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Editorial 2/2025

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

Fafnir's second issue of 2025 kicks off the new year – already off to a tumultuous start rife with speculative possibilities – with another timely selection of speculative fiction research, essays, and book reviews.

Many of the contributions to this issue follow the exploration of novel speculative perspectives to the climate crisis that has been an important line of inquiry in our journal throughout 2025. We are grateful to Israel A. C. Noletto, Professor of English Language and Literature at the Federal Institute of Piauí (IFPI), Brazil, for providing us with an inspiring prefatory on such themes for this issue, “The Search for the Perfect Era: Speculative Fiction and Eutopian Imagination.” Noletto reflects on the representation of utopia in contemporary speculative fiction, drawing attention to recent narrative movements such as solarpunk and hopepunk whilst looking back to the influences and impacts of “Golden Age” SF. Exploring a range of optimistic futures, Noletto ushers *Fafnir* into the new year, arguing for the ways in which speculative fiction “reasserts the power of storytelling as a cultural force”, empowering and emboldening writers and readers alike.

The two peer-reviewed articles that follow also engage in pragmatic and timely ecocritical inquiries by interrogating the critical potential of fantasy world-building as a tool for climate education and exploring a new mode of telling environmental and future-oriented stories that is emerging in Norwegian literature. In “Climate Models as a Retroactive and Exploratory World-building Tool,” John Cook, Alexander Farnsworth, Dan Lunt, Dann Mitchell, and Michael Farnsworth examine the famous fantasy worlds of J. R. R. Tolkien, George R. R. Martin, and Robert Jordan, as well as one built by Cook himself, as speculative climate models on a global scale. In so doing, they make a case for fantasy world-building as an engaging form for making climate science accessible to general audiences. “*Undringslitteratur*: Understanding New Norwegian Speculative Fictions” by Marta Tveit, in turn, identifies a form of speculative storytelling that is characterized by its Anthropocene poetics of scale, attention to everyday life, engagement with spirituality, and articulation of local elements considered characteristically Norwegian.

The issue also includes an essay by Markus Laukkanen, “*Game of Thrones* as a Work of Fantasy Fiction in the Storytelling Environment of the Internet,” based on the *lectio praecursoria* he gave at his doctoral defense at Tampere University in November 2025. In this essay, Laukkanen draws attention to the interactive media culture that formed around *Game of Thrones* as an intriguing challenge for speculative fiction research, which challenges both our notions of the relations between storytellers and readers and our preconceptions of the fantasy genre and its fandom.

This issue’s book reviews section is curated, for the last time, by our longtime Reviews Editor Jari Käkälä, whom we warmly thank for his dedicated service to *Fafnir*. The section is again full of insightful reviews of interesting scholarly publications on speculative fiction. Jeremy Brett reviews *Science Fiction and the Historical Novel: Days of Future Pasts*, edited by Ian P. MacDonald and Kate Polak, which explores the intersections between the historical and the speculative, examining the relationship between the past and the representation of possible future worlds. Turning to recent studies in fantasy research, Natalie Hopwood reviews Richard Z. Gallant’s monograph *Germanic Heroes, Courage, and Fate: Northern Narratives of Tolkien’s Legendarium*, which offers a new perspective on the theory of Northern Courage and the heroic, as presented in the works of J. R. R. Tolkien. Andrea Valeiras’s review of *The Songs of the Spheres: Lewis, Tolkien and the Overlapping Realms of their Imagination*, edited by Łukasz Neubauer and Guglielmo Spirito, highlights another recent work in Tolkien studies, which offers a critical comparison of the works of Tolkien and C. S. Lewis with a particular focus on Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia* and Tolkien’s (sub)creative projects. Anna Juhi John provides, in turn, a welcome outlook to science fiction studies in India by reviewing Urvashi Kuhhad’s *Science Fiction and Indian Women Writers: Exploring Radical Potentials*, which places analytical focus on the works of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Manjula Padmanabhan, Priya Sarukkai Chabria and Vandana Singh. The focus on fantasy continues in Jayden King’s review of Matthew Oliver’s *Magic Words, Magic Worlds: Form and Style in Epic Fantasy*, which focuses on the art of close reading. Oliver engages with selected novels from authors such as Brandon Sanderson, Robert Jordan and N. K. Jemisin, to explore language and style in epic fantasy. Calling attention an often-overlooked theme in speculative fiction, Miranda Miller’s review of Julie Wosk’s *Artificial Women: Sex Dolls, Robot Caregivers, and More Facsimile Females* examines the development and representation of artificial women across media, highlighting the relationships between sexuality, gender, technology and simulation. Finally, Cristina Arbués Caballé reviews Jaime Harrison’s *Digital Culture in Contemporary Fiction*, which investigates the representation of computational algorithms in the works of Joshua Cohen, Nicola Barker, Neal Stephenson, and a visual novel developed by Grasshopper Manufacture.

May this issue of *Fafnir* provide readers inspiration and food for thought for the new year. From the lair of Fafnir, we wish you all happy reading!

Elise Kraatila, Jessica Norledge, and Merve Tabur, Editors-in-Chief
 Jari Käkälä, Reviews Editor
Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research



The Search for the Perfect Era: Speculative Fiction and Eutopian Imagination

Israel A. C. Noletto

1. Introduction

The end and beginning of each year tend to inspire a kind of seasonal optimism, despite all the anxieties trailing behind from the year just closed. It is precisely this cultural trait of renewed anticipation that makes this moment particularly apt for reflecting upon a perspective that contemporary speculative fiction does not seem to deploy very often anymore: the eutopian framework (*eu-*, “beautiful”, plus *-topos*, “place” in Greek), or a narrative mode that depicts an intentionally good or improved society. Over the past two decades, most science fiction and fantasy, especially those oriented around the Anthropocene, have leaned towards gloomy palettes. In effect, ecological collapse, techno-dystopia, exhaustion of planetary resources, or dark fantastical settings such as grimdark fantasy have dominated the imaginative horizon. Yet this pessimistic swing is not the full story of these genres. There was a time, not too distant yet now feeling strangely remote, when both fantasy and science fiction invested their creative energies in composing worlds suffused with optimism, where courage, ethical determination, and curiosity were not uncritical hopes but workable assumptions about human exceptionalism.

It is in part towards these moments, commonly labelled “the Golden Age” in science fiction and the “foundational era” in fantasy, that this prefatory section turns. In so doing, I do not defend a nostalgic return to earlier modes or claim the superiority of mid-century imaginaries over contemporary ones. Rather, I aim to examine how the optimistic ethos of certain fantasy and science fiction traditions once shaped human possibility at moments when technological acceleration, geopolitical disruption, and cultural turbulence tempted writers towards despair. More to the point, I wish to draw attention to

more recent narrative movements, such as solarpunk and hopepunk, which revive this optimistic impulse in new forms. These movements, as their -punk suffix suggests, inherit a countercultural spirit – not one of nihilism or violent rebellion, but of defiance against pessimism and social degradation. In this way, they demonstrate speculative fiction’s ongoing capacity to frame the futures we desire and the pasts from which we draw strength.

2. A Golden Age in the Far Future

In the introduction to his essay on greenpunk, Pacheco (2010) poses two questions: What if technology is no longer a form of contamination? What if technology is precisely the key to saving the world? Despite addressing a recent literary phenomenon, these questions also represent the creative impulse of several stories from the Golden Age science fiction era (1926-1960), often remembered for its techno-optimism, a brisk confidence in what science and engineering could deliver. Under John W. Campbell Jr.’s direction, *Astounding Science Fiction* cultivated narratives in which technological ingenuity and rational problem-solving were not only expected but routinely rewarded, shaping a readerly sense that the future was open to improvement through unwavering human effort (Page 2019). Contemporary reference works likewise emphasize this prevailing mood, characterizing the era by its assumption that scientific progress, most emphatically via impossible gadgets, was both inevitable and beneficial, a framework that helped define the period’s larger imaginative impetus (Attebery 2003). Taken together, these accounts show that Golden Age stories habitually aligned technological advancement with social possibility, producing the clear, forward-tilted optimism that became a recognizable trait of this kind of science fiction.

A shared sense of optimism towards the future persisted for long sweeps of time. Major film and television franchises that followed continued to reaffirm this forward-looking sensibility, attracting global audiences over several decades. *Star Trek* – both the original series (1966-1969) and *The Next Generation* (1987-1994) – offers the clearest expression of this paradigm, imagining a post-capitalist society grounded in diversity (human and alien), cooperation, and a pursuit of understanding of the universe rather than material accumulation. Within these imagined worlds, technological advancement has reached a point where pervasive human problems have been eliminated, creating an optimistic vision of social possibilities. For instance, space exploration has allowed humanity to reach deep space and unfathomable knowledge. Gadgets like the universal translator made linguistic barriers obsolete, though invented to avoid the need for fictional languages, while the replicator (a kind of matter synthesizer) eradicated hunger and scarcity. *Doctor Who* (1963-present) tempers this technological confidence with a stronger emphasis on moral resilience, but it similarly foregrounds humanity’s capacity for doing good; its tenth modern-series season repeatedly invokes this belief in human worth, most notably in moments of profound crisis.

Today, stories exploring a similar formula, extolling a hopeful vision on humanity’s future, have recently begun to gain traction again. These have developed into an aesthetic movement termed solarpunk, a twenty-first-century science fiction mode that envisions equitable, ecologically restored

futures powered by renewable energy and collective care. Emerging in the early 2010s through online manifestos and visual art, it developed into a recognizable literary tendency with works such as *Sunvault: Stories of Solarpunk and Eco-Speculation* (2017) edited by Phoebe Wagner et al. and the *Glass and Gardens* anthologies (2018; 2020) edited by Sarena Ulibarri. These texts imagine communities who forge sustainable futures not through grand technological leaps but through communal cooperation, and localized innovation. In this sense, solarpunk fiction does not ignore current societal problems but rather operates as a cultural response to contemporary concerns like climate change, environmental degradation, and the perceived precarity of general conditions of the present.

In its narrative practice, solarpunk gives these commitments tangible shape through futures that are local, intimate, and materially attentive. Its prose mostly avoids the dense figurative language common to fantasy or the technological slang of cyberpunk. Instead, it generates a bright, unhurried clarity, favoring images of maintenance, shared labor, and small acts of care, highlighting simple everyday tasks rather than spectacle. *Multispecies Cities: Solarpunk Urban Futures* (2021) edited by Chaudhuri et al., for instance, offers such an orientation, with stories that imagine urban spaces in which renewable infrastructures and ecological reciprocity are folded into ordinary life, not as background detail but as the conditions through which communities negotiate responsibility and belonging (Schuller 2023). Becky Chambers's *A Psalm for the Wild Built* (2021) and *A Prayer for the Crown Shy* (2022) develop this sensibility in a quieter key: their solar-powered settlements, slow travel, and rituals of care sketch a world where technological sufficiency supports ethical curiosity rather than accumulation. In terms of themes and tropes, these texts seem to draw considerably on works like Ursula K. Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* (1985), a narrative about Earth's hypothesized surviving inhabitants that "might be going to have lived", whose culture and language reflect their commitment towards perfect environmental harmony – a story that could be rightly viewed as a sort of proto-solarpunk. Across all these works, solarpunk's thematic core becomes clear: climate change is neither denied nor catastrophized, but refigured as a collective design challenge, approached through concerted effort rather than heroics. Now at its early stages, solarpunk still looks exceedingly zealous, but it might, in time, settle into a more tempered vocabulary of hope, one that balances its fervor with a clearer sense of the material and political labor required to sustain the futures it imagines.

3. A Golden Age in a Remote Past

Commonly located in a remote fictional past, fantasy from the end of the foundational era, in what might be considered its own parallel Golden Age, expresses optimism not through technological possibility but through ethical possibility, although these works are often read today through ecological or melancholic lenses. Fantasy is fundamentally a narrative mode that believes in the potential for wisdom and the moral capacities of ordinary beings, frequently using anthropomorphized non-human creatures as symbolic figures. To illustrate, early twentieth-century works such as L. Frank Baum's *The Magic of Oz* (1919) already exemplify this trust in the individual's capacity to acquire and

embody moral attributes. Likewise, in *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955), Bilbo and Frodo are not heroes by predisposition but become heroic through circumstance, loyalty, and a willingness to act in defiance of evil and their own fears. The narrative's belief that courage can be found in unlikely individuals, and that honor has pragmatic force, is not merely thematic: it is the ethical engine of the entire trilogy, something that has been referred to as a sort of "affective novum" (Boucher 2024; Suvin 1979). Other contemporaneous fantasy texts of the twentieth century similarly express confidence in human potential for doing good (and non-human potential as a symbol for certain moral qualities). C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956) are structured around the assumption that ordinary children are capable of extraordinary righteousness and leadership. In a similar vein, Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* trilogy (1968-1972), while more psychologically complex, still frames the attainment of wisdom as a reachable horizon.

This confidence in the moral capacities of ordinary figures continues in later fantasy, though it begins to take on a different inflection as the genre turns its attention from heroic deeds to quieter labor and personal virtue. In the realm of cartoons and anime, stories such as *The Secret of Kells* (2009) and *Spirited Away* (2001) foreground characters whose courage, or acts of courage, is measured less by battle prowess or displays of strength than by attentiveness, curiosity, and compassion. In these narratives, a kind of moral optimism emerges in that they imagine human beings as generally capable of incremental, thoughtful acts that culminate in transformative change, reaffirming a view of humankind in which hope is enacted through daily choices rather than epic deeds. In connection with such thematic streams, hopepunk's prose typically uses a plain, relational style of language, marked by openness and emotional clarity. It avoids grand metaphors and elevated diction in sharp contrast with more traditional fantasy.

In recent years, this shift has often been discussed under the deliberately loose label "hopepunk," a term coined by Rowland (2017) as a counterpoint to the cynicism of grimdark, later taken up in wider critical discourses, especially among enthusiasts and, perhaps more prominently, in German-language fantasy. As Bauer and Sinning (2025) point out, hopepunk does not constitute a genre or a subgenre in any formal sense but an ethos, that is, a mode of expression that values persistence, mutual care, and a refusal to resign in the face of the bleakest of circumstances. Interestingly, it also seems to draw both on science fiction's commitment to collective problem-solving in precarious worlds and on fantasy's conviction that ordinary people can enact meaningful moral change. Crucially, hopepunk often treats cataclysmic events not as fixed settings but as starting points for an ethos of persistent, communal care in the face of uncertainty. Because this stance is not anchored to a specific scenario, historical moment, or fixed megatext, it moves freely across speculative forms. It can appear in climate-inflected science fiction, but it finds an equally natural home in fantasy, where the work of tending relationships, communities, and fragile places becomes the ground on which hope is enacted.

4. Conclusion

Speculative fiction, at its most hopeful, carries out a kind of double vision. It looks attentively at the pressures of its moment of writing, its social unease, its technological dilemmas, its ecological crisis, and holds them up for scrutiny, as with other forms of non-mimetic writing. Yet it also presses beyond mere criticism, it envisions drastically different alternatives, opening “what if” spaces where solutions can be discussed, futures can be tested, and better worlds can tentatively be shaped. Seen in this way, optimism in speculative fiction is not a naïve gloss laid over difficulty but a narrative stance: a way of arranging attention towards potential rather than inevitability. Much like the turning of the year, with its blend of reckoning and expectation, these stories invite readers to consider what might be changed and how human effort, moral courage, and communal care might set such change in motion on an individual basis.

Such narratives, therefore, offer more than an aesthetic effect. They perform a social function, reminding the reader that imagination is itself an act of participation in the world; to picture alternatives is to create the conceptual room in which actions, however small, can take form. Even amid ambiguity, these stories insist that human agency and ethical attention continue to matter. Consequently, speculative fiction reasserts the power of storytelling as a cultural force, one capable of guiding thought, prompting action, and sustaining aspiration. By modelling futures grounded in eutopian imagination in addition to dystopian predictions that also have their relevant locus, such narratives provide fertile ground for the next waves of creative work, encouraging writers and readers alike to imagine more boldly.

Biography: Israel A. C. Noletto is professor of English language and literature at the Federal Institute of Piau  (IFPI), lecturer in stylistics and science fiction at the Federal University of Piau  (UFPI), Brazil, and a language inventor (conlanger). He holds a PhD in Language and Literature from the Federal University of Piau , Brazil, and was a CAPES fellow at the University of Nottingham (2021-2022). He is interested in literary stylistics and fictional languages in science fiction as a literary phenomenon and has extensive scholarship on glossopoesis in writers ranging from George Orwell to Ted Chiang, Jonathan Swift to Anthony Burgess, Thomas More to Ursula K. Le Guin. He is the author of the book *Fictional Languages in Science Fiction Literature: Stylistic Explorations* (Routledge, 2024) and co-editor of *Reading Fictional Languages* (Edinburgh University Press, 2023), a collection of papers in glossopoesis by scholars in stylistics and professional language inventors from the UK, mainland Europe, USA, China, Argentina, and Brazil.

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Climate Models as a Retroactive and Exploratory World-building Tool

*John Cook, Daniel J. Lunt, Alexander Farnsworth,
Dann Mitchell, Michael Farnsworth*

Abstract: Literary world-building allows authors to experiment with their creation, changing features of imaginary worlds to contrast with the real world. In this sense, fictional world-building is a literary analogue to scientific models – simplified representations of the world. Merging the disparate disciplines of literary world-building and climate modelling, we present case studies of participatory culture, simulating the imaginary worlds of J.R.R. Tolkien, George R. R. Martin, and Robert Jordan, comparing our simulations to the original authors’ depictions. We also show how a climate model of an in-development fantasy world can guide world-building of new imaginary worlds, facilitating narrative immersion. Combining fantasy world-building and climate modeling offers the opportunity to fill gaps in imaginary worlds and draw pedagogical attention to the science of climate models, particularly in a classroom setting.

Keywords: world-building, climate models, fantasy, J.R.R. Tolkien, George R. R. Martin, Robert Jordan

1. Introduction

Epic fantasy has been defined as constituting “a story writ continentally” with the fantasy world itself as a protagonist (Attebery 1). The quest nature of epic fantasy lends itself to *world-building*, with characters traversing strange, new lands and overcoming trials and hardships that are part of the world (Presley 28). World-building – involving the development of geography, climate, society, history, magic systems, and theology in imaginary worlds – is thus

particularly associated with fantasy fiction. Often these imaginary worlds take inspiration from historical events, climatic change, or geographical locations.

This article presents four case studies of climate models developed from fictional fantasy worlds. The first three are from the existing worlds: J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth (a part of Arda), George R. R. Martin's world from *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996–) and its tv adaptation *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019), and Robert Jordan's world from *The Wheel of Time* series (1990–2013). The fourth models a fictional world of Terrios for an in-development climate fiction story by John Cook. We explore how this exercise is an active and sophisticated form of participatory culture that can enhance readers' engagement with and immersion into the imaginary worlds. We recognize that using climate models to explore imaginary worlds does make the assumption that such worlds adhere to "real-world" scientific framework, an assumption that may not have been intended by the original authors. However, climate models like our case studies can function as paratexts, defined by Gérard Genette as extra materials surrounding a text that help the audience engage with the main work (2). Non-authorial, fan-created paratexts like our climate models extend beyond Genette's original formulation, which restricted its scope to author and publisher intent to guide reader reception of the main text.

2. Fantasy world-building and participatory culture

When coining the terms *primary world* (the real world) and *secondary worlds* (imaginary worlds created by the author), Tolkien argued that storytellers are *sub-creators*, constructing worlds with internally consistent laws that readers can believe (*Fairy Stories* 18). An immersive experience is established if sufficient details and description are supplied for the reader to vicariously enter the imaginary world (Wolf, 48). The author's goal is for the reader to suspend their disbelief, a state which Tolkien described as *secondary belief*.

Fantasy has been critiqued as a form of escapism (Tally 43) that potentially causes audiences to disengage from societal issues (Suvin 392). Tolkien rejected this criticism, arguing that fantasy stories are not an escape from reality but a "revolt against the apparent inevitability of the modern, urban, industrial world" (Bal 1287). World-building has the potential to serve a critical purpose (Kraatila, "World-Building" 30), with imaginary worlds being used as satirical or social thought experiments dating back to antiquity (Wolf 148). Early imaginary worlds provided commentary on society, such as Thomas More's *Utopia*, an idealistic island operating on principles of communal living and social equality, which served to highlight flaws and injustices in the real world (Padrón 267). An imaginary world can offer a fresh perspective through which to view our own reality.

On occasion, world-building extends beyond the creation of the original author. Much of Tolkien's *legendarium* was published posthumously by his son Christopher Tolkien through careful curation of copious and sometimes contradictory drafts. Sanctioned by the wife of the late Robert Jordan and his editor, Brandon Sanderson completed *The Wheel of Time* series (Livingston 35–41). A "closed" world is one where the author has declared it finished with no more canonical material to be added to it. However, even in the case of some

closed worlds such as Tolkien's Middle-earth, the author wished to "leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama" (Wolf 270).

A non-canonical form of additive world-building is practiced in participatory fan culture, where fans act not just as passive consumers but also active creative producers (Jenkins, "Fandom" 18). Henry Jenkins introduces concepts such as textual poaching – the act of fans re-purposing materials from a commercial text in their own creative works for various purposes, such as filling gaps in the original work (*Textual Poachers* 53) – and collective intelligence, where readers as a community pool resources and combine skills in a process of shared meaning-making ("Collective"). Jenkins also draws upon the concept of oppositional reading, developed by Stuart Hall, to describe when readers reject the author's intended meaning in favor of a different interpretation (Hall 54). A prominent activity in participatory culture is fan fiction, defined as "fiction written by a 'fan' or reader, without the consent of the original author, yet using that author's characters and world" (Hobb 2005). While most fan fiction focuses on expanding the narratives of characters, it can also expand the world-building, satisfying the reader's desire to fill in gaps left by the author (Wolf 279). M. D. Presley refers to "inspired worldbuilding" that invites the audience to take an active part in the world, exercising their imagination after the story has concluded (88).

To fill those gaps, according to Presley, readers rely on "Primary World defaults" – the expectation that the laws of physics in the imaginary world are largely the same as in our world. This aspect of gap-filling is what Marie-Laure Ryan calls "the principle of minimal departure" (406), asserting that when readers interpret an imaginary world, they automatically assume the world operates similarly to our reality, except where the text explicitly dictates otherwise. Presley refers to it as "terra de facto" – the belief that any detail that is not an output of a fantasy conceit (like magic) must abide by the laws and constraints of the real world (232). This approach minimizes the cognitive labor required to believe the story, facilitating readerly immersion (Gerrig 279). Tolkien similarly argued that a secondary world should be credible in order to command secondary belief and always sought to maintain a finely-tuned balance between familiar realism and the fantastic. The elements of Middle-earth fit into "a framework of climate and geography, familiar skies by night, familiar shrubs and trees" (Kocher 147). This was a hallmark of Tolkien's style, describing familiar, homely things such as weather, the quality of sunlight, the hues of each sunset, all designed to bolster the reader's secondary belief (Kocher 154). Readers assess the created world in terms of the real world, understanding implicitly that anything that does not obviously deviate from the primary world (like dragons or magic) must adhere to our understanding of reality (Presley 80).

While simplified and imperfect, imaginary worlds must still be inherently consistent to provide verisimilitude for readers. In this sense, such worlds can be understood as analogous to scientific models – imperfect but useful representations of the real world (Kraatila, "World-Building" 33). Just as scientific models simplify and omit confounding factors to focus on specific properties, world-building pares away unnecessary details, providing "epistemic access" to phenomena that are otherwise difficult to comprehend (Elgin 8). For example, climate models – complex computer programs that represent our best theoretical understanding of fluid motions, physics,

chemistry, radiation, and biology – are often used as “digital twins” for the real world, where, for instance, an adaptation strategy can be tested in climate models, then fed back into the real world if proven fruitful. Future predictions from climate models play an important role in societal planning, with model results featuring in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports (IPCC).

Because climate models are based on fundamental physical laws, they can be applied to a variety of situations. Their chief use is simulating the Earth’s climate in modern times and the near future, but because the laws of physics are equally applicable at any time, the same models can be applied to any period in Earth’s history, going back many millions of years to when the planet looked very different and, similarly, millions of years into the future. As the laws of physics apply across the universe, climate models can also simulate other planetary bodies both inside and outside our solar system, as well as imaginary worlds. To simulate other worlds, a climate model requires maps specifying the height of the terrain (topography) and ocean depth (bathymetry), along with the type of land or oceans, the concentrations of different gases making up the atmosphere, especially those relevant for mediating temperatures (like ozone and carbon dioxide), and the amount of energy received from a parent star or stars. Further, the model needs parameters such as the radius and rotation rate of the planet.

Farah Mendlesohn argues that in a well-built imaginary world, if one turns the corner of the street, one will not run off the page of the author’s speculation because the coherence of the world is such that out of sight of the author, it forms itself (104). It is in this spirit of emergent imaginary world properties that climate scientists have developed climate models of several fantasy worlds. In some works of fantasy, like the case studies of Tolkien, Martin, and Jordan we present here, the maps and world-building are so detailed that development of a climate model of the imaginary world is possible. The aim of these case studies is to use the medium of fantasy fiction to communicate fundamental aspects of climate science to a broad audience, although they also provide external devices to reflect on the authors’ original worlds.

3. The Climate of Tolkien’s Middle-earth

J.R.R. Tolkien has been highly influential on the fantasy genre, being the first “great world-builder” and a model for modern fantasy authors (Dwyer 3). Tolkien displayed extraordinary attention to detail, drawing up elaborate charts to calculate times and distances that sometimes even included the direction of the wind and the phase of the moon (Carpenter, *Letters* 194). He drew upon his thorough and impressive knowledge of natural history and horticultural lore to develop realistic depictions of nature, helping readers transition from the real to the imaginary (Brisbois 198). The detailed nature of Tolkien’s world has inspired a diverse range of participatory fandom, including a number of books on the invented flora and fauna in Middle-earth (Wolf 173). His maps have inspired mapmaking of Middle-earth by others, like the unauthorized book *The Atlas of Middle-earth* (Wolf 162). In that book, explanations of Middle-earth’s

climate were attempted, such as the grasslands of Rohan resulting from the rain shadow of the Misty Mountains (Fonstad 182).

A radical example of textual poaching, where the author's original creation was repurposed to fill in gaps in worldbuilding, was a comprehensive simulation of the climate of Arda (of which Middle-earth is a relatively small region), described in a non-peer-reviewed mock paper by Radagast the Brown (2013) and expanded upon here. To build a climate model of Arda, first a map of topography and bathymetry was constructed using canonical maps published by Tolkien (*Lord of the Rings*, *Shaping of Middle-earth*) and unauthorized maps (Fonstad). The starting point was a map of the Northern Hemisphere during the Second Age of the world of Arda. The apparently flat world of Arda was mapped onto a sphere by the straightforward mapping of the circular Arda onto an equal-latitude/longitude grid. The missing corner regions were set to be oceans.

Tolkien specified that Middle-earth was our Earth at some distant past (*Lord of the Rings 2*) with the same year-length as ours (1107). In a 1958 letter, Tolkien suggested the fall of Barad-dûr occurred around 6000 years ago (Carpenter, *Letters* 283). Consequently, the radius of Earth and Arda were assumed to be the same, spinning at the same rate in the same direction. Similarly, the strength of the sun, the distance from the Sun to the Earth, and the tilt of the Earth on its spin axis, were assumed to be identical. The resulting global map, at a resolution of 0.5° longitude by 0.5° latitude, is shown in Figure 1.

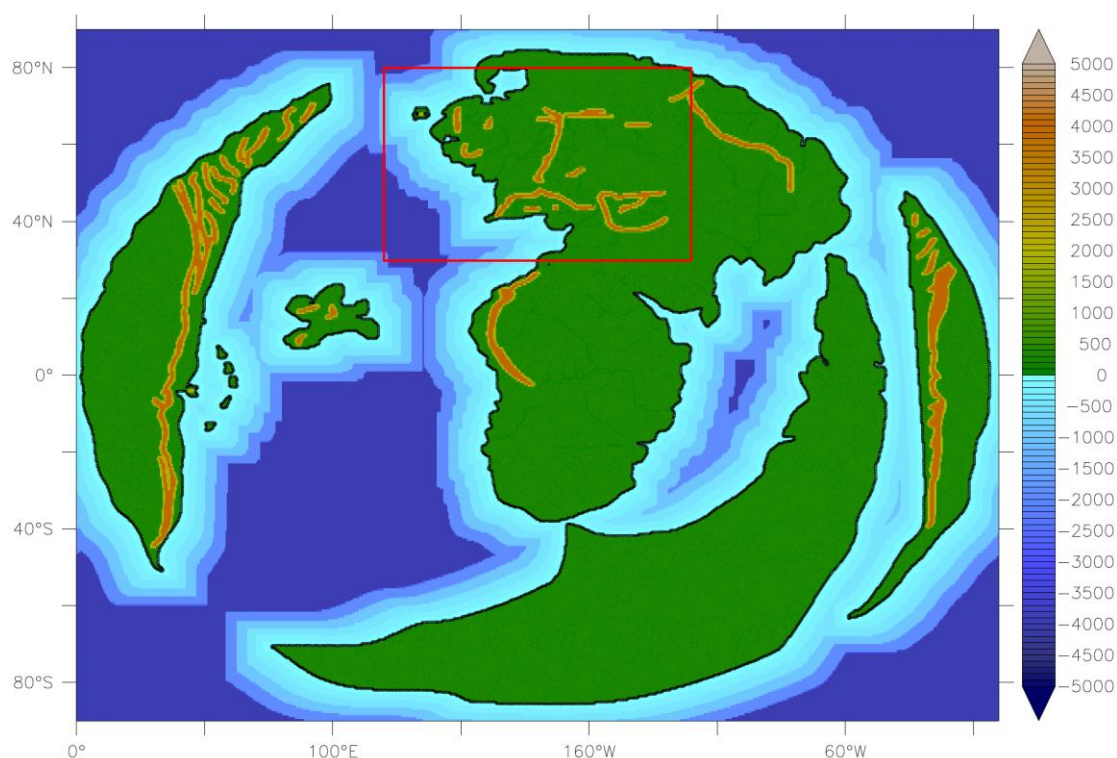


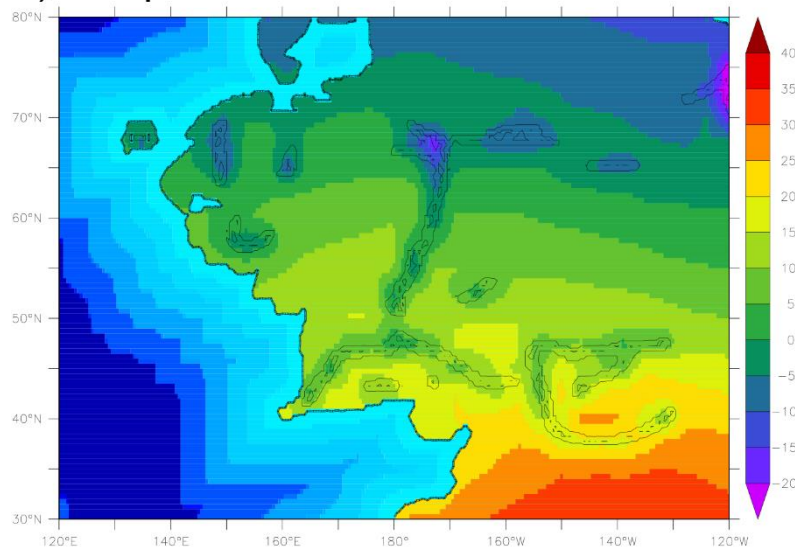
Figure 1. Map of topography and bathymetry for the Arda simulation, shown in units of metres. This world is known as “The Second Age of Arda.” The red rectangle shows the position of Middle-earth.

The climate model simulates temperature over the region of Middle-earth, shown below in Figure 2a. The relationship between temperature and latitude is clear, with cooler poleward regions (for instance, the annual average temperature is below freezing in the far Northern Kingdom of Forodwaith), and warmer equatorward regions (for instance, the annual average temperature is higher than 30°C in Haradwaith). In this respect, the climate of Middle-earth is similar to Western Europe and North Africa, which is unsurprising given that Tolkien was inspired by these regions. High-altitude mountainous regions such as the Misty Mountains are colder than the surrounding low-lying regions. This is because air temperatures cool with increasing altitude, as rising air gives up heat energy in order to expand as it rises. The temperature decreases east of the Misty Mountains, similar to Europe, because seasonality increases farther from the ocean. Winters become colder and summers become warmer, but winters cool more than summers warm, and so annual average temperatures fall away from the ocean.

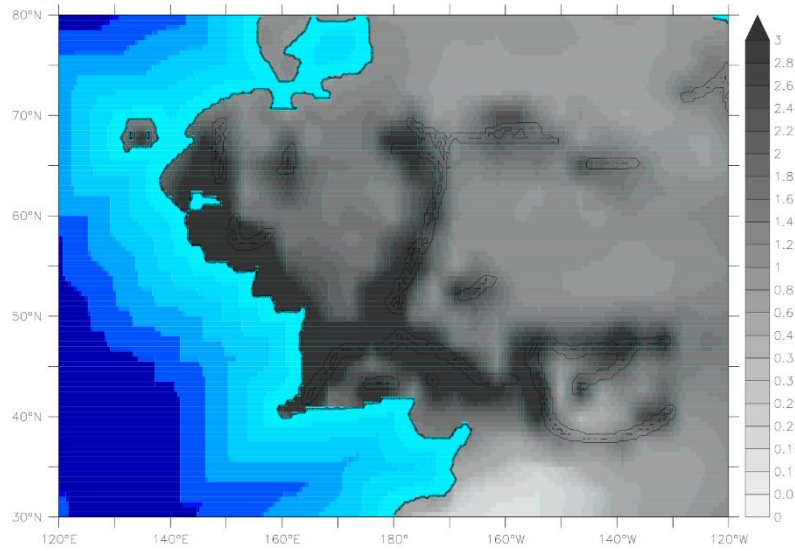
The model-predicted precipitation (rain and snow) over Middle-earth is shown in Figure 2b. The most striking effect is that the highest precipitation occurs over and to the west of mountainous regions, with a drier rain-shadow to the east of the mountains (for example, east of the Misty Mountains). This is because prevailing winds bring moist air from the western ocean onto the lands of Middle-earth. The air cools as it rises over the mountains, causing its moisture to condense from vapor into liquid, forming clouds and falling as rain or snow. On the eastern side of the mountains, the air has lost much of its moisture resulting in less precipitation. The regions in the far South of Middle-earth, in southern Mordor and Haradwaith, are dry, because these are “subtropical” regions, similar to the Sahara desert where dry air descends towards the planet’s surface.

Surface wind speed and direction, and mid-atmospheric pressure over the land of Middle-earth, are shown in Figure 2c. Strong westerly winds blow in the coastal southern regions of Middle-earth, such as the Bay of Belfalas, while easterly winds blow in the north.

a) Temperature



b) Precipitation



c) Wind and pressure

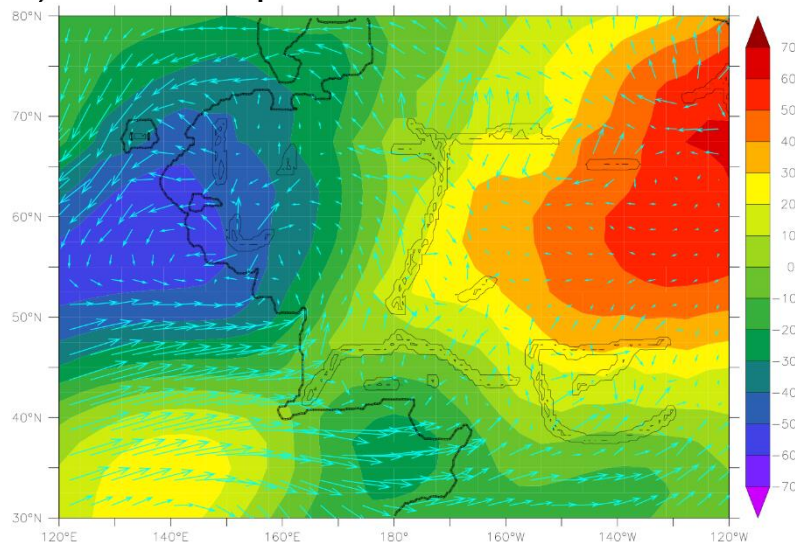


Figure 2.
a) Annual-average modelled temperature (units of °C), b) precipitation (units of mm/day), and c) surface winds and mid-atmosphere pressure (geopotential height at 500 mbar, geopotential height in units of metres) in Middle-earth. Thick black lines show the continent outlines; thin black lines show topographic contours. In Figures a and b, the ocean is shown in shades of blue which represent depth.

The vegetation component of the model allowed us to examine the model-predicted vegetation of Middle-earth, shown in Figure 3. Vegetation depends strongly on rainfall and temperature. Deserts are found in the warm, dry regions of the far South, and low-lying shrubs are found over much of Mordor. Shrub and cold desert are found on the peaks of the Misty Mountains, the Iron Hills in the north, and Blue Mountains in the west.

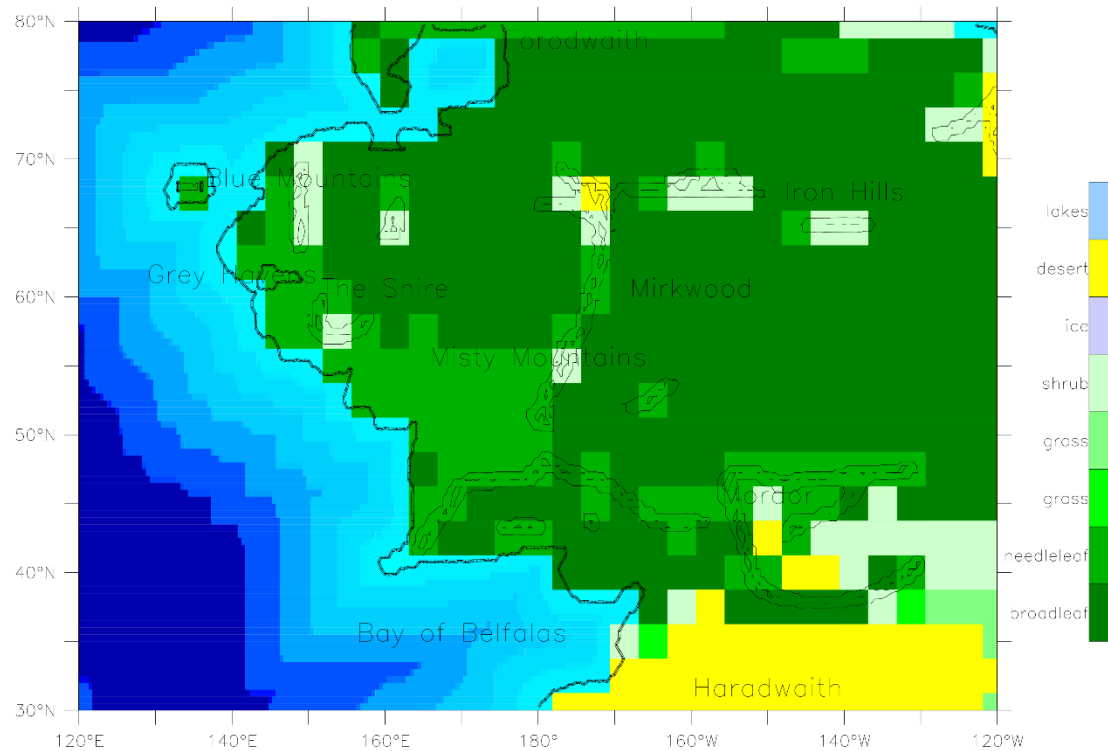


Figure 3. Model-predicted vegetation for the Middle-earth simulation. The approximate positions of places discussed in *Lord of the Rings* are also shown for reference.

The model simulations offer interesting insights into Middle-earth's climate. The easterly winds in the north (Figure 2c) may explain why ships sailing to the Undying Lands to the West depart from the Grey Havens, situated in the region of these easterly winds. The vegetation simulation, with much of Middle-earth covered with forests, is consistent with Elrond's claim that squirrels "could go from tree to tree from what is now the Shire to Dunland west of Isengard" (Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* 265). Of course, the vegetation model does not account for disturbance of vegetation from its "natural" state, such as forest fires caused by dragons, deforestation by dwarves, or growing of pipe-weed by hobbits.

When the Middle-earth climate simulation was first released (Brown 2013), the research was used to educate the public, explaining how models based on fundamental laws of physics could be applied to other worlds, even imaginary ones. The author was contacted by many educators, who reported that they were using the work as a teaching tool. For example, in a first years' course on marine science, students were instructed to draw prevailing Middle-earth surface winds, ocean circulation and regions of oceanic upwelling. The work has been translated into multiple languages, including chapters in

“Tolkien et les sciences” and “Le Trône de fer et les sciences”, both of which were nominated for the coveted “Grand Prix de l’Imaginaire” prize. The research received significant media attention with coverage in the *Guardian*, *Scientific American*, and PBS.

In 2014, Brown’s work was presented at fantasy fiction events, including BristolCon, a science fiction and fantasy convention. The newly “poached” reality created by the climate model was able to deepen narrative immersion for fantasy readers by supplementing the author’s original material with empirically driven plausibility. The model simulation did not merely fill in geographic blanks, but imposed a complex real-world logic onto the fantasy world, making the landscape a knowable character in the narrative. This activity moves beyond simple acceptance of the text’s geography to a moment of negotiation – the fans’ contribution is a response to the text’s lack of environmental detail. The fan response to the Middle-earth climate model was followed by strong public demand for similar climate simulations of other imaginary worlds such as the continent of Westeros from *Game of Thrones* (Nuccitelli).

4. Explaining the Climate of Game of Thrones

A distinguishing feature of the world from Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* series is its unpredictable seasons, an iconic example of climatic world-building influencing the story (Moser 61). The length of these seasons serves as a plot device whereby a long-lasting winter creates a “land bridge” of snow and ice that allows a catastrophic plague of the undead known as White Walkers to move southward. The puzzle of these unpredictable seasons has inspired much activity within participatory culture, drawing on the collective intelligence of the fan community. A number of hypotheses have postulated various causes for the errant seasons. These include reduced carbon dioxide concentration (Mera), decreased sunspot activity (*New York Post*), decreased ocean circulation strength (Farnsworth and Stone), changes to the planet’s orbit around the Sun (e.g. Laughlin; Delcke), or magic (illuminatus235).

Astronomers have also proposed their own explanations for the unpredictable seasons. Veselin Kostov led a team of scientists simulating the orbit of a planet orbiting around a binary star system composed of two sun-like stars. Such a three-bodied system is unpredictable, and they found chaotically varying years spanning from 600 to 850 days. However, Florian Freistetter and Ruth Grützbauch argued that Kostov’s binary star system was dynamically unstable. They proposed an alternative binary star system, where the planet moved perpendicular to the plane of the orbiting stars like a yo-yo – a configuration known as a Sitnikov orbit. Simulating such an orbit, Freistetter and Grützbauch reproduced the seasons resembling those described in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. A team of astrophysicists led by Adiv Paradise, who researches the climate of cold Earth-like planets, extended this research by simulating the climate of a world in a Sitnikov orbit. They found that when the planet passed closest to the binary stars, the sunlight would be so bright that the planet’s surface temperatures would reach over 100 °C. They concluded that the unpredictable seasons must be caused by some other factor, such as a chaotically varying axial tilt.

Incorporating rigorous, system-level modelling to this wide array of collective intelligence activity, we used the “CitCM3” climate model (Valdes et al.) to simulate the seasonality of Martin’s world. Climate models are typically used to manipulate different factors such as the amount of carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the atmosphere or changing mountain or ice sheet heights and extent, to understand their impact on atmosphere and ocean circulation (Farnsworth et al.). However, they can also be used to explore the impact on climate if the planet’s axial tilt varies. Many of the model’s boundary conditions were created using a map of the “Known World” (Martin, *The Lands*). As the city of Qarth is described as “the center of the world, the gate between north and south, the bridge between east and west ...” (Martin, *Clash* 383), it was placed at the center of the planet. Continental outlines, mountains, and hills were traced from the published map, and continents outside the Known World were invented (Figure 4).

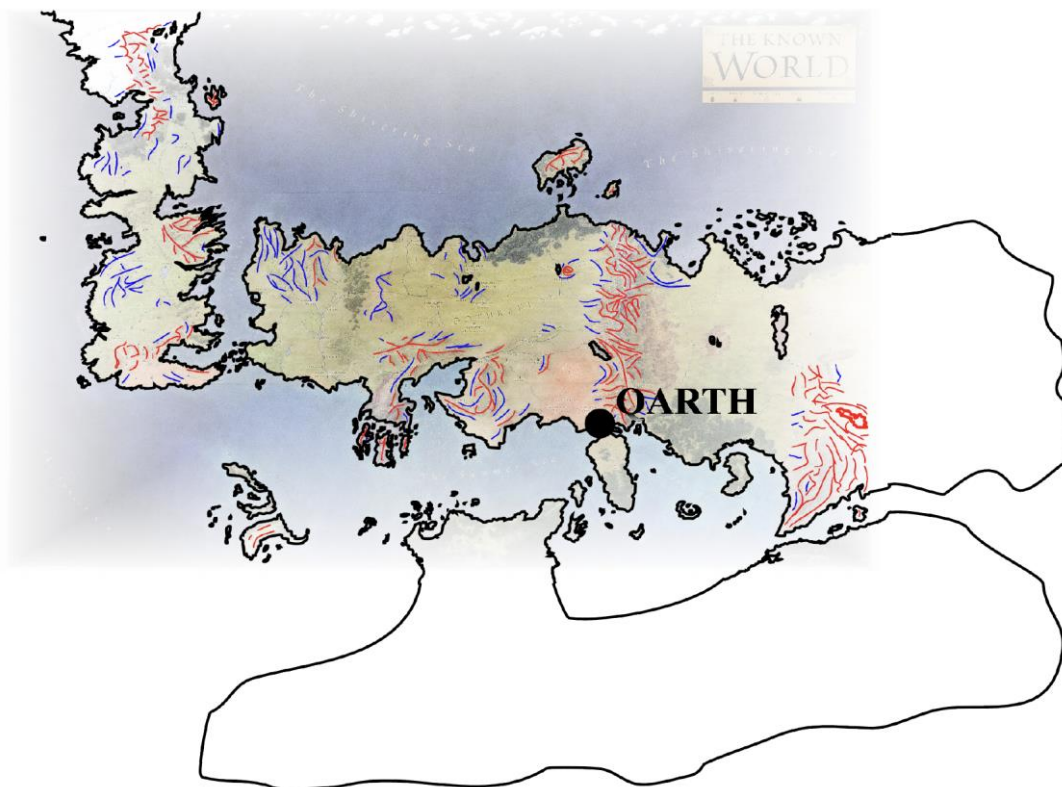


Figure 4. The map of the Known World overlaid with tracing of continental outline (black lines), mountains (red regions) and hills (blue regions).

The map was then converted into a digital form to be input into the climate model, as a series of grid boxes of resolution 0.5° longitude by 0.5° latitude. Mountains were assumed to have an average height of 2000 meters, hills an average height of 1000 meters, coastal regions a height of 20 meters, and all other land an average height of 100 meters. The resulting digital elevation map is shown in Figure 5a. This was interpolated to the same resolution as the climate model, resulting in the geography shown in Figure 5b.

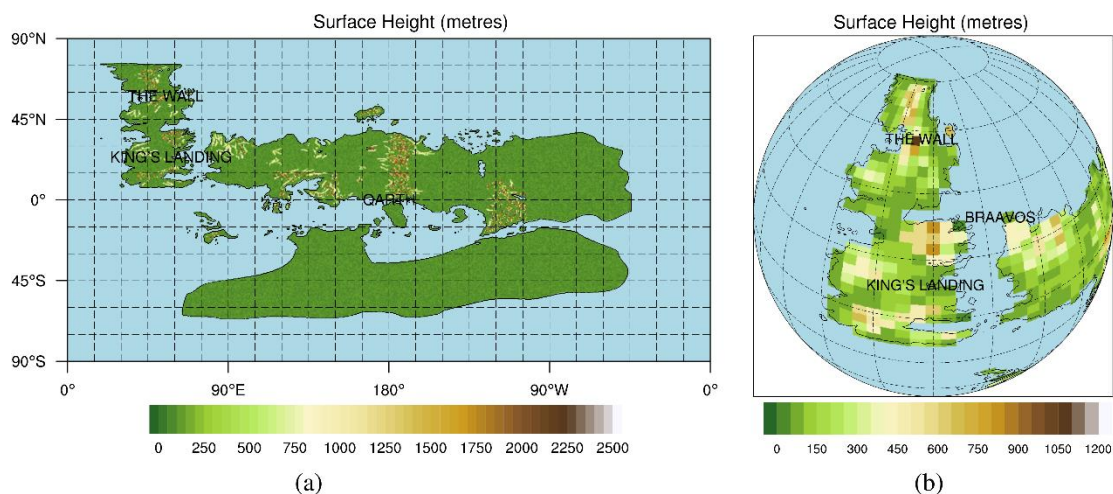


Figure 5. a) High-resolution (0.5° longitude x 0.5° latitude) mountain height for the whole planet. b) Model-resolution (3.75° longitude x 2.5° latitude) mountain height for the region of Westeros and western Essos. Note the difference in color scale between a and b.

Initially, the model was set up for a world with similar seasons as the real Earth, with four seasons in a single year. The tilt of the spinning axis of the planet was set at a fixed angle throughout the year, as is the case with the ‘real’ Earth shown in Figure 6a. The tilt of the Earth’s axis is the cause of seasons, and one way that seasons can be made to last longer is to allow this tilt to change throughout the year, so that the Earth “tumbles” on its axis like a wobbly spinning top. If the Earth tumbled exactly once a year, the spin axis would always point toward or away from the Sun, shown in Figure 6b, and the seasons would thus remain fixed at Northern/Southern Hemisphere summer or winter. This extended winter or summer would end if the tilt suddenly flipped so that the opposite hemisphere pointed toward the sun.

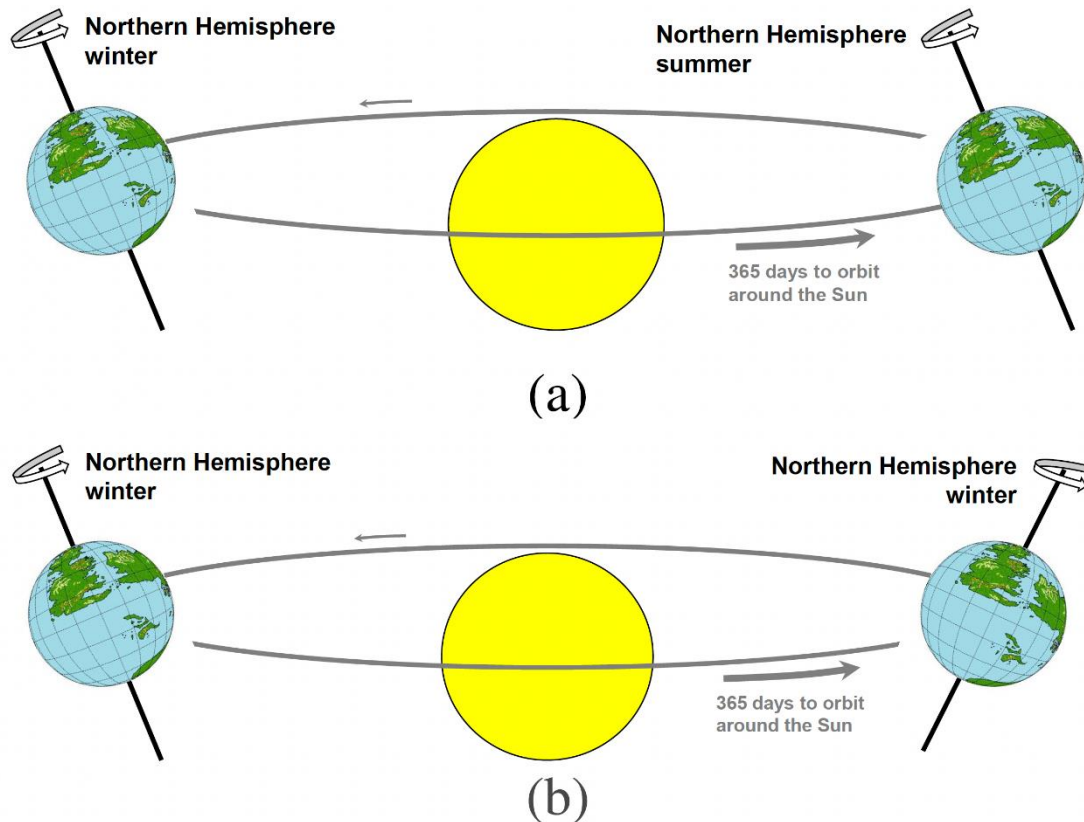


Figure 6. Configuration of Earth's orbit for a) Earth, where the angle of tilt of the spinning axis stays constant, and b) the world of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, where the tilt tumbles as the planet rotates around the Sun.

To simulate this kind of unchanging seasonality, a model was set up with the planet tumbling on its axis, resulting in a permanent Northern Hemisphere winter and Southern Hemisphere summer. To reduce the temperature difference between the winter and summer hemispheres (as the climate model became unstable if the temperature difference was too great), the tilt of the spinning axis was decreased from 23.5° (Earth's value) to 10° . This gave a less extreme winter in the Northern Hemisphere and less extreme summer in the Southern Hemisphere, and the model ran happily for at least 10 years. To ensure that a permanent winter is feasible Westeros must occupy relatively northern latitudes.

The climate model results show that a tumbling axis with an angle of tilt of about 10° , results in permanent seasons in broad agreement with the described climate of Westeros. To transition between the two seasons, the tilt would have to flip every few years. The reason for this flip is unclear. The tilt of the real Earth is stable because of the presence of the moon; if the moon was removed, the tilt would become unstable, which could result in unpredictable seasons. Could a similar phenomenon explain the seasons of Westeros? The world has one moon but according to legend, used to have a second moon until it "wandered too close to the sun and it cracked from the heat" (Martin, 1996, 288). Might the loss of a second moon have caused a chaotically tilting axis? This question seems suited for the astronomy community to explore.

Fandom's aggregated expertise – blending climatology, astronomy, coding, and lore knowledge – has aimed at achieving mastery over the text's reality. By attempting to solve the narrative mystery of a plausible mechanism of the seasons, it elevates the setting from a mere backdrop to a complex, internally consistent, and thus more believably real place. The pleasure of fan immersion comes from understanding the system that dictates the narrative.

5. Glimpsing Earth's future in the World of the Wheel

The story of *The Wheel of Time*, the 14-book epic fantasy series, is set in the Third Age of what we call the "World of the Wheel." While it is not explicit in the storyline, Jordan has confirmed that the First Age was actually modern-day Earth, which ends with a dramatic event – perhaps climate change (Theoryland). From his remarks, we estimate that the books take place around 18 000 years from today. By poaching from these remarks, we may pose an interesting question bridging the scientific and the literary: would today's climate change still be experienced in the World of the Wheel after all those centuries? Imposing real-world climate data and simulated history onto the fictional geography of *The Wheel of Time*, our model here explores the environmental legacy of the "First Age" (our current age) on the fictional "Third Age." The model's output thus becomes a fan-generated backstory of sorts.

About a quarter of carbon dioxide emitted today will remain in the atmosphere even 18 000 years from now. According to biogeochemistry models, carbon dioxide levels could be as high as 1100 parts per million (ppm) at that point (Lord et al. 8), much higher than the present-day value of 422 ppm, although reaching levels this high is highly unlikely (Hausfather and Peters 620). This high value assumes that the Paris climate goals will be exceeded and that many natural stores of carbon will also be released into the atmosphere (such as melting permafrost).

However, high carbon dioxide concentrations do not necessarily mean a warmer climate. On geologic timescales, the amount of energy from the Sun has slowly increased by around 1% every 110 million years. This is why hundreds of millions of years ago, more atmospheric carbon dioxide was needed to balance the lesser amount of energy received from the sun. Over shorter timescales, such as the last hundreds of thousands of years, slow changes in the orbit and tilt of the planet have been important factors. These cause Milankovitch Cycles, where the Earth transitions from ice ages to warmer periods around every 100 000 years. Given that we are currently at the peak of such a cycle, the planet will naturally cool over the next 50 000 years, which is why in the 1970s, some scientists were worried about a new ice age (Maslin). But will cooling from the Milankovitch cycle be enough to offset warming from the remaining carbon dioxide in the atmosphere? Figure 7 shows a million-year version of the classic warming stripes graphic, a visualization of climate where blue stripes represent cooler periods and red stripes represent warmer periods (data from Lord et al. 8; climate stripes inspired by <https://showyourstripes.info>).

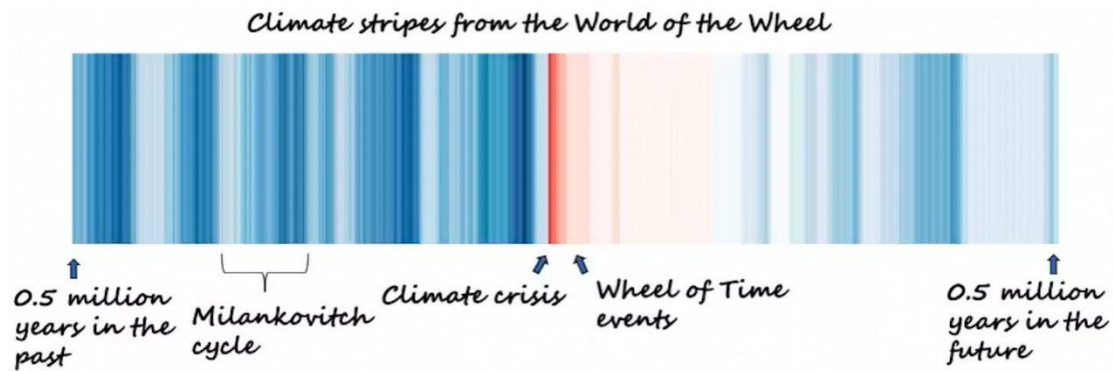


Figure 7. Warming stripes of Earth (and the World of the Wheel) for a million years.

The recurring blue bands are the 100 000 year Milankovitch cycles, clearly visible in the first half of the million-year period. Anything red can be considered human-caused climate change, and the events of The Wheel of Time are well within this period. Even the descending Milankovitch cycle won't be enough to counteract the increased warming from carbon dioxide, and so the inhabitants of the World of the Wheel would still experience elevated temperatures from a climate crisis that occurred 18 000 years earlier. While most (80%) emitted carbon dioxide is drawn back out of the atmosphere on short timescales (<200 years) by the carbon cycle, 20% remains on longer timescales (thousands of years). However, some of the weather changes from the still elevated temperatures could be offset by other factors. From a geological perspective, 18 000 years is not a long time, and landmasses would not change significantly, but in this fantasy future magical channelers "broke" the world at the end of the Second Age, creating several new supercontinents.

To find out how the climate would work in the World of the Wheel, we used an exoplanet climate model (Ball et al.), feeding in a topography based on hand-drawn maps of the world and carbon dioxide levels of 830 ppm based on one of the high potential future carbon pathways (Lord et al.). According to our model, the World of the Wheel would be warm all over the surface, with temperatures over land never cold enough for snow apart from on the mountains.

The World of the Wheel likely has stronger and wavier high-altitude jet streams – fast-moving currents of air high in the atmosphere – than modern-day Earth, because it has more mountain ranges, which generate atmospheric waves called Rossby waves, causing oscillations in the jet stream. There is limited evidence that the jet stream also gets wavier due to climate change (Mann et al.), although this influence is a much smaller factor than the introduction of new mountain ranges. According to our climate model, the jet streams would bring moisture from the western ocean onto land, and deposit it north of the Mountains of Dhoom. Surprisingly, this region (The Great Blight) is described as desert-like in the books, although the cause is suggested by the author to be due to metaphysical corruption, not physical (Jordan 585).

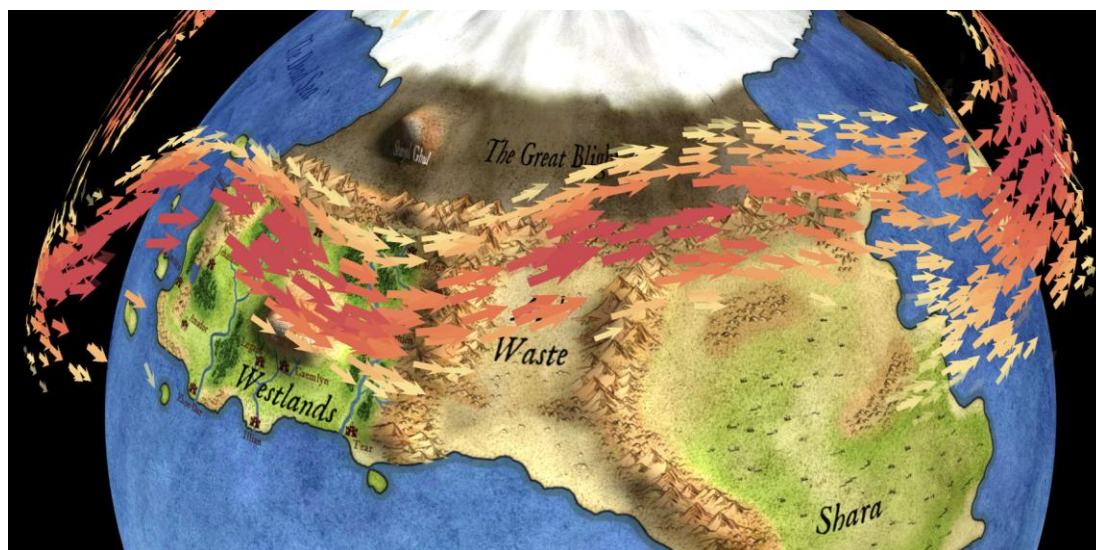


Figure 8. Simulation of the World of the Wheel, with red and yellow arrows showing the jet stream (Steinig).

Winds often revolve around two particularly enormous mountains, Dragonmount and Shayol Ghul, before blowing downslope and reaching far across the land masses. The peak of Dragonmount itself is nearly always surrounded by clouds, because the mountain is so large that winds travelling up its slopes force surface moisture to higher altitudes, cooling it and causing water vapor to condense into clouds. The fact that winds would be so different from modern-day Earth is predominantly due to topography, not increased temperatures from climate change.

Nevertheless, in the World of the Wheel, despite the extremely long time since carbon polluted the atmosphere, the inhabitants would still be exposed to warmer-than-usual temperatures. Here the story and the science diverge, as at times snow is mentioned in *The Wheel of Time*. Our finding that the simulated Earth 18 000 years in the future is hotter than the temperate, snow-prone world described in *The Wheel of Time* – a familiar, quasi-European fantasy setting – represents a significant act of oppositional reading realized through data, forcing a new critical interpretation of *The Wheel of Time*. The pervasive presence of snow in the narrative might be interpreted as denying the environmental legacy of the First Age (our world's climate change), while our application of climate science re-injects this lost history into the world, striving to achieve a deeper form of narrative immersion that feels causally linked to the reader's own reality.

6. Using a climate model to world-build “climate fantasy”

The three previous case studies demonstrate the retroactive benefits offered by climate science to the fantasy genre, enabling readers to engage in participatory acts such as textual poaching, collective intelligence, and oppositional reading. Climate models also offer an exploratory tool that can aid immersive world-building and potentially enhance the exploration of climate change themes in fantasy fiction. The battle for our planet's future is first and foremost a battle of

imagination – conceptualizing the scope of climate change and imagining a sustainable future (Oziewicz, “Planetarianism” 242). Fiction is a powerful tool for communicating the impacts of climate change, which are more emotionally compelling when told as a story compared to dry graphs and numbers (Oziewicz, “It Wasn’t Us” 23). In particular, fantasy is uniquely positioned as a literary genre to address climate change themes (Fetherston 463).

Marek Oziewicz argues that fantasy can challenge two underlying ideologies that obstruct progress on climate change. The first is anthropocentrism, the belief that humans are separate to and masters of the natural world. More than other literary genres, fantasy includes the nonhuman perspective, encouraging a shift from anthropocentric to ecocentric thinking (Le Guin 38). Fantasy can help readers abandon the illusion of mastery over nature and imagine a more ecocentric future (Oziewicz, “Fantasy” 68). The second ideology is neoliberalism, which fuels the belief in unlimited economic growth on a finite world (Oziewicz, “Planetarianism” 243). These societal systems can be interrogated through materialist fantasy, which explores how the physical environment and economic systems within an imaginary world influence its societies and characters. Such narratives can critique real-world issues such as extractivism, oppression, and environmental degradation. In science fiction, realistic alternative worlds are depicted through physics, chemistry, etc, while in fantasy, realism is constructed through detailed worldbuilding (Grifka-Wander 73). Immersing readers into materialist, internally consistent worlds can challenge them to contrast the imagined world with their own world and critically examine their own thinking and practices (Brochu 128).

In pursuit of the goal of creating an immersive reading experience, John Cook has developed an allegorical fantasy story exploring the denialist response to environmental damage. This theme was previously explored in the film *Don’t Look Up* (2021), which uses an asteroid as an allegory for climate change to explore irrational societal responses to an existential threat. However, a contemporary story satirizing a segment of the population can alienate that particular audience (Little 5). In contrast, locating a story in a fantasy world removes the connection to a specific nation or community, making it “about all of them at once, yet determined by none of them” (Kraatila, “Conspicuous Fabrications” 424).

To enhance the verisimilitude and immersive nature of the story, Cook integrated a climate model into the world-building process. In contrast to the retrospective case studies previously presented, he used climate modelling early in the world-building process. Presley argues that world-building should start with geography given the environment affects the individuals inhabiting the world, then continue through biology, physics, metaphysics, technology, and finally culture (172). A believable and engaging imaginary world requires three elements: invention, completeness, and consistency (Wolf 33). Incorporating a climate model in the world-building process contributes to all three attributes, with invention of landscapes, comprehensive simulation of biomes and climate across the entire planet, and consistency with the laws of nature.

Cook created a digital elevation map, specifying heights on land and in the ocean depths (Figure 9a), and used this map to develop a climate model which predicted climate behavior and the distribution of biomes (Figure 9b).

The digital elevation map and biomes map informed the design of the fantasy map and subsequent storytelling (Figure 9c).

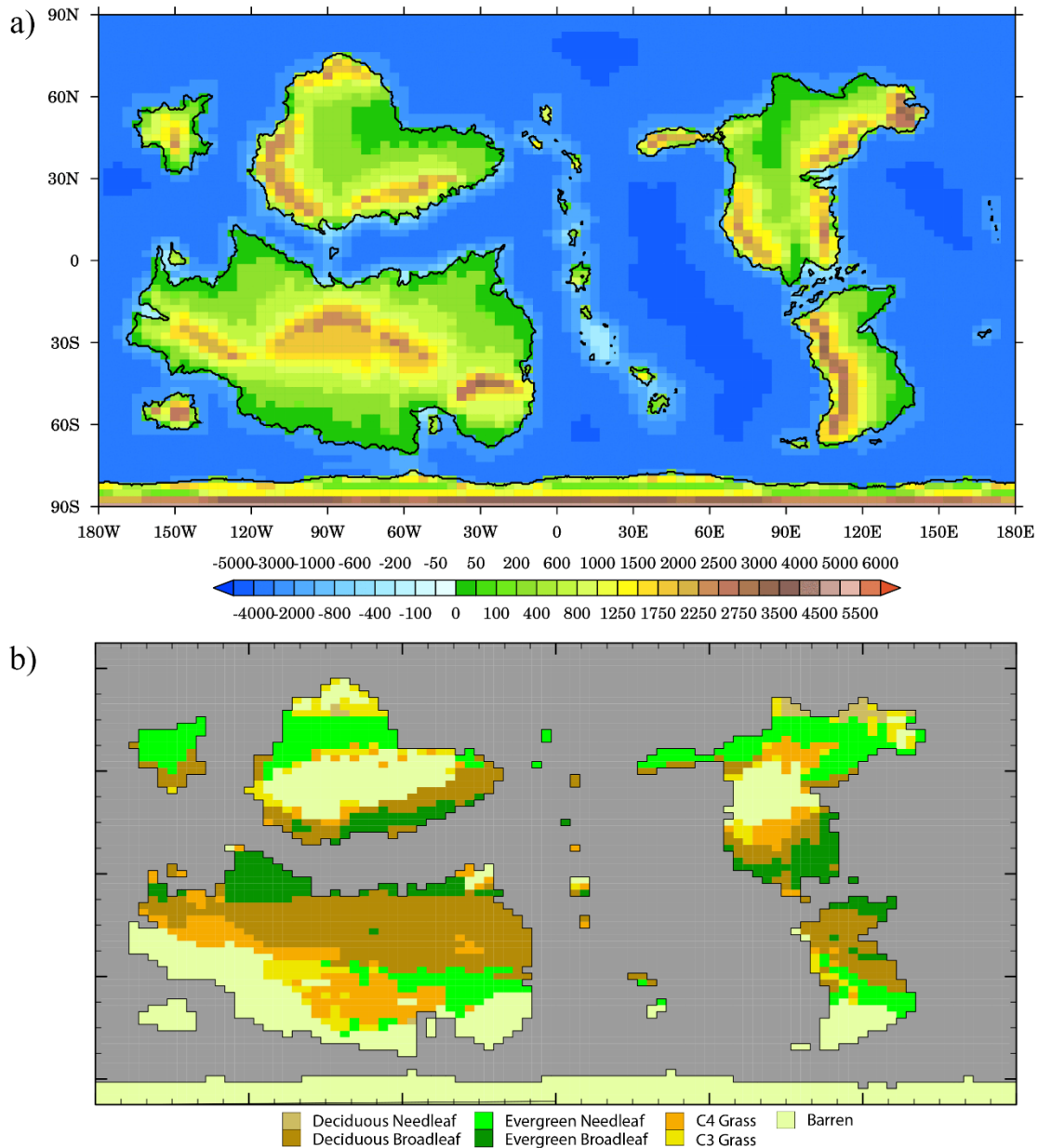


Figure 9. a) Digital Elevation Map; b) Sheffield Dynamic Global Vegetation Model (SDGVM) output, c) fantasy map for the imaginary world Terrios.

The model output provides concrete details such as temperature, precipitation (rain or snow), and wind conditions at every step along the characters' journey through a variety of biomes. This emulated and expanded on Tolkien's meticulous use of "endless calculations of time and distance, drawing up elaborate charts concerning events in the story, showing dates, the days of the week, the hours, and sometimes even the direction of the wind and the phase of the moon" (Carpenter, *Biography* 220). Tolkien used seasons to add subtextual depth to *Lord of the Rings*, specifying that "[t]he main action begins in autumn and passes through winter to a brilliant spring: this is basic to the purport and tone of the tale" (Carpenter, *Letters* 272).

Integrating insights from climate modelling offers a powerful new tool to help fantasy authors build a rich, detailed imaginary world. Creating an immersive experience can contribute to connecting readers to the natural world, thus taking advantage of the genre's inherent capacity to engage readers with ecocritical ideas (Ulstein 15). Further, such work can act as authorial paratext, with the model's outputs strategically deployed as both peritext – inside the book – and epitext – outside the book (Genette 5). An example of peritext might be maps based on simulated biomes, visually verifying the world's consistency (e.g., Figure 9c). Epitext could be release of the model code, its data, or commentary on its creation outside the book (such as this article). The model does not just describe the climate; it attempts to justify the world's ecological details, grounding the fantastical world in real-world physics. Climate models, existing as code or scientific output, are a sophisticated form of public paratext which use scientific insights to mediate and enrich readers' understanding of the original text's world.

A comprehensive, internally consistent world can also lay the foundation for constructing a materialist fantasy which explores how the physical environment influences the development of societies and culture. Of course, detailed climate simulations are only one aspect of an immersive imaginary world, which also requires societies and cultures, governance structures, histories and mythologies, genealogical relationships, magic systems, theologies, and more (Wolf 53). If the fantastic elements are the vibrant paints to splash across a new world, then geography is the canvas (Presley 231).

7. Discussion

A well-developed imaginary world extends beyond the canonical stories told within them, inviting imaginative readers to speculate and explore in creative and innovative acts of participatory culture (Wolf 17). A subset of this phenomenon is "scientific fan fiction," where scientists apply scientific concepts to an imaginary world, encouraging fans to engage more deeply with both the original works and the science involved (Larsen 2). When the climate model is created by a reader, the model's function is one of critical confirmation or challenge, serving as an external, analytical tool to test the coherence that the narrative was already implicitly promising. If the model confirms the text, it validates the reader's original act of secondary belief, strengthening the overall sense of immersion and realism for the entire reading community (like in the case of easterly winds blowing near Middle-earth's Grey Havens).

Thus climate models offer a new, modern tool for exploring imaginary worlds in both the conventional digital twin way, and the reverse way. The reverse way is retrospective, where readers use climate models to fill in the gaps of pre-existing imaginary worlds, like we do in our first three case studies. The conventional way is exploratory, where the author uses the climate model to “discover” the imaginary world and incorporate insights into world-building, as illustrated in our fourth case study.

The fantasy world climate model serves as a powerful mechanism for constructing and maintaining secondary belief. Gerrig argues that the best narratives minimize the cognitive labor required to believe the story (279). Successful immersion relies on the ability of the narrative to maintain the reader’s secondary belief. The climate model, and its paratextual presentation, provides this assurance. It offloads the cognitive check on environmental physics from the reader’s mind to a validated, rigorous system. The model’s successful output functions as paratextual support, confirming to the reader that their innate cognitive schemata about how weather and ecology work are still valid in the imaginary world. It provides a formal, data-driven validation that the world is built on a coherent, minimally-departed foundation.

Hence it is worth considering how and when it is appropriate to develop climate models of an author’s work. For example, caution should be exercised before climate modeling the imaginary worlds created by Robin Hobb, given her staunch opposition to fan fiction based on her work. N. K. Jemisin expressed an ambivalence for fantasy maps, with her book *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* critiquing cartography as a colonizing tool (Melville 16), emphasising the need for more Global South perspectives in epic fantasy such as the work of epic world-builders such as R. F. Kuang and Tomi Adeyemi. In some fantasy worlds, the magic system clearly works against natural laws, such as Sanderson’s *Stormlight Archives*, which features global-scale storms that behave counter to the physical processes governing storms. A climate model based on the laws of physics would fail to represent such a world as presented by the author. Along these lines, Tolkien expressed a strong dislike of “scientification” of his writing, objecting to the changing of the Elvish bread lembas to a “food concentrate” (Carpenter, *Letters* 293).

However, while many fantasy series require suspension of disbelief, integrating real-world physics into the narrative helps ground readers in the world. In this spirit, our climate modeling of Middle-earth, Westeros, and the World of the Wheel represents the highest order of engagement with Ryan’s principle of minimal departure. In the cases of Middle-earth and Westeros, the models fill gaps in the texts, providing a scientific and climatically plausible realism that reinforces narrative immersion. The models ensures the fantastic setting remains tethered to a stable, understandable physical reality. However, in the case of *The Wheel of Time*, when the simulated deep-future climate is significantly hotter than the temperate, snowy world described by Jordan, the model output becomes a form of oppositional reading. Armed with physics-based science, we discover that the text itself is in violation of the principle of minimal departure by neglecting the environmental legacy of the First Age (our time). In this scenario, the participatory community negotiates a new understanding, using real-world physics to establish a deeper, more rigorous narrative. The modeling process thus transforms the principle of minimal

departure from a reading rule into a dynamic, critical tool for world-building mastery.

Despite the fascinating insights that can be gained from using climate models to explore the weather and climate of imaginary worlds, there is a cost (computational, time, and, ironically carbon dioxide) associated with such processes. Such advanced activity will be beyond the resources of many fans and authors, who may prefer to stick to traditional world-building. However, simpler global climate models such as ExoPlaSim do not require supercomputers, but allow world-builders to input custom geography and generate realistic climate data on a laptop within hours; this is the model Paradise and colleagues used to simulate Westeros climate. Thus, climate models offer a powerful exploratory tool for worldbuilders – not only book authors but also game developers and screenwriters. During the Age of Exploration at the end of medieval times, as audiences began reading about explorers' journeys into new worlds, fictional creation of imaginary worlds became more detailed and comprehensive in response to reader demand (Wolf 72). In the same way, the modern ability to simulate detailed climates and biomes might inspire today's world-builders to make use of climate models to build comprehensive, accurate, and consistent environments. Lin Carter argues that world-builders should consider geography when sketching out their map – lush rainforests should not lie against a burning desert, and it pays to “do a bit of reading into climatology” (180). Climate models offer a more systematic and comprehensive approach to world-building.

That said, a limitation in our approach is that only a single climate model was used to explore the weather and climate of each imaginary world. This results in considerable uncertainty in our findings, because any single model has biases due to the finite resolution of the model used. The IPCC attempts to minimize (or at least, characterize) these uncertainties by using multiple models developed at a number of international climate modelling institutions, and present averages (with ranges of possible values) of the results. Furthermore, the boundary conditions implemented in fantasy models are more uncertain than those used by the IPCC, because conditions such as global topography and greenhouse gases are not always straightforward to determine accurately from the underlying fictional texts; for example, just how high was Mount Doom, or Dragonmount? Therefore, other researchers may equally validly implement quite different boundary conditions, in a different model, and end up with a considerably different representation of climate. In addition, even though climate models aim to represent our best possible understanding of scientific processes, this understanding has different levels of maturity for different aspects of the Earth system. For example, although the underlying fluid dynamics of the atmosphere and ocean are well understood (the well-known Navier-Stokes equations), other aspects such as the influence of evolutionary biology and long-term changes in vegetation-climate interactions, are still relatively poorly represented in models of Earth's past climate.

Building climate models, nevertheless, introduces a fan-generated epistemology, shifting the source of fictional truth from authorial fiat to systemic plausibility. The model asserts that Middle-earth's weather or Westeros's seasons are not determined by mere description, but by real-world physical laws, pushing the principle of minimal departure to its extreme. This creates a bifurcated knowledge system where the canonical truth is the text,

while the modeled truth is the physical mechanism underpinning the text. Cases where the model conflicts with the text force an oppositional reading, asserting that the text's environmental knowledge is incorrect and thereby claiming a higher, scientifically validated form of reality.

To “scientific” imaginative creation is to treat the fantasy world not just as a backdrop, but as a complex, self-contained system capable of being studied, tested, and predicted. This act is the ultimate expression of the fan mastery over the material described by Jenkins (*Textual* 74). Successfully modeling climate systems on an imaginary planet demonstrates a level of mastery over the system's structure that can surpass the author's own world-building needs. Scientifying fantastic works risks demystification, but in the participatory context, it can also offer a compensatory gain. In the Wheel of Time case study, for instance, the model injects a new moral dimension of environmental inheritance. It suggested that the trauma of the First Age (our current age of climate crisis) is a persistent, tangible reality that persists in the future world, making the fantasy world a powerful reflection of our own reality.

8. Conclusion

Coupling climate models with the fantasy genre offers a variety of educational opportunities. Retroactive modeling of existing worlds like Middle-earth have already proved to be a useful teaching tool for educators seeking to engage students about climate science, exploring the concepts of prevailing surface winds and ocean circulation. Exploratory climate models also offer the potential to enhance new fantasy stories, such as those that address climate change themes. The ability of modern climate models to project future scenarios is incredibly sophisticated and yet Marek Oziwicz argues that our most advanced technology for imagining the future is the story (“Planetarianism” 254). Fantasy stories can not only use allegory to help readers conceptualize the threat of climate change, they can also incorporate narratives of collective action that help readers imagine futures where our current destructive practices are replaced with sustainable ones (Oziwicz, “Fantasy” 68).

In summary, climate modeling of fantasy worlds is a happy collision between the dual thought experiments of fantasy world-building and climate modeling, offering opportunities for both the fantasy genre and climate science. The simulated precipitation maps and pressure systems are not just scientific curiosities, but represent the community's creative negotiation with the text. This scientific “poaching” transforms the map from a static, descriptive element into an active, knowable character in the narrative, thereby fundamentally shifting the terms of narrative immersion for the engaged fan. Climate models can deepen our understanding of fantasy worlds, enrich the world-building process leading to more immersive reading experiences, and draw pedagogical attention to the science of climate models.

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Undringslitteratur: Understanding New Norwegian Speculative Fictions

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Abstract: A distinctive type of non-realist literature is emerging in Norway, one that necessitates the articulation of a new classificatory term. I propose the label *undringslitteratur*, situating this intervention within the broader debate in science fiction studies on the productivity and limitations of “fuzzy” labels as devices for designating hybrid forms of imaginative writing that traverse and unsettle the boundaries between realist and speculative modes. Contemporary Norwegian speculative fictions – here conceptualized together as *undringslitteratur* – may be delineated through the convergence of four interrelated elements. First, *undringslitteratur* is characterized by a poetics of scale, oscillating between the local and the global, and by an underlying “Anthropocene unconscious” as theorized by Mark Bould, as a structuring undercurrent of contemporary cultural production. Second, these fictions pursue the re-enchantment of the everyday by subverting conventional expectations regarding the relationship between the quotidian and the spectacular. Third, *undringslitteratur* is distinguished by a pronounced regional inflection, articulating “nordicity” both in imagery and in portrayals of “northernness” as a discursive system. Finally, these texts exhibit a vein of “stealthy” spiritual seeking. Crucially, however, what sets *undringslitteratur* apart is not the explicit representation of religious practices, spirituality, or belief, but rather the subtle, situated manner in which such themes are approached and articulated. I conclude by arguing that the synthesis of these elements is aptly encapsulated by the term *undring*. Connoting wonder, contemplation, and pausing before the inexplicable, *undring* designates not merely a thematic preoccupation but a structuring affect that animates contemporary Norwegian speculative fictions.

Keywords: speculative fiction, climate fiction, Norwegian speculative fiction, Undringslitteratur

1. Introduction

In Norway, more and more books are appearing in bookshops carrying blurbs that are written in such a way as to carefully and resolutely avoid the term “science fiction.” Instead, the blurbs describe these volumes as something along the lines of “a (personal/honest/*real*) story of love and loss/murder/mental health issues *with* imaginative interludes/a sprinkling of the fantastic/an eye to the stars/dreamlike sequences, *involving* technological playfulness/ an unfortunate incident in the lab/a liberal approach to time,” or something to that effect.

The number of these books, which are arguably somewhat science-fictional but not self-defined as such, is multiplying at such a rate that the phenomenon needs its own category, a working title of its own that can guide both researchers and fiction authors. But what should these texts be labeled?

One could insist on labelling them “science fiction” due to their frequent extrapolation from technoscientific elements (like space travel, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, climate engineering), exploration of the human and posthuman, and of temporal and spatial displacement, *et cetera*. Writers of what is often referred to as the “golden era” of Norwegian SF (1960–1980s) proudly labeled their work science fiction, and fans also adopted this categorization as a fringe, countercultural marker (Lindholm, *Fra Algernon*). Today, however, few contemporary Norwegian authors or publishers employ the term without qualification. For instance, Bjørn Vatne (b. 1976), arguably one of Norway’s foremost science fiction writers (even when utilizing the narrowest definition of the genre label), was reluctant to have his work to be labeled as such until recently (Vatne *Norse Tomorrow*). Publishers, editors, and other cultural practitioners involved in the production of contemporary Norwegian speculative fiction’s (NSF) “paratext” (Määttä 107–108) often demonstrate considerable creativity in circumnavigating the term, usually justifying their decision by arguing “science fiction” as a brand is not highly marketable. Arguably, in the contemporary Norwegian context, the term is conventionally associated with young adult and children’s literature, and with Hollywood. Yet this new literature is marketed towards and appeals to adult readers. As “science fiction” is not the preferred term by writers and other practitioners, its use in academic discussions of these texts should also be questioned.

Another ready option is the homegrown term *fabelprosa*. In 1967, the two nestors of Norwegian science fiction, Jon Bing (1944–2014) and Tor Åge Bringsværd (1939–2025) – B&B, as they are often referred to – wrote an essay on what they called *fabelprosa*, a term for fantastic literature emphasizing *fabulering* (fabulation or imaginative yarning)¹ or, in other words, the act of making things up.² As will be discussed below, I find *fabelprosa* misleading in

¹ All translations from Norwegian are mine.

² The project of this essay, written while B&B were students, was “to make an attempt to present the literary movement known as science fiction” to a Norwegian audience” and to “have science

its duality of meaning, and thus in need of being supplemented by a term more precisely signifying hybridity and genre-fluidity. Furthermore, the term has arguably become irreversibly tinted by a certain era, stylistic tendency, and spirit within NSF, as also will be elaborated upon.

A new term is therefore to be desired, one that resonates with the literary style of an innovative period in NSF for publishers, booksellers, marketers and creators, as well as opening up for hybridity. In other words, a new point of reference is necessary to help us orient ourselves. I have written an article in the Norwegian newspaper *Klassekampen*, proposing the term *undringslitteratur*, directly translated as the literature of wonderment (Tveit). The term has since been added to a page of the *Norsk tesaurus for sjanger og form* (Norwegian Thesaurus for Genre and Form), hosted by *Nasjonalbibliotekets vokabulartjeneste* (National Library's Vocabulary Service, "fantastisk litteratur"). This article elaborates on that work by exploring the contours of what I am calling *undringslitteratur*.

I begin by situating the term within the wider discussion in the field of SF studies on the use of "fuzzy" (Rieder *Colonial Gaze* 192) labels to designate forms of imaginative writing that hybridize realist and speculative styles. I then illustrate how these new Norwegian fictions nevertheless carry a distinctiveness in their amalgamation of four elements. First, they are marked by a play on scale, moving between the local and global. Related to this is the core "Anthropocene unconscious" (Bould 1) undercurrent in these fictions, as I will elaborate upon. Second, there is a discernible strive to re-enchant the everyday, the "mundane" (Ryman et al.), through subverting expectations regarding the relationship between the quotidian and the spectacular. These two first elements are made possible to feature in the stories through the frequent employment of the "absent paradigm" (Angenot 9), as will be discussed. Third, these texts are characterized by a strong local flavor, through the creation of *nordicity* (Furuseth et al.), evoking the topologies of the north but also "northernness" as a discursive system. Fourth, there is a streak of spiritual seeking running through these fictions. However, as I will argue, it is not the representation of practices of worship, spirituality, or belief that sets *undringslitteratur* apart, but the situated "stealthy" mode through which these themes are approached and come to expression. A prioritizing of (melancholic or dark) atmosphere over plot, and a foregrounding of introspection, are devices through which these latter two elements operate, as will be further discussed.

Through its combination of these four elements, contemporary NSF is distinctive enough to represent a clear break with the *fabelprosa* of the golden era. It is this difference I am attempting to mark with the proposal of the term *undringslitteratur*, as well as drawing attention to the hybrid and genre-bending aspect of these texts. Finally, I discuss the connotations of the word *undring* and how it captures the essence of this new wave within Norwegian literature, drawing connections to the etymological layers of meaning behind the word.

fiction recognized as a serious literary genre in Norway." (Bing and Bringsværd 83). They spend the remainder of the essay explaining the English term "science fiction" but do not further outline the contours of the Norwegian translation *fabelprosa*, or how it is to be wielded.

2. Fuzzy Labels

My proposed term *undringslitteratur* must thus be read as part of a long-standing conversation on genre in science fiction and speculative fiction studies. The term speculative fiction itself emerged in the mid-20th century, gaining traction as writers and critics sought a more inclusive category that could address the limitations of strict genre boundaries, particularly the divide between “serious” literature and so-called genre writing. Speculative fiction is conventionally understood to be an umbrella term that encompasses genres such as science fiction, slipstream, weird fiction, magical realism, and alternate history, united by their engagement with imagined worlds that depart in some way from empirical realities (Oziewicz). The term’s popularity has increased in recent decades because it provides a flexible critical framework for analyzing narratives that grapple with contemporary issues, yet are not obviously categorizable. Donna Haraway’s understanding of speculative fiction is similarly broad and inclusive, as a feminist mode of relational worldmaking: “science fiction, speculative fabulation, string figures, speculative feminism, science fact, so far” (2).

However, in Norwegian the term “speculative” has slight negative connotations, more so than in English. This touches on the question of language: there is an argument for making the effort to find a Norwegian term for a Norwegian phenomenon. Furthermore, what I want to do with *undringslitteratur* is to create a period marker, referencing a certain ethos within Norwegian non-realist literature. I am striving for a distinctive break from, and worthy successor to, B&B’s *fabelprosa*, and so I want to contribute to a conversation that is more local; to create a useful localized category. As such, an international and broad label such as speculative fiction is ancillary in this process, of secondary relevance, though doubtless all the texts I have looked would fit comfortably within this Anglophone umbrella category as well.

Fabelprosa is arguably the closest Norwegian translation of speculative fiction. Conventionally, it is today either used as an umbrella term to mean all fantastic literature, for instance in the Norwegian dictionaries (“Fabelprosa”) or on the websites and bibliographies put together by the main library conglomerate Deichman (“Fargerik fabelprosa”). Less often, the term is used to demarcate the less definable genres adjacent to but outside of science fiction and fantasy.³

Fabelprosa may well be and will probably continue to be used as umbrella term for non-realist fiction. Yet it is in its second meaning, as a Norwegian term for hybrid realist/non-realist writing, where I instead suggest the term *undringslitteratur*. The first reason for this is that the dual meaning of *fabelprosa* as it is used today is imprecise, and may be misleading for readers, students and scholars. Like speculative fiction, *fabelprosa* creates difficulties with its duality of meaning – signifying both all fantastic literature *and* indefinable fantastic literature outside of the established categories of science fiction, fantasy, and horror.

³ For instance, on the website of the fantastic literature magazine *Nye Nova*, one of the founding members Jørn A. Jensen is introduced as working for both “the promotion of science fiction and *fabelprosa*” (Hansen).

Science fiction, fantasy, and horror have arguably become more clearly defined in Norwegian discourse, where their meanings are increasingly shaped by the English terms. They live their own lives and may well be referred to as *fabelprosa* or speculative fiction. *Undringslitteratur* can thus be used as a supplement, signifying in Norwegian that a certain text traverses genre boundaries, is more difficult to define. It can indicate that a text belongs to what might possibly in English be categorized into smaller subgenres like weird fiction, slipstream, mundane SF, or magical realism.

Second, writer Øyvind Myhre (b. 1945) expresses in an interview that he is “not too fond of the term *fabelprosa* as “it indicates that it's only about fables” (Ewo). I agree to some extent with Myhre in this argument, which brings the mind to a broader international debate a few years ago on the term “magic” in magical realism (see Foster and Scerbo). Third, *fabelprosa* as a term is too strongly entangled with a certain era, literary style and spirit in Norwegian non-realist literature. Though *fabelprosa* in its on-paper definition is broad, the term carries connotations to a *particular type* of non-realist writing in Norway, characterized by triumphalism and optimism, marked by the space age, social and political transformations at the “golden era” of NSF (1960s–1980s). Furthermore, the contemporary genre-bending texts are at a different point on the “realism-spectrum” (Chu 3) than the type of literature B&B were describing in 1967. There are less clearly-defined plotlines, the tone is darker, there are fewer answers or pure morals of the story, natural landscapes are foregrounded, gadgets and space are not what they once were. Something has significantly *shifted* in Norwegian fantastic literature, and it is this *change* I wish to draw attention to by proposing a new term.⁴

The proposal of the term *undringslitteratur* may thus more precisely be read as a continuation of long-running efforts to define hybrid imaginative writing in literary criticism. Over the past decades, a number of similar labels have been proposed to define a hybrid, realistic/fantastic style of imaginative writing. However, the urgency of defining such writing has varied. *Undringslitteratur*, as I conceptualize it, overlaps significantly with other similar contemporary labels, such as Juha Raipola’s “speculative climate fiction” (2019):

In speculative climate fiction ... the entire fictional world characteristically functions as a synecdoche for the changing climate. Speculative visions of flooding cities, melting glaciers, catastrophic storms, or drought-suffering environments demonstrate the potentially disastrous effects of climate change on the global environment, while the plot-level events of the narrative focus on the experience of living in a changed world. (8)

Raipola further distinguishes between two different approaches to climate change: mimetic (plausible) and speculative. *Undringslitteratur* overlaps with speculative climate fiction in its frequent emphasis on a changing climate and

⁴ There must be said to be a blurry transition between golden era NSF and *undringslitteratur* without any exact moment of change to pinpoint. Some works of the Norwegian golden era could also be classified as *undringslitteratur*: Axel Jensen’s *Oblidorian Trilogy* (Epp, 1965; Lul, 1992; and *Og resten står skrivd i stjernerne*, 1995). Like all genre labels, the borders between golden era and *undringslitteratur*, as both periodic and characteristic-based markers, are overlapping.

environments. Another close label is Caren Irr's concept of "realist hybrids." She lists works by Barbara Kingsolver, Amitav Ghosh, and T. C. Boyle as examples of novels that "are all interested in plagues, from locusts to flood and fire. They fuse realist prose style with an apocalyptic sensibility" (15). A third relevant term is "new Nordic magic" as introduced in the Danish magazine *Kosmorama* in 2021. The term is not explicitly defined, but the creators write "Forget about Nordic Noir! These days 'New Nordic Magic' is all the rage in Scandinavia, where trolls, vampires and deadly viruses spread in film and tv-series on the supernatural, the magic and in scifi" (*Kosmorama*). Further, magical realism, a literary mode in which fantastical or supernatural elements are presented as ordinary parts of everyday reality, is close to *undringslitteratur*. The editors of *Kosmorama* suggest further that the Scandinavian origin adds "a touch of everyday realism to the fantastic genres." Both magic realism and new Nordic magic overlap with *undringslitteratur* in that often the supernatural and the quotidian are blended together without a sense of explanation or surprise.

There are also broader sub-categories with which *undringslitteratur* finds affinity, like "slipstream" fiction, theorized extensively by Bruce Sterling (77), and "mundane SF" (Ryman et al.). Slipstream, which Rob Latham defines as "an emerging literary mode that engaged the contemporary world with the ideational boldness sf had allegedly abandoned" (1), ties together psychological and philosophical fiction and science fiction/fantasy. "The 'Mundane Manifesto' was produced by a collection of 'pissed off' science fiction enthusiasts at the Clarion West Workshop in 2004. The authors express frustration about the lack of plausibility of many SF tropes and plots. They wish, instead, to celebrate the mundane, the wonders that we Earth-dwellers already witness in our everyday lives or that are within reach. As such, 'mundane SF' is concerned with 'the awakening bedazzlement and wonder that awaits us as we contemplate the beauties of this Earth and its people and what will happen to them in time' (Ryman et al.). In *undringslitteratur* there is a similar focus on the Earth and the Earth-bound, on the explicit contemplation of "this Earth and its people" (Ryman et al.) – the mundane made strange. I will return to both Raipola and Irr's concepts, as well as "mundane SF" and "new Nordic magic".

The boundaries between these "hybrid" labels are arguably as "fuzzy" (Rieder, *Colonial Gaze* 192) as the labels themselves. John Rieder, iterating Paul Kincaid and inspired by philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, sees science fiction as a "fuzzy set" (*Colonial Gaze* 192) with unclear borders, fluid and tenuous – a set of "family resemblances".⁵ Rick Altman argues similarly that all genre labels will always be retroactively applied, inescapably inadequate and in flux (Altman 78–79).⁶ It is impossible to find the perfect descriptor that fits neatly all texts of a certain kind forever. Yet it is fruitful to keep conversations

⁵ Kincaid writes that science fiction "is best understood as a group of objects that bear a family resemblance to one another rather than sharing some set of essential, defining characteristics" (416).

⁶ Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint elaborate on Altman's concept of genre: "Never, as frequently perceived, objects which already exist in the world and which are subsequently studied by genre critics, but fluid and tenuous constructions made by the interaction of various claims and practices by writers, producers, distributors, marketers, readers, fans, critics and other discursive agents" (Bould and Vint 49).

on genre labels alive and inclusive. These discussions allow scholarship to better understand and mark changes in literary style, themes and patterns of identification within and between genres over time.

3. Moving Across Scales

Although the boundaries between these hybrid genre labels are blurred and subtle, and there are significant overlaps, there are nonetheless distinctions. What distinguishes contemporary Norwegian speculative fictions here conceptualized as *undringslitteratur* is the amalgamation of the previously mentioned four key elements, which I will discuss and illustrate in what follows.

The first element is play on scale. By this I mean that these texts draw attention to the relationships and flows between scales (individual, local, glocal, global), often in relation to planetary crises. One example of this is Ingeborg Arvola's (b. 1974) short story "Vi tar imot alle" ("We welcome everyone"). This unsettling story, featured in the Norwegian science fiction anthology *En strek gjennom tyngdekraften* (*A line through gravity*, 2022), follows a day in the life of a young woman, Julia Reiser. Julia lives in an "arbeideri" (worker-y, 16) and the story is written from first-person perspective in a vernacular, bearing traces the post-migrant vernacular found in parts of eastern Norway today, with some made-up neologisms. Next to the reliance on the absent paradigm, world-building through only hinting at the off-screen world, the vernacular dialect can make it challenging to understand exactly what the frames and facts of Julia's life are. As such this text, like many contemporary NSF texts, makes use of what Marc Angenot calls *the absent paradigm*—worlds otherwise, only alluded to outside of the frame or the bounds of the page (Angenot 10). The plot in this text seems to play out in a near future (not made explicit), in a dystopian high-surveillance society where nearly every aspect of life (such as fertility, health indicators) is carefully monitored.

Julia is entangled in a love triangle with her roommate Annie and ex-lover Kevlar (17), and preoccupied with her continued unsuccessful efforts for promotion at work, where she is told the tests show her to be "too emotionally unstable" (19). For this promotion, Julia has to write a historical essay, and it is through excerpts from this essay that the reader understands the future history of the world in which Julia lives:

History tells us the story goes like this. 2018: 68 million people displaced. 2022: 80 million people displaced.[...] Not always with death-threats and stuff. Like it was more like ... get out of here, you poor idiot, you pång, we're taking this land for our solar power project, to have cement factory, grow soybeans, to dam dam. (21).

By drawing attention to the effects of the ongoing climate crisis, Arvola's text touches upon the consequences of the Anthropocene, using the absent paradigm (Angenot) as a device. The Anthropocene is a proposed geological epoch defined by the profound and often irreversible impact of human activity on Earth's ecosystems, climate, and geology. Like many contemporary texts, Arvola's story thus reflects what Mark Bould calls the "Anthropocene unconscious" (1). He defines this as the underlying, and sometimes repressed,

affects that ecological destruction and climate crisis engender (24).⁷ In Arvola's story the Anthropocene unconscious operates through climate change and climate migration looming in the background, as an issue of the past now solved, though the reader might wonder at what cost. The problem of massive climate-migration has, in the story, been outsourced to a private company, which has come up with "Levesteder" as the solution. All nation-states pay the company for the establishment and maintenance of enclosed and guarded parallel societies, adjacent to all the major cities that were previously attracting refugees; Julia lives in the "new Paris" (25). In the Levesteder, people are given a "life-loan" that they gradually pay back with hours of labor throughout their lives. They are fed, clothed, and housed, and are also able to pay off secondary or tertiary loans by cycling to produce energy in their free time. Julia writes: "The habitats extract people, they explained in the beginning. We make people out of people" (24).

While climate change and other planetary crises loom in the background, the personal is foregrounded in this story.⁸ The text also plays with perspective in order to point to scale, and how individual life-worlds and planetary challenges feed into one another in various ways. In the final scene, Julia sees protesters outside holding up signs that say "set them free." She wonders to herself if the protest is about a chicken farm nearby, and the horrible conditions under which the chickens live: "I can understand, because the way chickens live and don't live, without head, but with heart, plastic tubes as food and all that flows through – it makes you wonder, what kind of asshole came up with that?" (32). However, Julia's later reaction to locking eyes with a woman in the protest,

⁷ These affects, such as eco-grief, complicity, solastalgia, eco-anxiety and frustration are "trailed by swarms of 'other things which must not be said', by an eloquent jive of demurral, equivocation, circumvention, slippage, contradiction" (24). Bould, in general, advises reading texts with an eye for the "Anthropocene unconscious" (2). More broadly, one may speculate that the Anthropocene unconscious is in the process of replacing colonialism (Rieder, *Colonial Gaze* 6) as the new "white noise" of speculative fiction and science fiction in general – the ever-present presence, even in absence. If so, this would suggest an evolution within the genres themselves, through constant subversion, play, and re-negotiation of their limitations (Bould 8–9). Then again, neither science fiction nor speculative fiction have ever been static genres; they are always the "children of the time" in the sense of always conversing with dominant issues and developments at the time of production.

⁸ Julia's essay continues:

Removing refugees from the equation – a huge plus. The rest of the world's population is better off. More resources. No money thrown away. And new refugees – they don't exist. Back then people feared climate refugees, made calculations about growing wastelands and islands destined to be flooded, but now there are no refugees. (21).

Julia's great-grandmother was one of the last refugees, a "førstekommer" (firstcomer) –the first refugees to arrive at what became known as "Levesteder" (habitats). Remarkably, the story does not portray any type of resistance or revolt to the system of the Levesteder. Vice versa; Julia's unnervingly upbeat tone, her life choices (moving up in the system at the cost of having a child with Kevlar), her fervent hostility towards the "brain-dead, sidewalk-born refugees" (25) of the past, "gettifying [sic] developed countries and birthing baby-thingies" (22), and continual aggrandizement of labor and sacralization of the leadership is jarring in light of the realities of the Levesteder that we as readers come only to glimpse between the lines.

and the context of the historical essay, opens for the possibility that the protest is about the ex-refugees detained in the Levesteder camp:

A woman stands on a podium and speaks to the crowd. For a moment
our eyes lock, fänk [sic] in the heart, like a shock, so much life
in her eyes, she sees me so much, I feel flayed alive, breathless, whirl around,
walk in opposite direction (32).

The word choice “flayed alive” harkens back to the earlier mention of chickens and livestock in Julia’s essay, raising questions on the line between humans and animals, and about systems that reduce both to commodities. Such questions move between the individual and the systems and structures in which she exists, influencing both. The different viewpoints of Julia and the woman at the demonstration puts the focus on perspective, and how narratives and truths morph and change both vertically and horizontally across scale. The question of perspective comes through in the text in another way: through the constant negotiations between the individual and the powers that be. Another possible interpretation of the final scene is that Julia’s strong reaction signifying that she knows what the protest is about on some level, making her an unreliable narrator. It is tempting as a reader to question whether her glorification of the Levesteder system in the earlier historical essay was really heartfelt, or done in order to appease the authorities and get the promotion she wanted. Through these disparate attitudes, the text reminds us that the difference between incarceration “safety and stimuli” (22) is a matter of perspective.

The short story thus employs perspective to draw attention to scale itself, and the sometimes unstable connections between individual, local and global, on which objects and concepts flow and lives are lived. The facts of Julia’s life as it is portrayed would not be what they are without planetary crises. Reversely, her personal story becomes an image of human suffering under unbridled neoliberal capitalist expansion, the driving force behind the emergence of the Anthropocene. Yet, she also represents some of the psychological elements that allow that expansion to continue: her limited horizon, adaptivity, and preoccupation with the everyday. Thus, the text illustrates poignantly how the individual and local power is in constant flow with the planetary, each continually reproducing the other. By fitting both perspectives within the frame of the picture painted in the story, the text turns the attention towards scale itself, and to these flows and movements between.

Timothy Morton argues that the Anthropocene moment requires an expansion of thinking to what they call “earth magnitude”: “the thinking of beings on a number of different scales, none of which has priority over the other” (22). In contemporary NSF, both the type of play with scale I have discussed in Arvola’s story and the Anthropocene unconscious are ubiquitous. Some NSF texts have climate change as a manifest theme, and some, as Furuseth and Hennig argue, are also openly didactic; they give examples from the work of Maja Lunde and Jostein Gaarder (179–180). The didactic aspect especially comes to the fore in young adult fiction.⁹ In *undringslitteratur*,

⁹ In this article I mainly discuss texts for adult audiences. However, examples of young adult speculative fiction include *Anna: En fabel om klodens klima og miljø* (2013; translated as *The World According to Anna*) by Jostein Gaarder, *Bouvetøya 2052* (2015) by Lars Mæhle, *Gutten og de glødende treet* (2017; *The boy and the glowing tree*) by Agnar Lirhus, and *Embla:*

however, the Anthropocene unconscious is more nebulously present (like in Arvola's story), without any clear message, sometimes only discernible as a tone or atmosphere.¹⁰ Though the Anthropocene unconscious often falls into the background, it sets the stage for contemporary Norwegian speculations. The present discussion on *undringslitteratur* can thus also be read in relation to contemporary conversations on Norwegian ecocriticism. In *Økokritisk Håndbok, Sissel, Furuseth and Reinhard Hennig* show how, up until the 2010s, Norwegian academic ecocriticism had not deeply concerned itself with the steady rise of climate-focused speculative fiction.¹¹ Yet, "[s]everal scholars have pointed to the unique qualities of genre literature, particularly the emerging climate literature, in addressing the global challenges we face today" (Furuseth and Hennig 183). This article may also be read as a contribution to the contemporary efforts to fill this gap in Norwegian ecocriticism.

4. Re-enchanting the Everyday

In its core Anthropocene unconscious and interplay with scales, *undringslitteratur* overlaps with Raipola's aforementioned term "speculative climate fiction." Yet these new Norwegian speculative fictions that inform my conception of *undringslitteratur* do not necessarily portray "speculative visions of the disastrous effects of climate change" (Raipola 8). There could, of course, exist texts that can be considered both "speculative climate fiction" and *undringslitteratur*. However, overall, *undringslitteratur* is less spectacular in its visions; rather, its focus is on the everyday.

These texts resist expansive or overtly grandiose modes of worldbuilding. Instead, while speculative, magical, or fantastic elements emerge, the worlds they construct remain anchored in material reality. The Anthropocene is not rendered in its systemic totality, but mediated through subjective registers – through the affects, perceptions, and interiorities of individual characters – so that planetary crises are apprehended obliquely rather than explicitly. These texts are not concerned with "the end of the world"

Kampen for Fremtiden by Arild Midthun and climate scientist Bjørn H. Samsø (2022; Embla: The struggle for the future). In contemporary adult NSF, the Anthropocene unconscious is more nebulously present, without any clear message. Novels like Bjørn Vatne's (1976–) *Nullingen av Paul Abel* (2018; The nullification of Paul Abel) exemplify "climate literature that does not necessarily accept that the ecocritical perspective should dictate what is right and wrong." (Furuseth and Hennig 183).

¹⁰ Further illustrative examples of the nebulous presence of the Anthropocene unconscious, and interplay of scale, in *undringslitteratur* are Anders Elsrud Hultgreen's feature film *Morgenrøde* (2014), Berit Ellingsen's near-future novel *Not Dark Yet* (2021), the novel *Før de henter oss* by Peter Franziskus Strassegger (2015; Before they come and get us), and Franciska Eliassen's feature film *Den siste våren* (2022; Sister, What Grows Where Land is Sick?).

¹¹ They describe how "when three researchers at the Center for Development and Environment published an article on Norwegian climate fiction in 2017, they focused on notable titles like Brit Bildøen's *Sju dager i august* (2014), Mette Karlvik's *Den beste hausten er etter monsoon* (2014), Tomas Espedal's *Året* (2016), and Agnar Lirhus's *Liten kokebok* (2016), rather than books by Maja Lunde, Gert Nygårdshaug, or Jostein Gaarder. Equally symptomatic was Karlvik's protest against the label of climate fiction, as she asserted that she had never seen herself as a climate fiction writer" (Furuseth and Hennig 179–180).

in its totality but “little worlds.” Part of the project, it seems, is often to make the mundane spectacular and the spectacular mundane.

An example is the short story “Problemet med opp” (The trouble with up) by Bjørn Vatne, appearing in the same anthology, *En strek gjennom tyngdekraften* (A line through gravity, 2022), in which Arvola’s story can be found. The anthology was the first to be published in over 20 years, featuring “only new, imaginative Norwegian science fiction” (262). The collection has several stories that foreground not just everyday tasks and actions, but everyday feelings and thoughts in non-everyday situations or contexts, raising questions of agency.

In this story, a man floating in an apartment complex-like structure called “the cube” in space, is completely obsessed with an argument he has going with his partner Beate and neighbors on which way is up (now that there is no gravity). The reader is never informed why the man is in this apartment complex, or why the complex is floating in space, or what lead up to the situation. This is in itself a literary device, resting on the absent paradigm, yet also through the writer’s choice of emphasis, sidelining the spectacular (floating in outer space on a mysterious journey), and foregrounding the mundane.¹² Through this choice, the story highlights that the way the characters experience what is essentially a post-apocalyptic and extreme situation is not the same as what it looks like from the outside. From here, a connection can be drawn to readers’ own situations, for instance in being in the middle of spectacular ongoing global crises yet simultaneously being preoccupied by relatively everyday and banal things. It is not difficult to draw parallels between the floating apartment complex, a symbol of post-industrial urban expansion in the second half of the 20th century in Norwegian cities that gestures towards the massive consumption and expansion of the Anthropocene, and the planet Earth, in that none of the inhabitants have any final answer to why they are there, what lead up to things being as they are, or where they are headed. Instead, inhabitants turn their attentions towards internal, solvable, comprehensible matters, such as deciding what is up and what is down. As such, the text touches on the tension between what Morton calls “the big picture” and “little me” (Morton 4).¹³

At the same time, the characters, for all their faults, are not portrayed with disdain. The main character does in the end choose to lay aside the question of up, in order to reconcile with his partner and community. Through the main characters’ arch the reader is invited to rediscover the beauty, the enchantment, of the everyday. The story comments on the tragic limitations of the human mind, while simultaneously celebrating and lifting up the banalities of life. In the end, it is a warm story about community, love and

¹² For instance easy chairs and television remotes, conflict with neighbours about up, bickering with Beate about what television shows to watch and what beer brand they should buy.

¹³ Morton recognizes the difficulty of attempting to think in this multi-scalar way for the average person –to think of oneself as “little me” (4), the individual, and at the same time as a human that is a geophysical force. They give the example of turning a car key and driving a car, something which is statistically meaningless in one sense, yet at the same time, in the large scale of things, millions of people driving cars every day has a massive impact on the entire planet.

interdependency.¹⁴ The spectacular, and the bigger, unanswerable questions, fall into the background.

Both Vatne and Arola's stories in the anthology *En strek gjennom tyngdekraften* negotiate seamlessly between the scales of "earth magnitude" and "little me" (Morton) through placing everyday concerns in sharp relief against spectacular backgrounds. This mechanism, characterizing *undringslitteratur*, overlaps with "new Nordic magic" in its emphasis on "the everyday grind," (Joyce).¹⁵ Yet, in contemporary NSF the emphasis is rather on drawing attention to the *processes of re-enchantment*, which centers agency. In Vatne and Arola's stories, for instance, everyday feelings and thoughts of the characters are centered, operating as anchors allowing for the seamless toggling between individual and planetary scales.

Furthermore, in its focus on re-enchanting the quotidian contemporary NSF also finds affinity with the aforementioned "mundane SF," also in that both can be understood as a reaction to the grandiose science fiction narratives served up by Hollywood, Bollywood, and other hubs of global pop-culture. The project of mundane SF and of contemporary NSF is not to dazzle but to re-enchant the material world, to make the mundane seem fantastic, and to hold up the processes by which people make them appear fantastic. As such, *undringslitteratur* often begins at a different point on the "realism spectrum" (Chu 3)¹⁶ than what B&B called *fabelprosa*. On the other hand, Ryman and

¹⁴ The uplifting of a community and interdependency (which in this story also carries a flavor of Nordic social-democratic ideology) becomes quite clear in the following quote, from which the anthology borrowed its title:

So where do I stand in the debate about up and down? I have always been among those who advocate for a unifying core. We call ourselves centrists, and we are unquestionably in the minority. Our goal is to provide the population with a single point that is 'up' for all people: the center of the cube. It is an immensely beautiful and democratic thought. It means that we renounce the age-old idea that every person has an infinite sky above them, and I believe this is what is difficult for Beate and Torgny: they refuse to realize that we are trapped here, together, and that's that. In many ways, they resemble the old earth-people. For them, it worked like this: if they could draw a line through the gravity affecting each person, billions of lines would point down towards the center of the planet and up towards unique points out there in the endless universe. If one moved far enough away from Earth, these lines would eventually be separated by light-years. Thus arose the idea that every person is capable of rising and ascending without bumping into anyone else, and the closer one gets to the divine, the more space one would have solely for oneself. This was a notion that created much trouble, from what I have understood.

For us centrists, it is quite the opposite. The closer one gets to the absolute core, or 'up,' the closer one will be to the people around one. Living an elevated life, therefore, involves not only closeness to others, but also limiting the amount of space you yourself occupy. (Vatne 231–232).

¹⁵ Yet, as a category "new Nordic magic" is not precise enough to be an apt descriptor for contemporary NSFs. The word magic implies the supernatural, bringing magic from a transcendental realm into the ordinary lives of humans. In contemporary NSF the enchantment takes place because the drama or spectacle of the backdrop (outer space in Vatne's story) provides a beautifying frame against which the quotidian is uplifted and placed front and center, allowing audiences an opportunity to re-value it, making the normal seem marvelous, enchanting, but not necessarily 'magical'.

¹⁶ Poet and scholar Seo-Young Chu sees no opposition between genre literature like science fiction on the one hand and realism on the other, to her there is only a "spectrum" of realism.

colleagues exclude stories featuring “larger-than-life” tropes of SF, such as interstellar travel, time travel, and contact with aliens, from their definition of mundane SF, deeming these scenarios too implausible. Larger-than life scenarios *do* occur in contemporary NSF.¹⁷

5. Creating “Nordicity”

Undringslitteratur could be thought of as inhabiting the middle ground between speculative climate fiction and mundane SF, closer to magical realism but with something other than magic. Classified within a “realism spectrum” (Chu 3), these fictions may well be called “realist hybrids,” fusing “a realist prose style with an apocalyptic sensibility” (Irr 15). Yet, *undringslitteratur* is not necessarily marked by an “apocalyptic sensibility” but rather occupies a liminal position right on the quivering line between tragedy and comedy.¹⁸

Furthermore, there is a situatedness in how the planetary is both approached and conveyed in these texts. In their exploration of climate change in Norwegian literature, television production, and film, Furuseth and colleagues identify four recurring elements: special relationships with nature, petroculture, “Norwegian gloom,” and “nordicity” (2020). Here I will focus on the significance of nordicity for defining *undringslitteratur*. Canadian linguist and geographer Louis-Edmond Hamlin coined the term *nordicité* to describe the circumpolar region characterized by “parameters such as latitude, annual cold, type of ice, natural vegetation, accessibility, resident population, and degree of economic activity” (Furuseth et al. 8–9). Daniel Chartier further explored this concept in literary and cultural studies, as also representing a discursive system, intertwining geographical landscapes with those of cultural imaginaries. In literature, nordicity implies that features of Nordic landscapes shine through as central elements of the story, including snow, ice, tides, or certain flora and fauna. However, as Furuseth and colleagues note, it is not just the representations of Nordic elements, but the modes in which these elements are portrayed, imagined, and re-imagined to which nordicity refers. Nordicity in art and literature sits at the intersection of the sociomaterial and the cultural, between place and national belonging, identity and more imaginative extrapolation.

Chu’s argument can perhaps be understood as a reversal of that made by Darko Suvin in 1972, which emphasizes what the latter called “cognitive estrangement.” To Chu, science fiction operates within the realm of mimesis, also by literalizing metaphors, and through doing so expands the concept of mimesis itself (Chu 3).

¹⁷ For instance, Sigbjørn Skåden’s novel *Fugl* (2019) is set on a distant planet where a human settlement exists. Another example can be found in Vatne’s short-story discussed above, or the novel *Oslo 2084* (2004) by B&B, private-investigator Robert Altermann is caught up in dramatic and violent hijinks in an Oslo that is partially underwater, where an underground alternative society is forming in the now disused subway tunnels. For this reason, rather than simply applying the concept of “mundane SF” to the Norwegian context, I propose the term *undringslitteratur* that accounts for the superimposition of re-enchanted mundane lives and larger-than life scenarios in NSF.

¹⁸ For instance, in their speculative fictions creators such as Cathrine Knutsen, Rannveig Leite Molven, Kristin Bergret, and Sigbjørn Skåden, seem to purposefully set out on the difficult task of writing neither a happy utopian nor a sad apocalyptic story.

The quality of nordicity is a point of convergence between wider Nordic eco-fiction and what I call *undringslitteratur*. I will illustrate using an example of a text that can simultaneously be read within an ecocritical framework with an emphasis on nordicity and place, and as *undringslitteratur*: Margrét Helgadóttir's (b. 1971) collection *The Stars Seem So Far Away* (2015, originally written in English).

Helgadóttir presents a series of interwoven short stories, following a small core cast of characters who move in and out of one another's lives, their paths gradually converging near the book's conclusion. The narrative unfolds in a post-apocalyptic warming world where the ice caps have melted, leading to a global catastrophe. Consequently, the surviving population, now starving refugees, flees north to scattered Arctic islands, seeking refuge in what remains of a cooler world.

The Stars Seem So Far Away vividly creates a sense of nordicity through its settings: outstretched seascapes, islands, and icy expanses. The vastness of the vistas underlines the smallness of the human in the large scheme of things. Myth and enchantment emerging through Nordic landscapes and fauna, notably (memories of) whales (48), (genetically engineered) polar bears (42), and a ghost fox (14), ornamenting the bleakness of sparse existences. Yet, the nordicity is also in the foregrounding of socio-psychological consequences of living in these cold, mostly barren terrains, and the type of cultures, value systems, and material relationalities they inspire.

An example of this can be found in reading the character Bjørg, first featured in the short story "A Rescue" (42), as an embodiment of certain ideals tied to nordicity. Bjørg lives by herself on an unnamed island, protecting a seed vault, with a group of genetically engineered pet polar bears, or "isbos." She embodies nordicity in her relationality to the material world, one that is strongly intertwined with identity. For instance, few but strong bonds, loyalties, and proximity are arguably hallmarks of Nordic social ideal and mark all Bjørg's connections. Her deep emotional connection to the polar bears, an iconic species of the northern hemisphere, and to the island, is a major part of her identity and informs her decision-making (Cade). She is arguably more at home with the animals and landscapes than other humans. For instance, she dreads having to go to the northern part of the island where there is a more built environment. She seems more or less comfortable about regularly murdering humans that arrive in boats and try to get at the vault, as she was taught to do in childhood by her now-deceased father, but worries about the isbos when she eventually does decide to leave: "She missed her isbos, especially Gard, their leader. She felt naked and vulnerable without the white animal close by" (151). The human connections Bjørg eventually does make are characterized by few strong bonds, especially to her partner Simik, and once the connection is made her devotion is absolute: "Whether I am a monster or not. Whether we stay or we leave. He is here. That is all that matters" (135).

Furthermore, Bjørg and her father's strong sense of duty and responsibility in protecting the vault reflects what is perhaps another tenet of Nordic values, a strong sense of (often abstract) collective responsibility

balanced with individual autonomy.¹⁹ Finally, Bjørg's uncomplaining "toughing-it-out" attitude under extreme circumstances, both the stormy and unpredictable climate and carrying out her duty of violently protecting the vault, reflects the ideal of resilience that echoes Hamlin's emphasis on cultural "ruggedness" in nordicity (Furuseth et al. 8–9). *The Stars Seem So Far Away* is thus a collection that both creates nordicity through portrayals of Nordic environments and culturally situated ways of becoming-with those environments.

6. Back Door to the House of Worship

There is a streak of spiritual seeking, a search for a connection with something beyond, running through *undringslitteratur*. Sometimes this streak is conspicuous, like in Bringsværd's novel *Slipp håndtaket når du vrir* (Let go of the handle when you twist) from 2015. The novel chronicles the journey of Jeremias, a character who frequently embodies various animals, along with his companions, Jensen, a black dog, and Hildur, a speech therapist. Through special bookshelves Jeremias and his friends jump between parallel universes, grappling to understand the rules and objectives of each new society, their own constant transformations, and of their mission. Despite its humorous and surreal tone, *Slipp håndtaket når du vrir* touches on sombre themes, such as racism, animal cruelty, intolerance, war, species extinction, and the search for meaning. The novel is also underpinned by Christianity in a number of ways. For instance, God sporadically appears in various forms including an eccentric old woman in a red poplin coat, and a burning bush, the latter directly referencing the Biblical story of Moses and the burning bush in Exodus. Throughout their adventure, Jeremias, Jensen, and Hildur find themselves constantly engaged in battle by a mysterious character called Fienden (the enemy), a manifestation of evil and darkness.²⁰

The streak of spirituality in *undringslitteratur* might be surprising, considering Norway is a highly secularized nation, as Turid Skorpe Lannem has shown. Yet, the spiritual elements rarely point to institutionalized religion, as they do in Bringsværd's novel, at least explicitly. The "something beyond" is often left intentionally ambiguous, like in Franciska Eliassen's (b. 1997) feature film *Den siste våren* (Sister, What Grows Where Land is Sick? 2022). The story follows two teenage sisters, Eira and Vera, growing up in a small town in northern Norway. Trying to understand her sister better, Eira reads Vera's diary, but is shocked by what she finds there. Like Alice in Wonderland, Eira falls into Vera's dark glittering universe, marked by oscillating hope and despair, as she grapples with the depth of depravity involved in the bleak

¹⁹ Bjørg remembers her father's words: "Look them in the eye and pull the trigger. It is your duty. Never forget that, girl ... We are helping the humans to survive in the future. So she would say it aloud to block out their cries. 'I am helping them.'" (43–44).

²⁰ In Norwegian, Fienden is a common-tongue name for Satan. It is revealed towards the end of the novel that the three protagonists are in fact a form of angels, and their mission, across the parallel universes, was in different ways to fight for the good, and to re-establish in various ways a form of cosmic order. Earth-dwellers being caught up in an eternal celestial struggle between heaven and hell, good and evil, is a frame that recurs in major world religions, art and literature.

human-driven machinations behind a changing climate. Eliassen's film depicts a number of mysterious rituals. One such ritual takes place in a dense forest amid pink and orange smoke; we hear drumming as a figure wearing a colorful dress and a deer skull as a mask leads a procession of people purposefully into the forest in slow motion. Wild dancing ensues and a variety of masks and twisted bodies flash across the screen. This particular scene evokes ideas of environment-based practices of worship in Norway, reaching back before the arrival of Christianity, reminiscent of paganism or animism. As such, the film brings up another kind of spirituality. Rather than transcendentalism, it represents a place-based earthy spirituality, emerging through everyday practices like moving through the forest. What distinguishes *undringslitteratur* from other hybrid genres is not the element of spiritual seeking itself, but the distinctive and historically specific way in which it comes to expression. Due to widespread social secularization in Norway,²¹ literary production is conceivably thought more normatively acceptable than outright practices of missionizing, spiritual proclamation, or collective worship. Furthermore, secularization opened more space for the sacralization of landscapes and environments, and some *undringslitteratur* can be read as part of these processes of sacralization and expressions of stealthy (or sometimes not so stealthy) reverence of and devotion to nature as the sacred.

The privileging of atmosphere over plot, alongside a marked orientation toward introspection, constitutes a set of aesthetic strategies through which both nordicity and spiritual seeking operate in *undringslitteratur*. The focus, like in Eliassen's film, is on the intimate: embodied experience, relationships, and psyche of the characters.²² Here, the inner lives of the characters generate the supernatural elements, not the other way around. Often plot is so far downplayed that it may be challenging for the reader to figure out what is actually going on.²³ The fictions instead center a "vibe," for instance through large visuals quivering with tension vibrato.²⁴ The atmospheres created are

²¹ Perhaps this characteristic of *undringslitteratur* (and the centrality of undring as a virtue in Norwegian society at large) may be understood as an attempt to fill in a vacuum left by the weakening of the centralized church's position (Statskirken) and the effects of secularization in Norway (Andreassen). Central institutions of ethics and morality, justice and politics have all severed official ties from organized Christianity. Yet, a Judeo-Christian ethos is often detectable in Norwegian society. In a book review of the anthology *Religion i dagens Norge: Mellom sekularisering og sakralisering* (2010, ed. Ulla Schmidt og Pål Ketil Botvar) Turid Skorpe Lannem summarizes thus: "Norway is among the most secularized countries in the world, but there is much to say about that." (372).

²² Other examples of the foregrounding of (dark) atmosphere over plot and an introspective focus can be found in Von Trier's film *Thelma* (2017), or Berit Ellingsen's near-future novel *Not Dark Yet* (2021). Interestingly, the speculative element often emerges as an extension of pre-existing socio-psychological tensions, like in Bår Stenvik's *Informasjonen* (2018) where body-language expert Sven's disassociation with life leads him to leave his body entirely and live through an experimental avatar where he can have full control over his own appearance at all times. Another example is Mathias Faldbakken's famous and popular novel *Vi er Fem* (2020), where a malignant, electrified, sentient blob emerges as a result of tensions within a modern cookie-cutter family living a life of boredom and overconsumption in a rural village.

²³ In the film *Morgenrøde*, for instance, the cold wind and wide-open landscapes, combined with the mysterious religious rituals and grief of the characters create a mystical mood that entirely supersedes the plot (Elsrud Hultgreen 2014).

²⁴ There is also a growing amount of speculative poetry being published, and texts written in long-poem form, for instance Terje Dragseth's weird-poetry *Voodoo Science* (2022), or *Bella Blu* (2012), which the writer has imagined as a continuation of the voyage begun in Harry

often heavy, dark, or mellow, sometimes characterized by what has been called “Norwegian gloom” (Furuseth et al. 14), and, at times, borrowing elements from weird fiction or horror. Dark-toned portrayals of landscapes, close-ups of natural elements, changing environments, coupled with an introspective focus, is prolific. Vera’s universe in Eliassen’s film features wide Northern landscapes and animals, particularly horses. The eeriness of these nature scenes, created by the soundscapes, seems to suggest deeper spiritual essences or forces within these environments. These portrayals,²⁵ and the space they are given in the telling of these stories, convey the undertone of the “Anthropocene unconscious” (Bould 1) through turning the attention towards nature, what it is and what effect humanity has had on it. The idea, it seems, is not necessarily to frighten, nor to create a sense of the sublime for its own sake, but to enlist atmospheres and environmental imagery for reflexivity: asking how and why different environments move us, influencing our thoughts, feelings and actions, and how we move them, and how such assemblages change as our environments change. The spiritual streak may in this way be understood as part of the efforts to “give heart” or return agency to the “little me” (Morton), as an antidote to the overwhelm and petrification that planetary crises generate. This is especially relevant in the current moment when discussions both inside and outside academia revolve around trying, and mostly failing, to grasp “the scales of the Anthropocene” (Heise 275). By centering the processes through which we try to make meaning of what lies beyond human understanding, *undringslitteratur* also reflects how the ecological effects of the Anthropocene push the limits of existent dominant structures of meaning.

7. Three Ways to Wonder

In this final section, I show how the distinctive amalgamation of the four elements described above is aptly captured by the Norwegian term *undring*, especially through its emphasis on and (re)imagining of agency. *Undring*, from Norrønt (Old Norse) *undra*, is loosely translatable as “wonder.” It has positive connotations associated with childlike wonder. In my previous article, I write that *undringslitteratur* “suggests a positive and innocent attitude to the world. It sniffs and picks at the myriad unknowns of our time and hopes everything will turn out okay” (Tveit 2022).

Furthermore, *undring* can be described as having three overlapping connotations with accompanying associations: scientific inquiry, nonhuman relationality, and spirituality. *Undre* as a verb connoting scientific inquiry can mean to critically think about, to question, or to ruminate on something, with a

Martinson’s infamous *Aniara* long poem (1956), Øyvind Rimbereid’s *Solaris Korrigert* (2004) and two volumes by Maria Dorothea Schrattenholz (2015, 2021).

²⁵ This darkness may be read as part of a generalized contemporary fondness for creating dark-toned mystical, “trolsk” atmospheres often in connection with nonhuman environments. This privileging of atmosphere alludes once more to “new Norwegian magic,” where it is hard to tell where the “real” magic of landscapes end and the “novum” (Suvin 375) begin. Taking a wider view, the inward focus seems very much in line with other Norwegian and Nordic cultural products, such as Nordic noir, meditative jazz or the unending enthusiasm for semi-autobiographical realism.

positive spin. This signification underscores the positive aspects of curiosity, celebrating logic, exploration, and experimentation. *Undring*, or wonder, in this sense is the necessary catalyst for engaging with and formulating (research) questions. Here *undringsslitteratur* connects to the more appealing aspects of the science fiction tradition; curiosity is, after all, the driving force behind innovation and inquiry. As Carl Freedman argues, science fiction functions as a literature of possibility, one that enables critical reflection on existing social structures by depicting them as contingent and therefore open to change (8). *Undring* as such becomes a celebration of curiosity, not just in childhood, but as a red thread through human life.

Secondly, *undring* is often evoked as a mode of relating to the nonhuman world. For instance, *undring.no*, the website of an organization working with “children and nature in various arenas,” states that “nature can be found everywhere. We lower the threshold and wonder [undrer oss] and seek knowledge together with the children” (“Undring og utforskning – på barnas premisser”). Finally, the word *under* can indicate a miracle, something that is to be marveled at and celebrated, brought about by unseen and/or incomprehensible forces – like the English term “a wonder.” The verb to wonder (*undre*) does not only designate scientific inquiry but can also be easily associated with religious or spiritual practices and texts. The term *undring* is ambiguous and roomy, and its ambiguity can be advantageous in this connection. With the rise of private or personal religiosity in a highly secularized society, a concept such as *undring* can be useful in underlining the co-existence of science and knowledge-production and spiritual pursuits beyond dualistic approaches.

Undring thus brings together scientific inquiry, spirituality, and the sociomaterial. The term thus reflects that the metaphysical and the transcendent – that which is beyond rational comprehension or scientific explanation – is not necessarily in contradiction to scientific curiosity and inquiry. It draws attention to the overlap between scientific and spiritual practices, and suggests that the two often exist in harmony within lived experience.

These three layers of meaning give the term *undring(slitteratur)* the depth and resonance needed to reflect the thematic and aesthetic concerns, scope, and purpose of contemporary NSF as delineated above. The movement across scale between the local and the global resonates with *undring*'s etymological grounding in a moment of stopping, of holding the small against the vast. Likewise, the re-enchantment of the everyday, the transformation of the mundane into the site of strangeness, embodies the mood of *undring*: an attentiveness to what ordinarily passes unnoticed, a lingering gaze that renders the familiar uncanny. Both these traits echo the affective register of wonder, but they do so in a specifically Norwegian idiom, where *undring* is less about spectacle or astonishment and more about quiet reflection in the face of shifting realities.

Equally, nordicity and the stealthy mode of spiritual searching are well served by the semantic richness of *undring*. Evoking *undring* in the Norwegian context, arguably brings with it a whiff of the bonfire smoke, freshly caught cod, and damp fur. It moves in the realm of deep memory and “folkesjela” –

Norwegian collective identity.²⁶ Relatedly, Nordic landscapes like fjords, forests, and frozen expanses, in these texts, are not only backdrops but terrains that invite a contemplative stance, evoking awe without yielding easy answers. The spiritual dimension in contemporary NSF is not declarative but subdued, emerging obliquely as though through half-light. Here, too, *undring* provides an apt frame: it suggests an orientation toward mystery that resists closure, a mode of questioning rather than certainty.

Finally, the term *undringslitteratur* designates not merely a thematic preoccupation within contemporary NSF but a structuring affect that animates the texts, especially through an emphasis on agency. To be in a state of *undring* is to be full of questions and critically engaged with the material world. *Undring* emphasizes the agency of the wonderer as it connotes not just passively marveling at a piece of technology or an event, but to an active engagement and entanglement with the material world. It indicates a willingness to become, or perhaps to acknowledge, entanglement, interconnection, interdependence and the transformative power of encounters (Tsing 6). Grounded in everyday sociomaterial reality, *undringslitteratur* thus draws us back from the fantastic or spectacular to the “mundane” (Ryman et al.), which is re-enchanted through the agency of the wonderer.

8. Conclusion

In this article, I have proposed the term *undringslitteratur* to label the fictions of the current moment in Norwegian speculative fiction, to draw attention to how style and content have changed from that of “golden-era” NSF. Despite strong overlaps with other terms in circulation for hybrid, realist/speculative styles of imaginative writing, *undringslitteratur* is distinctive in its amalgamation of four elements.

First, *undringslitteratur* is characterized by a poetics of scale, oscillating between the local and the global in ways that resonate with the “Anthropocene unconscious,” where the impact of human activity on the nonhuman world is a constant, quiet presence. Through elastic motion between scales, between the individual and the planetary and those in-between, *undringslitteratur* explores contractions and expansions of objects and concepts and the pangs, flares, and

²⁶ Connection to specific natural environments is crucial to Norwegians sense of national identity and belonging. The struggle for sovereignty and nation building in the 1800s idealized traditional, rural life. The Norwegian national romantics, in their nation-building project, emphasized the drama and cultures of high mountain peaks and deep, glacier-carved fjords, creating a rugged and wild environment. This formed part of the rhetoric and narratives for Norwegian emancipation and sovereignty leading up to independence in 1814, also because it was something Denmark did not have, and Sweden less so (Bo 173). Furthermore, Furuseth and colleagues write about Norwegians’ “special” relationship with nature: “There is a widespread notion that Norwegians are closer to nature than the citizens of other nations” (11). Whether this is the case or not, the notion itself has become culturally significant, along with the idea of being defined as a resilient, rugged “nature people” (Furuseth et al. 8–9). *Undring’s* connection to the nonhuman world therefore not only highlights the deep ties between nature and wonder but also draws attention to these ties’ foundational role in shaping individual and national identity.

unforeseen pathways these movements generate.²⁷ Second, *undringslitteratur* pursues the re-enchantment of the everyday by subverting conventional presentations of the relationship between the quotidian and the spectacular. It is not just about lifting up the everyday and the intimate, what Morton discusses as “little me” perspectives, but also about drawing big questions, issues, and unknowns, as well as “big” (human) agency, into the quotidian. Third, *undringslitteratur* has a regional inflection, articulating nordicity both as a mode of topographical evocation and as a discursive system of “northernness.” Fourth, *undringslitteratur* exhibits a vein of stealthy spiritual seeking, that comes to expression through situated modes. A prioritizing of (melancholic or dark) atmosphere over plot, and an emphasis on the introspective are devices through which these latter two elements often operate.

Finally, I have discussed how the synthesis of these four elements is aptly encapsulated in the term *undring*. Connotating wonder, contemplation, and pausing before the inexplicable, *undring* designates not merely a thematic preoccupation but a structuring affect that animates contemporary NSF. The term encapsulates and celebrates two of the most important features of human life in harmonic synchrony: the broadness of embodied perception and the limits to understanding, the knowable and the unknowable. By threading together these four elements, *undring* embodies a uniquely Norwegian poetics of wonder, one that lingers in ambiguity while inviting the reader to dwell in its spaciousness. It points to wonderment as a driving force centering agency, which is crucial to both scientific and spiritual explorations of the material world.

Here I have shown how the label *undringslitteratur* is applicable in contemporary Norway. However, given that Norwegian fiction is not a closed circuit and flows with wider Nordic and global cultural tendencies and events, the term might also be useful in framing and further understanding other literatures. Another question to be explored is, where does the appeal of *undringslitteratur* lie for contemporary Norwegian audiences? How can we make sense of the current upsurge of this genre-crossing, strange and woeful type of writing? As the co-editor of the newest Norwegian SF-anthology Joanna Rzadzowska said in an interview: “When the crises come at us through all channels, science fiction can provide an alternative perspective on contemporary times” (Henanger and Mejdal). If we accept Csicsery-Ronay’s argument that “science fictionality” may be a useful mode of engagement with our modern world (2), then one may argue that when Norwegian audiences turn to SF they are no longer primarily looking to be dazzled with gadgets, scientist heroes, novel social and material technology, and space travel, which were the hallmarks of the golden era. They are arguably searching, instead, for tools with which to understand and process their own discombobulating, technologically accelerated, digitized presents marked by the climate crisis, connecting with characters who are equally confounded.

The appeal might also become evident when viewing *undringslitteratur* as a provider of temporary relief for widespread apprehension and disenchantment. Audiences are allowed to participate in the “art of noticing”

²⁷ Flows between the local and the global are also affecting production processes. Stephen Joyce writes about the recent shift to “glocalised” production using the Norwegian-produced series “Beforegners” (2019-2021, created by Anne Bjørnstad and Eilif Skodvin) as a case study.

(Tsing 37) through the re-enchantment of relatable life-worlds – to really see the depth in the eye of a reindeer, or the many shades of blue in a glacier. *Undringslitteratur* is a literature of complicity, atonement, and lamentation, one that stays with the trouble of the Anthropocene (Haraway). Yet, it is also a literature that glimmers with hope in its facets of wonderment, a soft invitation to Earthly (re)connection.

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Lectio praecursoria:
Game of Thrones as a Work of
Fantasy Fiction in the Storytelling
Environment of the Internet

Markus Laukkanen

Biography: Markus Laukkanen, PhD, defended his doctoral dissertation titled “Co-Opting *Game of Thrones* with Digital Paratext Narratives: Interactivity, authorship, and affordances in the storytelling environment of the internet” at Tampere University in November 2025. He works as a researcher in the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation -funded project “Journalistic Future Narratives in and about NATO-era Finland”. Laukkanen's research interests include narratology, the study of fantasy, interactive digital narratives, social media studies, culture war narratives, and journalistic narrative practices. Link to dissertation: <https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-03-4228-9> Contact: markus.laukkanen@tuni.fi

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In a broad sense, my dissertation (Laukkanen, *Digital Paratext Narratives*) concerns a kind of literary culture in the age of the internet. In a slightly more exact sense, it concerns the intertwining of the narrative forms and narrative practices that proliferate in online spaces. It asks, how do these new forms and practices change the ways we approach fictional narratives? In particular, how does the *de facto* online context of contemporary narratives influence the author–audience dynamic of fictional communication (e.g. Phelan)? While these have ended up becoming the central topics of my dissertation, I did not originally set out to study the internet or internet culture. Rather, I set out to

make sense of a fantasy story that had captivated me – and many, many other people – like few others before.

I wrote my Finnish-language master's thesis (Laukkanen, *Monsters*) on George R. R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire fantasy series. More precisely, I wrote it on what I perceived as its dynamic relationship with the popular genre of fantasy. In that thesis, I discussed how approaching a work of fiction as fantasy informs one's reading of it on many levels. These range from paying attention to certain parts of the work while overlooking others, to anticipating the progression of its plot. The knowledge of this anticipation is famously used by Martin to create shocking twists and surprises for his readers.

My dissertation monograph was supposed to expand this train of thought further: to move from the level of an individual work to that of the entire genre. In fantasy scholarship, there is an old tradition – that I find frustrating – of trying to define the genre based on the inclusion of fantastic elements (e.g. Manlove; Attebery). If a work of fiction depicts something that is perceived as “impossible” in “consensus reality” (Hume 12), meaning the real world, then that element is taken to be what makes the work fantasy. This logic always rubbed me wrong, as it did not really mesh with my own experiences of reading fantasy.

Reading a work of fiction in the context of a popular genre like fantasy, I thought, means adopting many genre-specific narrative expectations. These expectations are learned through previous experiences with works in the same genre (see Rabinowitz 43–44). Popular genres, then, could be thought of as discursive formations, or even traditions with their own customs and rules of conduct (see Kraatila 36). Authors and audiences of fantasy, together, form a *discourse community* that dynamically negotiates what the genre is and what it is not. Whether a work of fiction is fantasy, then, is determined by whether it is created and read as part of the genre conversation of fantasy, not by its inclusion or non-inclusion of fantastic elements. Even though the dissertation I ended up writing is very different from what I envisioned back then, this discursive understanding of fantasy has given my research an outlook to literary phenomena as something authors and audiences co-create by partaking in public discourse.

When I was writing my master's thesis, I had a tantalizing recurring idea: expanding my focus from A Song of Ice and Fire to its popular television adaptation *Game of Thrones*, and maybe even to their public reception. After all, I was writing about the ways Martin's literary work makes use of genre conventions to shock and surprise. What better illustration of how impactful such genre-conscious narrative devices could be than the online fan discourse about *Game of Thrones*? For example, reaction videos to the death of the series' initial protagonist, Ned Stark, seemed to gain considerable virality online. People who had read the novels would secretly film and share their friends and loved ones being horrified by the events of the show. Some of these early reaction videos can still be found online, although most have been lost to the ephemerality of digital texts. Indeed, many only exist because they were inadvertently archived as parts of later compilation videos seeking to remonetize the work of others.

Tackling this phenomenon, in addition to putting forth my case about the genre poetics of A Song of Ice and Fire, seemed much too far-ranging a task for what was already an ambitious master's thesis. I therefore only briefly

referred to *Game of Thrones* and its public response in that text, thinking I might lean on them more extensively later. In my doctoral dissertation, I decided from the beginning to include *Game of Thrones* not only as an illustration of the effect of Martin's poetics, but as actual target material. Maybe, I thought, I would even analyze some actual audience comments and reactions. This decision was to prove fateful.

Sometime later, when working with a group of fellow doctoral students on a Finnish-language book about narratives after postmodernism (Björninen) – where I wrote a chapter about *Game of Thrones*, naturally – I was confronted with the vexing question of whether there were any discernible elements in post-postmodern narratives that could not be found anywhere in postmodern literature. The only distinct feature I felt I could convincingly argue was exclusive to the domain of post-postmodernism was the influence of online culture on contemporary fiction. As the internet did not really exist before the 1990s, I reasoned, online culture could not possibly have influenced, say, the narrative form of Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). So that is what I decided my chapter would be about: the influence of online culture as I saw it in *Game of Thrones* (Laukkanen, "Kuka kertoo").

This shifted my focus, again, away from Martin's poetics of fantasy literature, and towards a broader discursive outlook to *Game of Thrones*. Once I started delving into this topic in more detail, I realized that audience-created online content – or *audience-authored digital paratexts* as I call them in the dissertation – regarding *Game of Thrones* could not merely be a fun sideshow that illustrated my argument. These paratexts would have to be promoted to equal status with *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *Game of Thrones*: they would become a category of target material proper for my study. Shifts like this kept happening even after that, and eventually audience-authored paratexts became my primary focus, and the works of fiction themselves were demoted to a supplementary role. It seemed to me that what I had uncovered was more than a fan culture curiosity: I took it to be a sign of a fundamentally changed, or changing, relationship audiences had with works of fiction, and perhaps with narratives in general. That new relationship was fundamentally interactive in nature. In digital media environments, audiences participate in narrative communication in active ways they could not practice before.

It turned out that I was nowhere near the first person to have had thoughts along these lines. In retrospect, this should not have been surprising. In game studies and media studies particularly, a lot of work on interactive cultures had already been done. Due to this revelation, I again drifted further away from my original idea of a monograph dissertation on the poetics of fantasy based on Martin's work. Delving into internet studies has been an education in interdisciplinary thinking. Different fields approach similar questions in very different ways, through different theoretical frameworks. If you ever start to feel confident that you know a thing or two about something, adopting an interdisciplinary perspective to it will soon cure you of that illusion. Especially when studying something timely – like online culture – there is bound to be a nigh on endless variety of perspectives out there capable of offering something valuable to your research. While navigating the overlapping frameworks of various fields of study has been humbling and difficult, I have also found it very productive.

As the culture of interactive audience engagement became more entrenched over time, it seemed to become increasingly common that fans did not just share their own reactions to or interpretations of *Game of Thrones*. They also started to actively speak back to the show (see Jenkins 14), creating alternatives and counterpoints to it. Of course, things like this have always happened in fandom scenes to some extent. I argue, however, that it is *internet-age culture* that has truly made active audience participation in works of fiction a major cultural practice. My eventually article-based dissertation involves lengthy elaborations on narrative theory regarding the communicative dynamics of that practice; here, I want to illustrate some of those dynamics with examples.

Let us first take a look at a case I discuss briefly in the first article of my dissertation (Laukkanen, “Audience-authored Paratexts”). By the end of the third season of *Game of Thrones*, the character Gendry Rivers – an illegitimate son of the recently dead king Robert Baratheon – finds himself in some trouble. Magically powerful “king’s blood” courses through his veins, but he has no protectors at court. His cold-hearted uncle, Stannis Baratheon, has decided to allow him to become a victim of human sacrifice in order to obtain dark powers. Stannis’ loyal right-hand man, an ex-smuggler-turned-knight Davos Seaworth, disapproves of this plan and decides to save the poor youngster. Under the cover of night, Davos frees Gendry, sneaks him away from the island fortress, provides him with a rowboat, and instructs him to flee to King’s Landing, the capital of the realm.

At face value, there is nothing very special about this plotline of strained family relations, magic, and betrayal in the context of *Game of Thrones*. However, after his escape, Gendry ended up not appearing in the series again until season seven, which aired four years later. The character was barely mentioned in the years between his watery escape and eventual return. This was regardless of the fact that up to that point, the show had generally presented him as a major character, and many in the fandom had been fond of him. As a result, memes depicting Gendry’s imagined adventures at sea started being produced and going viral. It was often jokingly suggested that the show should intermittently cut to a view of the open sea with Gendry perpetually rowing his little boat.

Over time, however, the fandom response to the character’s disappearance started to sour, like it did to many other aspects of *Game of Thrones*. It was widely assumed that Gendry had been abandoned by the show, and that his storyline would never reach a conclusion. Now some fan-produced memes named Gendry’s rowboat “S. S. Abandoned Plotlines” and populated it with other characters whose storylines fans expected to go nowhere, including Brynden “Blackfish” Tully, Rickon Stark, and the fire-priest Thoros of Myr. If you have seen *Game of Thrones*, you might remember that these particular characters did end up returning to the show before it ended, although many fans still vehemently argue that their storylines were not concluded in a well-considered or satisfactory manner.

Audience-created memes, including the more negative ones that I would consider counter-narratives (see Hyvärinen), were popular enough in online discourse that the creators and writers of *Game of Thrones*, as well as Joe Dempsie, the actor who portrayed Gendry, commented on them multiple times. Eventually, a reference to the memes was even incorporated into the series

itself. Upon Gendry's return to the show, Davos goes to retrieve him from King's Landing, where he sent him in the third season. As a way of greeting the young man he once saved, the old knight quips, "Thought you might still be rowing." As an in-universe line of dialogue, this makes little sense: it is clearly nothing but a direct reference to the audience-created memes about Gendry's lost years. Online audiences, then, contributed to the discourse surrounding *Game of Thrones* forcefully enough to have their input be reflected in the actual narrative of the series.

Sometimes production publicly acknowledges the existence of audience-authored content or even approves of it – as was the case here. I argue that such acknowledgements contribute to legitimation of the *narrative authority* of audiences (Dawson, *The Return*). If the creators of *Game of Thrones* accept the input of audiences as a part of the story, then surely others should too. In my use of the concept, narrative authority refers to one's ability to narrate a given story, and to have that narration be recognized as legitimate by others. Creators of narratives generally have a great deal of narrative authority regarding works, whereas audiences do not. However, the underlying interactivity of digital environments affords audiences the ability to assert some amount of contingent narrative authority even in cases where production does not help them. It remains contingent, because in principle it only affects those who interact with works of fiction via online spaces. It is worth noting, though, that nowadays people increasingly *do* interact with narratives – and everything else – in ways that are mediated by the internet. This means that even if you yourself do not interact with audience-created online content, others around you do, and that includes authors of fiction. You could remain blissfully naïve to the digital context of contemporary culture, but the culture itself is not. Through cultural osmosis, the consequences of digital culture seep into everything.

Okay then, someone might say, but why does this matter? Is this not, ultimately, an inconsequential phenomenon? A sideshow at best. Based on how widely paratextual fandom discourse is used in society, I do not think so. For example, Barack Obama and Donald Trump, two consecutive American presidents, shared memes about *Game of Thrones* on official White House social media channels to lay claim to cultural capital associated with the enormously popular series. In what has been called the attention economy of the internet, the ability to tap into that cultural capital is a way of wielding significant power (Evans 148–149). It is power to set the stage of public discourse, to control the narrative so to speak (see Dawson, "Who Controls").

In my dissertation, I touch on many different ways participatory audiences seek to wrest control of pre-existing narratives from their authors. For example, there exists a strand of audience discourse concerning *Game of Thrones* as climate fiction. Different factions of the participatory audience argue either that the series concerns anthropogenic climate change or that it does not (Laukkanen, "Narrative Authority"). To support the climate fiction interpretation, fans appeal to the plot of the series, drawing parallels between real-world climate change and the apocalyptic long winter that threatens Westeros. To argue against the climate fiction interpretation, they may appeal to *Game of Thrones* being set in a fantasy world that is completely separate from the real world. Whether arguing for or against the climate fiction interpretation, participatory audiences often appeal to the authority of Martin as the original author of *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Was the climate change parallel

some find in the story intended by Martin or not? If it was, then it is considered acceptable to deploy the cultural capital of the series for climate activism. If it is decided that it was not intended by Martin after all, however, it is portrayed as being morally wrong.

As luck would have it, Martin himself has publicly commented on this topic. His comments seem to favor the climate activist interpretation: he has said that the long winter could indeed be seen to resonate with the real-world threat of climate change. This was reported widely on entertainment media websites. But if you oppose the climate fiction interpretation of the series, what are you to do with this information? Will you accept defeat? Of course not. Instead, you will disregard Martin's comments – or rather, argue that he did not mean them, that his words were misreported, or that he was tricked or coerced to make these comments. Or perhaps he was lying for attention. To counter the climate fiction interpretation, some in the audience created an image of Martin stitched together from other quotes and interviews. J. R. R. Tolkien famously disliked *The Lord of the Rings* (1955–1957) being read as an allegory for the Second World War. Martin reveres Tolkien: he has even been nicknamed “the American Tolkien.” Somewhere here there is an angle that allows this faction of the participatory audience to construct an image of Martin to counter the one wielded by the other faction.

Ultimately it does not matter if *Game of Thrones* is about climate change or not, of course. However, participatory audiences online seek to gain some level of ownership of the series and its cultural capital in order to deploy them as weapons in online culture wars. In other words, they co-opt *Game of Thrones* for political purposes. While such *narrative co-optation* may find more dire expressions elsewhere in contemporary society, I think public discourse about fantasy – and other kinds of fiction, to be sure – nevertheless constitutes an important and easily overlooked arena of 21st-century life where important cultural values are negotiated.

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BOOK REVIEW:
*Science Fiction and the Historical Novel:
Days of Future Pasts*

Jeremy Brett

MacDonald, Ian P. and Kate Polak, editors. *Science Fiction and the Historical Novel: Days of Future Pasts*. Liverpool University Press, 2024. ISBN: 978-1-83553-839-5.

Frederic Jameson casts a long scholarly shadow over the thoughtful and expansive text of *Science Fiction and the Historical Novel: Days of Future Pasts*. With his ability to make incisive connections between literary genres, Jameson famously argued in his 1982 article “Progress versus Utopia; or, Can We Imagine the Future” that science fiction (SF) picked up from its predecessor, the historical novel, the mantle of narratively expressing our collective understanding of historical thinking. That is, where historical fiction achieved its literary significance by producing an intense alienation for the reader between past and present – thus marking the past as truly strange and as a space marked by its temporal and psychic distance from us – science fiction accomplishes similar outcomes by estranging the reader, fundamentally, from both past *and* future. As MacDonald and Polak note in their introduction, the collection focuses on the “doubly temporalized estrangement” of how, “despite its speculative future, sf provides a critical laboratory not just, or even primarily, for looking forward but also for looking backwards, for thinking historically” (2). At first glance, historical fiction and SF might seem entirely at odds – apart, perhaps, from those SF novels set in a fictional past or that are billed as alternate histories. However, taking into account how SF is generally pitched as a genre that documents the human future, the volume’s contributors demonstrate that SF frequently engages in narrative and thematic discourse with the past generally by “either relocating it to a fictional space in the future in a metaphorical or allegorical fashion ... or reimagining and adjusting past

events and considering what might have happened had circumstances gone differently” (7).

In this context, SF performs what the editors term the action of *metarecursivity*, that is, the process by which characters in a set future “look back” to an historical moment even as their author thinks “history forward by projecting a sequence of events leading to a future condition” (7). A loop is thereby created connecting what lies behind us to what lies in front of us, our pasts to our futures, and this connection is made especially manifest when characters in SF futures think about pasts that are still part of our own futures as the readers. In this way, the volume’s editors and contributors posit that “future spaces engage the historical process by creating pasts from our futures” (8). This leads them to examine how SF repeats, reexamines, and reconfigures our understanding of history and our place in it, and inspires them to explore the ways in which memory and imagination intersect. These are important starting points for discussing a genre so innately linked to futures that are informed by actions and decisions of the human past and driven by potentialities that create a myriad of these futures.

The collection’s usefulness is amplified by the selection of analyzed texts; it is a well-chosen group that casts a wide net to capture a variety of diverse types of narratives that approach our relationship to our pasts in complex, profound ways. In his chapter, Phillip E. Wegner takes up the general development of the historical novel and the process by which SF adds a new multidimensionality to the narrative of the historical by creating futures that transform our present into a past that has not yet happened, thus rendering our own present as historical time. He quotes Jameson’s observation that “our history, our historical past and our historical novels, must now also include our historical futures as well” (19), punctuating this with an analysis of Jo Walton’s novel *Lent* (2019), set in early Renaissance Florence and swirling around the figure of fiery monk Girolamo Savonarola. Walton’s protagonist is engaged in a thoroughgoing utopian process that seeds a field of creative possibilities, including that of the ultimate triumph of a collectively developed future based on changing how we conduct ourselves in the past. In Cao Xuenan’s analysis of Liu Cixin’s *Three-Body Problem* trilogy (2006-2010), as well as its English translation vs. the Chinese originals that have resulted in varying readings of the series’ dystopian significance, Cao looks at how the series champions opacity as a virtue over transparency in sharing culture and information. Meanwhile, Eric Aronoff analyzes two works by Ursula K. Le Guin: *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and the future anthropology *Always Coming Home* (1985). Aronoff makes much of Le Guin’s academic background as an anthropologist and her frequent engagement with the various meanings and conceptions of *culture*. In *Left Hand*, Aronoff sees Le Guin linking literary form to what he calls “culture-building” where the individual elements of a culture “become meaningful when understood within the structure or patterns of that cultural whole,” in this way working as “the evocation of a ‘whole’ culture” (68). In his analysis, Aronoff argues that *Left Hand* renders unfamiliar cultural symbols and practices into a familiarized text in which SF’s traditional “cognitive estrangement” is tamed by making structural sense of an ethnographic present via familiar textual structures. By contrast, in *Always Coming Home* he sees Le Guin create a future ethnography describing a post-apocalyptic Northern California through a construction of various kinds of texts

– songs, poems, myths, rituals, and so on – that belie the idea of a cultural “whole” and posit the conception of a settled cultural order as a privileged Western idea. In Aronoff’s examination, the two works together push and pull against and towards our understandings of the components of which “history” is made.

Examinations of depicted apocalypses form the next portion of the volume. They are the focal point of Rebecca Oh’s chapter, where she discusses works not generally thought of as SF: Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* (2009) and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997). These works eschew the traditional view of speculative apocalyptic fiction as driven by the reader’s impulse to save the actual world, an impulse undergirded by a belief in a changeable present. Oh argues that these works, instead, work in favor of ‘realist apocalypse’ set in worlds (specifically, the Global South) that are already destroyed by the forces of inequality and global capitalism, or that are languishing in an everyday dystopia created by them. As Oh puts it, “[a]pocalyptic realism challenges the recuperation of the future at the heart of apocalypses yet-to-come” (82). Rather, works like these demand that we confront the various structural inequalities already in existence that warp possible futures for so many. This type of apocalypticism transfers world-ending visions from a conjectured future into a localized present. Dystopia is also the main concern in Luke Alan Rodewald’s analysis of Margaret Atwood’s *The Testaments* (2019), the sequel to the classic 1985 work *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Rodewald labels *The Testaments* as a “critical dystopia” that complicates the fictional nation of Gilead by infusing it with hope and the resistant nature of oppositional spaces. At the same time, he sees the novel challenge the monochromatic bleakness of its predecessor by reinterpreting characters and motivations to allow for the introduction of positivity and optimism for characters and readers alike. After this, volume editor MacDonald looks at the interaction between history, the present, and memory in Tade Thompson’s Africanfuturist *Wormwood* trilogy (2016-2019). MacDonald offers the series as a “sustained meditation on the process of historization and the nature and effect of the historian on, in, and as the archive” (113). As MacDonald points out, the historical “archive,” as long known by librarians, archivists, and scholars alike, is an inherently brittle construct, marked by numerous acts of deliberate and inadvertent silencings. Likewise, the accuracy of the series’ xenospheric archive (a bionetworked data repository) is affected by ongoing changes in the future memory of past events. As memory changes, MacDonald notes, so does the record of the past change – so that the novel presents a world where new pasts are always being created and with them, new presents.

This is followed by Jackson Ayres in an essay on Ian McEwan’s AI-centered novel *Machines Like Me* (2019). Ayres analyzes the work in the context of contemporary neoliberalism and discusses how McEwan uses the setting of an alternate Britain as a lens through which to examine our own present, an age lacking in effective political consensus and awash in a dangerous subjectivity. Notably, McEwan sets his work in an alternate 1982, thus tying in our current neoliberal moment to the 1980s, when the rise of Thatcherism in the UK helped instigate that very moment. Edgar Nabutanyi’s essay follows this discussion by looking at the stories of Ugandan author Innocent Immaculate Acan, whose concern with environmental degradation and devotion to a Ugandan tradition of activist short fiction has resulted in a body of work that subverts the themes

and tropes of Western ecological catastrophe – particularly the theme of collective societal guilt that ignores the specific harms that the West commits – that often resonate differently, to say the least, for the peoples of the Global South. These non-Western-centric perspectives continue with an examination of a different counternarrative to settler colonialism in Shannon Lodoen’s discussion of Cherie Dimaline’s Indigenous YA dystopia *The Marrow Thieves* (2017). Lodoen argues that Dimaline critiques the colonialist practice of treating Indigenous peoples as consumable commodities and resources, and in so doing highlights the inhumanity inherent to policies of extraction. As a result, the essay also examines how Dimaline centers the Indigenous voice over the traditional hegemonic narratives of white Canadian history and settlement.

With Preston Waltrip’s analysis, the focus shifts to examining Carmen Boullosa’s 1997 multinarrative work *Heavens on Earth* which threads together a seventeenth-century Aztec memoir, the story of a woman living in the violent Mexico of the 1990s, and the record of a far-future archivist whose community resolves to abolish all language and past memory to end history. In Waltrip’s reading, the novel posits that past, present, and future are, indeed, intimately connected, but remain vastly different and not subject to any sort of totalizing historical narrative. This is followed by volume co-editor Polak’s contribution in which she analyzes Naomi Alderman’s *The Power* (2016) and its concern with tensions between the unjust systems of power under which we live. That power, Alderman and Polak both note, tends to be generally limited to certain *kinds* of bodies, but a range of possible alternate futures exist if we can escape our traditional understandings of those bodies.

The collection concludes with Gabriella Friedman’s study of the surrealist alternate history *The Bird is Gone: A Manifesto* (2003) by Stephen Graham Jones. In Friedman’s view, the novel subverts the traditional contagion narrative to consider how Indigenous peoples relate to the U.S. nation-state that occupies them (209). As Jones creates a fictional world where Native Americans have reclaimed the possession of vast swathes of American land, Friedman observes Jones’ use of a fictional disease rampant among the Native population as a tool for examining definitions of national and cultural identity. In her reading, the novel also uses the disease trope to reflect the complicated ways in which Native Americans relate to and interact with the technologies and social structures of white settler colonialism.

The volume concludes with a critical afterword by Gerry Canavan, cementing the idea that SF is less about the future and more about “exploring how choices made in the present both by individuals and by groups could lead to highly divergent potential consequences. *If x were to happen, or y were to exist, what would happen next?*” (227). In this way, Canavan’s afterword ably complements the multiplicity of narratives presented in the collection, as they together demonstrate the thematic possibilities of metarecursivity, that is, “understanding the present as the past of a future that is itself the past of some further future” (230). Such a radical way of science-fictional thinking has immense implications for people desiring to rethink their approach to interpreting history and thus to considering the true diversity of possible futures for ourselves and for our planet. The work is accessible for scholars and students alike, with thoughtful analyses of a wide variety of sources; just as valuably, each piece in the volume is girded by strong theoretical foundations that enhance the essays without overburdening them with academic jargon.

Biography: Jeremy Brett is a Librarian at Cushing Memorial Library & Archives, Texas A&M University, where he is the Curator of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Research Collection, one of the largest of its kind in the world. He has worked at many different libraries and repositories and received his MLS and his MA in History from the University of Maryland – College Park in 1999. His professional interests include science fiction, fan studies, and the intersection of libraries and social justice.



BOOK REVIEW:

*Germanic Heroes, Courage, and Fate:
Northern Narratives of Tolkien's
Legendarium*

Natalie Hopwood

Gallant, Richard Z. *Germanic Heroes, Courage, and Fate: Northern Narratives of Tolkien's Legendarium*. Walking Tree Publishers, 2024. ISBN: 978-3-905703-49-8.

Scholarship comparing Tolkien's work to the medieval sources that inspired him is a well-established sub-set of Tolkien studies. Richard Z. Gallant's *Germanic Heroes, Courage and Fate* aims to take this subject in a bold new direction by using Tolkien's "theory of Northern courage" as a guide to how Tolkien adapts medieval notions of heroism into his legendarium. Gallant defines the theory as "the dark, despairing melancholy and stout refusal to give up in the face of certain defeat" and marks it as "the common, unifying thematic thread running throughout the narratives of the Eldar, Edain, and Dunedain" (2). While Tolkien never stated that he directly applied this theory to his work, Gallant's argument hinges on "the theory of Northern courage" as a pervasive, subtextual throughline. In tandem with "Northern courage" is *wyrd*, the Anglo-Saxon conception of "fate" that Gallant defines as something that "represents what is done and the consequences of what is done, rather than what is preordained to happen" (171). The monograph has a chrono-narratological structure, beginning with the Elves of the First Age as the *exemplum* for "Northern courage" in Arda and then progressing into reactions to the *exemplum* by later Ages and other Peoples. This structure is then sub-divided into chapters that focus either on individual characters, such as Fëanor, Galadriel, and Aragorn, or chapters with a focus on the theory and associated concepts, such as divine Authority as both spiritual and narratological power,

wyrd and the role of the historian as *wyrdwriteras*, and the relationship between “Northern courage” and the Atlantean material of the *Akallabêth*.

Gallant’s main goal is to present how Tolkien works these concepts into his legendarium as a cohesive narrative and to provide references to historical influences. There are three levels of discussion at work in *Germanic Heroes*. First, Gallant examines what is in the legendarium and Tolkien’s written references to “Northern courage” and “Germanic” heroism, as they connect to Elvish culture. Second, he maps out historical touchstones for comparison and discusses how these theories relate to texts such as *Beowulf*, Alfred’s *Boethius*, and the *Hildebrandslied*. The third, and most pervasive throughout the text, is the level of Gallant’s own opinions on how the prior two interact to craft an image of the “Germanic” legacy of heroism present in Tolkien’s writing.

Based on this description, Gallant’s appropriation of the “theory of Northern courage” back into the legendarium situates it as the perceived singular, decisive thesis of Tolkien’s works. However, Gallant’s discussion adds copious terms that complicate the argument being made in the monograph. The main issue here is the range of terms being employed without defining these terms as they are being introduced to guide the reader. The clearest example of this is *doom*, which may refer either to doom-as-destruction or doom-as-fate. While *doom* is introduced in chapter two “Original Sin in Heorot and Valinor,” it does not receive a proper definition until the following chapter, “The Dance of Authority in Arda,” where Gallant clarifies that it is doom-as-fate, per Tolkien’s use of the word. Still, throughout the text he continues to use both definitions interchangeably, adding unnecessary ambiguity. There are also examples of words created for the purpose of the argument that, while a strong effort, add context that is discordant to what Gallant intends. An example of this is *Noldorization*, a play on *Romanization* that is introduced in chapter five, “The Noldorization of the Edain.” The intention is to show how Noldorin culture influences the Edain in the First Age, and therefore passes on “Northern courage” but its linguistic connection to *Romanization*, a process that relied on the conquest of other peoples and subsummation of other cultures into the Roman Empire, produces an image very different from the light-handed, trickle-down effect that Gallant labels as *Noldorization* (79-80).

Despite this, many terms are used with their historical context intact – such as *wyrd*, *exemplum*, and *ethos* – and referenced clearly and effectively for an academic audience. Particular focus is given to defining “Germanic,” a term that can be problematic for medieval scholarship outside of its linguistic use. In chapter one, Gallant effectively marks out four traditional uses of the term and provides strong analysis for the merits and detriments of each: the historical and ethnographical, the literary, the heathen and pagan, and the literary-ethnographic. The final use, literary-ethnographic, is meant to refer to Tolkien’s understanding of the “Germanic” and provides the foundation for the types of sources that the monograph compares to the legendarium material throughout its discussion. The “theory of Northern courage” is Tolkien’s conception of heroism in “Germanic,” and particularly Norse, literature, and so Gallant chooses sources, he states, that include “the ethical code of Germanic heroes in Anglo-Saxon, Old High German, and Old Norse fiction” (23). Though he refers to “heroic poetry” that tells of the Migration Period of the Germanic peoples, his range of sources is wider, including Anglo-Saxon religious and philosophical

texts, Icelandic family sagas set at the turn of the millennium, and historical texts relating to these “Germanic” figures.

Gallant’s textual analysis is strong, especially his discussion of the Alfredian *Boethius* and its understanding of *wyrd* in Chapter 3, and the comparisons between Aragorn and Charlemagne in Chapter 10. Both chapters provide a new and interesting perspective on Tolkien’s legendarium and the relationship to its medieval predecessors. These are clearly sources that Gallant knows well and he builds a strong thesis around them, but many of the sources central to the “theory of Northern courage” actually seem somewhat lacking or ill-fitting for the research being conducted. For example, there are multiple references to *Hrafnkels saga*, an Icelandic family saga that is not set in the Migration Period, nor does it have characters that can be considered “heroic.” Yet it is one of the pillars of Gallant’s definition of “Germanic” heroism, and because of this he includes them in his discussion of the “theory of Northern courage.”

This is ultimately the main weakness of the monograph, which, it could be argued, misunderstands the nature of the “Germanic” hero and how Tolkien’s legendarium reacts to that concept of heroism. Gallant views the character of Fëanor as the first and quintessential example of “Northern courage” amongst the Eldar, but also the progenitor of sin and *wyrd* amongst the Noldor. Because of this, the character becomes his central point of comparison to medieval heroes, embodying “the raw negative aspects of the heroic” (25). However, the “heroes” Gallant compares are Weyland the Smith and Gunnar of the Niflungs, with further references to Grendel from *Beowulf*. While all three are complex and worthwhile characters in their own right, it would be remiss to call any of them “heroes.” In addition to this, Gallant does not mention any characters that may be deemed quintessential heroes of the Northern world, such as Sigurðr the Dragon-Slayer, Dietrich of Bern, or even Beowulf himself. As a result, the monograph presents Tolkien’s perception of the “Germanic” heroic material to be far more pessimistic, and therefore disingenuous, than the medieval originals Tolkien would be drawing from. While this does support the “theory of Northern courage” outlined in the first chapters, this picking and choosing of sources to fit the theory rather than assembling the theory based on what is found in the sources unfortunately makes the argument feel somewhat forced.

The tendency for this kind of argumentation is only exacerbated as the topics move away from the Eldar to discuss how the “theory of Northern courage,” through its Noldorin origins, affects the Edain and later Men. This is a strong angle to approach the whole of the legendarium, to establish the patterns throughout the Ages and Peoples of Arda as originating from the same heroic ethos, but it has the side-effect of obfuscating non-“Germanic” elements. The best example of this is in chapter six, “Discontinuity of Heroic Ethos,” which focuses on the downfall of Númenor. Gallant’s main argument in this chapter is that “there does not appear to be anything ‘Germanic’ about the narrative’s mood and tenor” because it is based on Plato’s Atlantean material (99). However, a cursory glance between the “theory of Northern courage” and the *Akallabêth* raises a question about that conclusion: if Númenor is doomed to be destroyed by the consequences of its own free will, much like Fëanor, then why are they not examples of “Northern courage,” too?

Ultimately, Gallant attempts a bold re-evaluation of the Tolkien material and makes a valiant effort to trace a theme shared by every Age of Arda. His book has the potential to open up further research into the topic of relating “Germanic” heroic tropes and literature to Tolkien’s legendarium. However, this effort to tie every main theme to the “theory of Northern courage” and *wyrd* is also the weakness of the overall monograph. The seeming unwillingness to expand beyond a pre-conceived idea of “Germanic” heroism that results from this approach is a major drawback. Unfortunately, the book seems to show elements of an approach of going in with one’s working theory and argument already fully formed and forcing Tolkien’s work and sources to comply with them, rather than examining what the texts themselves are saying. A simpler, looser approach with well-defined terms could have produced a more argumentatively sound monograph to examine what is actually written in the legendarium rather than what Gallant wants to be there. The book has been praised by fellow Tolkien scholars in the Foreword and Introduction (Tom Shippey and Thomas Honegger, respectively) as a piece that will be readable for both academic and lay audiences alike. However, it seems that this book is best suited to Tolkien scholars with an established medieval background, as they will be the most equipped to work through the rougher patches of Gallant’s theories to find the stronger aspects within.

Biography: Natalie Hopwood is a PhD candidate at the University of Leeds. Her thesis is an intertextual analysis of encounters with dragons, dwarfs, and the undead in Old Norse legendary and romance sagas. Her secondary research niche is the reception of medieval literature in popular culture. She has previously published on the emotions of *draugar* in Icelandic sagas and has an upcoming chapter on Jack Kirby’s use of Norse mythological imagery in twentieth century comic books.



BOOK REVIEW:

*The Songs of the Spheres: Lewis, Tolkien and
the Overlapping Realms of their Imagination*

Andrea Valeiras

Lukasz Neubauer and Guglielmo Spirito, editors. *The Songs of the Spheres: Lewis, Tolkien and the Overlapping Realms of their Imagination*. Walking Tree, 2024. Cormarë Series n° 48. ISBN 9783905703481.

The Songs of the Spheres: Lewis, Tolkien and the Overlapping Realms of their Imagination is an anthology of essays where different scholars explore J.R.R. Tolkien's legendarium and C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*. Their works are considered not only individually but also in contrast and comparison to one another, as the studies revolve around the Inklings' friendship. In the introduction, the editors Neubauer and Spirito reference conversations and debates between Tolkien and Lewis to examine how their works affected each other. The editors point out that the relationship between the two writers gave rise to a curious harmony between their narrative creations, despite the differences in their ways of understanding the world. This is visible, for example, in the ways in which their different approaches to Christianity are reflected in their works.

While the eleven essays in this volume all revolve around the same theoretical framework, the book would have benefited from a structure organized into more specific units. As all of the essays explore worldbuilding, plots, and characters in ways that focus on their relationship with mythology and religious imagery, a more thematically organized approach – such as having separate sections for “Concerning Myths” or “Conjuring Creatures” and so on – would have provided a clearer structure for the volume. A more considered structure would have helped to enhance the comparison between both authors and their opinions about the other's stories and worldbuilding.

Below I will briefly discuss the chapters in the order that they are currently presented in the book.

The essay that opens the book is “C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien: Friendship, True Myth, and Platonism” by Justin Keena. After briefly explaining how both authors understood myths and determined the foundational ideas for their stories – Lewis through fantasy, Tolkien through a “true-myth” with supposedly historical reminiscences – Keena develops a deep analysis of the philosophical roots of their texts. Taking Plato’s Cavern Myth as a focal point, Keena establishes a connection between the different visions of both writers, combining their foundational ideas under the concept of “Christian Platonism.” After this, in “What do they teach them at these schools?: A Critique of Modern and Postmodern Outlook in the Writings of Lewis and Tolkien”, Piotr Anicet Gruszczyński contrasts the works of Tolkien and Lewis with the writers’ contemporary society. This examination finds that the environments and plots of Tolkien and Lewis seem to be more related to Classical Antiquity and Medievalism than to their contemporary schools of thought. While this essay discusses both authors, Gruszczyński focuses on the concept of “moral nihilism,” an approach to contemplating reality attributed specifically to Lewis. After examinations of such Classical influences and comparisons to the modern world, the third essay, “Deep Magic from the Dawn of Time is not Healing: Pauline Law in C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien” by Giovanni C. Costabile, jumps to searching for points of influence in early Christianity, discussing how both writers were admirers of Saint Paul of Tarsus and speculates on how the Pauline Law is alluded to in their texts. While the analysis of the moral decisions by Lewis’s and Tolkien’s characters, and the results of these decisions in light of the doctrine are interesting, Costabile offers so many different angles on the matter that the essay unfortunately suffers from a lack of focus.

While the essay that follows this, “The Lion and the Pitch: Creation Myths and Music in Lewis and Tolkien” by Chiara Bertoglio, is elaborate, it does manage to connect the creation myths of both writers with music theory. Music is a very important element in Lewis’s and Tolkien’s stories, and so analyzing the role of harmonies and composition as a narrative vehicle contributes to a better understanding of their worldbuilding, especially in Lewis’ *The Magician’s Nephew* and Tolkien’s *Aunilindalë*. Bertoglio also explores how both authors include references to texts such as the *Bible*, Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Dante’s *Purgatory* into the “musical discourse” of their works. Although this analysis of influences is extraordinarily complex, Bertoglio’s ample use of examples and descriptions makes it easy to follow. The next essay, “Ex nihilo or ex materia?: The Acts of Sub-creation in J.R.R. Tolkien’s Arda and C.S. Lewis’s Narnia” by Lucas Neubauer follows the same thread on worldbuilding. Neubauer links the writers’ beliefs and influences to the result of their creations, examining whether the worlds imagined by both authors are really “ex-nihilo,” that is, do they really start from zero. This is also one of the examples where spelling out some of the connections between the essays would have been helpful: As this essay explores the figure of demiurge, the cosmogonic myths, and Plato’s metaphysics, it would have benefited from directly contrasting its points against Keena’s essay earlier in the volume.

After this, Joanna Łekawska’s “The Interpenetration of Past, Present, and Future in The Chronicles of Narnia and The Lord of the Rings” explains

temporal lines in both stories, considering the existence of overlapping spheres of time. Łękańska finds that Lewis goes further than Tolkien with this subject, transforming time into a specific persona with the character of Father Time. Łękańska also takes a great interest in the mysterious Bombadil, Tolkien's character who remains at the center of both scholarly and fannish theories and debates. In fact, this makes the essay something of an outlier in the volume, as it turns the focus more towards reception and the audience's conversation around the works.

The book goes back to the mythology theme with "A Jumble of Unrelated Mythologies?: Cohesion and Consistency in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *The Hobbit*" by Gabriel Schenk. This title refers to Tolkien's opinion about Lewis's creation (repeated also by scholars such as Alan Jacobs and A. N. Wilson). Schenk proposes examples that reflect the complexity and deep meaning of Narnia as a narrative universe, at the same time highlighting some of the incoherences in Tolkien's world and its fictional history. In the essay, Schenk argues that the only fair comparison to Lewis's work in terms of creation would be *The Hobbit* and not *The Silmarillion* since it has been widely revised and corrected. Schenk concludes that Tolkien's narrative preferences, such as his dislike of allegories, made him subjective when it comes to evaluating his colleague's worldbuilding.

This is followed by Hamish Williams's essay "Dionysiac, Apolline, Orphic, or...?: Nietzschean Conflicts in Representing the Natural World in Christian Fantasy" which again returns to Classical references as Williams explores how the conflicts contraposing the Apolline (stability, shape, order) and the Dionysiac (chaos and misrule) are represented in Christian Fantasy, mainly by acts of nature. Williams adds to these two new elements: With regard to Lewis he introduces the element of "Aslanine," which corrects the loss of order and respect to the natural laws, and with Tolkien he links the "Orphic" which refers to the constant search for balance between order and chaos where nature acts as a stabilizing agent. According to Williams, this latter element is incarnated by Tom Bombadil, again demonstrating the great interest that this character attracts due to his enigmatic nature.

As a sort of reversal of Schenk's essay earlier in the collection, the next essay, "The Liminality of J.R.R. Tolkien's Non-human Species: A View through the Lens of C.S. Lewis" by Andrzej Wicher, analyzes the creatures imagined by Tolkien from the perspective that Lewis depicted in *The Discarded Image*. According to Wicher, there are different types of liminality, which sometimes take the form of certain rites of passage and transformation. His main example is the peculiar mortality of Tolkien's elves and the meaning of Lothlórien, as the liminality of their status regarding death makes them neither mortal or immortal but "longaevi" (long livers), a term used by C.S. Lewis in *The Discarded Image*. This feature helps to classify them in a place between mortal Men and the godlike, immortal Valar.

Following the motif of non-human creatures and linking it to the biblical theme, in "Ye are of your father the devil': Satanic Figures in Arda and Narnia" Franz Georg Árpád Klug addresses the subject of evil in the shape of satanic entities in relation to the Christian backgrounds of Tolkien and Lewis. In his discussion, Klug examines various characters, classifying them in two "satanic triplicities" which he finds in Melkor/Morgoth, Sauron, and Saruman on Tolkien's side, and in the White Witch Jadis, the Lady of the Green Kirtle, and

Tash in the case of Lewis's work. This essay encompasses several aspects of the evil in the narratives of both writers, for example, examining the role of villains as vehicles of God's plan, the analogies with the Fall, and the corruption of characters such as Boromir through comparisons to Judas. Overall, Klug's aim is to compile the influence of the religious beliefs of Tolkien and Lewis and to demonstrate how they are visible in the representations of evil in their narrative universes. However, the essay unfortunately tries to pack too many things into a fairly concise chapter, resulting in a lack of focus in its deeper analysis.

The book concludes with "The Nostalgic Fantasy of 'Good Plain Food' in Narnia and Middle-earth" where Kris Swank discusses the role of nostalgia in relation to the importance of food in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. As Swank explains, Tolkien called that element "Good plain food" and C.S. Lewis's brother, discussing Lewis's tastes, called it "old domestic cookery." As this seems a shared fondness of comfort, tradition and childhood memory, Swank argues that there is a point of idealization in both writers' conceptions. This use of nostalgia for times long past and memories of the loss of innocence is reflected in their works, Swank posits, both through grand celebratory feasts and through creating small oases of comfort amid conflict. This is a good example of the kind of nostalgia exhibited by generations that have lived through wars (as Tolkien and Lewis had) or serious economic recessions, which leads them to long for the times when everything was simpler, even if the reason for that impression of an easier life was that they were children during that period.

In conclusion, *The Songs of the Spheres* is a collection of essays that offers a variety of perspectives on the narrative universes of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. Its main contribution is the multiplicity of perspectives as it contrasts both authors' works without diminishing any of them. The combined exploration of Tolkien's and Lewis's narratives highlights their similarities and differences in how their works reflect the real-world cultures and beliefs behind their worldbuilding processes. As previously stated, this book would have benefited from a different structure, since the repetition of themes can give an impression of redundancy when readers encounter the same subjects here and there, with some of the connections getting lost. For example, Gabriel Schenk and Andrew Wicher's essays revolve around the views that Tolkien and Lewis had about each other's narratives and imagination, so it would have been very interesting to link the essays together more directly. Moreover, certain essays, such as Klug's analysis of satanic archetypes, lack the depth required by the subject, suffering from trying to fit too many ideas into one relatively brief chapter. That being said, the book offers interesting approaches to the worldbuilding processes and the mutual sources of inspiration for Tolkien and Lewis, in a way that can captivate both scholars and readers who desire to get a deeper understanding of the texts and everything around them. The Inklings' relationship and mutual influences is certainly a topic that should receive further scholarly attention in the future.

Biography: Andrea Valeiras-Fernández's PhD research in English Studies focused on *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, analyzing the presence of the text in popular culture. Her current academic interests focus on storytelling and social assimilation of different narratives. Her publications include articles about illustrations of *Alice*, the worldbuilding process, and the role of music

and poetry in the text. She has also explored Terry Pratchett's Discworld, studying the importance of the footnotes as a tool for expanding the lore and reinforcing the satire.



BOOK REVIEW:
*Science Fiction and Indian Women Writers:
Exploring Radical Potentials*

Anna Juhi John

Kuhad, Urvashi. *Science Fiction and Indian Women Writers: Exploring Radical Potentials*. Routledge, 2022. ISBN: 978-0-367-52776-1.

Indian science fiction has witnessed a resurgence in the 2000s. Science fiction (SF) and overall speculative fiction genres experienced a brief hiatus following the country's independence from its British colonizers in 1947, as "serious," "realist" literature was considered to better advocate for and reflect the new sensibilities of the young republic. SF in late nineteenth-century India was at first imitative of the Anglo-western imports and included many direct translations of those English-language classics into various Indian languages. However, the genre quickly added to and mutated with the rich traditions of indigenous speculative literature. Nonetheless, Indian SF stayed in the periphery of literary canons. It was not until the globalizing forces of the early 2000s that science fiction and fantasy literature began to draw national and international attention anew.

Although it has happened slowly, Indian science fiction has gradually also generated significant academic interest. Analyses of colonial dreams, and postcolonial and post-millennial futures have emerged through numerous research articles and a few book-length publications, including works by Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay (2016, 2019), Suparno Banerjee (2020), and Sami Ahmad Khan (2021). In addition, there are also some unpublished doctoral theses, such as Ajay Singh's (2002) that examine SF writing in India's regional languages. These works have primarily sought to delineate the ways in which Indian writers have negotiated the genre of SF (often in relation to the notion of genre fiction), and they have examined the hybridity that marks SF writing in the Indian context. More recently, Shweta Khilnani and Ritwick

Bhattacharjee (2022) and Emma Dawson Varughese (2025) have furthered academic investigations into the genre's tryst with "Indianness" from its postcolonial and post-millennial sites of production, while Taryne J. Taylor, Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay et.al. (2024), as well as Merve Tabur and Sami Ahmad Khan (2025) in their edited volumes locate Indian SF within broader iterations of speculative fiction emerging from historically connected non-western cultures.

Evidently, scholars of Indian SF have their hands full in theorizing it as a genre of both local and national literary productions as well as situating it as a mode of both national and transnational inquiries of the historically linked Global South. In this regard, Urvashi Kuhad's *Science Fiction and Indian Women Writers: Exploring Radical Potentials* (2022) belongs to the camp of national readings of Indian SF. It posits itself as a new addition to scholarship in Indian SF through its dedicated study of Indian women writers of anglophone science fiction, with the aim of focusing on the feminist positions that their works take within the writing tradition. Unfortunately, the book runs into several factual, conceptual, analytical and methodological challenges that undermine its contributions to the larger academic discourse.

Kuhad selects Begum Rokhaya Sakhawat Hossain, Manjula Padmanabhan, Priya Sarukkai Chabria and Vandana Singh because Hossain is currently considered as the first woman writer of SF in (colonial) India, and because of the canonical position that these writers enjoy within English-language Indian SF. The texts Kuhad selects include Hossain's short story "Sultana's Dream" (1905), Padmanabhan's *Escape* (2015), Chabria's *Generation 14* (2008), and Singh's two novellas, *Distances* (2008) and *Love and Other Monsters* (2007). Kuhad's primary focus is "on the ability of the chosen SF texts to sensitize the readers and inspire in them a radical perspective and an acknowledgement of the need for change" (155). She aims to highlight this "radical potential" of SF and its constituent sub-genres as used by these women writers in imagining "alternate setting to discuss sensitive political, social or ecological issues and give voice to those who are marginalized, such as women, people of colour, transgender or bisexuals" (155).

However, this multitude of focal points suffers from a lack of a clear approach. It is only in the concluding chapter that Kuhad describes her cultural materialist approach to the discussed SF texts, but even there it primarily seems to comprise of situating these works against the authors' spatio-temporal locations, their literary oeuvre, and their activism within and through the education system. However, the close readings presented in the analyses seldom benefit from these locating points, thus neutralizing the potential of the cultural materialist approach to adequately historicize and politicize these literary works. At the same time, the introductory chapter also does not define what the author means by the "radical potential" of SF that the book's title promises to explore. Unfortunately, this results in ambiguity throughout the book on what exactly Kuhad proposes is radical about SF by Indian women, and what kinds of things it has the potential to change. Based on the directions suggested by the book, Kuhad views the genre as an effective medium for these SF writers to critique the current political climate, the social position of women and people with marginalized sexualities, the climate crisis, and the dilemma of advancing technologies. Consequently, she asserts that the selected SF texts

convey the author's intent of "social criticism" aimed to evoke responses in its contemporary reader (157).

Kuhad begins by tracing a history of the origin of SF in England and North America to highlight the contested definitions of "science fiction" and its marked distinction from fantasy as a literary category. This also leads to the popular debate on labelling Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) as the precursor of modern SF. Although this brief history hints at the gender imbalance within the production of SF, it does not discuss it. Kuhad asserts that Indian SF inherited the "hard" and "soft" SF distinction from its colonial roots and continues to use them unchanged. However, existing scholarship on Indian science fiction shows that Indian SF writers have historically challenged these generic definitions and distinctions of western science and science fiction (Chattopadhyay 2016, Banerjee 2020). The genre underwent hybridizations, for example, through its cultural contact with local modes of telling, and through the broad and varied understanding of "science" in India. These reconfigurations remain unaddressed in Kuhad's work.

Even as she ties together the histories of Indian SF with Anglo-American SF via colonialism in this introductory chapter, Kuhad seems to overlook previous research on how Indian SF writers have challenged the genre. This previous research includes, for example, analysis of twentieth-century SF from across Indian languages where, as Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay notes in his essay "On the Mythologerm: Kalpavigyan and the Question of Imperial Science" (2016), the concept of "vigyan" from Indian epistemologies transforms the genre of SF, rather than being informed by western "science," and opens avenues for "discarded 'alternative sciences'" (437) from the mythic and historical pasts. Suparno Banerjee's *Indian Science Fiction: Patterns, History and Hybridity* (2020), further elucidates how such linguistic and epistemological difference to "science fiction" and its genre conventions resists imperial visions of modernity and progress. A further work that would be necessary to include in such definitional discourse is Vandana Singh's "Speculative Manifesto" (2008) where she champions the use of the broader term "speculative fiction" over science fiction because of the engendered bias in western science as well as the primacy of imagination over scientific fact in thinking about alternative realities. Instead of engaging with Singh's own discussion on identifying her work as speculative fiction, Kuhad uses Robert Heinlein's (1941) and David Bowlin's definition of the same term to locate the text as such (113). At the same time, authors like Amitav Ghosh (in his *The Great Derangement*, 2015) blatantly dismiss the genre in entirety, particularly its sub-genre of climate fiction, because of its alleged inability to critically reflect on the climate crisis and the historical and political reasons for it. In this way, Ghosh is in fact reinstating the label of escapist literature associated with genre fictions to SF. Indeed, it is concerning how Kuhad seems to base the defining parameters of the genre solely on the anglophone understanding of the genre, as seen in her categorical inclusion of Darko Suvin, Robert Scholes, Damien Broderick and Samuel Delaney, while excluding Indian scholarship on Indian SF. This gap in the book's research background seems to further stall a critical textual analysis of the fictional works in the subsequent chapters.

The second chapter, "Indian Science Fiction," presents a concise history of SF in India, from the late nineteenth century to the present day. The comprehensive account of SF – in popular print and in visual formats in

different Indian languages across the country – is the strength of this chapter. Based on the presented overview, Kuhad identifies common themes shared by SF in Indian languages, including ecological crisis, developments in technology, science and society, confluence with mythology and spirituality, and social concerns such as gender. She also identifies a few recognizable subgenres such as utopias, dystopias, and alternate histories in Indian SF writing, and she introduces the key institutions and organizations that drive academic and public interest in Indian SF. Although Kuhad briefly points in the direction of the early stages of academic inquiry into Indian SF, several recent key contributors to the field, as mentioned above, remain curiously unacknowledged.

There is also a rather major issue in this chapter in the attempt to track the “origins of SF in India” (24) through the Hindi-language SF of Pandit Ambika Dutt Vyas and Keshav Prasad Singh in 1884 and 1888, especially as earlier research (and Kuhad’s own account of Bengali science fiction) later dates Jagadananda Ray’s short story “Shukra Bhraman” or “Travel to Venus [as being] published in 1879” (31), showing the factual error of this statement. Indeed, previous research indicates that at least three linguistic traditions within India, namely, Bengali, Hindi and Marathi were simultaneously producing SF in colonial India, either in the mentioned languages or by speakers of these languages in English. This is comprehensively discussed by, for example, Suparno Banerjee (2010, 2020) and Hans Harder (2001), along with several prefaces to anthologies of translated SF, such as Shiv Gopal Mishra’s prelude to an anthology of Hindi science writings in fiction (2002) and Bal Phondke’s preface to the anthology of Indian SF in English translation, *It Happened Tomorrow* (1993). Considering the complex influence and multiple contacts that western literature, especially SF, had with India’s different linguistic circles, it seems rather problematic to attribute primacy to any single linguistic tradition.

The third chapter, “Contemporary Indian science fiction writers and their works,” utilizes a biographical method to underline the socio-political context of each of the writers and the resulting “literary, political and educational activism” that shapes their extrapolation of women and queer identities in fictional futures. Even though this helps to contextualize the proposed radical potential of the selected texts by responding to the current state of women and queer identities in the country, the analysis suffers from its cursory engagement with relevant theories – (Indian) feminisms, gender, ecocriticism, and posthumanism. The strongest analysis in the chapter is on Hossain’s short story where Kuhad effectively discusses the gender politics that were at work in colonial India and sidelined the education of women, specifically Muslim women, at the time. In this analysis, Kuhad insightfully combines discussion on Hossain’s personal rebellion with the use of the dream narrative as a way to access an analysis of how the work builds a techno-scientific, feminist utopia with an inversed society, which in turn works to comment on the social and political processes that suppress Indian (Muslim) women. The postcolonial and post-millennial contexts in which Padmanabhan, Chabria and Singh’s works, discussed in this chapter, exist, is underexplored and it has potential to mark poignant shifts in women’s SF writing. However, because Kuhad’s analysis does not engage with relevant previous research on Indian SF, this analysis unfortunately lacks depth in exploring the mythopoeisis

and mythologem evident especially in the works of Priya S. Chabria and Vandana Singh.

The fourth and fifth chapters read as outliers due to their linguistic approach to analyzing the worldbuilding in the selected texts. Kuhad's use of conjunction and its grammatical functions to indicate connections and disjunctions does not seem an appropriate method for analyzing "the literary quality of the text" in a way that would "link the imaginary world of SF with the living world" (131). The textual evidence that Kuhad mines from the texts to present semantic analysis (of words, phrases, idioms, sentences, and so on) and narratological analysis (of literary devices, themes, characters and plot structures) to argue for the centrality of conjunctions and disjunctions in science fictionalization of contemporary issues of gender, is unfortunately not very convincing. These discussions are followed by a concluding chapter where she encapsulates the hypothesis of reading Indian SF as radical literature and viewing the selected texts to "possess the ability to initiate a movement towards increased responsibility, especially amongst the younger generation, so as to analyze future changes from a critical perspective" (157). It is only in this final chapter that Kuhad broadly elaborates on her intention to show the genre as a subversive medium that Indian women SF writers use to comment and warn their audience on the precarity of Indian women and queer identities in technodystopian and ecologically compromised futures.

Because of its issues in terms of current research and the substantially limited use of cultural materialist, feminist, ecocritical, posthumanist and other critical lenses in the textual analysis of the selected SF works, Kuhad's book unfortunately does not significantly qualify the proposed "radical potential" of SF or explain how it "instills in the reader the ideas for change and the ways in which they can bring about the extreme change which is necessary to change or model the existing conditions" (155). While Kuhad's book does not seem to achieve all of the aims it set out to achieve, it does fulfill the aim to serve as a general introduction to Indian science fiction and to canonical women SF writers and their works for those who are at their early stages of exploring the genre's presence in the subcontinent (156).

Biography: Anna Juhi John is a doctoral scholar in the Department of English Studies, Central University of Gujarat. Her research focuses on South Asian science fiction written in, and translated into English, particularly in the twenty-first century. Her ongoing research investigates posthuman themes in anglophone South Asian science fiction as they intersect with environmental humanities, gender and sexuality studies and dystopian studies. She has previously published a book review in the *South Asian Review*.

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BOOK REVIEW:
*Magic Words, Magic Worlds:
Form and Style in Epic Fantasy*

Jayden King

Oliver, Matthew. *Magic Words, Magic Worlds: Form and Style in Epic Fantasy*. McFarland, 2022. ISBN 978-1-4766-4588-9.

Magic Words, Magic Worlds is an ambitious and timely contribution to fantasy studies, distinguished by its commitment to close reading and attention to stylistic nuance. Oliver argues that academic criticism has largely ignored questions of language and form in epic fantasy. In a lengthy preface and introduction, he expresses frustration with the scarcity and quality of existing work on the topic, identifying only two previous book-length studies focused on form in fantasy: Farah Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008) and Susan Mandala's *Language in Science Fiction and Fantasy* (2012), which he refers to throughout the text. He also credits *The Shape of Fantasy* (2021) by C. Palmer-Patel, which was released while he was completing this volume and has been retroactively incorporated into his research. His own work differs from these predecessors by emphasizing close reading – which he describes as a neglected and underutilized method in fantasy scholarship.

The lack of close reading in the field is understandable: epic fantasy is often composed of lengthy, complex texts. Nonetheless, Oliver sets out to engage in precisely this kind of deep analysis, focusing on authors known for their expansive work, such as Stephen R. Donaldson, Brandon Sanderson, Steven Erikson, and Robert Jordan. He argues that, despite what the New Critics proposed, close readings need not be divorced from political context, as demonstrated by critics such as Isobel Armstrong and Caroline Levine, and that fantasy texts, like all literature, speak to fundamental questions of history.

The introduction outlines the theoretical frameworks that underpin the study. References to Derrida's semiotics quickly give way to more genre-specific

thinkers such as Brian Attebery and Farah Mendlesohn. Oliver critiques what he sees as an overreliance on Attebery's concept of fantasy as a "fuzzy set," which he claims is often used to avoid the difficult task of defining the genre with precision. Mendlesohn's taxonomy, particularly her classification of portal-quest fantasy, Oliver also engages with primarily in a critical light, although he acknowledges her contributions. He also offers his own working definition of epic fantasy, drawing in part on Stefan Ekman's work—an insightful addition that deserves more attention in the field. Oliver links the "epic" dimension of epic fantasy to classical epics via the temporality of narrative, suggesting that features such as deep time and communal identity have made the form particularly attractive to conservative writers. These same features, however, also open epic fantasy to the interrogation of stable historical narratives.

The body of the book is divided into four sections, each composed of two chapters. Each section addresses a specific stylistic or formal element through comparative close readings of selected texts. The first section addresses syntactic complexity. Oliver begins with one of the most common critiques of epic fantasy: its tendency toward prosaic excess. Through analyses of Stephen R. Donaldson and Steven Erikson – two writers frequently criticized for florid prose – Oliver argues that elaborate, highly descriptive writing can serve a valuable function. By defamiliarizing the world and foregrounding characters' interiority, excessive description can cultivate empathy for situations that may be otherwise inaccessible to readers. In contrast, the chapter that follows examines minimalism in the prose of R. F. Kuang and Ursula K. Le Guin. By reducing the descriptive focus on violence while keeping it central to the plot, Oliver finds that these authors modulate the reader's psychological response. However, he also notes that this restraint carries a risk: it may inadvertently silence victims by censoring their experience in an attempt to avoid voyeuristic appropriation. Ultimately, Oliver contends that both approaches engage and subvert genre conventions to evoke empathy in distinct ways.

The second section considers narrative perspective, with one chapter on third-person narration and another on first-person. Third-person narratives dominate epic fantasy to the extent that first-person entries are seen as formal outliers. Drawing on Genette's distinctions between heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narration (though he does not pursue this vocabulary beyond the introduction), Oliver argues that third-person narration in epic fantasy democratizes narrative authority by granting visibility to a broad array of characters. Comparing Donaldson and R. Scott Bakker, he identifies a contrast: Donaldson's narration, though controversial – his protagonist commits rape upon entering the fantasy world – nonetheless affirms human agency and subjectivity. Bakker's third-person narration, by contrast, reflects his background in philosophy and neuroscience, constructing what Oliver calls "an entire system of semantic meaning-making" (112) devoid of agency.

The first-person chapter focuses on Glen Cook's *The Black Company* and N. K. Jemisin's *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*. Oliver shows how Cook uses fragmented syntax and narrative gaps to undermine the genre's typical good-versus-evil binary, thereby "subverting epic essentialism" (128). In Jemisin's work, on the other hand the first-person perspective heightens the disruption of linear temporality, which Oliver argues destabilizes one of the key features of epic: the depth of time.

The third section addresses the evocation of wonder, specifically how authors use the delayed release of information to produce cognitive estrangement – an effect typically associated with science fiction. Oliver draws on Darko Suvin’s concept of cognitive estrangement to argue (despite what Suvin himself might have asserted at the time) that fantasy can provoke similar responses when it integrates the scientific with the mythic. This argument is explored through readings of Sanderson’s *Mistborn* and Michael Moorcock’s *Elric Saga*. Although the religious and philosophical differences between Sanderson and Moorcock are noted – Mormonism versus atheism – the contrast is not fully developed. Still, Oliver shows that both authors cultivate wonder through gradual revelation, encouraging the reader to remain cognitively flexible. On the other side of the spectrum, he contrasts the blunt, action-driven prose of David Gemmell with the ironic, genre-aware writing of Fritz Leiber. Together, these case studies suggest that even the most fantastical fiction must maintain a tether to rationality and coherence.

The final section examines framing devices, especially paratexts and frame narratives, and how they construct a text’s authority. Epigraphs are explored across several authors, with particular attention paid to Sanderson and Jordan. In his discussion on Jordan’s *Wheel of Time*, Oliver examines how epigraphs create an illusion of external authority, reinforcing secondary belief while simultaneously inviting scrutiny of the nature of historical knowledge. The final chapter analyzes how Steven Erikson and Samuel R. Delany use frame narratives to introduce irony into their worlds. Challenging the assumption that fantasy must always aim for immersive sincerity, Oliver argues that framing devices can destabilize binaries between literal and metaphorical truths. Erikson’s florid speech is rendered ironic through its attribution to an in-world narrator, while Delany uses the device of an academic debate to blur the boundaries between myth and scholarly discourse.

Overall, *Magic Words, Magic Worlds* is well structured and offers a wealth of detailed textual analysis, drawing from both commercially successful and critically acclaimed works. However, one weakness lies in the engagement with Mendlesohn’s taxonomy. While Oliver criticizes Mendlesohn’s portal-quest model, most of his chosen texts (with the exception of Donaldson’s *Thomas Covenant*) align more closely with the immersive fantasy mode. This inconsistency undermines the theoretical coherence of the book but does not significantly detract from the insights produced through close reading.

This book does not present exhaustive close readings; rather, it models the critical value of close attention to style in fantasy fiction. Therefore, *Magic Words, Magic Worlds* fills a crucial gap in fantasy scholarship by modelling the kind of stylistically attentive reading typically reserved for canonical literature. By bridging popular appeal with academic rigour, Oliver’s work opens new avenues for discussing epic fantasy’s formal complexity – even as it occasionally overreaches in its theoretical assertions.

Biography: Jayden King is a professional military flight instructor with a special interest in fantasy literature and creative writing. He holds a BA in Creative Writing and a BA (Hons) in English Studies from the University of South Africa, an MA in Creative Writing from the University of Hull and a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Pretoria.



BOOK REVIEW:

*Artificial Women: Sex Dolls, Robot
Caregivers, and More Facsimile Females*

Miranda Miller

Wosk, Julie. *Artificial Women: Sex Dolls, Robot Caregivers, and More Facsimile Females*. Indiana University Press, 2024. ISBN 9780253069245.

Building on her previous work on the intersection of women, machines, and artificiality, in her latest book, *Artificial Women: Sex Dolls, Robot Caregivers, and More Facsimile Females*, Dr. Julie Wosk studies the dual development of technologically artificial women in both media and history. She expands upon the analysis of the historical context for artificial women set out in her previous book, *My Fair Ladies: Female Robots, Androids, and Other Artificial Eves*, to engage with more recent novels, films, and art that continue to complicate and engage with feminine artificiality. Wosk uses Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" as one lens of examining mechanical women, though frequently she goes beyond cyborg identity to consider works that portray full artificiality and the potential artificial creation of humanity or the elimination of such creations. As Wosk argues, this blurring of the lines between humanity and artificiality makes the robots under discussion into "an arresting version of posthumanism" (4). With a view to analyzing how works of fiction that deal with posthuman themes can help to redefine fixed binaries around gender and humanity, *Artificial Women* examines the overlap of such binaries through the figure of the feminine robot. The work of scholars like Sherry Turkle also prove critical to Wosk's discussion of the presence of empathy in technology, as empathy can both be perceived as culturally feminine and serve a key developmental role in human socialization.

Wosk situates her work at the intersection of three major fields of study: robotics, Women's Studies, and emotional human consciousness. Her research

essentially places each text under study – including films like *Under the Skin* and *Ex Machina*, and television shows like *Westworld* – in relation to these three fields to reveal a cultural perception, fear, or critique about its constituent parts. These critiques include, for example, technology as vector for control, women’s autonomy, and self-sacrificial empathy. Overall, the primary concern of Wosk’s book is to track the changing forms of artificial women and the cultural fascinations they both imply and create by virtue of their existence.

The book is structured into five main chapters, each focusing on a different form of artificial womanhood. The first chapter, “A New Breed of Sex Robots and Sex Dolls,” traces stories about an ideal synthetic woman back to the Pygmalion myth and then flashes forward through time to arrive at the real-world sex doll industry. Wosk pays special attention to the element of control that is present in the customizable features of both physical and AI-chatbot sex dolls, discussing how this customizability plays into cultural stereotypes of objectifying women and the need to “dial down” talkative women (Wosk 37). As a way to search for the borders of this trope, Wosk identifies the other end of this cultural stereotype in television shows where female robots escape the control of their programming. In direct contrast to the control over real-life facsimile women, she sees this as speaking to the fear that women “are not so controllable after all” (57). In the second chapter, “Under the Skin: The Fabricated Femme Fatale,” Wosk studies the recurrence of the eye motif in film and television narratives about artificial women, considering how it is meant to highlight both the viewer’s gaze and the women’s artificial presentation under that gaze. Wosk finds that these femme fatale artificial women are represented in ways that typically portray the extremes of either puppet and creation or puppet-master and creator. They may, however, swing from one axis to the other.

Moving away from tales of violence and destruction, the third chapter, “Female Robot Caregivers, Doubles, and Companions,” tracks associations of empathy as a feminine trait which extends to the way caregiver robots for children and the elderly are frequently gendered as female (Wosk 97). As a basis for this discussion, Wosk examines how real-life socially assistive robots are developed to “project the aura of empathy” (99) to enhance the social well-being of the individuals they care for. The fourth chapter, “Paradoxes of Perfection: A Servant No More,” returns to the duality of how the theme of puppet or puppet-master is treated, now in the portrayal of automated female servants. They represent both a desire for mechanically efficient women without any “negative” traits of womanhood and a fear of losing control of these automated women. Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” forms the basis for the idea of the “Cyborg Mommy” – the housewife who operates technology to perform her tasks – that transforms into the entirely robotic domestic servant or nanny figure in fiction (Wosk 130). “Virtual Voices: Talking Barbie Dolls, Alexa, Bitchin’ Betty, and More,” serves as the final chapter with a primary focus on the voice of a computer as a woman. From talking dolls for children that reinforce a gendered stereotype to voice assistants that default to female – harkening back to the days of female telephone operators and science fiction computer voices – Wosk tracks the connections of feminine passivity to the always-available female-voiced chatbot. Still, Wosk ends on a note of hope when she observes that rather than responding with a joking denial, recent

updates to virtual assistants now refuse to engage with sexual user comments (Wosk 154).

The strengths of *Artificial Women* lies in Wosk's dedication to the critical investigation of artificial women in both media and history. Her tracing of real-world sex dolls and robot caregivers allows for greater understanding of the exigence of stories exploring those topics. Her text thus serves as a resource for both a critical scholar of robotic technologies and womanhood and for a literary scholar of science fiction and feminist texts. Though the robot women are often placed into limited and restrictive identities, Wosk recognises the varieties present in the catalogue of artificial women and uses a multitude of examples to explore how they vary between sexual partners, mechanical servants, and emotional caregivers. She also looks at how robot women can attempt to break away from these restrictive identities and examines the strategies and strength required to do so.

One missed point of investigation in chapter two lies in the analysis of the film *Under the Skin*. While discussing how the female alien's true self beneath a fabricated female human skin is exposed, Wosk observes several times that the alien's self beneath her white skin in this film is a "black body" (77). While Wosk touches on racial stereotypes and portrayals in the previous chapter on sex robots, this section would have been an effective moment to bring that critique back to bear on this film and character, in particular.

Overall, however, this is a strong book that thoroughly examines artificiality, gendered portrayal and perception, and agency in images of artificial women. It gives a detailed overview of the current state of artificial women in real life and in various media and highlights several key examples in great depth. The ideal audience for this text would be any scholar or reader looking to deeply understand the imagery of female robots and the influence of gendered cultural perspectives on technological creation. Because of this, *Artificial Women* is a text that will continue to be relevant in the study of artificial women, as narratives exploring their humanity continue to be written even today.

Biography: Miranda Miller received her B.A. in English and Creative Writing from the University of Iowa and is currently a second-year graduate student at Florida Atlantic University. She is pursuing her M.A. in English with a concentration in SFF. Recently, she won the David G. Hartwell Emerging Scholar Award at ICFA 2025 for her paper, "Parasitism, Coexistence, and Colonialism in Animorphs."



BOOK REVIEW:

Digital Culture in Contemporary Fiction

Cristina Arbués Caballé

Harrison, Jaime. *Digital Culture in Contemporary Fiction*. Liverpool UP, 2024. ISBN: 9781802074710.

Given the increasing use of advanced technologies, improved data processing, and the growing role of algorithms in controlling human behavior, Jaime Harrison's *Digital Culture in Contemporary Fiction* seems an essential work. Harrison recognizes that current human interactions with technology are impacting individual identities and asserts that fictional works can subvert power structures and alter algorithms. In his view, the texts he analyzes in the book serve to challenge the structures which shape human identity, by attempting to define these structures and questioning how they operate. Harrison argues that digital culture induces a reframing of the subject and subjectivity which can prompt reader self-assessment when the logical code where algorithms are inscribed is interrogated. Through the analyzed works, Harrison examines these sociocultural patterns and studies how the systems which support digital culture also encourage readers to consider how these same systems are built. Moreover, Harrison suggests that the texts he has chosen are especially effective because they do not alienate a non-tech literate reader.

The theoretical framework Harrison employs is multidisciplinary, and while it is rooted in digital culture studies, it deliberately incorporates philosophy, sociology, and linguistics, reflecting the need for broader frameworks to understand how new technologies affect identity. The monograph consists of seven sections where Harrison analyzes two novels, Joshua Cohen's *Book of Numbers* and Nicola Barker's *H(A)PPY*, a graphic novel, Neal Stephenson's *Fall; or, Dodge in Hell*, and a video game, Grasshopper Manufacture's *The 25th Ward: The Silver Case*. The two opening chapters of the monograph, titled "Fiction and Algorithms" and "Towards a

definition of contemporary digital culture” work as an introduction which outlines the employed theoretical framework. These sections also delineate the book’s aim to consider technology’s transformative potential, as well as its latent negative effects on individual and collective identities. In the introductory sections, Harrison also provides an ethnography of key events that have significantly altered identity formation since the internet’s inception, arguing that while the interplay between human subjects and digital technologies is certainly not new, the current shift in data usage has a greater impact than earlier events. Notably, he locates Edward Snowden’s 2013 revelations on governmental data use as pivotal in the shift towards the public’s understanding of the purposes for which data is utilized.

The two theoretical concepts Harrison draws from the most to understand how algorithms shape human individual identities are Tom LeClair’s notion of the systems novel (1980s) and Shoshana Zuboff’s “surveillance capitalism” (2019). To define data use, he then uses the works of William Davies, Bonnie A. Nardi, and Michel Foucault. Furthermore, Harrison repeatedly utilizes Antoinette Rouvray and Nick Seaver’s anthropological approach to algorithms, which seems a particularly useful way to consider how individuals can understand them as a cultural concern. During the introductory chapters and throughout the entire monograph, Harrison frames algorithms as narrative processes that are similar to fiction: in this way, he likens data analysis to narratological analysis, an idea reinforced by Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language. As such, the first two chapters begin the discussion of Harrison’s key theme in the book: the radicalized individualization that is enforced by digital culture. Each following chapter, then, addresses the need for collectivity against a heterogeneous individualization that erases uniqueness, given that data aggregation, according to Harrison, causes plurality to be lost within the confines of algorithmic systems.

Chapters two and three, “It’s time that writing took something back from the internet’: Joshua Cohen’s *Book of Numbers*,” and “The dystopian social network: Nicola Barker’s *H(A)PPY*,” examine how digital culture is used to enhance society’s inclination towards conformity and complicity. One of the main aims of both chapters – and arguably, of the entire monograph – is to study how the “semantic logic of programming languages, the instructions that each algorithm executes, and the data structures in which data are stored and manipulated can shape the subject and subjective experience” (49). Therefore, Harrison focuses on algorithm creation and narrativization, arguing that the novels’ focus on algorithms is a critique of the subject’s displacement in a society which denies that subject their individuality and authority. Harrison’s argument is that understanding the narrativization of algorithms proves them to be fictional byproducts of subjectivity which propagate a massification of choices in behavior. This massification not only reinforces social marginalization but it also implies a rise in the strengthening of hierarchical structures. The rise of hierarchies, Harrison argues, happens when algorithm-produced narratives are favored over subject-built ones. Harrison sees Cohen’s *Book of Numbers* as showing the process of creating the algorithm itself, while in Barker’s *H(A)PPY* he suggests it is done by presenting how social networks attempt to control (and forcibly impose) happiness. Thus, Harrison contends that both novels critique how algorithms act as normative devices that disallow deviation from the norm and show how individuals are manipulated into

behaving *and* feeling in specific ways. Harrison also notes how the novels reinforce the exploration of this manipulation by highlighting the way in which the inherent binary nature of algorithmic language paves the way for a simplification of language, which inevitably affects individual identities and how they are built in our current societies.

Harrison makes a poignant observation regarding Barker's complex formatting, revealing an interaction with the visuality of programming. He argues that the author's formatting choices, such as her incorporation of different colors, typefaces, and other embellishments, not only resonate with data visualization but highlight the loss of creativity in binary thinking (both in the virtual and real world). Moreover, these choices make the text difficult to read on anything other than paper, thereby contesting data automation and classification. Later, in chapter five, Harrison circles back to the need to use alternative formatting styles as he discusses how the video game he analyzes uses three different art styles for its three different subplots, which, in his view, emphasizes a societal disconnect. Therefore, Harrison's overall stance on formatting shows how both Barker's novel and Grasshopper Manufacture's video game can help to point out the societal disconnect induced by algorithms and digital culture. As Harrison points out, in addition to representing this disconnect, these works simultaneously try to subvert it, demonstrating the crucial role of format alongside content for reader impact.

In chapters four and five, "The online dreamworld: Neal Stephenson's *Fall; or, Dodge in Hell*" and "Crafting a novel from digital culture: Grasshopper Manufacture's *The 25th Ward: The Silver Case*," Harrison turns to a graphic novel and a video game for further analysis. While the choice of different fictional mediums is interesting and the contents of the chapters align with the book's intentions, Harrison's choice of a graphic novel here appears more related to its genre and its author's professional background – that is, to Neal Stephenson's Silicon Valley experience – than to providing significantly new analysis on our reception and treatment of algorithms and data. Similarly, the video game's obscure and technologically obsolete nature – which Harrison explains is now almost inaccessible – also makes the book's cohesion falter. Although it is pertinent to emphasize that sociocultural analysis should not be limited to the novel, the last two case studies become somewhat repetitive, functioning more to exemplify how any kind of fiction can subvert digital culture's social modification, rather than offering fresh perspectives. As a result, the analysis of both texts is less compelling than that of the texts in earlier chapters, lacking similarly effective analysis of the potential societal impact of the analyzed texts and narrowing the reach towards more specific audiences.

Notwithstanding, Harrison uses these chapters to discuss the lack of intimacy induced by digital cultures, examining fake news, or "alternative facts," and the treatment of misinformation within society. This leads to his once more addressing the loss of collective consciousness that is induced by societal conformity, something further explored by Harrison when arguing that the graphic novel makes its readers reflect on how algorithms can shape consciousness. In Harrison's discussion, this also leads to a consideration of how algorithms codify even values and ideologies, which is especially relevant in terms of the often political function of science fiction. The examination of the video game also considers the notion of collective consciousness, as Harrison

discusses how individuals deal with information overload and analyses how the video game explicitly forces players to actively piece together the plot of the text.

The monograph concludes with the section “Fiction, Algorithms, Cognition,” which argues for considering how digital culture and software engineers might benefit from a familiarity with the Humanities that can encourage a certain ethicality which often seems to be missing from digital culture creation. Overall, the texts Harrison has chosen seem to offer a pessimistic depiction of digital culture, and in his discussion they also emphasize the limitations that resistance towards digital culture can offer. However, Harrison’s study also points to how, if its reductive elements can be contested by audiences, digital culture does also have potential to lead to the development of more broad-minded individuals. This is what Harrison seems to work towards: making audiences aware of the potential for reformation, a reformation inherent in the production of works such as the ones analyzed.

In conclusion, drawing from diverse theoretical fields and exploring a range of topics – such as authorship, reader response, postmodernism, affect theory, media culture and posthumanism – Harrison’s book is quite comprehensive and will interest a variety of scholars. At the same time, while its focus is broad, its concise length might be a limitation as some ideas seem to need expansion and others feel underdeveloped. Notwithstanding, Harrison generally offers a commendable interdisciplinary approach to studying the power that fiction holds on understanding digital culture, providing a compelling study on how algorithms and data collection impact individual identities. In fact, Harrison’s bold textual choices, simultaneously addressing contemporary identity, algorithm creation/alteration, and corporate data processing, reveal the rising need to understand fiction’s relation to algorithms and data. *Digital Culture in Contemporary Fiction* is, therefore, a necessary text, which examines new individual behaviors and fictional forms, as well as their potential to alter societal approaches to digital cultures.

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