BOOK REVIEW:

Magic, Monsters, and Make-Believe Heroes: How Myth and Religion Shape Fantasy Culture

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Douglas E. Cowan’s Magic, Monsters, and Make-Believe Heroes is an overview of popular culture with the fantastic at its heart and an intention to use myth and religion as its investigative lens. However, this analytical promise, made clear from the more specific subtitle – How Myth and Religion Shape Fantasy Culture – remains somewhat unfulfilled because Cowan does not discuss myths or the idea of the “mythic” in fantasy, but largely focuses on Campbell’s hero’s journey as it appears across chosen texts. The “religion” aspect of the book is no more prominent. Cowan makes clear from the outset that Magic, Monsters, and Make-Believe Heroes is less explicitly about religion than his three previous books dealing with religion and popular culture: Sacred Terror (2008), Sacred Space (2010), and America’s Dark Theologian (2018). Instead, he explains that this book concentrates on how the broad spectrum of fantasy film, television, and participative culture are evidence of an ongoing need for mythic vision. By “mythic vision” Cowan understands larger frames of meaning into which people continually write themselves and how these frames of meaning, over time, elevate some of the storyworlds to the status of “religion”
(xiii). Investigative lenses aside, *Magic, Monsters, and Make-Believe Heroes* is Cowan’s invitation to explore the fantastic culture methodically by analysing its dominant themes.

The thematic structure of the book and its scope indicate that Cowan attempts to reach multiple audiences. These audiences seem to include scholars from various fields, students, and fantasy fans. Across nine chapters, he covers texts ranging from novels, films, and TV series to role-playing games and other participatory practices. The first four chapters tackle themes of fairy stories, magic, immortality, and everlasting youth. Chapters 5 and 6 analyse the mythic hero, chapter 7 focuses on the warrior-heroine, and chapter 8 is devoted to RPGs and LARPs. The final chapter is focused on Cowan’s musings on the nature of “happily ever after” (186). At 194 pages, *Magic, Monsters, and Make-Believe Heroes* is a medium-sized book, with a helpful index, bibliography, and impressive mediography (with references to 187 films and TV-shows). All these help the readers navigate their way through the broad body of texts that Cowan tackles.

The broad scope of Cowan’s analysis can be a delight to readers who enjoy a panoramic view of culture. Readers who seek a more focused view, however, might be disappointed because the breadth of scope leaves little space for a detailed analysis and engagement with research across the fields. This leads to a quality dissonance across the book. Some texts, such as John Boorman’s science-fiction Zardoz (1974) and Yuen Woo-ping’s *Snake in the Eagle’s Shadow* (1978), have not been analysed at length previously and, most probably, have been forgotten by the popular audience. Cowan’s original and engaging exploration of these texts reminds academics and popular readers alike about the existence and value of these films. The discussion of other texts in *Magic, Monsters, and Make-Believe Heroes*, such as Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and J. M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan* (1937), including their respective numerous film and stage adaptations, might prove interesting to a popular reader but may leave an academic audience wanting more critical material and analytical depth. Depending on the reading audience, the scope of this book can be its delight but possibly also its downfall.

Cowan’s definition of fantasy is as broad as his choice of texts. He follows David Pringle’s suggestion that fantasy is the “fiction of the heart’s desire” but also heeds Ursula Le Guin’s warning that fantasy is true, if not factual (17). The keys to Cowan’s views on fantasy are the three main tropes: the supernatural exemplified by magic, the monstrous represented by villainous creatures, and the heroism embodied by fantastic protagonists. In chapter 1 he devotes two sections to sketching the limits of fantasy and to “explaining fantasy” (17). In these sections, Cowan mentions a plethora of things such as magic carpets, heroic deeds, cyclopes, and access to magical powers, and he identifies them as elementary to fantasy texts and easily recognisable to popular audiences. Based on these tropes, he distils his own three main tropes from the similarities between the late 1950s and early 1960s “peplum” (sword-and-sandal) films, which explore the deeds of Hercules, Samson, and Goliath, the popular heroes of the European cinema of the time (14). The three tropes that Cowan favours lead him to a broad scope of genres and literary forms because he includes everything from traditional fairy tales, animal fables, “lost races”, “lost worlds”, and “lost time” stories; epic battles involving wizards and witches; Arthurian legends and post-apocalyptic landscapes; and superheroes and supervillains as
In many respects, *Magic, Monsters, and Make-Believe Heroes* encapsulates all the love of stories that Cowan developed in childhood (xiii). In this sense, the book is a friendly love-letter to his childhood self and, written in a conversational tone, it is accessible to a wide audience. Cowan is aware of potential criticism on his choice of texts and thus invites his readers to treat his book, not as an end of the discussion, but as a beginning (xv). His last sentence seems to reinforce this idea of an open-discussion table, as he writes: “So, let me tell you a story...” (194). Unfortunately, my contention with this approach is simple: the fantasy field has moved past the beginnings because fantasy critics have been working steadily on them for the past forty years. Academics would have welcomed a more detailed analysis of fewer texts along with a more-
focused contextualisation of current fantasy research. My greatest delight in this book would have been if it had started with: “So, let’s discuss this story....”

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