



BOOK REVIEW:

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

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Cowan, Douglas E. *Magic, Monsters, and Make-Believe Heroes: How Myth and Religion Shape Fantasy Culture*. U of California P, 2019. ISBN 978-0520293991.

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-fantasy *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

a part of fantasy culture (14). In this Cowan hardly limits his idea of fantasy; rather, he uses it as an umbrella term that includes everything “non-purely realistic”. Fantasy, in other words, according to Cowan, is in many respects limitless. A limitless approach can be aggravating for a critic of the genre but is likely a joyful one for a popular reader.

It is possible, too, that Cowan’s “limitless” approach to fantasy reigns due to his limited engagement with current fantasy criticism. Although he uses Farah Mendlesohn’s *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008) to discuss the *Grimm* TV series as an intrusion fantasy, other critical works applicable to Cowan’s vast number of texts are absent. For example, as Cowan introduces myth as one of the driving terms of his book and discusses fantasy in terms of storyworlds, the absence of Brian Attebery’s *Stories about Stories* (2014) is notable.

Cowan’s panoramic view of fantasy does not stop him from a diligent approach towards fantasy gaming, though, which makes chapter 8, “The Stuff of Legends”, the best chapter. Here Cowan argues that gaming is the “theatre of the mind, the principal domain of fantasy”, and offers a few examples to support this argument (170). First, Cowan introduces Wil Wheaton’s *Titansgrave: The Ashes of Valkana* (*Geek & Sundry*, 2015) and brings the uninitiated closer to the world of RPG in general. Second, Cowan investigates *Dungeons & Dragons* (*A War in Scarlet: “Night of the Owlbear”*) and studies the rise in the involvement of players throughout the campaign and their gradual immersion into the characters. The chapter concludes with a discussion of *LARPS: The Series* and offers insight into the mechanisms of live-action playing games, contrasting them with Joe Lynch’s film *Knights of Badassdom* (2013). As he explores his way through these three examples from the fantasy gaming world, Cowan directs his readers to sources that can be easily accessed online. This turns the chapter into an interactive manual, which explains the processes that take place during the games and strengthens Cowan’s arguments on the nature of gaming and fantasy in general. Cowan argues that fantasy (gaming) is more than a spectator sport (167). He further argues that gaming operates on a different level of engagement: it is a step further from a reader of a book or an observer in the cinema. Gaming is about becoming a part of the adventure, if only for a weekend, whether as a hobbit, a dwarf, a wizard, or even an orc (167). Cowan reminds his readers that the numerous rules that govern RPGs and LARPs should always be secondary to the story and that the framework of the game serves the adventure the players create among themselves, not the other way around (171). This engaging introduction to the RPG and LARP culture will likely be especially satisfying to fantasy enthusiasts.

In many respects, *Magic, Monsters, and Make-Believe Heroes* encapsulates all the love of stories that Cowan developed in childhood (xii). 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...”

Biography: Trained primarily as a 20th-century literary critic, A. J. Drenda holds a PhD in Fantasy Literature from Anglia Ruskin University, UK. She has taught media analysis, politics, and culture at Middlesex University, London, and her main research interest is magic in fantasy.