



BOOK REVIEW:

*Re-Enchanted: The Rise of Children's
Fantasy Literature in the Twentieth
Century*

Brian Attebery

Cecire, Maria Sachiko. *Re-Enchanted: The Rise of Children's Fantasy Literature in the Twentieth Century*. U of Minnesota P, 2019. ISBN 978-1517906573.

Maria Sachiko Cecire's study of modern children's fantasy takes a particular historical cluster as representative of the genre: the two midcentury masters, J.R.R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, along with a younger generation of writers who either studied with those two at Oxford or were profoundly influenced by the curriculum and philosophy they imposed on the study of literature. The latter include Diana Wynne Jones, Philip Pullman, Susan Cooper, and Keven Crossley-Holland. J. K. Rowling is not in the core group, but the Harry Potter books are discussed as an offshoot, as are, later on, Lev Grossman's *Magicians* trilogy and George R. R. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire*. Fantasy as defined around this core is Anglocentric and medievalist. It looks back to an imagined past, both personal and cultural, as a way of recapturing the enchantment of the title. From Jacqueline Rose and Perry Nodelman, Cecire takes the idea that children's literature constructs a walled-off space of purported innocence around childhood – primarily for the benefit of adult readers and writers. Adding in the idea of imagined communities from Benedict Anderson, she extends this notion to the childhood of the race – and exactly which race that might be forms a major part of the second half of this study.

Cecire's choice of focus gives coherence to a notoriously wide-ranging and diverse topic. By looking at Lewis and Tolkien as educators as well as

creators, she is able to bring in considerable information about literary canons and educational goals as well as particular texts that serve as touchstones for the writers she is studying, such as Tolkien's favorites *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. She also sets up an argument about fantasy and racism that brings her study (despite its subtitle) well into the 21st century. Early chapters immerse us in the curricular wars waged at Oxford and between it and Cambridge, where modern literature was being championed by the likes of F. R. Leavis. Having demonstrated a pattern of medievalist Oxford fantasy, she then explores its use of Christianised myth and of traditions that are a mix of nostalgic invention and rediscovery. A core chapter (one of the strongest) deals with Christmas fantasies such as Cooper's *The Dark Is Rising*, which Cecire convincingly traces back to the "Christmas challenge" that sets Sir Gawain off on his adventure. She makes the point that the assemblage of Christmas traditions that were half revived, half invented by Washington Irving, Clement Moore, Charles Dickens, and Victorian merchants fill an important niche. They have what Cecire calls "affective authenticity", which she defines as "the sensation of something being emotionally true, even if it is not empirically true". And she goes on immediately to extend the idea beyond its seasonal application: "These are the truths that Lewis and Tolkien argued are the most important in life, beyond facts and beyond time" (162). Modern fantasy is exactly an exercise in affective authenticity, which is another way of saying, as Ursula K. Le Guin noted, that fantasy is no less true for not being factual.

This insight, which I take to be Cecire's central thesis, is valid and immensely useful in understanding the power of fantasy. However, I have some problems with the historical narrative that frames it. The Oxford connection she traces is real, and the canon formed around it is often taken to be the whole story of the genre, but the boundaries of that tradition are leaky, and the sense of a common enterprise even among the Oxford writers is perhaps an invented tradition like the Christmas one she dismantles so deftly. In order to construct fantasy as Anglophile, if not always English, and medievalist, she has to pass over some major writers and misrepresent others. Le Guin's innovative use of nonwhite characters in *Earthsea* goes unmentioned. George MacDonald barely makes it into her study, disguised as a medieval revivalist along the lines of his contemporary William Morris. Edith Nesbit (a powerful influence on Lewis) doesn't show up at all, nor does one of my favorites, L. M. Boston, whose *Green Knowe* stories include a Chinese refugee and a Caribbean slave among their protagonists and who possibly authorised Cooper and Jones similarly to undercut the myth of a white England. I would suggest that MacDonald, Nesbit, Rudyard Kipling (in the Puck of Pook Hill stories), Boston, Henry Treece, Alan Garner, Philippa Pearce, and David Almond make up a cluster of children's fantasy writers who use the form to interrogate history (from the Neolithic to the near past) and privilege. Their work thus anticipates some of the fantasists Cecire brings in at the end as a counter-statement to the Oxford group.

But here I am in danger of falling into the reviewer's trap of reviewing the book the author *didn't* write. The one she did write is engaging, well-researched, and, I think, important. It offers new insight into the processes by which modern fantasy came to be associated with a specific group of writers and a particular kind of storytelling. A chapter titled "White Magic" looks not only at fictional texts but also at the conversation that arises in response to them, such as the online debate between contributors to a Tumblr site called

MedievalPOC (People of Color) and commentators on Reddit who seek to deny the existence of African, Asian, and Arabic sojourners in medieval Europe, though all are well documented. The latter demonstrate quite effectively the psychological significance of that innocent and presumably racially pure space that medievalist fantasy shares with children's literature. Citing Robin Bernstein, Cecire observes that "the inextricability of childhood, innocence and whiteness since the end of the eighteenth century creates a serious barrier to reimagining the stories we tell to and about children, and perpetuates the racialized roles that we give to young people through their toys and media" (183). Yet the MedievalPOC dare to challenge the racist assumptions that cling to fantasy literature, as does the writer Junot Díaz, whose metafantasy *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* informs the next chapter, which is called "Your Inner Child of the Past". A major strand in Díaz's novel is the title character's infatuation with Tolkien until he comes across the closest thing to his own racial identity in *The Lord of the Rings* in the form of the evil Haradrim, "black men like half-trolls" (qtd. in Cecire 220). That description marks Middle-earth as out of bounds to readers like Oscar. The unacknowledged truth, the secret bargain made by lovers of medievalist fantasy, is that the space of innocence is also one of exclusion and domination.

Yet Cecire does not end on that sour note. Her concluding chapter suggests that fantasy can change and is changing. She encourages us to seek out other sources and traditions for fantasy and writers such as Nnedi Okorafor, N. K. Jemisin, Zen Cho, Daniel José Older, and Tomi Adeyemi. Cecire gives us the tools we need to read their work as both an answer to and a continuation of the work begun by Tolkien and Lewis.

Biography: Brian Attebery is editor of the *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* and author of a number of studies of fantasy and science fiction, including *Stories about Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth*.