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A Book Review:

Gender Identity and Sexuality in Current Fantasy and Science Fiction

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Barbini, Francesca T, ed. *Gender Identity and Sexuality in Current Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Luna Press Publishing, 2017. ISBN: 978-1-911143-24-6

Gender Identity and Sexuality in Current Fantasy and Science Fiction is the first publication of Academia Lunare, Luna Press Publishing's academic branch for fantasy and science fiction, and it is a promising one. The book consists of ten original contributions with various perspectives and different foci, which proves to be one of the collection's strengths: the book as a whole offers a solid general overview of the broad questions of gender identity and sexuality in the speculative genres.

The articles complement each other by offering slightly different starting points. An author's point of view is prominent in two of the articles. In her article, Juliet E McKenna uses concepts that are more familiar from discussing gender-balance and gender equality in the workplace (for example the sticky floor and the glass ceiling) to explore discrimination in science fiction and fantasy publishing. A J Dalton, partly from the point of view of a fantasy author, discusses "gender-identity and sexuality in current subgenres of British fantasy literature" and points out the history and conventions of a genre and subgenre to certain extent limit the choices an author has, and how the polarization of societies is reflected in what kind of fantasy literature audiences demand.

A survey of the diversity of characters and representation is the overarching theme in four of the articles. Anna Millon's article "Bikini armour: women characters, readers and writers in male narratives" studies female character representation in fantasy fiction, whereas Hazel Butler explores the representation of bisexual characters in fantasy literature and television. Cheryl Morgan's article outlines "how the transgender tipping point has influenced speculative fiction," that is, how the changing attitudes towards trans people and non-binary genders are influencing science fiction and fantasy, enhancing both the quality and quantity of representation of trans people in the genres. Shifting the focal point to the world of card games, Rostislav Kůrka shows how the non-binary nature of gender and sexuality is taken into account in the card game *Magic: The Gathering* and its story, and how things have changed during the twenty decades of its existence.

Lorianne Reuser's article "Subversion, Sex, and Violence: Rape as Narrative Tool in *A Song of Ice and Fire*" feels especially topical while reading it in the middle of the #metoo campaign. Furthermore, touching on genre conventions and traditions, Reuser's feminist critique of the novels and the HBO television series demonstrates how fiction rebelling against one set of conservative traditions (in this case "sanitised, fairytale-like fantasy" [176]) may still be lacking in other areas. The aspect of film adaptation is present also in Jyrki Korpua's article where he discusses Tolkien's female roles and changes to them in Peter Jackson's cinematization of *The Hobbit*. In Korpua's analysis, the spotlight is on audiences and the reception of the character of Tauriel, based on data

gained via the World Hobbit Project. Alina Hadîmbu, too, discusses the later-added character of Tauriel, alongside with Rey, the female lead of the latest *Star Wars* films, when assessing whether these new female characters are “gender balancing in otherwise male-dominated fictional worlds or [whether they have] a greater purpose”. Finally, more traditional literature scholarship in the collection is represented by Kim Lakin-Smith’s article. In its exploration of the feminine grotesque using Lacanian concepts, it is linked to the theme of representation as it studies how the analysed novels represent “the societal and psychological complexities of real pubescent girls” (152).

All in all, Barbini has put together a collection of articles that is quite diverse in its topics and perspectives yet manages to be coherent. As such, *Gender Identity and Sexuality in Current Fantasy and Science Fiction* becomes a contemporary assessment of the current state of the speculative and recommended reading for anyone interested in these questions in the speculative genres – or perhaps especially for those who are not yet familiar with these aspect of fantasy and science fiction. On a more trivial note, there are a few small typological and stylistic issues that may catch a reader’s attention; for example, the rather old-school editor in me is not convinced that allowing the use of contractions like “isn’t” and “won’t” is necessarily the best possible editorial decision – although I presume that it is a deliberate move to downplay the level of strict academicness. The fact that a review needs to pick on these does indicate, though, that actual shortcomings of the collection are minor indeed.

To conclude, even though quite a few books and articles on gender and sexuality in the speculative genres have been written during the last decades, this collection a concise overview of the state of the art as it is now, and what questions are topical at this point in history. In recent years, we have seen the “gamergate” controversy attack women gamers and game developers, the “Sad Puppies” distorting the Hugo Awards voting, the #metoo campaign revealing the extent of sexual harassment in the film industry amongst others, and pay gaps in the workplace addressed prominently at least in the British mainstream media. Echoes of all of these evils can be heard in the articles. Thus, it is obvious that the collection is burningly topical and very much needed.

Biography: Päivi Väättänen is a doctoral candidate at the University of Helsinki, Finland, and she is currently working on her doctoral dissertation on genre and identity politics in African American science fiction. She has published on narrative ethics and the phenomenon of afrofuturism, and recently an article titled “Educating by Unreliability: Expository Manipulation in Science Fiction” in Worlds of Imagination (2017).