



BOOK REVIEW:

*George R. R. Martin and the Fantasy Form*

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Young, Joseph Rex. *George R. R. Martin and the Fantasy Form*. Routledge, 2019. ISBN 978-1138502161.

Everyone, it seems, has their own two cents to offer on *A Game of Thrones* (*GoT*), whether the books or the television adaptation. This is the sentiment that launches Joseph Rex Young's monograph, *George R. R. Martin and the Fantasy Form*, which anyone who studies fantasy fiction certainly knows well. Worse, from Young's point of view (and I highly concur), is when scholars and readers make general claims about fantasy fiction as a whole *solely* based on the *GoT* television adaptation. In his book, Young sets out to challenge and overturn some of these knee-jerk notions. In particular, he argues that Martin, rather than "abandoning or subverting the conventions of his genre, is actually using them particularly well" (5), but where Martin sets himself apart is by presenting an epic fantasy world with the tones and trappings of low fantasy. With this thesis in mind, Young delivers an incredibly nuanced and highly accessible analysis of *A Song of Ice and Fire* (*ASOIAF*) that, at the same time, resonates deeply for how scholars should understand the contemporary fantasy genre overall. Indeed, Young has a talent for taking fantasy scholarship that is decades old and, rather than dismissing it as outdated, shows how *ASOIAF* instead responds to those old ideas, thereby pushing the genre forward. In a way, it is regrettable that Young frames his book so entirely around Martin's text. Although a valuable single-author study in its own right, this monograph – by emphasising Martin rather than the fantasy form – risks missing fantasy scholars uninterested in Martin when, in fact, I suspect that most fantasy scholars will benefit from this book. Thus, let me begin my review with an appeal: if you are a scholar of fantasy, I highly recommend you read this text regardless of your remit.

In Young's short introduction, he rightly exposes how frequently people come to conclusions about Martin's text based on either the HBO television adaptation or various non-literary approaches to the book series – for example, the potential historical inspirations for *ASOIAF*. This leads to Chapter 1, "The American Pratchett? – Muck and Modality", where Young tackles the general consensus that *ASOIAF* is wholly original and therefore entirely different from other work in the genre, especially J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (*LOTR*). For Young, any evaluation that celebrates *ASOIAF* for moving beyond *LOTR*'s allegedly black-and-white moral rigidity fails to properly appreciate the nuances of either text. In Martin's case, *ASOIAF* begins with a prologue that presents the embodiment of an evil Other in the form of White Walkers. This establishes from the first page a supernatural presence – a point particularly important since "magic" is a common reproof against fantasy, and one against which Martin is often held as a counterexample. As explained by Young, however, it's not that Martin's work is "more realistic" but that Martin deliberately and repeatedly makes authorial choices that direct the reader to take note of "filth" and other low mimetic markers. Using Northrop Frye's theory of modes, Young identifies *ASOIAF* as set within an ironic mode, similar to the works of Terry Pratchett and even the *Monty Python* series, where nobility and other "high figures" are satirised and brought low. Thus, Martin and other ironic-mode fantasists "deploy characters who at least episodically see through those conceits in order to emphasise the follies of those who do not" (32). In this way, they reveal the hypocrisy and baseness of aristocratic rulers such as Cersei Lannister, but plenty of high mimetic characters, such as those found in Tolkien, still appear in *ASOIAF* – for example, Martin spares Syrio Forel a farcical death because he embodies genuine nobility (36).

Given Young's generally insightful focus on authorial choices, however, one of his few missteps in *George R. R. Martin and the Fantasy Form* involves his over-reliance on Martin's own defense (in interviews) of racism and rape culture as "historically accurate". This problem becomes particularly noticeable in Chapter 2, "Enough about Whores' – Sex and Characterisation". Although Young briefly mentions the Othering of the Eastern cultures, and even goes so far as to identify "Dothraki rape culture" (56), he otherwise pays little attention to the problematic racial aspects of the text. Instead, Young focuses on Khal Drogo as a redeemable character. A page later, Young identifies Daenerys's feminism as "anachronistic", the precedent for which can be found in the Gothic tradition (57). Unfortunately, this reading of fantasy fiction as a pseudo-historical text whose "good" politics are anachronistic retro-insertions risks legitimising racism and sexism. In this case, Young would have done well to take note of another scholar of similar surname, namely Helen Young, whose *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature* (2016) firmly critiques the depiction of race and racism in *ASOIAF*. Yet, oddly enough, Joseph Rex Young seems to deliberately avoid Helen Young's work. Although *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature* appears in his bibliography, Young's index only lists one reference to Helen's book – a superficial one, no less, as he casually mentions her term "gritty fantasy" while ignoring her more substantive arguments. Instead of choosing to discuss the relevant social issues, Joseph Rex suggests that the sexual violence pervading Martin's books, rather than illicit titillation, is simply a deeper form of characterisation. Treating one's partner well in the "game of beds", as he says, grants that character greater sympathy from the reader (45).

Still, despite divorcing individual ethics and morality from their larger social context, an intellectually suspect move, Young's individualistic approach nonetheless remains an oddly effectively one. After all, *ASOIAF* is a highly popular text; *something* must account for it. What Young manages to do, then, is uncover the tools used by Martin to deliver a commercially successful (yet still emotionally powerful) narrative.

In Chapter 3, "Look with Your Eyes' – Immersion and Thinning", Young turns to how readers have engaged with the rhetorics of the narrative. As the term "rhetorics" implies, Young heavily engages with the work of Farah Mendlesohn, but first he demonstrates how *ASOIAF* employs John Clute's "thinned" world concept, where magic has leaked out of the land. At the beginning of the series, the dragons are all dead, and, despite the briefly seen White Walkers from the prologue, most supernatural forces throughout Westeros are merely considered meaningless fairy tales. Because of this thinning, Young thus classifies *ASOIAF*, for the most part, as an *immersive fantasy* (74), a rhetorical structure through which readers understand the fantastical world as focalised by characters already familiar with it. The occasional instances of *intrusive fantasy* (that is, where an unknown or supernatural element intrudes on the focalising characters) are still buffered – their effect deadened – by a layer of immersive fantasy. Rather than identifying Martin's use of contradictory Mendlesohnian rhetorics as a failure in consistency, though, Young proposes that these devices combined offer a "resonant, penetrating critique of the unpredictability of human morality" (125). In Chapter 4, "Dead Men Come Hunting' – Intrusion and Recovery", Young extends the discussion from immersive fantasy to intrusive fantasy. Here, Young turns abruptly to 19<sup>th</sup>-century Romanticism. As he stated earlier, modern "fantasy is essentially a latter-day continuation of the Romantic tradition, being centrally concerned with mysteries posited at the centre of humanity's relationship with the world" (88) – in this case, fantasy and the supernatural seem to go together. This brief introduction to Romanticism allows Young, in Chapter 4, to combine Mendlesohn's and Clute's theories with Thomas Weiskel's three-stage structure of Romantic transcendence, or stages in which the protagonist encounters the sublime. He then offers close readings of several key characters, demonstrating how each moves away from Thinning to Recovery by contact with the supernatural.

The way that Young continually combines different theoretical devices throughout his monograph, though, is a primary reason why I recommend the book so highly to students and scholars of fantasy fiction. It would be easy, for example, to overuse Clute's and Mendlesohn's contribution to fantasy studies. As with any theoretical foundation, one must be careful in relying too much on a single theory, as this may not offer anything new or significant to our understanding of the field. Since fantasy scholarship has traditionally focused so much on genre definition, over-reliance has been a frequent issue. As a result, some scholars might simply accept Mendlesohn's categories in *Rhetorics of Fantasy* as if they were the final say on the subject, and then move on. In contrast, Young applies his theoretical tools in a way that expands our understanding of both Martin and the theories themselves. As often as I myself have closely read (and reread) Frye, Mendlesohn, Clute, and the other big-name fantasy theorists, I repeatedly found myself being surprised and delighted by how Young chooses to apply their scholarship. Thus, *George R. R. Martin and*

*the Fantasy Form* not only successfully analyses *ASOIAF* but also effectively furthers the field of fantasy itself by subjecting its most common methodologies to rigorous, unique applications.

For instance, Tzvetan Todorov's theory of hesitation is not much used nowadays, especially by fantasy scholars, but Young surprisingly finds a good application of the hesitation principle to *ASOIAF* in Chapter 5, "Remember That You Were Brothers' – Superstition and Cohesion". In Todorov's theory, the fantastic arises when readers (technically, *implied* readers) hesitate between two equally plausible explanations of events – a realistic one, and a supernatural one. As a result, Todorov's theory excludes most genre fantasy; as the supernatural is confirmed early in fantasy narratives, authors do not create any significant readerly hesitation. According to Young, however, Martin harnesses the "rhetorical structure of the Todorovian fantastic" by maintaining hesitation – for several thousand pages, in some cases – only to move back and forth between hesitation and confirmation of information and events, especially with regards to the supernatural (137). For example, several characters inform Jon Snow that Mance Rayder has been searching for the Horn of Joramun. The information they provide results in

layers of conflicting information ... [but] Jon Snow, the protagonist of a Mendlesohnian intrusion fantasy, is hotwired to believe Ygritte when she tells him Mance was looking for the horn. He thus believes Mance when he presents the warhorn. (133)

As can be seen in this example, Young combines Todorov's and Mendlesohn's theories to demonstrate how a readerly hesitation is maintained. In Chapter 6, "But Here You Are' – Magic and Healing", Young then turns to David Sandner and a focus on moments of Todorovian resolution. Here and throughout the book, Young employs this different theoretical model to develop his thesis that Martin is not breaking fantasy expectations so much as manipulating them in order to direct his readers to challenge expectations of heroism and aristocracy. Finally, in Young's conclusion, he offers some final thoughts on the lasting influence and pervasiveness of fantasy fiction. The Introduction and Conclusion thus work together to bracket the importance of Young's analysis of *ASOIAF*, framing his monograph not just as an investigation in Martin's world but as an integral foray into authorial choices which, rather than breaking away from the fantasy tradition, instead pushes the genre forward.

Overall, I found Young's assessment of genre fantasy highly compelling. Rather than seeing fantasy as a dry repetition of the same formula, he deftly demonstrates how incredibly rich and nuanced the genre can be. As well, while structuralist approaches such as Todorov's hesitation principle or even Mendlesohn's "taxonomy" of fantasy rhetorics may seem dated to literary scholars, Young confirms their continued importance in understanding and assessing formulaic literatures. By doing so, Young proves that the works of Frye, Mendlesohn, Clute, Weiskel, Todorov, and Sandner continue to play an important role in contemporary fantasy today. *George R. R. Martin and the Fantasy Form* is a must-read for any scholar of fantasy, especially those who seek to better understand the unceasing conversation between authors and critics in the field.

*Biography:* Charul (“Chuckie”) Palmer-Patel is the founder of *Fantastika Journal* ([www.fantastikajournal.com](http://www.fantastikajournal.com)), a journal that brings together the genres of fantasy, SF, gothic/horror, among others. Her first monograph, *The Shape of Fantasy* (2020) investigates the narrative structures of epic fantasy and incorporates ideas from science, philosophy, and literary theory. Her next book, *The Mother-Hero: Negotiating Motherhood and Maternity in American Fantasy Fiction*, investigates the place of the mother in late 20<sup>th</sup>- and early 21<sup>st</sup>-century literature. More information about Palmer-Patel is available at [www.doc-fantasy.com](http://www.doc-fantasy.com).