimmäinen, ja sitten alkaa Yö.” (Tolkien, *Taru* 228.)

Johduksesta puhuvat myös haltiat, jotka teoksessa ovat ”kuolemattomia” ihmisiin ja hobitteihin verrattuna, sillä he eivät sairastu tai kuole vanhuuteen, mutta heidät voidaan silti lyödä väkivallalla. Haltiat tietävät – ehkäpä pitkän ikänsä ja suuren tietämyksenä vuoksi – paljon johduksesta ja näkymättömistä voimista. Kaikista Keski-Maan haltioista suurimmaksi ja mahtavimmaksi kuvaillaan Galadriel, Lórienin salatun valtakunnan valtiatar, joka niin ikään puhuu teoksessa johduksesta tai elämän tiestä, joka on kuin eteen valmisteltu polku:

”Hyvää yötä, ystäväni!”, sanoi Galadriel. ”Älkää liiaksi vaivatko mieltänne ajattelemalla matkaa tänä yönä. Kukaties itse kunkin tulevat polut on jo valmistettu hänen jalkainsa eteen, vaikka hän ei niitä näe.” (Tolkien, *Taru*, 315)

Samat merkilliset voimat ohjaavat vihollisen tekemän kaappauksen ja vauhdikkaan matkan jälkeen hobittikaksikko Merrin ja Pippinin mystiseen Fangornin metsään ja muuttamaan teoksessa käynnissä olevaa sotaa ihmeellisen sattuman kautta. Hobitit päätyvät herättämään luontoa ja etenkin puita suojelevien enttien vihan, mikä johtaa nämä tuhoamaan aiemmin voittamattomana pidetyn, pahan velho Sarumanin kotilinnakkeen Rautapihan. Gandalf selittää tapahtuneen onnenkantamoisena:

Ja kuinka ollakaan, vihollisemme [Sauronin ja Sarumanin joukot] ovat yhteistuumin onnistuneet ainoastaan tuomaan Merrin ja Pippinin hämmästyttävän nopeasti ja juuri yhdennellätoista hetkellä Fangorniin, jonne he eivät muuten olisi milloinkaan joutuneet”
... Merrillä ja Pippinillä oli onnea: he tapasivat hänet [Puuparta, enttien johtaja] tässä, juuri tässä missä me istumme. (Tolkien, *Taru* 424–25)

Sattuma ja onni, kenties Eru Ilúvatarin johdatus, näyttävät siis ohjaavan hyviä voimia eteenpäin taistelussaan pahuutta vastaan.

2. Rukous ja siunaus

Teoksessa muutamaan kertaan artikuloidun *johdatuksen* lisäksi Tolkienin teoksen hengellisyys näkyy pieninä arkisen rukouksen ja siunauksen pyyntöinä tai toiveina. Tämä on ehkäpä selkeämpää, sillä pyhien (valarin) nimeen tehdyillä rukouksilla näyttää olevan merkitystä. Lisäksi hyviä asioita ja johdatusta näytetään toivovan pyyntörukousten kautta. Siunausta taas toivotaan sekä arkisissa asioissa, kuten gondorilaisten ruokailuissa, mutta myös erityisissä tilanteissa, kuten kuoleman ja lopullisen voiton hetkellä.

Haltiat Tolkienin teoksissa huutavat usein avukseen Tähtien valtiatarta Vardaa, yhtä valarin kuningatarta, jota he kutsuvat nimellä Elbereth. *Tarussa sormusten herrasta* Sam Gamgi huomioi haltioiden tavan: ”Minä huudan *Elbereth*. Niin kuin haltiat sanovat. Kukaan örkki ei sanoisi niin.” (Tolkien, *Taru* 778, kurssiivi alkuperäinen). Elberethin nimen mainitseminen muistuttaa katolisten tapaa lausua Neitsyt Marian nimeä rukouksissaan. Tolkien onkin puhunut Mariasta etenkin vertautuen haltioiden valtiatar Galadrieliin (Tolkien, *The Letters* 407; ks. myös Korpua, *The Mythopoeic Code of Tolkien* 141, 172), mutta hänessä on näin analogioita myös Elberethiin.

Jo teoksen alkupuolella, kun Frodo puolustautuu Sauronin Mustia ratsastajia vastaan huutaen Elberethiä avuksi. Mustien ratsastajien johtaja, Noitakuningas, näyttää kammoavan tätä pyhää nimeä:

Silloin Frodo heittäytyi eteenpäin maahan ja kuuli huutavansa ääneen: *Oi Elbereth! Gilthoniel!* ... ”Tässä iski Frodon miekka”, hän [Aragorn] sanoi. ”Eikä se tämän pahemmin liene satuttanut vihollistaan, sillä miekka on ehjä, ja kaikki terät hajoavat osuessaan tuohon hirveään kuninkaaseen. Enemmän sitä vahingoitti Elberethin nimi.” (Tolkien, *Taru* 168–170, kurssiivit alkuperäiset)

Hobitit oppivat teoksessa huutamaan avukseen pyhiä nimiä haltioiden tavoin. Frodon valtaa jopa karismaattisen hengen (kre. *kharisma*, armonlahja) tapainen voima hänen puhuessaan tuntemattomilla sanoilla: ”*Aiya Eärendil Elenion Ancalima!*” hän huudahti eikä tiennyt, mitä oli sanonut, sillä tuntui kuin toinen ääni olisi puhunut hänen äänensä kautta, kirkas ääni, jota ei luolan saastainen ilma vaivannut.” (Tolkien, *Taru* 614.) Myös Sam ”rukoilee” (tai huutaa apua) Elberethin nimeen myöhemmin kahteen kertaan Mordorissa (ibid. 621).

Rukouksessa mainittu Eärendil on Tolkienin *Silmarillionissa* haltioiden suuri sankari, joka pelastaa koko Keski-Maan hakemalla apua valarilta taistelussa pahuutta vastaan. Palkinnoksi teoistaan hänet nostetaan tähdeksi taivaalle myyttisessä kertomuksessa. Tähdet, Elberethin sytyttämät taivaan valot ovatkin haltioille pyhiä, ja Eärendilin tähti pyhin kaikista. Haltioilla on tapana siunata kohtaamisensa Keski-Maassa sanoen ”*Elen sila lúmenn’ omentielvo*, tähti loistaa tapaamisemme hetkellä”, kuten Frodokin osaa *Tarussa* sanoa suurhaltioille (Tolkien, *Taru* 72).

Arkisempi siunaus taas näkyy teoksessa gondorilaisten ruokarukouksessa. Gondorilaiset ovat jäänne aiempien aikojen läntisestä maasta Númenorista, joka hukkui tuhansia vuosia aiemmin aaltoihin, mutta jonka jälkeläiset edelleen muistavat korkean syntyperänsä ja historiansa.

Teoksessa kohdattu gondorilaisten päällikkö Faramir opettaa hobiteille ruokarukouksen merkityksen menneen muistona:

Ennen kuin he aloittivat syömisen, Faramir ja kaikki hänen miehensä kääntyivät kohti länttä ja olivat hetken hiljaa. ... ”Näin teemme aina”, hän sanoi kun he istuutuivat. ”katsomme kohti ollutta Númenoria ja ohi olevan Haltiakodon ja sitä mikä Haltiakodon takana on ja on aina oleva.” (Tolkien, *Taru* 575)

”[J]a on aina oleva” viittaa myös gondorilaisten uskoon ikuiseen Jumalaan sekä valariin. Myöhemmin, kun Aragorn kruunataan Gondorin uudeksi kuninkaaksi, myös hänen kruunajaissanoissaan korostetaan valarin vallan pysyvyyttä ja hengellistä (jumalallista) taustaa:

Aragorn polvistui ja Gandalf laski Valkean kruunun hänen päähänsä ja sanoi: ”Nyt alkavat kuninkaan päivät ja olkoot ne siunatut niin kauan kuin *valarin* valtaistuimet kestävät!” (Tolkien, *Taru* 825, kursiivi alkuperäinen)

Myös teoksen sankareita eli Suurimman Sormuksen *Tarussa sormusten herrasta* monien mutkien ja sattumuksien kautta tuhoavia (tai tuhon mahdollistavia) hobitteja ylistetään sanoilla, jotka voidaan yhdistää myös palvomiseen. Hobiteille huudetaan: ”Ylistäkää heitä! Eglerio!” (Tolkien, *Taru* 812). Haltiakieli sindarin sana *eglerio*, englanniksi *praise*, voidaan kääntää myös palvomiseksi, mutta Tolkien tarkoittanee erityisesti aseman kohottamista ja arvostamista.

Teoksen tärkein oppi onkin, että myös pienten yksilöiden teoilla on väliä. Haltiaruhtinas Elrond kiteyttää tämän teoksessa lausumalla: ”Sellaisia ... usein ovat ne teot, jotka kääntävät maailman pyöriä: pienet kädet niitä tekevät, koska ne on tehtävä, kun suurten silmät ovat toisaalla” (Tolkien, *Taru* 231). Elrond tiedostaa Gandalfin tavoin, että Frodon on tuhottava Suurin Sormus, sillä se on hänen ”tiensä”, hänen kohtalonsa: ”luulen, että tämä tehtävä on annettu sinulle, Frodo, ja jollet sinä löydä tietä, ei sitä löydä kukaan” (ibid. 232). Pelkkä kohtaloon uskomisen ei riitä Elrondillekaan, sillä hän myös toivottaa seikkailulle siunausta, jälleen tähtien kautta: ”Mutta menkää rohkein sydämin! Hyvästi, seuratkoon teitä ihmisten ja haltioiden ja kaikkien vapaiden kansojen siunaus. Loistakoot tähdet kasvoillanne!” (ibid. 241).

Kuten esseeni alussa huomioin, Paavi Franciscus tunsikin Tolkieninsa niin hyvin, että hän saattoi kirjassaan ja puheissaan puhutella Frodoa etunimeltä ilman sen enempää määritelmiä ja kutsua Tolkienia itseään tuttavallisesti ”suureksi eppisten kertomusten kertojaksi”. Jesuiittajärjestön pappina Franciscus seurasi hengellisyydessään oppi-isänsä Ignatius Loyolan (1491-1556) näkemyksiä, niin sanottua ”ignatiuslaista hengellisyyttä”, jossa pääpaino on lohdutuksessa, tarkkanäköisyydessä ja myötätunnossa (consolation, discernment, compassion, Loyola 81, 142–7). Nämä ovat näkökulmia, jotka Franciscus varmaan havaitsi myös Tolkienin fantasiassa. Voisi sanoa, että ainakin lohdutus ja myötätunto sekä rohkaisu ovat myös Tolkienin teoksen hengellisyyden keskiössä.

Tolkienin *Taru sormusten herrasta* ja koko hänen fantasiatuotantonsa vaikuttaa nopeasti luettuna viihdyttävältä mielikuvitukselliseen (toiseen) maailmaan sijoittuvalta seikkailukirjallisuudelta. Syvemmin teosten sisältöjä pohdittaessa käy kuitenkin selväksi, että katolisen kirjailijan hengellisyyden

piirteet näyttäytyvät myös teoksen kautta. Teos on hengellinen, ja teoksen hahmot havainnollistavat myös kirjan maailman sisäistä hengellisyyttä monin tavoin.

Biografia: Dosentti Jyrki Korpua on kirjallisuuden yliopistonlehtori (ma) ja tutkija Oulun yliopistossa. Hänen teoksiaan ovat mm. *The Mythopoeic Code of Tolkien: A Christian Platonic Reading* (McFarland 2021), *Tolkien ja Kalevala* (SKS Kirjat 2022, englanniksi *Tolkien and the Kalevala*, Routledge 2024) sekä *Alussa oli Sana – Raamattu ja kirjallisuus* (Avain 2016). Korpua oli yksi *Fafnir*-lehden perustajista ja on vuodesta 2024 alkaen toiminut lehden toimitusneuvoston puheenjohtajana.

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BOOK REVIEW:

*Hot Equations: Science, Fantasy, and the
Radical Imagination on a Troubled Planet*

Paula García-Rodríguez

Cohn, Jesse S. *Hot Equations: Science, Fantasy, and the Radical Imagination on a Troubled Planet*. University Press of Mississippi, 2024.

The 2024 US elections have once again marked a before and after in the reality in which we live. The global rise of authoritarian governments has blurred the boundaries between speculative fiction and genuine experience, as scenarios once confined to the realms of science fiction and fantasy increasingly reflect the political and social realities faced nowadays by certain segments of society. Once again, we seem to inhabit a world in which a select few – defined by specific markers of race, gender or class – are chosen and granted privilege, while those who fall outside of normative categories are perceived as threats to the established order and are subsequently marginalized.

According to Jesse S. Cohn in his monograph *Hot Equations: Science, Fantasy, and the Radical Imagination on a Troubled Planet*, the fantastic can both reflect our anxieties over contemporary political dilemmas and operate as spaces of resistance and epistemological reconstruction (11). Within this framework, Cohn introduces the concept of “the New Black Fantastic,” a category that challenges and reconfigures the conventional narratives of “purification” in science fiction, which have excluded certain social groups, as authors of the New Black Fantastic “walk the same Earth but do not necessarily share the same world” (13). By this, Cohn refers to authors who, through their works, transform the established paradigms of science fiction, fantasy, and horror genres to make visible their historical and social experiences that have been systematically marginalized by the narratives in these genres. Figures such as N. K. Jemisin, Nisi Shawl, and other exponents of contemporary science fiction find their place in the New Black Fantastic, as they are all new artists

who are not content with taking up old science fiction tools, so that with their approach they become authors of new narrative and political horizons in the face of the ideological closure of the present (13).

“What kind of times are we living in?” (9) and “Which world are we in, and what can be done in it?” (11) are the central inquiries driving *Hot Equations*, which is structured into four main sections, twelve chapters, and an appendix. The first part, comprising chapters one to four, examines the contemporary context in which Cohn’s work was written, shaped by the Covid crisis of 2020 and the political instability that followed. In Cohn’s view – as the modern capitalist system and the nation-state framework are failing even in their own terms, resulting in a pervasive sense of uncertainty and hopelessness – radical imagination is not an escape but an essential strategy for developing alternatives to a decaying system (3). In chapter one, Cohn delves into the relationship between science fiction and politics, arguing that the stories that get promoted or rejected in the social imaginary reflect larger power struggles, as “the question of who owns ... the power to conceive worlds, has always been a question of who owns the future” (17). Cohn references Tom Godwin’s short story “The Cold Equations” (1954) and Bruno Latour’s concept of the “black box” to expose how power structures justify exclusion and structural violence under the guise of inevitability. The author cleverly plays with the title of Godwin’s well-known story to name his monograph, using “hot” as a signal of radical rethinking of the “blackboxed” logic that reduces life to something impersonal. This is further analyzed through the parallels between N. K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* trilogy and real-world calamities such as Hurricane Katrina and the Border Crisis, as ways to examine how power systems eliminate uncomfortable factors from the public equation and construct narratives that exonerate the perpetrators (21). Chapter two discusses how the boundaries between the human and the mechanical become blurred, and how this is represented in science fiction. Cohn uses the term “*biotechnical sublime*” (36) to describe the astonishment that arises when the mechanical nature of what we consider human is revealed: “the revelation that you, too, are a machine” (35). He then sets up a major paradox: on the one hand, acknowledging that humans are machines can lead to a sense of “*disenchantment*” by reducing life to mere material processes; on the other hand, it can produce a sense of “*reenchantment*” by revealing the material interconnection between all beings and phenomena in the universe (36). Chapter three follows this with a criticism of the tendency to consider texts as passive, inert things by fetishizing textuality and interpretation in literary theory (61). Through different reflections, Cohn proposes a “methodological metafetishism,” a methodology to study and change the world by thinking beyond the subject-object categories (62). Chapter four closes the first part with a discussion on how science fiction rethinks Lacan’s “Barred Other” through the figure of the alien and its various shapes (83), using it as a “vehicle,” for fantasies of “the Other” and human concerns (86).

According to Cohn, there is a need for a general rhetoric of the fantastic that will allow us to understand how works within this genre persuade audiences, and that will consequently help to uncover how the collective imaginary is constructed. This general rhetoric is the object of discussion in the second part of the monograph, in chapters five to seven. In the fifth chapter, Cohn provides an extensive list of aspects and techniques inherent to the

fantastic, such as “monstrosity” (105), or Bloch’s “novum/antiquum” (102), in order to establish the narrative strategies that succeed in rendering as believable the types of scenarios and events that, in theory, defy the logic of the real world. In chapter six, Cohn follows this by examining the impossible in works of the fantastic, taking twentieth-century superhero comics as a key example of how the impossible cannot, in fact, alter the system because these stories consistently insist on restoring the world to its *normal* state after each disruption (122). Cohn’s further exploration of the impossible considers Spade’s “impossible people” (129) whose identities as black, queer or disabled, “the people for whom life is made impossible” (134), defy normative categories. In addition to Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* trilogy, Cohn makes use of literary works such as McCaffrey’s *The Ship Who Sang* to achieve a deeper understanding of this category and to further illustrate the virtual absence of marginalized people in the science fiction, fantasy, and horror genres – further noting that even the rare appearances of such characters are usually limited to dystopian stories (129). Hence, Cohn demonstrates how the narratives of the New Black Fantastic provide a safe space for “impossible people,” clearing the path for other marginalized voices and transforming social impossibilities into sources of power and imagination. Relying on the New Black Fantastic, chapter seven concludes the second part as it shows how these insurgent voices – sometimes called “co-futurisms” (145) – push genre boundaries claiming a discursive sovereignty, spaces in which non-Western epistemologies and ancestral knowledges can thrive along with the scientific component (147).

The third part of Cohn’s study examines the intersection of science, fiction, and power, focusing on how the boundaries between scientific knowledge and imaginary narratives are often more permeable than commonly acknowledged. While in the 1960s humanities scholars were criticized for inappropriately adopting scientific concepts and language, in chapter eight Cohn discusses a range of examples to demonstrate the fluidity of such boundaries. A series of equations from Karl Marx to Donna Haraway, some mathematically valid and others not, illustrate this permeability (165-173). Chapter nine then examines the 1920s utopian vision of the Gordin brothers who, through their literary and philosophical work, challenged existing laws and proposed a radical vision that rejected the authority imposed by both natural and social conventions. Their alternative, what they called “pantechnics” (186), reflects their rejection of traditional authority structures. Through Colson’s interpretation of the affinity between anarchism and alternative modes of thought, Cohn explores how the Gordins’ *The Land of Anarchy* – a hyper-modern utopia that novelizes their nonfictional *Pananarchist Manifesto* (184) – articulates an anarchism that transcends Western traditions, connecting to various ways of imagining freedom and rejecting authority. In *The Land of Anarchy*, five newcomers – “the union of the five oppressed” – are introduced to attack the “separation of powers” (183), with which the Gordins develop their concept of multiplicity, a promising but ultimately insufficient notion, according to Cohn, as it fails to account for intersectionality (188).

The fourth and final section of Cohn’s study discusses how the world is increasingly mirroring the realities depicted in the science fiction, fantasy, and horror genres, where “the public, political realm is itself becoming increasingly science fictional ... in character” (221). Chapter ten studies the varying

connotations that fantastic figures can acquire through what he calls “Unicorn Rhetoric” (221). Here Cohn surveys how, depending on the moment, context, and the individuals applying it, a fantastical creature such as the Unicorn comes to be used as anything from a representation of purity and innocence to an emblem of queer camp aesthetic (226), or even an ironic metaphor for fraud in politics (228). This leads to the central conclusion of the chapter that instead of concerning ourselves with the role of politics in fantasy, we should consider the question “How does the fantastic enter into the realm of politics?” (232). In chapter eleven, Cohn dives further into how, instead of remaining a marginal subculture, science fiction has become a main component of the global public imagination (234). This led to the widespread adoption of symbols typical to these narratives as tools for interpreting and addressing complex social issues, including climate change, economic crises, and geopolitical tensions – also within the political sphere. Several political movements, for instance, have found in cosplaying and Live Action Role-Playing a strategy for protest and mobilization (243). This was apparent, for example, when Palestinian protesters used a work of fiction as symbolism to voice opposition to the Israeli occupation in 2010, by dressing up as the Na’vi from *Avatar* (244). Closing the last part of the volume, chapter twelve introduces Peter Nicholls’ “Monster of Anarchy” as a representation of the anarchist desires for science to recognize that it is indebted to the mystical and the magical (251). In this discussion, Cohn condemns modern scientificity with the intention of breaking with capitalism, statist realism and the Modern Constitution, which constitute “the forces currently throttling the planet” (260).

Unfortunately, Cohn does not provide a concluding chapter. This is probably due to the *quasi*-improvised and at times essayistic character of his monograph, which takes the reader seamlessly through distinct ideas and shifts between various text types, from an academic essay in one chapter to something styled more as a collection of diary entries in another. Instead of a conclusion, Cohn follows chapter twelve with a “Provisional Manifesto for Nonmodern Anarchism” (261) as an appendix which, while original and pertinent to the subject and the shape of the work, leaves the conclusion of his study very open. A structured closure would have been helpful to clearly highlight the prolific ideas the author explores.

Nevertheless, *Hot Equations* is an essential work for those who are concerned with how science fiction, fantasy, and horror mirror the political and social tensions of our time. Cohn’s study should not be considered an introductory text, however, as it is a dense discussion, at times philosophical and more suited to readers already familiar with science fiction and its sociopolitical implications. Cohn’s work is particularly valuable for those wishing to rethink the rhetorical and ideological dimensions of the fantastic while challenging the conventional critical reading of the genre.

Whereas the book offers useful insights, it is not without its limitations. The already-mentioned broad variety of themes and text forms that Cohn uses throughout its chapters creates a sense of dispersion, and although it strengthens the concept of his book, at times this undermines the coherence of the text. Additionally, the monograph exhibits a narrow scope in its geopolitical analysis despite the global implications suggested by the title. The book primarily focuses on American political contexts, rarely and only briefly mentioning other scenarios and literary situations. This makes the book’s claim

of addressing global issues feel subtly overshadowed by its Americentric approach. Nevertheless, the contribution that Cohn makes with *Hot Equations* to the field of the fantastic is unquestionable, as it is necessary to acknowledge works of fiction that attempt to open up the panorama of science fiction and fantasy to other voices, especially given the current times.

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BOOK REVIEW:
Animals and Science Fiction

M.E. Boothby

Castle, Nora, and Giulia Champion, editors. *Animals and Science Fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2024. ISBN: 978-3031416972.

Animals and Science Fiction addresses a rather glaring gap in SF scholarship. Since Sherryl Vint's seminal 2010 text *Animal Alterity: Science Fiction and the Question of the Animal*, there has been limited work merging animal studies and the genre study of SF. Castle and Champion's work marks the first edited collection on the subject.

To be sure, there have been some excellent animal SF articles in the usual publications: *Science Fiction Studies*, *Science Fiction Film and Television*, here in *Fafnir*, and particularly in the journals *Extrapolation* and *Humanimalia: A Journal of Human/Animal Interface Studies*, which often focus on works that dwell in the strange liminal spaces between many speculative fields. A 2022 special issue of the journal *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism* (vol. 26, no. 2) called for articles examining depictions of "animal futurity," while a 2024 theme issue of *Trace: Finnish Journal for Human-Animal Studies*, asked for responses concerning animals in "uncommon worlds," both resulting in animal SF articles. Beyond this, there exist several books that center on other fields but analyze animal SF texts as examples, such as David Herman's *Narratology Beyond the Human* (2018) or Missy Molloy et. al.'s *Screening the Posthuman* (2023). Individual scholars have made significant contributions to the field, such as Joan Gordon and Sherryl Vint herself. Finally, there have been several recent edited collections concerning critical *plant* studies and SF, including Dawn Keetley and Angela Tenga's *Plant Horror: Approaches to the Monstrous Vegetal in Fiction and Film* (2017), Natania Meeker and Antónia Szabari's *Radical Botany: Plants and Speculative Fiction* (2019), and Katherine E. Bishop's *Plants in Science Fiction* (2020). Yet there is currently a lack of published work dedicated specifically to animals and SF, making Castle and

Champion's collection a sorely needed addition to scholarship, with more books on the subject hopefully to follow soon.

I should note here the collection's chosen acronyms: "NHAs" for nonhuman animals and occasionally "HAS" for human-animal studies (while NHA and HAS are capitalized in the text, SF is not). Starting from the editors' introduction, it is clear that the goal of *Animals and Science Fiction* is to "reinvigorate scholarship focused on this crucial topic" (2) by building directly upon Sherryl Vint's work in *Animal Alterity*. Castle and Champion lay out the critical importance of combining HAS and SF, noting that "sf texts allow readers to imagine alternative methods of 'seeing' nonhuman animals, both on their own terms and with regard to their inextricable entanglement with humanity" (2). The power of SF, then, "can be effectively mobilized to explore, critique, and theorize the current state – and, importantly, the future of – human and [NHA] relations" (3). This introduction is followed by a transcribed interview with Vint herself, on how the field has changed since she wrote *Animal Alterity* 14 years prior, and where she sees it going from here. The interview is invaluable to scholars working at this niche intersection of fields.

The editors note that they have intentionally "taken a broad view of what constitutes sf, what constitutes a text, and even what constitutes an animal" (3). Despite the potential of this to frustrate some scholars who crave definitive categorization, this collection is working under expansive, fluid frameworks, following Vint's notion of "sf as a network of linked texts, motifs, themes, and images, a network in which it is always possible to make new and novel connections" (3). This openness to new and novel connections is clear in the exceptional diversity of chapters in *Animals and Science Fiction*. Knowing that one of the shortcomings Vint notes about her *Animal Alterity* is a lack of diverse perspectives, Castle and Champion have striven to correct this. *Animals and Science Fiction* is divided into five parts with 20 chapters, and I will address all 20 briefly, as the contents therein are so varied that a comprehensive overview proved difficult.

Marta Mboka Tveit opens "Part I: Affect and Identity" by examining two "African Speculative Fiction (ASF)" (40) texts, one a short story by Edwin Okolo and the other a series of photographs by David Uzochukwu. This chapter draws quite masterfully on a large number of theorists, from Joan Gordon to Joshua Bennett, in order to create a nuanced argument for "the 'uneasy' kinship between the people who often suffer the most under the (neo)colonial logic and the nonhuman animal, and how ... Critically embracing that kinship can bring an edifying sense of solace and strengthen both" (51). Tveit's article is followed by Melissa Bianchi's analysis of less-examined 2D video games (as opposed to lush 3D) in which one plays as an NHA, including *Frogger* (1981) and *The Plan* (2013). This part of the collection then concludes with Peter Sands' chapter on Philip K. Dick's post-nuclear, species-destabilizing novel *Dr. Bloodmoney*.

In "Part II: Animal Communication" – perhaps the strongest part of the collection – four scholars offer studies of fictional human-NHA communication in delightfully different texts. Jerika Sanderson outlines "pity" versus "empathy" as evoked by the dinosaur vocalizations, i.e. "voices," in *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom* (2018). Rachel Fetherston contrasts Laura Jean McKay's novel *The Animals in That Country* (2020) – a work of Australian speculative fiction that is rapidly becoming a central text of human-NHA communication – with Robbie Arnott's *Flames* (2018). By tracing a path to

these texts through more “problematic perspectives of the nonhuman” (113) in older settler-colonial Australian literature, Fetherston argues that, in McKay and Arnott, these outdated ideas “are being subverted by ... more nuanced, ecological perspectives of human–nonhuman relations.” Following this, Liza B. Bauer and Nora Castle explore the SF trope of animal “uplift” through Adam Roberts’ key text in the field, *Bête* (2014). They discuss how uplift encapsulates human exceptionalism and the entrenched idea that language separates those with personhood from the voiceless, animals and others thus made “killable,” to use Haraway’s term, by that lack of language (130). Lastly, Iulia Ibragimova writes stirringly about the animality and communication of SF’s living, biological spaceships, including those in the television series *Farscape* and Nnedi Okorafor’s *Binti* trilogy.

Part III of the collection considers more medical, bodily, and scientific human-NHA interactions, under the heading “Bio-intervention and Corporeality.” Monica Sousa introduces readers to the little-known British novel *The Many Selves of Katherine North* (2017) by Emma Geen who creates a storyworld in which the protagonist “jumps” into various semi-virtual animal bodies in her profession as a “phenomenaut” – a witty portmanteau implying that voyaging into another creature’s phenomenology (or *Umwelt*) is akin to an astronaut departing our familiar planet. Then with an abrupt shift of genre – for this collection keeps its readers on their toes – Katarzyna Ostalska invites readers on a journey into the microscopic through Canadian poet Christian Bök’s *Xenotext: Book 1*, where, by using the genetic coding of bacteria as an enciphering process to produce words, the poet has created what Ostalska calls an “‘alien’ biochemical language” (189). Next, Brianna R. Burke explores how the Korean English film *Okja* (2017) “eviscerates the simulacra obscuring the factory-flesh-food system” (204) by presenting viewers with both emotional human-NHA relations and visceral horrors, and Emma Trott closes this part of the collection by examining the rich potential of interactions between black bodies and NHAs through medical transplantation in Malorie Blackman’s YA novel *Pig Heart Boy* (1997).

“Part IV: Community (Re)building and Entanglements” explores SF texts that are both culturally and generically diverse. Frances Hallam uses a variety of ecocritical and postcolonial lenses to illustrate “Africanfuturist assemblages” in Okorafor’s *Lagoon*, concluding that “the flow of matter—oil, water, and blood—merge and mix within the ocean inhabitants as a material-semiotic Anthropocene encounter” (246). Then Conrad Scott examines the entanglements of dogs, turtles, humans, and bacteria from the Canadian Indigenous perspective of Thomas King’s *The Back of the Turtle*. Lastly, Zoei Sutton et al. stretch the definition of SF to include speculative urban planning, imagining a “multispecies right to the city” (275).

Part V, titled “(Future) Fossils, Ancestrality, and Haunting,” is the least strong segment of the collection, mostly because its lack of cohesion makes each chapter feel rather like an afterthought – perhaps an inevitable difficulty when attempting to collate such disparate articles. First, Thomas Moran argues that Jia Zhangke’s 2013 Chinese film *Tian Zhuding* uses animals as both divinatory mirrors and witnesses for the human protagonists, to “attest to a deep disquiet within the accelerating temporality of Chinese capitalism” (311). Alice Fox then outlines the playable future symbiogenesis of *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017), a post-apocalyptic videogame world haunted by the “lively ghosts” (322) of

machine-animals. After this, Vera Thomann walks the line between SF and scientific speculation using Dougal Dixon's *After Man: A Zoology of the Future* (1981). Finally, most notable in this section is Kathryn Heffner and Edward Guimont's discussion of dinosaur erotica as a locus for feminist sexual empowerment. Self-aware, they write:

Despite initially seeming absurd, dinosaur erotica offers a route to discuss and explore a plethora of issues, from the ethics of animal cruelty and exhibition to the politics of both gender and animal rights, the colonial ideal of fetishizing women ... and the racial aspects inherent in notions of deep time. (332)

In their analysis of dinosaurs as a critique of fetishization and domination in erotica, Heffner and Guimont illustrate the potential for fruitful scholarship in even the most unusual texts. Their acknowledgment of absurdity also recalls Castle and Champion's statement of taking a broad approach to what SF can be, leaving SF academic space open for a plethora of unexpected explorations.

Indeed, many of the SF texts discussed in *Animals and Science Fiction* may once have been seen as absurd in critical circles, and yet in this rapidly mutating and entangling academic climate, stretching the definitions and understandings of "animal" and "SF" is a vital practice. Castle and Champion's collection achieves its goal of reinvigorating Vint's line of inquiry at exactly the moment when the study of animals in SF seems poised to explode. It is a collection with palpable enthusiasm and propulsion, relaunching a crucial question, and it will prove useful to any scholar working on the subject.

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BOOK REVIEW:
*Chinese Science Fiction: Concepts, Forms, and
Histories*

Zichuan Gan

Song, Mingwei, Nathaniel Isaacson, and Hua Li, editors. *Chinese Science Fiction: Concepts, Forms, and Histories*. Springer International Publishing: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024. ISBN: 9783031535413.

The volume *Chinese Science Fiction: Concepts, Forms, and Histories*, edited by Mingwei Song, Nathaniel Isaacson, and Hua Li, offers a vital and timely contribution to the field of Chinese science fiction (SF) research. It aims to provide an accessible introduction to Chinese SF while simultaneously weaving intricate theoretical inquiries with specific historical case studies. In the introduction of the book in chapter one, the editors argue that Chinese SF, despite its long historical roots tracing back to the late Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911), is characterized by discontinuities and interruptions caused by political upheavals and shifting cultural paradigms. Each revival of SF in China involved a fresh reinvention of the genre, integrating national themes with global influences from Japan, Russia, and European American traditions. The editors highlight the contemporary resurgence of Chinese SF since the early 2000s as particularly significant. They relate this revival to China's pursuit of technological advancement and the political vision encapsulated in the "Chinese dream" – a state-driven narrative of national rejuvenation, prosperity, and global prominence. The genre has since gained substantial domestic and international recognition in both the market and academia. The editors emphasize that this boom of Chinese SF necessitates a reconsideration of SF's global contours, proposing that examining Chinese SF enriches and complicates prevailing definitions of the genre.

Focusing on works in the late Qing period, the first section of the volume traces the emergence of Chinese SF at the turn of the 20th century. The

contributors in this section critique the perspective of viewing early Chinese SF as a merely imported literary creation, instead presenting it as a culturally rooted, politically engaged form of knowledge production shaped by its historical moment. In chapter two, Lorenzo Andolfatto challenges a simplistic definition of SF as fiction solely informed by science. By re-examining early Chinese SF through Kang Youwei's *Book of the Heavens*, Andolfatto contends that literary forms were not passive conduits for Western scientific thought but actively participated in shaping and expanding scientific epistemologies in late-imperial China. Further exploring the intellectual milieu, Liyuan Jia in chapter three investigates the era's fascination with pseudoscientific concepts such as hypnotism and mesmerism, demonstrating how notions of the body as a machine permeated late Qing culture. In relation to this, the fourth chapter by Guangyi Li illustrates how – although it was ostensibly intended for the popularization of scientific knowledge during the late Qing – SF in practice frequently served political objectives. Highlighting the complexities of categorization since the genre's emergence in China, in chapter five, Virginia L. Conn illuminates a notable difference between Chinese and Anglophone scholarly discourses on the contested definitions of “Chinese SF.” English-language scholarship often situates Chinese SF within global literary frameworks; in contrast, Chinese scholarship on this genre has historically engaged in broader debates concerning the “essence” of science and its intersection with literature.

The volume's second part shifts focus to the modern and contemporary periods, particularly examining the transformation of Chinese SF under the People's Republic of China (PRC). Following the establishment of the PRC in 1949, SF was primarily designated as children's literature or “literature and art about science (kexue wenyi)” (11), tasked with promoting scientific literacy and educating the nation's youth. The authors in this section illuminate Chinese SF's enduring value as a vital medium for navigating complex social, political, ecological, and philosophical concerns from the late Qing to the contemporary digital age. Beginning this examination in chapter six, Qiong Yang highlights the crucial role played by “writing editors” in shaping both scientific discourse and the SF genre during the late Qing period as well as the Republican era (1911 – 1949), a function that persisted in altered forms after 1949. After the near-total halt in SF production during Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976), Chinese SF experienced a notable revival in the post-Mao cultural thaw. Encouraged by Deng Xiaoping's focus on science and technology, SF authors began to expand their scope by incorporating themes from “scar literature” (15) and blending elements of detective and romance fiction. Melissa A. Hosek in chapter seven contends that Mao-era films with science-fictional elements typically emphasized socialist ideals of human-nature integration, whereas, in contrast, the post-Mao SF cinematic landscape embraced rapid technological development, frequently depicting it alongside dramatic ecological exploitation or destruction. Turning to the digital and internet realm in the contemporary era, Hua Li in chapter eight and Heather Inwood in chapter nine argue that the proliferation of online SF novels and SF subgenres is a manifestation of broader societal reflections and anxieties surrounding technoscientific culture. They suggest that these works reveal tensions in embracing and balancing commercialization, technological evolution, and humanistic ideals in contemporary China.

The third section of the book addresses the resurgence and global ascent of Chinese SF from the late 1990s. Emerging at the turn of the 21st century, key SF authors like Liu Cixin and Han Song produced works that engage with China's complex social transformations. This generation of Chinese SF writers is characterized by conceptual and aesthetic experimentation, frequently exploring themes such as terror, dark consciousness, algorithmic governance, and posthuman existence. The chapters in this part of the book offer critical readings of representative contemporary Chinese-language SF authors. In chapter ten, Jannis Jizhou Chen examines Han Song's key works, such as the hospital trilogy, proposing that illness fundamentally shapes Han Song's narrative style. Chen argues that this connection manifests through disjointed narration and delirious storytelling, compelling readers to navigate overlapping realities and illusions. In chapter eleven, Gwennaël Gaffric interprets the pastoral utopia at the end of Liu Cixin's *Three-Body Problem* trilogy as a reconciliation with nature, yet one complicated by its artificial, technologically constructed environment. The focus on how SF works reflect contemporary challenges continues in Frederike Schneider-Vielsäcker's analysis in chapter twelve. Schneider-Vielsäcker connects the portrayal of transformed or mutated bodies in the works by post-80s SF authors (Chi Hui, Chen Qiufan, Zhang Ran) to these authors' generational concerns arising from China's rapid economic reforms and social shifts since the 1980s, such as the one-child policy. Finally, the volume concludes in chapter thirteen where Mingwei Song traces the unique development of SF in Taiwan, emphasizing its persistent posthuman themes and Neo-Baroque aesthetics. Beginning with Chang Ta-chun's "Those Who Mourn," featuring "Zhilishu" – a grotesque, mutated figure symbolizing historical trauma – Song identifies this figure as central to Taiwan SF's ongoing engagement with queerness, political violence, and posthuman identity.

The volume effectively situates Chinese SF within broader transnational dialogues, underscoring its global literary significance while compellingly arguing against monolithic understandings of the SF genre. A salient highlight is the introduction penned by the editors, which offers remarkable analytical depth and breadth. Employing accessible language and a precise chronology, the editors adeptly trace the histories of Chinese SF and convincingly identify the core social conditions informing the genre across different periods. The chapters on late Qing SF are particularly notable for their firm grounding in historical sources and archival research. While some arguments could benefit from more explicit dialogue across chapters – the interconnections are occasionally more implied than articulated – the historical framing and careful bibliographic work offer a valuable foundation for future scholarship. As a researcher of contemporary Chinese SF, I found the last section of the book especially compelling. These chapters bring Chinese SF into conversation with diverse theoretical frameworks, offering rigorous textual analysis and intellectually inspiring arguments. They illustrate how Chinese SF serves as a fertile site for cultural critique, narrative innovation, and philosophical exploration. While this section introduces more specialized terminologies, such as "Anthropocene" and "posthumanism," which might seem less accessible to newcomers, this complexity reflects the growing interdisciplinarity of the field. The engagement with emerging and sometimes contested discourses, including the rethinking of "the human" within critical race theory and Asian American studies, as well as Marxist political-economy critiques of the Anthropocene,

exemplifies the field's openness to self-reflection. The diversity of perspectives in this volume affirms the genre's capacity to inspire multiple, sometimes competing, lines of inquiry.

I believe the book's consistent emphasis on non-binary thinking – both conceptually and aesthetically – is a particularly significant contribution to discussions about the future of Chinese SF. The authors demonstrate that this engagement with non-binary modes of thought is not intended to mirror neoliberal identity politics or follow trendy discourse; rather, it is deeply rooted in the complex historical entanglements, conceptual traditions, and representational practices of Chinese-speaking and Sinophone regions. One of the book's most compelling arguments, in my view, is in the final chapter by Mingwei Song. Song suggests that many Taiwanese SF writers share a distinct political and aesthetic sensibility, with their narratives often structured around queer, non-binary, and posthuman forms of life. This characteristic, I would argue, resonates in intriguing ways with the narrative and political aesthetics found in the work of SF authors in the PRC and North American SF writers with Chinese/Sinophone heritage. The volume serves as an excellent springboard for future exploration of how these different strands of Chinese and Sinophone SF have been shaped in both dialogue and divergence. It indicates the significance of exploring the institutional, market, and linguistic conditions that influence these dynamics in the contemporary moment, revealing considerable potential for comparative and transnational approaches to the genre.

Overall, *Chinese Science Fiction* provides a rich, multi-faceted account of Chinese SF. It moves beyond the focus on recent bestsellers to explore the genre's deep historical roots, diverse forms, and complex relationship with science, politics, and culture in China. It is an invaluable resource for scholars and students interested in Chinese literature, SF studies, and global cultural history.

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BOOK REVIEW:

*Black Speculative Feminisms: Memory and
Liberated Futures in Black Women's Fiction*

Patricia Coloma Peñate

Jones, Cassandra L. *Black Speculative Feminisms: Memory and Liberated Futures in Black Women's Fiction*. Ohio. Ohio State UP 2024.

In the introduction to her volume, *Black Speculative Feminisms: Memory and Liberated Futures in Black Women's Fiction*, Cassandra L. Jones highlights the discursive essence of black women's literature, what she calls the discursive nature (2) of Black women's literary tradition. According to Jones, this communal exchange aims to "have a clear stake in imagining, presenting, and creating liberated futures" to collaboratively preserve cultural practices (1). Her interrogation of this rescuing of the past as a compulsory step needed to enable the possibility of imagining the future echoes the claim Toni Morrison made in her 1984 essay "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" that a community's connection to ancestral ways of knowing is essential for its future survival. Following this parameter, Jones emphasizes how the collective protection of the past is a feminist enterprise that is essential for her definition of "Black speculative feminism," a term that encapsulates black women's literary dwellings, that is, spaces that enable creativity, potential and detached examination. As Jones argues, to design possible futures, black speculative fiction needs this activity of recovering the history that was interrupted by colonialism and slavery, so that it can create an approach that supports an African-based sense of time where past, present and future happen simultaneously. These elements facilitate the restorative aspect of how Jones's "Black speculative feminism" aims to imagine liberated black futures.

In chapter one, Jones discusses examples of how reconnecting with the past through memory leads to healing. In her comparative analysis of Tananarive Due's *The Good House* and Nalo Hopkinson's *The New Moon's*

Arms, she employs the notion of *rememory* to further examine how Black women's speculative fiction as a visionary genre "offers an unusual means of annotating those material histories where Black emotional and intellectual interiority are redacted" (3). Jones focuses on how these two novels present a perspective that departs from an African-based spiritual and cultural standpoint, contrary to white horror narratives that ignore black history and trauma. Epistemologically this cultural standpoint serves to illustrate how the real danger, in terms of individual identity, for the population of Africa lies in disregarding their historical trauma. The protagonists of the two novels struggle every day because of their split from their ancestral roots, which deeply affects their identities and sense of community. Jones's examination of *rememory* firstly addresses Toni Morrison's interpretation of it as "an intrusive thought" in *Beloved* (43) where this invasive mnemonic experience happens in relationship to a location. Similarly, Due's novel employs a place, the good house, to represent the protagonist's forgotten cultural legacy and to examine how individual and communal history change once her connection to it is reestablished. According to Jones, such rejoining surpasses healing from trauma and leads to joy, which, in turn, becomes a central means by which Black women express memory through the speculative. In contrast to these discussions, Jones's examination of Nalo Hopkinson's novel adds a further physical dimension, that of the human body, into the study of memory and trauma. Thus, her analysis of the ways in which Black bodies are inscribed with memory and history serves to highlight the ongoing manifestation of the past in the present. Through her comparison, Jones discusses how trauma, once healed, enables the ancestral connection that leads to the recreation of promising communal and individual futures. Furthermore, to address the legitimate nature of African-based spiritual phenomenon she also illustrates the dialogical nature of Black women's writings by relating her concept of Black speculative feminism to "conjure feminism," which refers to "Black embodied theories of being and a Black womanist sense of space, time, and ethics" (Brooks et al. 452). These theories of being constitute "a way to think specifically about the enduring histories of Black women's knowledge-production that began with the lessons we learned at our grandmothers' kitchen tables and are woven into the fabric of Black women's writing practices: motherwit, root medicine, food as ancestral memory, mothering, and spirit work..." (Brooks et al. 452).

Chapter two analyzes Nnedi Okorafor's novel *Lagoon* to illustrate how the obsessive need to forget the past acts as a mechanism of oppression. Jones employs Okorafor's definition of Africanfuturism, a science fiction genre where African writers focus on stories that examine colonial influences and employ the genre's tropes to decolonize African cultures. This maneuver shows the importance of reconstructing cultural pasts to make liberated African futures possible, and as Jones proposes, such envisioning departs from a focus on the importance of reconstructing traditional African culture that is free from colonialism. As an example of this, Jones argues that in *Lagoon* Okorafor mobilizes the shift towards traditional Nigerian culture by imagining a spiritual awakening where the old gods come to destabilize and destroy the missionary Christian influences that have empowered European perspectives and suppressed traditional African ones. Engaging in an analysis of the returned African deities, Jones shows how they are representative of Nigerian culture and ways of being. She also articulates how the appearance of these deities and

their influence on the protagonists works to challenge the patriarchal nature of some cultural practices, such as the masquerade. Overall, this chapter continues the examination of how the reconstruction of a decolonized past is key to conceptualizing an African future that is centered on African cultural values, and in doing so, it also continues the discussion of how such recovery must also engage a matriarchal perspective.

Jones devotes chapter three to examining works that challenge the Western notion of time's linearity, a cultural understanding not shared by African-based cultures. Through the contrastive analysis of Octavia Butler's *Kindred* and Rasheedah Phillip's *Telescoping Effect: Part One*, Jones disentangles how these two writers employ time travel to examine the ways in which it "mirrors those realities of systematic oppression that originate in the past and continue to shape the life chances of black folks in the present" (53). In this discussion, Jones highlights how the chronopolitical approach that Afrofuturism takes to memory and history is essential not only in recovering lost pasts, but also in interrogating the present and in articulating possible futures. Within the umbrella term of Afrofuturism, she examines the notions of "sankofanarration" (56) where narratives aim to preserve the past and disrupt the linearity of Western time, and Rasheedah Phillips's concept of "Black quantum futurism" (56), a chronopolitical approach to intervening in epistemological temporal notions. Both concepts address memory and temporality, and, according to Jones they resemble Butler's challenges to temporality in her fiction. Furthermore, Jones examines Butler's speculative element in *Kindred* as an example of epigenetics in order to illustrate how Butler relates the protagonist's physique to the inherent relationship between trauma and genetic inheritance. Connecting the novel's protagonist with her ancestor is, according to Jones, Butler's way of implementing restorative fabulation. Likewise, in *Telescoping Effect: Part One* Jones sees Rasheedah Phillips as examining the connection between family and genetics across time, illustrating the current cultural anxieties that arise from the relationship between time and memory. The two ideas central to the novel's plot are, firstly, exploring how memory can be employed as an economic enterprise as the protagonist connects with her ancestor through a technological company, and secondly, examining how search engines and social networks blur the line between personal and work time so that our public selves can be corporately owned, resulting in a new type of slavery. Phillips's articulation of time and memory is apparent already in the novel's title, as telescoping is a psychiatric term that refers to "a cognitive impairment in which one's understanding of linear time is disrupted" (66). Jones's analysis of these two novels shows how challenging linear time is a traditional device of Afrofuturism.

Through her analysis of Butler's *Patternist Series*, in chapter four Jones articulates how memory and dissonant voices threaten "official history" (71). Narrated in a reverse chronology, Butler's series presents a distant-future dystopian world where the society and its system derive from the history of Transatlantic Trade, and in which some humans have developed telepathic powers and are living in a feudal system where those who do not have this ability are enslaved. Central to Jones's analysis of Butler's representation of the relationship between memory and historical narrative is Pierre Nora's notion of *lieu de mémoire*, which represents a postmodern rupture of the solidity of official history. At the same time, she also critiques Nora's concept for not

taking into account the ways in which the historical narratives of minorities can work to destabilize the official narrative. To examine this mnemonic conflict, Jones highlights the centrality of Anyanwu, a shapeshifter character, who embodies Butler's interest in Igbo culture, but who also brings forward the breach in official history in Butler's Patternist series. Despite this character's ability to change bodies, they mainly inhabit a Black woman's body. As Jones argues, as in Okorafor's novel, this highlights how history is inscribed in Black bodies. Consequently, Anyanwu rises as the keeper of memories and her immortality gives her a complete vision of time with multiple conscience shifts. In this way, Jones argues that this character represents not only the circularity of Black time, but also Butler's own cautionary tale about the political dangers of forgetting oppressed people's history. Given the reverse chronological pattern of Butler's series, it is sometimes complicated to follow Jones's argument if one has not read the series. Nonetheless, Jones's work illustrates the centrality of Black Speculative fiction to enable possible futures.

In the concluding section, Jones speaks about the uncertainty of our present and emphasizes the key role that Black women's speculative fiction has in reminding us "how an understanding of the past and how we remember it are just as important in any project that purports to save ourselves from ourselves" (90). As Jones effectively argues through her volume, black women's speculative fiction generates a space where time is circular and where healing trauma and sites of memory are essential to recreate liberated futures. As a result, this volume makes a great contribution for teaching African American literature by women, and stands as a great reference book for coursework.

Biography: Patricia Coloma Peñate holds a PhD in English from Georgia State University (2012). Prior to lecturing for the Modern Languages Department at Universidad Católica San Antonio de Murcia (UCAM) in 2015, she taught English and Spanish at Georgia State University, University of Alabama at Birmingham and Universidad Internacional de La Rioja (UNIR). She specializes in African American literature and folklore, Ethnic literatures of the US, Women Studies, and in the study of space as a metaphor in literature.

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BOOK REVIEW:
*Speculative Whiteness: Science Fiction and
the Alt-Right*

Jaime Segura San Miguel

Carroll, Jordan S. *Speculative Whiteness: Science Fiction and the Alt-Right*.
Forerunners: Ideas First. University of Minnesota Press. 2024. ISBN:
9781517917081

The last two decades have borne witness to the rise of populist politics championed by authoritarian, conservative alt-right parties. The misappropriation of cultural productions for political purposes has also increased in ubiquitousness and deviousness. In the last few years, the academic world has responded to these cultural shifts with an increasing focus on research into how these movements consciously employ narratives to support their ideologies. Jordan S. Carroll's *Speculative Whiteness: Science Fiction and the Alt-Right* exists at the core of these renewed efforts by the academic world to better understand the discursive strategies of hate groups that represent a threat to democratic values worldwide. The book covers several topics, from the historical connection of science fiction (SF) to white nationalists, to the struggles for the representation and control of SF awards, and to the different theoretical concepts that support Carroll's argument. Throughout the volume, the author provides examples from SF works and their reception to explain the underlying theoretical apparatuses and discursive topoi used by hate groups.

Carroll focuses his criticism on the concept of "speculative whiteness," an idea that underlies much white supremacist discourse and which maintains that only white men can possibly offer a viable future for human civilization. This is explained to work mostly through two different mechanisms: Firstly, Carroll shows that there is a connection between supremacist discourse and traditional misconceptions of developmental psychology and social Darwinism,

some of which hail all the way from the Victorian Era. For example, alt-right groups maintain that the reason why white men – referring to men from Western, Caucasian cultures – have found themselves at the zenith of civilization and in a position to control and exert power over other cultures, is simply because they are innately superior. Secondly, in their worldview, biological predestination to greatness is enmeshed with the idea of unrealized white potential to explain why white men – groups or specific individuals – are sometimes unable to access the power that they consider their birthright. The recurring interpretation of these groups is that historical contingencies, such as feminism, socialism or leftism in general, have impeded them from realizing their full potential. As a result, hate groups often believe that not only does SF offer perfect scenarios for white men to speculate about possible futures with alternative types of governments or social categories, but also that SF is the sole province of white men. Carroll explains these ideas in the three sections of their book. Though there are a variety of topics covered, the sections mostly follow a chronological order.

In the first chapter, “Introduction: Fascist Worldmaking,” Carroll provides a brief overview of the historical links between SF and white nationalists. In his discussion, this ranges from the discussion of early figures, like James H. Madole, the founder of the American Renaissance Party, to current ones, like Jason Reza Jorjani, the co-founder of the AltRight Corporation. Here, Carroll lays out the theoretical foundations for the discussion, from the ways in which right-wing hate groups attempt to misappropriate SF narratives, to the metapolitical use of cultural works. The discussion is illuminated with abundant references to SF works and to explanations of how white nationalists and other hate groups have laid claim to SF narratives for discursive purposes.

One of the key topics Carroll emphasizes in the first chapter is how, regardless of how alt-right groups have attempted to twist SF for spurious and deliberately misleading uses, they have not come up with anything new. Indeed, he argues that alt-right groups have consistently simply used what *was already there*; in other words, the speculative nature of SF leaves it open to being more easily misused and misappropriated than other genres. Moreover, even though a significant majority of SF authors often portray an alternative future in an attempt to criticize aspects of present-day politics or the dangers of certain ideologies, a few have embraced fascist talking points and themes in their works. What is more, even works that endeavor to fight against anti-democratic values can be misinterpreted: many SF narratives portray dystopian societies or authoritarian and autocratic rulers with satirical or cautionary purposes, but the alt-right has frequently engaged in what has been called an “irony bypass” (Jonathan Bowden, qtd. in Carroll 7). This idea refers to how fascists, having figured out the fact that “orthodoxy must reproduce heretical ideas if only to negate them,” (7) often take advantage of it. As Carroll concludes, the alt-right uses SF not to look at a future where humankind finally breaks with the current state of affairs, but, in a reactionary way, to go back to an idealized past.

The second chapter, “Invaders from the Future,” moves from examining how the racial essentialist and determinist discourse of white supremacy shows in alt-right appropriation of SF, to looking at how it uses SF to support its fallacious meritocratic argument that white men are destined to greatness because of what they do. Carroll introduces the white supremacist idea that

white men are like the “nerds” of SF narratives through the example of the accelerationist and Neoreactionary philosopher Nick Land, who perceives Western culture as an eternal struggle between the “nerds” and the “masses.” This entails that while the masses need the nerds to keep the wheel turning, the nerds no longer need the masses, for they are “in the process of automating the kind of drudge work performed by the unintelligent” (27). This argument – which the alt-right aims to make more appealing by phrasing it as the driven and hard-working person triumphing over the careless and lazy one – is in reality only new dressing for the same old essentialist values of racial determinism that permeate the far-right ideological apparatus. Carroll promptly dismantles the alt-right usage of such doublespeak. For example, he points out that Land characterizes the masses with the same descriptors long used by the American far-right against African-American communities, accusing them of being “hedonistic, hypersexual, unintelligent, and violent,” and claiming they only want “welfare handouts” (30). Additionally, Land maintains that the masses lack the low-time preference – the capacity to withstand discomfort now for a greater reward later on – required to further civilization. Likewise, the chapter discusses how alien and mutant narratives which SF often uses to criticize the process of otherization or to embody an external threat, are in alt-right discourse commonly misappropriated as narratives representing oppressed white males. Carroll explains how the “Slan” phenomenon that followed van Vogt’s 1940 novel *Slan* – a narrative about superhuman beings who are persecuted – sprouted a wide range of fan initiatives. Although these were initially innocent activities such as simple fan and book clubs, they soon gave way to more obscure projects. As an example of this, Carroll discusses Claude Degler’s project of spending most of the 1940s managing a rural compound in the Ozarks and calling on fans to come live there to “initiate a eugenics program, breeding science fiction enthusiasts together to produce a race of supermen or ‘Homo Cosmens’, who’d rise up to build a new civilization” (32). This racial determinism, in turn, is shown to be linked with neoconservative talking points about wealth accrument, since capitalist accumulation is understood by the alt-right as “an expression of racially determined providence” (44), as exemplified by Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged*.

Finally, Carroll’s third chapter, “Whitey on the Moon,” moves the focus of the book from discussing the underlying ideas of SF that have long appealed to supremacists and fascists, to examining how SF narratives are often used directly to justify antidemocratic measures. Carroll introduces this topic through the idea that SF narratives introduce “illiberal ideas past gatekeepers who would otherwise balk at them if they were presented in realist narratives” (Spencer, qtd. in Carroll 63). This idea has been praised by Richard B. Spencer, a neo-Nazi and White supremacist political commentator. This demonstrates the ideological divide between mainstream far-right groups and the most extreme and fringe of the alt-right spokespersons. The latter, as exemplified by Spencer, espouse views that SF narratives where an elite group of nerds dominate other races basically betray the essence of true white men who should aspire to shoot for the stars and explore “outer space and the universe” (Spencer, qtd. in Carroll 63). Carroll explains that some SF narratives are readily adopted by the alt-right to contextualize their demands because of the sometimes-fine line that separates satire and criticism from representation. Thus, in the alt-right view, *Interstellar* (2014) perfectly explains why the USA

is no longer allegedly at the fore of space exploration, since it accurately depicts how multiculturalism has led to stagnation. For example, in his 2016 *“Whitey on the Moon”: Race, Politics, and the Death of the U.S. Space Program, 1958-1972*, Michael J. Thompson argues – counter to all factual data – that NASA failed because the money that used to be allocated to space research had been rerouted towards welfare payments for Black people, a point that illustrates the fight between white supremacists and Afrofuturist writers (Carroll 65-66). Likewise, the chapter examines the debates that SF writers and alt-right personalities have had in the last few years about the types of governance depicted in SF works such as *Elysium* (2013) or *Dune* (1965). Carroll points out that in these debates the works are often stripped of all critical qualities and presented as narratives that call for antidemocratic governments as the only way to “suppress the fickle demands of the masses” (72). As Carroll concludes, white nationalists favor SF narratives because they allow living in a perpetual cognitive dissonance of rooting for a speculative future where white men can explore their full potentials, while at the same time hoping that this future becomes a monumentalization of their present identities as “glorious, necessary, and eternal” (100).

Overall, Carroll’s *Speculative Whiteness* joins the growing body of scholarship on the intersection of SF and politics, such as André M. Carrington’s *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* (2016), or David M. Higgins’s *Reverse Colonization: Science Fiction, Imperial Fantasy, and Alt-Victimhood* (2021). Readers should understand Carroll’s book as a historical view of the relationships between the far-right and SF, rather than a book on literature theory; expecting the latter, given its short length, would be a discredit to the author. Even though the argument could at times benefit from a deeper exploration of the ways in which alt-right discourses use doublespeak or show ideological incoherence, it is still an interesting volume for scholars looking for a brief and entertaining introduction to the association between the alt-right and SF. Due to its brevity and approachable language, it will be of interest also to students of literature, political sciences, and film, as well as to SF fans and those concerned citizens who might want to better understand the interplay of culture and politics.

Biography: Jaime Segura San Miguel is a substitute lecturer for the Complutense University of Madrid. His preferred genres for research are Gothic horror, fantasy, and dystopian fiction, and he works with the fields of medical humanities, myth criticism, history of ideas, and the political uses of literature. His main body of research analyses how the discourse of psychiatry has affected the representations of madness, and how this has in turn affected how society stigmatizes mental health problems.



BOOK REVIEW:

*Female Heroes in Young Adult Fantasy
Fiction: Reframing Myths of Adolescent
Girlhood*

Maryem Ben Salem

Phillips, Leah. *Female Heroes in Young Adult Fantasy Fiction: Reframing Myths of Adolescent Girlhood*. Bloomsbury Academic, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2023.

The representation of female characters in mythopoeic fiction has historically been confined to one-dimensional and traditionally gendered narratives. Leah Phillips' book *Female Heroes in Young Adult Fantasy Fiction* is part of a relatively new and burgeoning wave of research that reevaluates and critiques these portrayals, creating new paradigms for conceptualizing female protagonists in fantasy. Basing her research on gender and girlhood studies as well as literary analysis, Phillips employs the Cinderella trope to encapsulate the issues of female representation in popular culture, pointing out how traditional displays of white femininity and personifications of the damsel in distress diminish agency and empowerment in these narratives. In the first chapter of her book, she examines the legacy of Cinderella and the limitations of female portrayals today, reflecting on the history of mythopoeic heroism and the limitations it presents. She dedicates the remainder of her book to analyzing three compelling examples of female characters in recent YA fiction, examining characters who question gender binaries and offer new models of identity and selfhood that are more inclusive and representative of diversity. The book aims to deconstruct the archetypal fantasy hero by demonstrating how these unconventional heroines forge their embodied identities while recognizing plurality and change. Set against a backdrop of growing interest in the effects

of popular culture on youth identity formation, Phillips' book is timely and challenges existing academic discourse.

Phillips begins her first chapter by discussing the figure of Disney's Cinderella and its impact on pop culture. She argues that this widely-celebrated Disney tale, based on the original classic by Charles Perrault, not only perpetuates patriarchal ideals but also promotes performative white femininity. The author draws attention to the role of the male characters in the story, arguing that it was the king's need to find a bride for his son that catalyzed the narrative, effectively positioning Cinderella as the "hero's prize," a domestic virginal figure who must be presented in adherence to traditional norms of white femininity to epitomize the ideal bride. Despite meeting certain beauty requirements and coming from the right social class, Cinderella is still in need of a makeover (a trope that remains alive even today), an event that Phillips assimilates to the rebirth that the archetypal hero undergoes. The metaphorical birth is necessary to transform her into the hero's prize, giving her "the appearance that makes Cinderella eligible to be his bride" (10). Chapter one problematizes this focus on appearance and 'looking the part,' linking it to the harsh beauty standards that are forced on women since girlhood, and that are continuously perpetuated through the Disney franchise and the enduring makeover trope in pop culture.

Phillips proceeds to discuss the legacy of Cinderella, contending that despite ostensible advancements, the new Disney princesses and pop culture heroines have not changed. To substantiate her claim, she refers to characters like Merida in *Brave* (2012) and Mulan in *Mulan* (1998). Phillips argues that despite Merida's less traditional appearance and her rejection of conventional romantic notions, she still adheres to traditional beauty standards and goes through a minor makeover. The same can be said of Mulan as the author points out: "Mulan, Pocahontas and Jasmine all see 'their features audaciously whitewashed'" (14). This is something that warrants further clarification, but unfortunately Phillips does not elaborate on how exactly these makeovers erase cultural representation or change features. Mulan's makeover depicts her in traditional clothing (Hanfu) and makeup that adheres to Chinese aesthetics of that period (although it is not completely historically accurate). While she is in fact wearing white makeup, this cannot be considered whitewashing from the producers' side, as it is an authentic depiction of how Chinese women did their makeup during that time. The key issue in this scene is not conformity to Western standards of beauty but rather the problematic forced transformation trope that Phillips challenges early on in the chapter. Furthermore, Mulan challenges the gender binary by engaging in cross-dressing to replace her father and to be able to fight alongside men, the same act of hybridity for which Phillips praises Pierce's Alanna (*The Song of Lioness*) in subsequent chapters. The parallels between Mulan and Alanna's gender transgression, which is a core component in both stories, is overlooked in this instance, undermining the progressive cultural significance of Mulan's character. Shifting focus to Merida's makeover in *Brave*, it is portrayed as something that she resists and ultimately rejects, freeing herself from her confining dress and wearing her curls proudly, in a powerful scene that shows her going against conventional rules of femininity. What is more, while Phillips rightfully asserts that Merida does not represent racial diversity, I would argue that the lack of romance in her tale and her commitment to her freedom goes against the 'hero's prize'

notion that Cinderella symbolizes. Moreover, Phillips' criticism extends to Katniss in *The Hunger Games*, who is viewed as a 'hero in drag' (17) and labeled in the category of characters that are "essentially looking like Cinderella while saving the day" (16). While she makes some valid observations about how Katniss' character resembles that of the male hero and meets the conventional standards of beauty, limiting her character to an inverted version of the archetypal male hero neglects essential components that make her different. Although Katniss does possess characteristics that are stereotypically associated with male heroes, such as leadership skills and physical strength, she also possesses traditionally feminine traits like empathy and caregiving. Furthermore, Katniss uses the Capitol's expectations of her as a young female contestant to bend the system to her advantage, which can be interpreted as Collins subverting and critiquing gender roles through the narration. Overall, while Phillips in this section of the study rightly identifies issues concerning the perpetuation of white beauty standards and the casting of conventionally attractive characters in movies, her analysis could benefit from a more nuanced analysis that recognizes the progressive elements that differentiate these characters from the Cinderella archetype.

Phillips dedicates the remaining part of the first chapter and all of the second chapter to discussing the concept and origin of mythopoeic heroism, articulating her aim to construct a female hero that exemplifies the model of an embodied subjectivity recognizing plurality and change (19). She further contends that mythopoeic young adult literature carves out both figurative and real realms where women can thrive and establish their presence as heroic figures. Phillips explores how mythopoeic fiction is a powerful tool for gender equality by introducing diverse characters that break away from the typical white male hero archetype and subvert traditional gender hierarchies. The notion that mythopoeic YA literature transcends mere storytelling is central to the author's argument, as it engages in reshaping our perceptions of gender through presenting inclusive representations of identity and agency. Therefore, Phillips posits, these literary works aim not to simply mirror reality but to mold it through inspiring readers to envision realms not bound by the constraints of gender and through "creating new maps and new ways of mapping" (34). The strength of Phillips' argument lies in relating literary criticism to gender and girlhood studies through examples from popular mythopoeic works that employ characters such as Meyer's Cinder (*Cinder*) and Pierce's Alanna, and her study establishes a solid connection between theory and practice.

Chapters three to six are dedicated to studying the characters of Alanna the Lioness, and Daine the Wildmage in Tamora Pierce's *The Song of Lioness* and *The Immortals* series as well as Cinder in Marissa Meyer's novel *Cinder*. In these chapters, Phillips examines how such characters challenge traditional gender norms and societal expectations, demonstrating the aspects that give these representations empowering strength. The focus in chapter three is on the story of Alanna from Tamora Pierce's Tortall universe and its implications on gender performativity, examining the significance of the protagonist's choice to mask herself as a boy in order to gain access to the training opportunities that her gender is denied. Discussing how "Alanna uses her counterpart status to destabilize the linear, teleological trajectory of the heroic romance and the unified, coherent and individual (heterosexual) identity it exists to produce" (58), Phillips views Alanna's journey as a powerful criticism of binary gender

norms and the standardization of heterosexuality. This amounts to an effective explanation of how the protagonist's movement through these socially constructed barriers enlarges the definition of heroism beyond that of the archetypal male hero.

The focus shifts in chapter four to Marissa Meyer's *Cinder*, where the female main character is a cyborg rendition of the classic Cinderella character. Phillips argues that, through Cinder's identity, the novel highlights themes of bodily integrity and autonomy, as well as the intersection of technology and humanity, all of which have been topics of debate in the last two decades. Cinder's struggles for bodily autonomy in a systematically oppressive world mirror the real-life challenges that women continue to face in terms of objectification and the right for self-determination. The chapter also touches on issues of body image and its effects, particularly those that are especially relevant to teenage and young women.

In the final sections of her analysis, Phillips discusses how evolving representations of heroism can challenge traditional notions of power and individualism. Chapter five explores the character of Daine from Tamora Pierce's Tortall universe, a young woman gifted with a unique bond with nature and the ability to communicate with animals, prompting readers to ponder the blurred lines between human and non-human beings. Phillips points out how Daine's exceptional talents relationally reconceptualize heroism, building on ecological awareness and empathy as well as highlighting a sense of co-existing with the other. Drawing on feminist perspectives, she also finds Daine's narrative to contribute to a broader discussion about the relationship between nature and the human. In the last chapter, Phillips builds upon the themes and issues explored in the previous chapters to establish a new more inclusive paradigm of heroism. Her new model suggests that heroism should be founded on the notions of engagement, compassion, and mutual reliance, in turn subverting the traditional narratives of solitary achievement and domination perpetuated in the past.

Throughout its chapters, Phillips' study draws on a foundation of insightful research and analysis of critical theory, all the while remaining engaging and accessible. This volume would serve effectively as a textbook for emerging scholars and undergraduate students alike. Her insights truly resonate when exploring the impact these heroines have through their self-exploration and identity-building journeys that mirror those of their young audience. Phillips' work not only explores the historical concept of heroism in fantasy, but offers a fuller, more humane definition of what it means to be a hero. Although her research could benefit from a more well-rounded analysis of contemporary heroines such as Katniss or Mulan, who share many of the progressive aspects that Phillips demonstrates in the characters she analyzes, she highlights significant limitations that can undermine the impact of these characters. Her work thus broadens the academic conversation about female representation in YA mythopoeic fantasy and encourages writers and readers alike to consider more inclusive portrayals that challenge traditional narratives.

Biography: Maryem Ben Salem is a second-year PhD student at the North American Studies program at the University of Debrecen in Hungary. She specializes in female heroism in young adult fiction and fantasy and her academic interests include gender studies, posthumanism, and pop culture.



BOOK REVIEW:
*The Romantic Spirit in the Works of J.R.R.
Tolkien*

Paula Lobato Díez

Sherwood, Will, and Julian Eilmann, editors. *The Romantic Spirit in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Zurich and Jena, 2024 (Cormarë Series 51). ISBN 978-3-905703-51-1.

The Romantic Spirit in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien, a collection of articles edited by Will Sherwood and Julia Eilmann, manages to make a statement even before the reader turns the first page. As Sherwood vividly explains in his introduction, the cover, designed by Jay Johnstone, openly echoes David Caspar Friedrich's magnum opus "Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog" (1818). As the editor notes, Peter Jackson's *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001) also paid homage to this enigmatic painting, but it now seems to acquire a different undertone. Both the original artwork and its cinematographic rendition depict a *Rückenfigur* (back-figure) – be it a man or two hobbits – admiring a vast land that expands before their very eyes, granting them the unique perspective that the heights provide. However, the most striking detail about Johnstone's cover is that the figures are darkened despite their foreground placement and they are found in the depths of a foggy valley, overlooked by the peak of an imposing mountain. Instead of gaining clarity, the heroes in this case stand before the mighty representation of Romanticism itself, which is white and covered in snow, while they remain in the shadows. But what exactly is Romanticism? And how is Tolkien Romantic? These are the questions that the book poses, and the hero's climb to cognition is arduous.

The book is organized thematically into four main sections: "Nationalisms, History, and the Other," "Language, Art, and Music," "Imagination, Desire, and Sensation," and "Nature and Travel." The first section opens with Valentina P. Aparicio and Elliott Greene's essay, a

compelling explanation of the relation between the horseback knights from the city of Rohan and indigenous American tribes. By referring to John Hunter's studies on the "Nordic Renaissance" and theories of stadial history, the chapter manages to explain how Tolkien's work can be viewed as Romantic: the Rohirrim present mythical qualities which, after being adapted to "European taste" (15), were attributed to "ancient Britons by comparative observation with Native Americans" (12) in the Romantic period – such as stoicism, passionate speech-making, love of liberty, and a taste for poetical recounting of heroic deeds. Since Tolkien strove to compose an English epic and the Saxons and the Norse had begun to be considered the authentic root of English people following Thomas Percy's earlier attempts of cultural legitimation of the British, Native American tribes were regarded as the closest representation to what life might have been in Anglo-Saxon times as they "existed at a 'younger' stage of society" (9) in the eyes of 19th century British scholars.

In the next essay, Lynn Forest-Hill seeks to answer a question opposite to Aparicio and Greene's: how does Tolkien's work *transcend* the Romantic Movement? While the study is well-researched and profoundly illustrative, its discussion unfortunately shifts back and forth between periods in a way that does not manage to make a clear separation between Romantic heritage and the original medieval sources. Nonetheless, the author makes an important contribution by contending that while both medieval and Romantic influences are present in Tolkien's oeuvre, "by drawing on genuinely medieval sources, [his] work avoids the political inauthenticity of the Romantics" (38) in their depiction of medieval times. In doing so, Tolkien detaches his work from courtly love tropes and the Romantics' nation-building agenda and adopts more historically accurate modes such as the ironic, elegiac, and epic.

Sharin Schroeder's chapter focuses on the influence of Sir Walter Scott, examining how his impact on Tolkien is not easily recognized because of an interwar political trend of eliminating Scottish authors from the canon and fewer people accessing Scott's texts as a result. To address the question of Scott's influence, Sharin compellingly discusses the fleeting nature of popularity in literary traditions, which may eventually turn against even Tolkien. Chapter four closes the first section with Mariana Ríos-Maldonado's cross-border analysis of Dark Romanticism and the uncanny in Tolkien's oeuvre when contrasted with the German author E.T.A Hoffmann's. Ríos-Maldonado's excellent parallelism between the characteristics of Freudian uncanny in Hoffmann's work, as opposed to Tolkien's, exemplifies how the English author not only agrees with Hoffmann's vision of *the Fäerie* but also radicalizes his Romantic depictions of the monstrous. This is something he achieves through the portrayal of a Manichean source of evilness: Sauron and his realm. Ríos-Maldonado contends that Mordor's creatures are meant to resonate closely with Victorian and Edwardian societies; the worlds which Tolkien's contemporaries inhabited. Hence, Mordor as a source of fright relies heavily on the reader's instincts about realities they almost seem to recognize as their own.

The second section of the collection takes a multifaceted approach to understanding how Tolkien is Romantic by contrasting his work with other artistic fields. The section opens with Verlyn Flieger's chapter on the interconnectedness of Owen Barfield and Tolkien's creative production, categorizing Tolkien's Romanticism as "centered on words" (131) and placing it

in conversation with real-world ideas such as English nationalism or the terrors that the First World War caused to Tolkien's generation. This is a clever choice for an opener since it bridges both sections of the collection. In Tolkien's works, Edmund Burke's ideas on 'the sublime' and the human threat of war are brought together in a particular brand of Romanticism which dwells on the bareness of daily communication. After all, beyond refined elven tongues, ordinary everyday English is what enshrines real English mythology.

In a similar fashion, Chiara Bertoglio provides a multidisciplinary comparison between Carl Maria von Weber's operas and Tolkien's oeuvre, contributing further to the pattern of connections between Germanic art and Tolkien in this collection. In her essay, she presents a world of contrasts: Catholic doom and providence, a love of nature, and fear of technology. This ultimately showcases a rather gothic awareness of the darkness which can reign in the world, a product of the experienced realities in the interwar period. Annise Rogers follows this with a chapter that considers William Blake's artistic legacy as a way of moving from music to pictorial art and discerns a substantial amount of *indirect* connections which at the same time are unavoidably influenced by their rich written production. Commendably, Rogers actively discusses artistic movements such as the Pre-Raphaelites or Art Nouveau and also chooses to engage with the term 'Romanticism' itself. In doing so, instead of narrowing the horizons of the Romantic, she manages to open new paths for future research.

The editors have carefully chosen David Smith's chapter on Tolkien's visual Romanticism as a culmination of this section, as he engages with the ideals of other artists such as Blake and Coleridge while focusing his analysis on "Leaf by Niggle" (1942). Smith manages to provide his own definition for Tolkien's Romantic imagination, one that prioritizes the treatment of "a greater unity surpassing individuality" in favor of Romantic values which defended "a necessary self-effacement in favor of a naturalistic interconnectedness" (231), and which, despite Tolkien's prolific works full of verbal and literary art, was placed upon visual art. Hence, transcendence, which is at the core of all artistic activity, could be achieved potentially through the use of visual imagery.

The third section of this volume provides yet another turn in the understanding of Tolkien's Romantic tendencies, ranging from earthly pleasures to the most elevated philosophic contemplation. Kacie L. Willis and Christopher Hagan deftly interact with Keats's Romantic "gusto" through the lens of psychology and cultural studies in both Tolkien's published work and private letters. They conclude that Tolkien's literary representation of food and drink ultimately symbolize his profound appreciation for a sense of community which, due to historical circumstances, was at times denied to him. Ascending in the gradation of human pleasures, Adam Neirik turns to Platonic metaphysics and Coleridge's notion of sensuality and Reason to read *The Silmarillion*. Hence, by explaining the human process of apprehension and cognition through aesthetics, his essay showcases how good and evil are not absolute forces in Tolkien's work. On the contrary, he examines how Tolkien presents them as rather affected by individual contemplation and the predetermined Ideas, in Plato's terms, that each subject holds. John R. Holmes's chapter then recedes from the suspension of disbelief in classic authors such as Coleridge to unearth less popular Romantic tenets which are latent in Tolkien's work. Holmes's study is a real *tour de force* in this book;

although shorter than the other essays, his work manages to encompass many ideas concerning fantasy discussed in the preceding essays while providing a fresh perspective on the topic. This is followed by Austin M. Freeman's investigation on Tolkien's inspiration for the poem "Mythopoeia" in the school of thought of a group of fantasists which he calls British Theological Romanticism. This section is concluded by Brandon Wernette's chapter that offers a delightful analysis on the power of Wordsworth's sublime in the creation of songs – which are essentially poems, too – and the relationship between nature and the author. In Wernette's reading of Tolkien, the pervasive effect that aesthetics has in his legendarium is what makes it undeniably Romantic.

While the first three edges of the Romantic polyhedron are well balanced out, it is striking that only two essays are found in the concluding section, "Nature and Travel." Eva Lippold's chapter opens an interesting dialogue between Romantic travel literature and the multiple journeys which Tolkien's characters follow in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. While it is vital to introduce the genre of Romantic travel writing and present it as the cornerstone of this section, Lippold's study leaves the topic open for a multiplicity of more specialized essays which would have bolstered the impact of the collection. Nick Groom's "The Ghostly Language of the Ancient Earth': Tolkien, Geology, and Roman Lithology" then concludes the volume by approaching Tolkien's Romanticism through an understudied theme: the soil and rocks. In analyzing Wordsworthian visions of the inanimate, Groom sees these lithic forms as an Otherness central to the storytelling and conception of Tolkien's world and to the many realities that abound in it – as many as there are characters and readers.

I find this collection of great relevance and interest for the field, although its density also poses challenges. However, as Sherwood already claims in his introduction, this book is by no means to be understood as the ultimate guide to Tolkien and various strands of Romanticism, but rather as the opening of new pathways to be explored. Because of its interdisciplinary nature, this volume will interest both scholars who aim to deepen their knowledge, and admirers of Tolkien's work who enjoy specialized reading. I would definitely welcome a second volume which provides a more prominent platform to some of the most poignant or understudied themes, such as the aforementioned travel literature. As the characters on the cover still have a long way ahead, their steps shall take the readers on a never-ending journey towards the many peaks of Romanticism.

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BOOK REVIEW:
J.R.R. Tolkien's Utopianism and the Classics

James Hamby

Williams, Hamish. *J.R.R. Tolkien's Utopianism and the Classics*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. ISBN 978–1350241466.

Studies of Tolkien's work often face two common criticisms: firstly, that critical theory is seldom applied, and secondly that his works are rarely placed in conversation with those of other major 20th-century writers, with the exception of his fellow Inklings.¹ The result, as the argument goes, is that Tolkien criticism is often self-contained and ignores broader movements in literature and theory. Hamish Williams's study, *J.R.R. Tolkien's Utopianism and the Classics*, however, defies these notions by utilizing theorists from Plato to Nietzsche to Derrida and by examining Tolkien's works alongside 20th-century writers such as Mary Renault, Henry Miller, and Nikos Kazantzakis, among others. Another common presupposition Williams's book refutes is that Tolkien's fiction relies almost exclusively on Germanic influences. To supplement this view, Williams demonstrates that Tolkien incorporated many Greek and Roman sources as well. Commenting on the importance of seventeen years of classical education on Tolkien's intellectual life, Williams argues that he "never really abandoned the classical world ... [nor] the pervasive cultural-historical sense that he, as a creative writer, was working in a Western literary tradition, in a long line of literary texts leading back to ancient Greece and Rome" (11). Following Tolkien's own metaphors of storytelling as a "cauldron of soup" or "a compost heat," Williams points out the extent to which Tolkien's legendarium combines many different sources, such as "Old English heroic epic, Celtic mythology [and] medieval romance" (138), into something new.

¹ The Inklings were an informal group of creative writers at Oxford University, most of whom shared an interest in Christianity and in building fantasy worlds through fiction. In addition to Tolkien, the group included C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, Owen Barfield, and others.

As the title suggests, this volume argues that Tolkien relied heavily on classical sources to create utopian societies within Middle-earth. Williams uses a wide backdrop of utopian thought, from Plato to Thomas Moore to the British Romantics to frame Tolkien's utopianism. Williams astutely addresses what could easily be dismissed as simplistic pining for "the good old days" by suggesting that Tolkien's utopianism provides "useful constructs for explorations of the perfect, of lost ideals in the past, which could even shape our contestations with the present" (23) and furthermore that the "ideals and values ... evident in better, relatively more perfect past communities ... are not restricted to a lost past" (26). In so claiming, Williams argues that Tolkien's legendarium speaks directly to the 20th century and provides a model for what values and ideals *could* still exist in our real world. However, it seems that Williams stretches his definition of "utopia" here, and it is difficult to see how Tolkien is not engaging in the nostalgia that Williams refutes.

The volume begins with an introduction that argues that Tolkien's learning in classical literature and philosophy provided him with the theoretical framework for his vision of an ideal society. Three further chapters make up most of the rest of the book. These chapters focus on, respectively, the patterns of civilizational fall, Odyssean ideals of home in *The Hobbit*, and notions of the classical sublime in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. The volume concludes with a brief epilogue that recaps the main points of the book and discusses how "Tolkien's narrative exploration of Middle-earth is really a kind of re-exploration, and indeed rewriting of places past, such that one might better call it a retrotopianism" (139). Williams's ideas about Tolkien's retrotopianism could have been developed more thoroughly, and contrasted to ideas that are truly utopian. Otherwise, though, Williams skillfully notes the ways classicism and utopian literature shape the world of Middle-earth.

The first chapter, "Lapsarian Narratives: The Decline and Fall of Utopian Communities in Middle-earth," juxtaposes Tolkien's representations of disgraced societies with how he imagined their utopian origins, in order to argue that the narratives of civilizational decline, and especially the symbolic significance of falling cities, play a pivotal role in Tolkien's utopian vision. Williams begins the chapter by citing Tolkien's belief that all stories contain some type of fall (17), and he identifies the many classical inspirations that inform Tolkien's notions of civilizational collapse, including the books of The Old Testament, Hesiod's *Works and Days*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and Plato's descriptions of Atlantis in *Timaeus* and *Critias*. Williams argues that Tolkien used these sources to create the story of Númenórean decay in his legendarium. Though the grim stories about Númenor's and Gondor's declines may seem pessimistic or dystopian, Williams argues that "Tolkien's narratives of decline are not simple nostalgic exercises but are quite explicit in their recognition of problems which need to be rectified and restored—they are utopian thought exercises" (48). Again, Williams's assertion that these narratives of decay are utopian in nature seems a stretch, and his discussion would have benefitted more by considering how these stories are dystopian.

After broader civilizational degeneration, Williams pivots to focus on the symbolic significance of the besieged and falling city, specifically Minas Tirith, and discusses its literary and historical antecedents, most notably Troy and Rome, arguing that a city's fall is an integral part of its renewal into a utopia. In the conclusion to the chapter, entitled "The ancient city *must* fall" (29, emphasis

original), Williams explores how “every generation has reworked this motif [of the fall of Rome] in new ways to fit its own historical contexts and utopian desires” (49). He then compares Tolkien’s writing to three 20th-century movies, *Quo Vadis* (1951), *Spartacus* (1960), and *Gladiator* (2000), and explains that in each of these films Rome experiences some form of moral decay that necessitates its fall. Likewise, in Tolkien’s writing, Númenor slowly becomes wicked and is destroyed, leading to the renewal of society in the founding of Gondor. Thousands of years later, Minas Tirith experiences the same sort of spiritual decay, as represented by Denethor’s decline into despair (54). Williams concludes the chapter by noting how the story of Minoan civilization and its collapse affected Tolkien’s imagination, pointing out that Sir Arthur Evans’s four-volume work, *The Palace of Minos* (1921, 1928, 1930, 1935) “provides some interesting parallels with Tolkien’s legendary Númenor” in the way it describes civilizational collapse (55). In all, Williams concludes that Tolkien’s narratives of declining ancient communities “[reveal] a panoply of different modern concerns at play in Tolkien’s writings: religious conservatism, anti-modernism, anti-technological thought, anti-imperialism and liberalism” (58). These various backward-looking beliefs form the core of what Tolkien envisioned as an ideal society.

The next chapter, “Hospitality Narratives: The Ideal of the Home in an Odyssean *Hobbit*,” argues that hospitality in *The Hobbit* mirrors that found in *The Odyssey*. As many critics have observed, hospitality is a key component of *The Odyssey*, and the behaviors of guests and hosts are prescribed and enforced by the gods. Guests and hosts behaving poorly (i.e. Penelope’s suitors or Polyphemus) or appropriately (i.e. Odysseus in Phaeacia) often reveals their character. In this chapter, Williams suggests that *The Hobbit* can be interpreted as a hospitality tale that endorses positive relationships between guests and hosts (62). Williams points out several scenes with varying levels of hospitality in *The Hobbit*: Bilbo hosting Gandalf and the dwarves in Bag End, the trolls planning to eat Bilbo and the dwarves outside their cave, Elrond’s otherworldly home, the underground dwelling of the goblins, Beorn’s mead hall, the home of the king of Mirkwood, the great hall of Lake-town, and the Lonely Mountain of the dwarves, usurped by Smaug (59). Williams asserts that “place can contribute to the meaning of a work” (60) and that utopianism can be represented by “the restricted, relatively small-scale mundane *topos* of the home” (61). The contrasts between, for instance, Elrond’s home in Rivendell where outsiders and wanderers are cared for and the cave of the Polyphemus-like trolls who desire to eat Bilbo and the dwarves emphasizes notions of good and evil, of utopian and dystopian impulses, in the text. One of the most important functions of hospitality in *The Hobbit* is to highlight Bilbo’s character arc from xenophobia to xenophilia. When Gandalf first appears at Bilbo’s door, Bilbo says and does things appropriate for a host, but his actions lack true warmth and consideration (92). Bilbo is protective of his comfortable life and does not wish to be intruded upon, yet he is tested even more by the rowdy behavior of the dwarves. By the end of the book, however, Bilbo earnestly invites the dwarves back to his home at any time (93) and, as is seen in *The Lord of the Rings*, Bag End becomes so frequently visited by outsiders that his relationship with his home community becomes strained (92). Bilbo’s journey and hardships have caused him to grow into a xenophilial host who welcomes outsiders.

In the final chapter, "Sublime Narratives: Classical Transcendence in Nature and Beyond in *The Fellowship of the Ring*," Williams asserts that Tolkien rewrote "certain classical motifs ... through the insertion of Christian, anti-modernist (anti-Nietzschean) ideas" to create "the sylvan sublime" (105). Williams identifies ways that different classical ideas about the sublime in nature heightens characters' awareness of themselves and the world. Firstly, Tolkien utilizes the Christian sublime in the chapter "Three is Company" to cast the hobbits' experiences in The Old Forest as spiritual transformations as they meet otherworldly beings like the elves and Tom Bombadil. Williams argues that "Tolkien's sublime is substantially Christian" because of the way he uses the word "joy" to express Sam's emotions when meeting the elves (108). Next, Williams identifies the influence of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* on landscapes in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, particularly on the scenes where the characters feel horror. Williams notes that in Greco-Roman thought, wild places such as forests and mountains "were generally associated with the danger of encountering primitive, even pre-Olympian or violent deities ... [and] beasts which haunted such landscapes" (113–14). Just as in *The Metamorphoses* when, for example, Actaeon is torn apart by his own hounds after watching Diana bathe in a forest spring, the hobbits encounter malevolent beings, such as Old Man Willow, deep in the ancient Old Forest (113). Saving the hobbits from this ordeal is Tom Bombadil, whom Williams interprets as an "Orphic guide to the sylvan sublime" (119). Like Orpheus, Bombadil has a supernatural ability to control the world around him, mainly through music. Williams asserts that "the Ovidian universe is essentially one of diversity, change, violence and confusion" (128), and so too are the wild places of Middle-earth. Moreover, the singing of Tom Bombadil recalls the primordial song of the Ainur in *The Silmarillion*, thus connecting the hobbits' experiences in The Old Forest with cosmic forces locked in an eternal battle between good and evil. Williams concludes the chapter by comparing the Gondorean ruins that litter Middle-earth's landscape to the ruins of Greece and Rome in the real world. Williams points out that these ruins fill the hobbits with a sense of the "Númenórean sublime" that provides them with "a sense of renewed national spirit and of pride at being awakened" and also gives them a "pervasive sense of hope in the face of grimness and defeat which underlies much of Tolkien's Christian-inspired philosophy" (135).

Throughout this volume, Williams aspires to demonstrate that much of Tolkien's work derives from classical literature. He acknowledges that Tolkien was influenced by other sources, such as medieval Germanic literature, but he argues that all of these sources blend together to create Middle-earth. Williams's book is an astute study of classical reception in Tolkien and it thoroughly demonstrates the way Tolkien used the past to comment on the present. Moreover, Williams's volume excels in placing Tolkien's work within multiple critical frameworks and within broader literary movements and social realities of the 20th century. Scholars of Tolkien, classical reception studies, and 20th-century literature will benefit from Williams's ability to piece together so many of Tolkien's different influences. All in all, Williams shows how Tolkien's rewriting of classical literature creates a utopian vision for a world that has lost a sense of certainty. Like a hobbit surveying the ancient ruins of Gondor, the classicism of Tolkien's creative vision inspires his readers with a sense of wonder and reassurance that all that is good and beautiful has not been lost.

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BOOK REVIEW:
Celebrating Tolkien's Legacy

Kristine Larsen

Bunting, Nancy, Seamus Hamill-Keays, and Toby Widdicombe. *Celebrating Tolkien's Legacy*. Walking Tree Publishers, 2024. ISBN: 978-3-905703-52-8.

Despite its title, this volume largely ignores Tolkien's impact on literature, or on popular media more generally. Indeed, according to the series editors' preface most of the essays "investigate the possible effects of crucial events" in Tolkien's life, such as the untimely death of his mother, Mabel, in 1904 from diabetes at age 34, and "discuss some of his 'neglected' relatives" in an attempt to "provide inspiration for further research into the complex relationship between JRR Tolkien's life and work" (vii).

According to co-author Widdicombe's introduction, the collection recognizes the passing of the fiftieth anniversary of Tolkien's death in 1973 with seven biographical essays and two additional pieces that "consider where Tolkien studies may go in the next few decades and what issues it needs to address" (xiii). Here Widdicombe raises what seems to be a bit of a straw man, implying that Tolkien's legacy would be in danger of becoming "the preserve of professional linguists," against which this volume is aimed (xvi). However, given the number of peer-reviewed interdisciplinary journals dedicated to Tolkien studies (including *Tolkien Studies*, the Tolkien Society's *Mallorn*, and the *Journal of Tolkien Research*) as well as other journals specializing in the broader influence and study of Tolkien and the other Inklings (e.g., *Mythlore* and the *Journal of Inklings Studies*), Tolkien studies does not appear to be in any danger of being overrun by marauding bands of philologists. Instead, Widdicombe's claim illustrates what seems to be an unfortunately recurring problem in this volume, whereby opinion is presented as incontrovertible fact. For example, when Widdicombe claims that the Tolkien Estate is becoming "less interested in verity and ever more interested in preserving the

biographical legend and in profits,” his evidence consists of what he views as the increasing tendency to take “liberties with [...] source material” in the film and televisual adaptations of Tolkien’s work over the 21st century (xvii). His central piece of evidence, that Peter Jackson’s original film trilogy “was remarkably faithful” to the literary source material, has been debated by fans and scholars since the films’ initial release.

In her preface, Nancy Bunting explains the methodology of the first part of the book, “Past: Biographical Explorations,” which relies on biographical and contextual (historical/societal) information for its analysis. This approach mirrors that of Bunting’s and Hamill-Keays’s previous volume on the early life of Tolkien’s wife, *The Gallant Edith Bratt* (2022). As reviews of that work frequently pointed out the issues with Bunting and Hamill-Keays’s approach (see for example Gunner), Bunting’s preface here seems a deliberate response to this criticism, projected in a surprisingly defensive and even dismissive tone.

Although many of these works are “expanded and revised from *Beyond Bree*,” the monthly publication of the Tolkien Special Interest Group of Mensa, they seem to be used here without having gone through any outside peer review. Bunting’s opening essay, “Tea in Hay,” attempts to reconstruct an event mentioned in a note by Tolkien’s widowed mother, Mabel. This note apparently concerns one of her sons’ adventures with Father Francis Morgan who became the boys’ legal guardian after Mabel’s death. Bunting weaves together genealogical, geographical, geological, historical and philological tidbits to argue that the most likely location for their adventures was Kinver – before expanding to a claim that the Kinver Rock Houses (carved into the soft local sandstone) are a “possible model for hobbit holes” (7). The essay then takes a hard turn, claiming without solid evidence that Morgan and his charges “more than likely” stopped at a particular church in Kinver and “ponder[ed] its roots in early Catholic history,” particularly the “local tradition” that it was dedicated by Wulfere, King of Mercia” (9). Bunting connects this point, and the fact that “Kinver was part of this Hwicce kingdom,” to a line from Tolkien’s 1945 letter to his son Christopher where he wrote that “you are a Mercian or Hwiccan” (10). This example illustrates the general procedure of reasoning utilized throughout Bunting’s authored and co-authored essays.

The co-authored “The 1897 Diamond Jubilee and the Long Awaited Party” ponders Tolkien’s possible childhood experiences of the national Jubilee celebration, presenting it as a significant influence on rather generic aspects of Bilbo Baggins’ “long-expected” birthday party, such as the fireworks, food, and family interaction. Details include Victorian mourning fashions that the widowed Mabel would have been expected to follow and speculation on which members of their extended family the Tolkien boys might have engaged with.

While previous biographical investigations have focused on Tolkien’s younger maternal aunt, Jane, in “May Incledon, the Other Suffield Aunt” Bunting and Hamill-Keays present original biographical research on Mabel’s elder sister, May, her husband, Walter Incledon, and their potential financial, emotional, and religious influence on Tolkien’s family life. The authors do an admirable job in piecing together a great deal of circumstantial evidence, right down to details about the couple’s house. The childhood relationship between Tolkien, his younger brother, Hilary, and May’s daughters, is given emphasis, interspersed with general information on the circumscribed and largely colorless lives of middle-class Victorian girls. The first part of this essay builds

perhaps the most cohesive argument in the volume, drawing attention to the complex relationship with Catholicism that existed among members of Mabel's family, and suggesting the effects Catholicism had on her life after her and May's conversion in 1900. The information that Walter Incledon forbade his wife from openly practicing her new faith, and the apparent impact this had on his relationship with his daughter, Mary, when she later converted as well, is potentially interesting for those curious about Tolkien's extended family. This is followed by Bunting's speculative essay "J.R.R. Tolkien: Ambidexter" which is unfortunately slight in both page length and evidence, arguing that Tolkien was ambidextrous, and speculating how that might have been related to his creative abilities, especially in language creation.

Widdicombe's first contribution in this volume, "For Want of a Biography, the Story Was Lost," focuses on perceived problems with past biographical treatments of Tolkien, principally seen as rising from Tolkien's stated aversion to having his life chronicled by others and a desire by the Tolkien family – especially Christopher Tolkien, as his father's literary heir – to control the biographical narrative. While this essay largely has the tone of an opinion or editorial piece, it does include a noteworthy comparison of several biographical treatments (Carpenter's authorized biography and two unauthorized works) and invites the reader to consider how the family's tight rein on materials available for scholarly analysis impacts the field of Tolkien studies. Widdicombe ends with an impassioned plea for a modern, scholarly biography facilitated by digitizing all known Tolkien papers – which in his view should be funded by the Tolkien family as they have financially benefitted from the commercialization of Tolkien and his literary legacy.

Death takes center stage in the following essay, Bunting's "1904: Mabel Tolkien, Living and Dying," expanded and revised from her earlier essay in *Lembas*, the journal of the Dutch Tolkien Society Unquendor. Bunting's biographical and historical sleuthing concerning the events that led up to Mabel's death seeks to reconstruct the impact that her lingering and ultimately fatal diabetes had upon her young sons. This essay also makes heavy use of hypothesizing based on historical norms of the period. While the discussion is highly detailed (as seen in its descriptions of the symptoms of late-stage diabetes and the Tolkien boys' whooping cough) such details seem more melodramatic than illuminating. Bunting's argument that the episodes of Ring madness suffered by the ringbearers in *The Lord of the Rings* were motivated by hypothetical episodes of diabetic psychosis manifested by Mabel is highly speculative, at best.

This is followed by the only essay of Bunting's specifically written for this volume, "The Interlace of Autobiography and Faërian Imagery in *Smith of Wootton Major*." Here, Bunting spends 100 pages attempting to weave together claimed autobiographical aspects with Tolkien's self-described genre of "Faërian Drama" ("On Fairy-stories" 63) in his late and problematic 1967 work *Smith of Wootton Major*. This essay exemplifies another recurring problem with the volume, an insufficient (and largely dismissive) engagement with preexisting scholarship. While especially noticeable in Widdicombe's contributions, Bunting's essay only very briefly engages with the works of other scholars (for example, that of Verlyn Flieger, the editor of the extended edition of *Smith of Wootton Major*). Instead, Bunting recycles her own research on Tolkien's extended family, searching for what she feels are salient connections.

Her largely psychoanalytical focus ultimately comes back to Mabel Tolkien who Bunting presents not only as the major inspiration for the Faery Queen of the story, but as Galadriel in *The Lord of the Rings* as well.

The remaining two essays, both written by Widdicombe, form the second part of the volume, “Future; New Directions in Tolkien Studies.” Regrettably, the discussion relies on sweeping generalizations, inaccuracies which amount to mischaracterization, and plain factual errors (similarly noted by reviewers of Widdicombe’s 2020 volume *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Guide for the Perplexed* [Bratman 273]). For example, “Tolkien as Forgotten Utopian” begins with the now largely debunked claim that “the motivation for the legendarium was [Tolkien’s] desire to create a mythology for England” (251; see Shelton). Similarly to the other essays in this volume, this entry largely sidelines previous scholarship and surprisingly claims that before the essay’s completion “no book-length studies and fewer than half a dozen articles” had been written on the subject. However, this completely ignores, for example, Mark Doyle’s 2019 volume *Utopian and Dystopian Themes in Tolkien’s Legendarium*.

The volume’s conclusion, “Christopher Tolkien as Editor: The Perils of Kinship,” claims that Tolkien scholars are largely ignorant of, or in denial over, the impact of Christopher’s editorial choices throughout his father’s posthumously published works. This sweeping generalization overlooks, for example, Douglas Charles Kane’s critically acclaimed *Arda Reconstructed*, which delves quite openly into the results of Christopher’s editorial choices in bringing *The Silmarillion* to publication. Widdicombe also forgoes any mention of Christopher’s own comments (especially visible in the later volumes of the encyclopedic *History of Middle-earth* series) where he regrets some of his prior editorial choices (a famous example being the paternity of the High King of the Elves, Gil-galad). Widdicombe’s tone is surprising for a scholarly essay, including general mean-spiritedness directed at both the Tolkien family and the Tolkien studies community. It is highly unfortunate that this tone detracts from Widdicombe’s sometimes-salient points, for example, concerning the control of the Tolkien Estate over what information is available to scholars.

While this volume presents many historical and biographical details, I am sorry to say that the overall effect of its arguments, like Bilbo, feel “thin, sort of *stretched* ... like butter that has been scraped over too much bread” (Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* 41, emphasis original). As a result, I would encourage the reader to consider its arguments with a particular eye towards bias detection, especially given the frequent conflation of correlation and causation in this volume.

Biography: Kristine Larsen, Ph.D., an astronomer at Central Connecticut State University, studies the intersections between science and society, including astronomical history and depictions of science and scientists in popular media (especially the works of J.R.R. Tolkien). She is the author of *The Sun We Share* (2024), *Science, Technology, and Magic in The Witcher* (2023), *Particle Panic!* (2019), and *The Women Who Popularized Geology in the 19th Century* (2017), and in 2020 she received the Tolkien Society Best Paper Award.

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BOOK REVIEW:
*Mapping Middle-earth:
Environmental and Political Narratives
in J.R.R. Tolkien's Cartographies*

David A. Brewer

Behrooz, Anahit. *Mapping Middle-earth: Environmental and Political Narratives in J.R.R. Tolkien's Cartographies*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2024. ISBN: 9781350290808.

At the close of *Mapping Middle-earth*, Anahit Behrooz writes “I hope this book makes a case for the need to situate Tolkien within time; both [within] his own contemporary context – which was profoundly more political than certain imaginations often allow – and within our own contemporary literary discourses, in order to bring his oeuvre more seriously within the field of literary studies” (174). She is only partially successful. Behrooz convincingly demonstrates that Tolkien’s thinking about the costs of empire and the relations between humans and the non-human world extends far beyond what one might expect based upon the still frequently encountered caricature of the Oxford don nostalgic for a past that never was. However, this demonstration is overshadowed by Behrooz’s repeated attempts to show how Tolkien aligns with – and in so doing anticipates, at least chronologically– several influential theorists in literary studies, including Michel Foucault, Donna Haraway, and Edward Said.

I am not convinced that demonstrating the similarities between Tolkien’s work and that of these theorists is necessarily the best way to argue for Tolkien’s political significance, especially since he never appears to know more than – or think differently from – the more recent figures with whose work his oeuvre is being compared. That is, for Behrooz, the far-reaching qualities of, say, Tolkien’s incipient posthumanism are far-reaching precisely because they stake out a position supposedly akin to that staked out decades

later by the likes of Timothy Morton. This may legitimate the study of Tolkien in some circles, but it does not seem likely to further that study nearly as much as would be hoped.

However, before I get into the details of how Behrooz frames her argument and where I think it succeeds or goes astray, I should acknowledge that she clearly knows Tolkien's work inside out, and when she is not making these "see, he's just like X" moves, her interpretations, both of Tolkien's narratives and of his maps, are often insightful. Indeed, there is a marked difference, both in tone and success of execution, between her brief (and often a bit dated) summaries of various lines of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century academic inquiry and her frequently shrewd commentary on particular moments in *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and the other, less polished narratives of Middle-earth that were brought out toward the end of Tolkien's life and posthumously. As I will try to argue at the end of this review, Behrooz's close readings offer glimpses into how scholarship on Tolkien might be able to fit into literary studies as a genuinely equal partner. That is not ultimately the book we have, but perhaps Behrooz has pointed the way toward how we might get such a book.

First, though, let us consider what *Mapping Middle-earth* has to offer its readers. As its title suggests, Behrooz is interested in the maps that Tolkien and his son made, both those that were included in the published novels and others that were preserved by Christopher Tolkien's zeal to gather up the fragments of his father's study, that nothing be lost. She is also attentive to the landscape – both natural and built – that those maps claim to represent, positioning herself squarely in the tradition of "critical cartography" (a Foucault-inflected movement dating back to the 1980s that is dedicated to unmasking the operations of power in even the most seemingly transparent and innocuous of maps). By focusing on maps and the landscape in this way, she hopes to reveal the "power dynamics that are inherent between people and their surroundings" and "the politics of space within Tolkien's sub-creation" (3, 4). Behrooz divides her critique into three broad areas, each of which receives its own chapter: the environmental devastation wrought by humans over the past few centuries, the incommensurate time-scales on which humans and non-humans operate, and the ecological consequences of European imperialism.

Each chapter is structured in largely the same way: it opens with an overview of the dominant positions regarding the topic at hand (sometimes making it sound like there is more of a consensus than I think there is), which is then followed by a series of explorations of moments and recurrent issues in Tolkien's work that intersect with that topic. For example, chapter two, entitled "Environment," surveys ecocriticism, especially the strain that tries to theorize the Anthropocene and the post-human, and then analyzes the figure of Tom Bombadil; the instrumental use of maps by Bilbo Baggins, Aragorn, and Gandalf; different approaches to stewardship of the environment, especially those of Gandalf and Denethor; the destruction of trees in the expansion of Númenor; and the agency of the non-human, such as when the mountain Caradhras tries to block the fellowship of the ring from crossing. In some of these discussions, maps figure prominently. In others, they fade from view, and we only get a consideration of the landscape and its inhabitants. Throughout this chapter, though, Behrooz seeks to demonstrate how "Tolkien was dancing around many of [the] same ideas" as modern theorists: "a fundamental mistrust

of the separation between the human and the non-human,” “this separation’s proclivity towards hierarchy, [and] a fascination with decentring the Anthropos and recognizing nature as a kinetic force that begins to collapse the ontological and phenomenological boundaries between the human and the non-human” (68). By her account,

Tolkien’s writing touches on some of the foundations of deep ecology in his dislike of instrumentalism, his fervent belief in the value of nature beyond human need. But ... he also goes beyond this towards philosophical queries into the boundaries between the human and non-human, stressing a non-human intentionality and a wild, chthonic vibrancy that disrupts the boundary that cartography, among other things, attempts to fix around the human and the non-human (69).

I quote so extensively in order to convey a sense of what Behrooz regards as the stakes of her inquiry in this chapter and to offer a taste of her prose, which is not always as fluid as would be helpful to readers trying to follow her argument. She sees Tolkien as offering “a radical approach that goes far beyond the love of trees with which he is so associated” and it is in that unexpected radicalism that the value of his work apparently lies (69).

I am not persuaded that this is the most productive way in which “to bring [Tolkien’s] oeuvre more seriously within the field of literary studies” (174). For one thing, it downplays what I would regard as one of Behrooz’s real strengths: her insight into particular moments in Tolkien’s work. For example, I had never considered the parallels between the Hobbits clearing trees for farming in the Shire and the Orcs doing so as part of the fortification of Isengard (82–83). Yet now that Behrooz, following Verlyn Flieger, has pointed out those parallels, it is hard not to see the Hobbits as more aggressive and reckless than their general reputation would suggest. Similarly, her insistence that maps attempt to “freez[e] the deep time of the landscape” (114) sets up an interesting discussion of Lothlórien as “an act of embalming, a ‘corner of the Elder Days’ that ought to be relegated to the ancient depths of deep time but is not” (123). Accordingly, it has “the same stagnation” that is to be found in “the artificial fixity of the map as object”: “nestled” at the center of the map that is included in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, “between the Drimrill Dale and the Field of Celebrant, the Nimrodel running neatly through it in ink, Lórien is preserved forever, a cluster of trees that – much like the mallorn themselves – can never wither or fade” (125).

However, the intriguing implications of what Behrooz is drawing out of these passages are unnecessarily curtailed by her repeated insistence that what lends them significance is the way in which they anticipate the positions of more recent theorists. I am completely open to the possibility that Tolkien “was a man, in many ways, ahead of his time” (133). But being Said or J.B. Harley *avant la lettre* is hardly the only way to be ahead of one’s time and many of the most provocative aspects of Tolkien’s work are ones that do not wholly align with the theorists that Behrooz is holding up as the gold standard. Consider, for example, her claim that the impossibility of adequately mapping a dynamic process like the Huorns forming a wood around Isengard helps us understand the measures they are taking as “the ultimate act of non-human incomppliance” (96). This strikes me as an idea that has the potential to take recent thinking

about non-human agency in an interesting new direction – one that focuses less on the somewhat spatialized concepts of networks and assemblages and more on how the will of non-human actors works over both space and time. Unfortunately, Behrooz declines the opportunity to consider Tolkien as a theorist in his own right whose work might challenge and extend that of recent post-humanism. Rather, what she sees as important about Tolkien's work in this regard is that it "reform[s] and resist[s] the easy fantasy soundbite of the legendarium – a moral, binary battle between good and evil – into something much more radical and ambivalent: a troubling of our automatic centering of human concerns" akin to the challenges laid down by Morton, Haraway, et al. with which we are already familiar (96). That is, Behrooz seems far more concerned with legitimating the study of Tolkien by showing that it could lead to the same conclusions as recent theorists than with using his work to push their theories in new, more sophisticated and nuanced directions. Perhaps the latter is not how she conceives of the task of literary studies, but I think not pursuing it is a missed opportunity.

Behrooz seems to unnecessarily limit the force of her argument in another way as well. She repeatedly acknowledges the existence of other ways of thinking about the material on which she is working, only to immediately discount them or set them aside as having been covered by someone else. Yet often those other ways of thinking could intersect with Behrooz's in intriguing and important ways. For example, she is rather dismissive toward considering maps as a form of paratext or something that readers would engage with as part of following the narrative or understanding a fictional world, except in the case of Thrór's map, which has a clear function within the storyworld of *The Hobbit*. Yet it seems highly probable that many readers, especially lay readers, have engaged in just that sort of map-use in order to grasp, for example, how difficult it would be to get from the Shire to Mordor. Moreover, surely it makes a difference whether they are doing so with a black-and-white map printed as its own double-page spread early in the text itself (as it appears, for example, in the 1965 Ballantine paperback edition of *The Fellowship of the Ring*) or as a slightly different fold-out map printed in color and attached to the rear endpapers, as it is in a 1987 Houghton Mifflin hardcover edition. Behrooz seems to regard these ways of approaching maps as both naïve and already sufficiently treated by scholars like Ricardo Padrón. But surely things remain to be said about how the paratextual positioning of maps, or their use by readers as narrative assistants or guides to world-building, could intersect with the kinds of critique that she is teasing out.

Similarly, Behrooz acknowledges that Gerard Hynes has argued that "the Vale Ossë drag[ging] an island across the sea" in *The Book of Lost Tales* is probably a nod to "an episode in the *Prose Edda*, in which the giantess Gefjon pulls Zealand out into the ocean" (105). However, she immediately pivots away from a consideration of the consequences of this nod, effectively suggesting that the only context that matters for Tolkien's engagement with different time scales is the discrediting of the creation story in Genesis brought about by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century geology. However, since Tolkien was a medievalist by trade, it seems likely that we could learn something useful by considering how the semi-mythic time of the sagas resembles or departs from the deep time of geology (not to mention the compressed time of Church doctrine). All of which is to say that by only permitting her argument to include

what she regards as new, Behrooz prevents her ideas from going as far as they could, had they engaged more with some of the traditional concerns of Tolkien scholarship. Perhaps she is working from a premise that those traditional concerns have kept Tolkien from being taken sufficiently “seriously within the field of literary studies” (174), but I would propose that the best way to bring about the latter would be to treat Tolkien’s work as something that is good to think with, rather than as merely an object on which to bring recent theory to bear, and to consider previous Tolkien scholarship, no matter how seemingly old-fashioned, as a potential interlocutor for other modes of inquiry, instead of a closed body of work to accept or reject.

Two final things should be noted. One is big and the other fairly small. The big thing is that Behrooz gives equal weight to the published novels and to all of the subsequently gathered material. This has the potential advantage of positioning them all as necessary components of the legendarium as a whole, but if Behrooz is interested in Tolkien’s work as a prescient critique of some important aspects of our own time, then I should think it would matter that several thousand times more readers have plunged into *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* than into any of the other material, not all of which is even finished. The small thing is that the copyediting process seems to have broken down in the production of this book. Several of the works cited in the text are not in the bibliography and there are a number of small errors that should have been caught before publication: for example, there is an allusion to Haraway as “her of cyborg fame” (68), a claim that Bilbo’s close attention to maps has “worked to give him skills thatch none of the other characters possess” (73), a reference to the “principle narrative tension” across Tolkien’s oeuvre (134), and a dating of “the genocide of Indigenous populations in the colonization of the Americas” to 1452 (139).

Ultimately, *Mapping Middle-earth* does not take us as far as it could or as I wish it would. But it is nonetheless a useful counter to the still far too common caricature of Tolkien as a nostalgic, largely apolitical conservative. Behrooz’s book is also a helpful guide to the ways in which Tolkien responds to some of the questions posed by what she calls “our own collective mistake-making” (175). While the book probably will not do all that Behrooz apparently hopes it will do, it is worth engaging with nonetheless, both as a collection of interesting observations about different moments in Tolkien’s oeuvre and as a cautionary example of how too narrow a definition of significance can get in the way of demonstrating the actual importance of one’s work.

Biography: David A. Brewer is Associate Professor of English at The Ohio State University. After a quarter-century of writing about eighteenth-century literature, the history of the book, and the complexities of fictionality, he is now turning his attention to fantasy and the history of magic, the first fruits of which will be a short book on Susanna Clarke’s *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*.



BOOK REVIEW:
Imagining the Celtic Past in Modern Fantasy

Robert Finnigan

Fimi, Dimitra, and Alistair J.P. Sims, editors. *Imagining the Celtic Past in Modern Fantasy*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. ISBN 9781350349995.

In the introduction to *Imagining the Celtic Past in Modern Fantasy* (2023), Dimitra Fimi states: “The idea of ‘Celticity’ has often functioned as a reservoir of cultural memory, nostalgia, and constructed heritage in modern fantasy” (3). This assertion sets the tone for a rich and detailed exploration of how contemporary fantasy literature engages with, reinterprets, and challenges notions of Celtic heritage. Published as part of Bloomsbury’s *Perspectives on Fantasy* series, this book provides a collection of essays that interrogate the construction and utilization of Celticity in modern narratives. Rather than presenting a singular overarching argument, the editors have organized the volume as a thematic exploration, creating a multifaceted examination that progresses from Celtic elements as narrative intrusions to their commodification in popular culture. With contributions from ten researchers, the book illuminates the ideological, cultural, and historical stakes of depicting Celtic pasts in fantasy literature. The text will undoubtedly appeal to scholars of fantasy and heritage studies, though its theoretical density may challenge general readers.

The book is divided into four parts, each focusing on specific thematic and generic aspects of Celtic fantasy. The progression of these sections reveals a deliberate curatorial vision from the editors, moving from localized literary analysis toward broader cultural implications. Part I, “Celticity as Fantastic Intrusion,” examines how Celtic elements intrude upon historical and narrative frameworks in three key texts and sets the stage with three essays examining how Celtic elements create a sense of otherness or magical incursion into otherwise familiar worlds. K.A. Laity’s chapter on Susanna Clarke’s *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* explores the tension between Englishness and Celticity

in the novel, with particular attention to how fairy magic embodies an unsettling Celtic otherness. Laity's analysis draws out the anxieties surrounding the porous boundary between rational English magic and its more emotional, dangerous, and Celtic-coded counterpart. Following this exploration, Gwendolen Grant's discussion of Alan Garner's *Boneland* situates the novel within Garner's broader engagement with Celtic mythology, revealing how Jungian psychology and Garner's personal mythology inform the seamless blending of worlds in his novel. The first part concludes with Kris Swank's essay on Jodi McIsaac's *The Thin Veil* series, offering a compelling examination of how McIsaac's heroines draw on Irish mythological figures to navigate personal and collective crises, presenting supernatural gifts as deeply intertwined with human and humane qualities.

Part II, "Celtic Fantasy Worlds and Heroes," turns to world-building and heroic narratives. Alistair J.P. Sims analyses the heroic biographies of Cú Chulainn and Connavar in David Gemmell's *Rigante* series, employing the Heroic Biography Pattern, a framework analyzing the recurring narrative elements in heroic lives similar to Campbell's hero's journey, to unpack their archetypal qualities and narrative functions. Anthony Smart's chapter complements this with a detailed study on the influence of classical ethnography on Gemmell's depiction of Celtic and Romanized worlds, illustrating the complex interplay of barbarism and civilization in these narratives. Cheryl Morgan's essay on Patricia Kennealy's *Keltiad* series rounds out this section with a fascinating exploration of how Celtic myths and futuristic settings intertwine to create a richly imagined and ideologically loaded narrative universe, further demonstrating how heroic patterns evolve across different storytelling contexts.

Part III, "Celtic Fantasy Beyond the Anglophone," broadens the discussion by highlighting non-Anglophone perspectives, demonstrating how Celtic imagery transcends linguistic boundaries. French language fantasies take center stage in Viviane Bergue's chapter as she examines how Léa Silhol's work blends Celtic and Christian mythologies, positioning Silhol's portrayal of faeries as representations of both fallen angels and moral arbiters in a fantastical world. Duncan Sneddon's essay on Iain F. MacLeòid's *An Sgoil Dhubh*, on the other hand, focuses on Gaelic history and mythology, offering a close reading of how MacLeòid integrates Old Irish sagas, Norse traditions, and contemporary Gaelic identity into a uniquely rooted fantasy setting. Both chapters highlight the depth and diversity of Celtic influences across languages and cultures.

Part IV, "Fantastic Perceptions of Celticity" then moves on to examine the cultural commodification and reinterpretation of Celtic themes in speculative fiction and fan culture. Juliette Wood's essay on the Celtic Tarot discusses how modern esoteric practices imaginatively link Celtic mythology with divination, despite the historical disconnect between these traditions. The volume concludes with Angela R. Cox's chapter where she uses critical discourse analysis to explore fan discussions of Celtic material in fantasy, uncovering how Celtic tropes have become so embedded in genre conventions that they are often rendered invisible. Cox's work also highlights the colonialist undertones of these tropes, noting how the romanticized and homogenized use of Celticity often erases authentic Irish and Welsh cultural elements.

One of the volume's strengths is its ability to challenge readers' assumptions about Celticity. As Fimi notes in her introduction, "pan-Celticism"

often collapses regional differences and historical gaps, creating a mythological past that is more coherent than reality. Several essays interrogate the origins of these misconceptions, tracing the romanticized view of Celtic traditions to figures like Robert Graves and Jessie Weston. For instance, Grant's chapter reveals how the triple goddess figure in Garner's work owes more to Graves's *The White Goddess* than to authentic Irish or Welsh sources. Similarly, Wood's essay highlights the imaginative but unhistorical association of the Celtic Tarot with ancient myth.

Imagining the Celtic Past in Modern Fantasy is an invaluable resource for scholars and readers interested in the intersections of fantasy, mythology and cultural identity. Though not structured around a single unified thesis, the editors have crafted a coherent scholarly journey that gradually expands its scope, beginning with close readings of Celtic intrusions in specific texts, moving through examinations of heroic patterns and cross-cultural expressions, and culminating in broader analyses of how Celtic elements function within fan communities and popular consciousness. This structural progression reflects the multilayered nature of Celticity itself as a construct that operates simultaneously as literary device, cultural touchstone, and commercial product. By blending rigorous scholarship with accessible prose, Fimi and Sims have curated a collection of research essays that is as enlightening as it is enjoyable, offering fresh perspectives on the enduring allure of the Celtic past in modern fantasy literature.

Biography: Robert Finnigan obtained his PhD at the University of Sunderland and is now based at the University of Birmingham. Robert is currently researching Arthur O'Shaughnessy and Anglo-Irish contributions to Aestheticism and Decadence within the *fin de siècle* period. His primary research interests lie in the broad areas of Aestheticism, Decadence, as well as Science Fiction, Fantasy and Speculative fiction. He has published several articles on these subjects and has reviewed for journals including *Journal of Victorian Culture*, *Victorian Review*, *Victoriographies* and *The Pre-Raphaelite Review*, *Irish Studies Review*, *Nordic Irish Studies*, *The Irish Journal of French Studies* and *Studi irlandesi: A Journal of Irish Studies*.



BOOK REVIEW:

Identifying Self through Society: A Socio-psychological Perspective of A Song of Ice and Fire

Nicholas Wanberg

Dhantal, Smita. *Identifying Self through Society: A Socio-psychological Perspective of A Song of Ice and Fire*. Christ University, 2024.

Dr. Smita Dhantal's doctoral thesis, *Identifying 'Self' Through Society: A Socio-Psychological Perspective of A Song of Ice and Fire*, sets out to promote a new model for describing fictional characters relative to social and psychological factors. SPCAM (the Social Psychological Character Analysis Model) aims to help researchers be "more methodical and thorough" (vii) in their analyses, offering a novel approach to organizing social and psychological data on fictional characters. The model contextualizes each character's development against affecting social forces and psychological factors, through which those conflicting influences are renegotiated. It then tabulates social and psychological influences on characters, offering various visualizations to depict how the factors interrelate. These charts and tables require careful interpretation but present a thoroughness that could assist researchers in addressing details that might otherwise be overlooked.

The first character from George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* that Dr. Dhantal analyzes is Sansa Stark, examined through the lens of adolescence. This is the least theoretically complex of the readings, and Dr. Dhantal uses this analysis to illustrate the model's basic operations while offering general insights into Sansa's development. Building on this, Dr. Dhantal then expands into a focus on engagement with more overtly external social forces by analyzing Arya Stark in the context of religion. This second analysis highlights the complex interplay between religious influence and individual psychology in the novels, as it manifests in Arya's life experiences.

Next, to further illustrate the model's versatility, Dr. Dhantal shows how it can offer insights even into comparatively minor characters. To this end, the study on Viserys Targaryen in the third analysis chapter contrasts the character's self-perception with their perception by society, highlighting a productive interplay between the contrasting perspectives.

Lastly, in the culminating analysis, Dr. Dhantal builds on the preceding examples to engage with the social model of disability and analyze the development of Tyrion Lannister. Aimed at emphasizing SPCAM's ability to engage with major theoretical perspectives, the analysis highlights how social and psychological forces work together to construct or deconstruct Tyrion as a disabled character. This illuminates how various actors and social trends work to hide his abilities and undermine his accomplishments by reference to his disabled status. At the same time, Tyrion's actions and perspective are found to show various attempts to resist, renegotiate, or occasionally exploit that construction. Finally this is compared to other characters with the same physical condition, demonstrating that Tyrion's perspective is shaped by factors beyond disability and ability. Hence the analysis demonstrates how gender, class, and other forms of social privilege have been central to his ability to resist and renegotiate his status and how they have contributed to the nuances of his sense of self.

Dr. Dhantal notes that the model has been published as a patent by the Government of India and forms the basis of several forthcoming publications, suggesting further developments and explorations yet to come. While in the long run we may come to see this as an early iteration of SPCAM, already the present version shows interesting avenues for refinement and adaptability toward ongoing research. Although in its current form SPCAM is more descriptive than analytical, as Dr. Dhantal shows, it provides a basis that can lay the groundwork for nuanced analytical conclusions. Furthermore, the tables and charts that can be generated with the model may provide a constructive way for researchers to organize their observations. Overall, Dr. Dhantal's work establishes a foundation for methodological character analysis, inviting further development and scholarly engagement. It will be interesting to see how the model evolves across subsequent applications.

Biography: Nicholas Wanberg holds a PhD from the University of Tampere, where his research focused on intelligent non-human creatures in speculative fiction and their role in engaging with race and Whiteness. His published and forthcoming works examine Whiteness, gender, reproduction, and aesthetics across fan fiction, film, and literature. He is not currently affiliated with academia or pursuing an academic career.



BOOK REVIEW:

*The Human Race Vs. the Minorities: Racism,
anti-racism, and intelligent non-humans in
the world architecture of speculative fiction*

Smita Dhantal

Wanberg, Nicholas. *The Human Race Vs. the Minorities: Racism, anti-racism, and intelligent non-humans in the world architecture of speculative fiction*. Tampere University, 2023. ISBN 978-952-03-2949-5.

Despite being heavily dependent on imagination and fantastic elements, speculative fiction has always been considered to entail reflection on, or critique of, real-world problems. Nicholas Wanberg's research for his doctoral dissertation is a timely and important commentary on the different layers and meanings of racism in social and diegetic contexts. After a thorough review of existing research on concepts of racism and the role of non-humans in speculative fiction, he weaves a connection between the two. He finds that previous studies have not examined "how racism encodes at the level of the world's architecture" (35) and aims to bridge this gap by analysing both written and cinematic works: J.R.R. Tolkien's novels *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, the seven books of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, and the original cinematic trilogy of George Lucas's *Star Wars*.

Wanberg clearly defines his key terms, such as "non-intelligent humans," "world architecture," and different approaches to "anti-racism." It is noteworthy that he distinguishes world architecture from world-building. While world-building is the "practice or process whereby imaginary worlds form in the minds of authors and readers," world architecture is "the collection of all details about the world that can be confirmed by appealing to the text, emphasizing the relationships between details" (52). Wanberg extensively reviews relevant literature related to the above key concepts and examines how racism evolves in the selected works in relation to examples of real-world

racism — whether this is through the use of particular vocabulary or the juxtaposition of being politically correct in public spaces whilst tolerating casual racism in informal settings. He then draws examples from the text to prove how societal hierarchies in speculative fiction mimic those of the real world. The humans of speculative fiction are compared with white supremacy groups in the real world, wherein a white male transcends all racial markers, and overrides others in leadership qualities and moral superiority.

After tracing relevant elements of racism historically in the initial chapters, Wanberg focuses on its symbolic characteristics in his final chapters. He discusses concepts such as color-coding, morality, sexuality, and reproduction with reference to the position of BIPOC characters (Black Indigenous Person/People of Color) in the world architecture, compared with the *white* men on the social hierarchy. Wanberg also discusses works of speculative fiction which try to break away from these patterns by creating characters who deliberately counter such norms of color-coding and hierarchy. In doing so, he argues that such works reinforce the presence of whiteness that corresponds with real-world stereotypes.

Finally, Wanberg notes that while racism and resistance to racism have always coexisted, the term “anti-racism” and its various forms emerged only in the mid-twentieth century. As the select texts have already been used to study anti-racist themes in previous research, Wanberg makes way for alternative readings that enable discussion of how the selected texts are commentaries on racism in the contexts of relativism, universalism and practice-oriented anti-racism. Wanberg uses this research to argue that relativism and practice-oriented anti-racism can co-exist harmoniously. He employs John Fiske’s concept of guerilla reading which helps readers validate their perspective by being selective about the examples they encode in their analysis, giving way to alternative interpretations. Similarly, accepting the differences between social groups and races can help people to co-exist peacefully. Wanberg’s dissertation not only contributes to the discourse on racism and anti-racism in the world-building that takes place in speculative fiction, but it also sheds light on these concepts as seen in the real world. Such discussions are important academically as they affect young minds who will move forward in academia and in the world with an enduring, responsible, and accepting mind-set.

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Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research invites authors to submit papers for issue 1/2026. Research into any and all aspects of science fiction, fantasy, and other speculative genres is welcome from a range of disciplines.

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The submissions must be original works written in English, Finnish, or a Scandinavian language. Manuscripts for research articles should be between 20,000 and 40,000 characters in length. The journal uses the most recent edition of the MLA Style Manual (MLA 9). The manuscripts for research articles will be subjected to a double-blind peer-review. Please note that as *Fafnir* is designed to be of interest to readers with varying backgrounds, essays and other texts should be as accessibly written as possible. Also, if English is not your first language, please have your article proofread by an English-language editor. Please ensure your submission conforms to our journal's submission guidelines, which are available at: <https://fafnir.journal.fi/about/submissions>

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