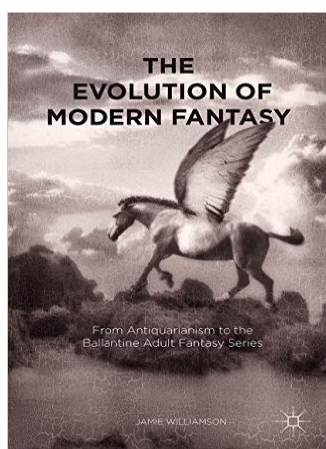




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A Book Review: Jamie Williamson – *The Evolution of Modern Fantasy: From Antiquarianism to the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series*

Dennis Wilson Wise



Williamson, Jamie: *The Evolution of Modern Fantasy: From Antiquarianism to the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. ISBN 978-1137518088.

In archaeology, archaeologists like to distinguish between “lumpers” and “splitters”—that is, those who perceive great similarities between pieces of evidence in the historical record versus those who see vast differences. In an admirable new work on the literary history of fantasy, Jamie Williamson might be the “splitter” in a field full of lumpers, breaking up the relatively cohesive narrative often told about fantasy’s literary history. The centerpiece of Williamson’s story is Lin Carter and the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series (BAFS), which ran from 1969 to 1974 in the wake of the Tolkien and sword & sorcery booms of the 1960s. The BAFS, basically, had created a respectable literary prehistory for the new publishing genre of fantasy fiction. Although Williamson does not say so specifically, Lin Carter did for the fantasy canon what Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer Adler did for the “Great Books,” codifying a list of canonical “great” works that, perhaps inadvertently, tended to homogenize those works under one unified rubric. Carter and the BAFS posited “a sort of timeless Platonic Form, involving magic and invented preindustrial worlds” (ix) that has shaped our views on fantasy ever since, even causing misreadings of great past fantasy works because “of the tendency to view pregenre fantasy through a postgenre lens” (176). Williamson’s project, then, is a sort of historical recovery: he wishes to examine the pregenre fantasy writers canonized by Carter in order to recover their original literary and aesthetic intentions.

Pregenre fantasy writers, largely, had no interest in the “BAFS template”: a wholly invented secondary world with an abiding interest in magic. Indeed, Williamson usefully distinguishes between the “literary” branch of pre-BAFS fantasists (including Tolkien, Dunsany, William Morris, E. R. Eddison, Hope Mirrlees) and the “popular” branch of pre-BAFS fantasists—Howard, Leiber, Jack Vance, Clark Ashton Smith, plus others. Unlike the literary writers, the popular writers almost never attempted to engage older forms of literature or aesthetics. They chose instead to write

modern adventure stories with surface archaic elements. The literary writers, however, deliberately engaged older literary forms, spurred by antiquarian interest as well as inspired by scholarly new editions and translations of obscure and forgotten literature. Thus, as Williamson says, whereas “the popular writers largely adapted traditional elements of content to the conventions of modern narrative forms, the literary writers would be more aptly described as writing modern works actively engaging the conventions of traditional ‘faery, or romance literature’” (36). Such antiquarianism, however, is peculiar to European writers, Williamson argues—it requires being cut-off from a tradition of thought and writing. The fantasy aesthetic developed by the antiquarians largely does not apply to non-European literature. Thus, in Williamson’s view, a writer such as Leslie Marmon Silko should not be considered a fantasist, since the “impossible” elements in *Ceremony* stem from Silko’s inheritance of a living Native American tradition.

The story of antiquarianism begins in the eighteenth century, where antiquarians (and pseudo-antiquarians like James Macpherson) employed methods—such as an elegiac, archaic style or appended essays on historical context—that anticipated methods to increase verisimilitude used by literary fantasists such as Morris or Tolkien. Next come the Romantics, who often turned to the ancient Greeks as a source of inspiration for the imagination. From there Williamson turns to the Victorians and one of his great themes: the neglect of narrative fantasy poetry in the BAFS canon. Except for an increased length and a more sanitized morality, Victorian verse fantasies largely followed Romantic verse fantasies. No “clear-cut reason” exists for why prose gradually displaced narrative poetry as the primary locus of fantasy, although Williamson suspects it has to do with the “retreat from the revolutionary intentions of many of the Romantics” (104). Nonetheless, he argues, the prose romances of William Morris (dubbed by Lin Carter as the “founder” of fantasy) advance rather than break with earlier Romantic writing and Morris’s own prior work (123).

Williamson’s next two chapters on twentieth-century fantasy—one for literary writers, another for popular ones—continue to complicate the easy ascriptions of “influence” that generally mark other histories of fantasy. The literary fantasy writers never saw themselves as forming a new genre or literary movement, and they resembled each other *not* because of mutual influence but through sharing a “common inheritance from the preceding century and a half” (163). Tolkien, for example, could have easily composed his mythology without the mediating example of Lord Dunsany (162). The popular fantasy writers, for their part, borrowed from sources only tangentially influential on the literary writers—the adventure-cum-romances of Sir Walter Scott, for example, or the works of James Fenimore Cooper, H. Rider Haggard, and Edgar Rice Burroughs.

Only a few minor points can be brought against *The Evolution of Modern Fantasy*, which overall is a highly intelligent, informed work. Williamson’s writing style leaves something to be desired; while his book’s structure is clear, individual sentences tend to be verbose and repetitive. Williamson also strangely neglects contemporary fantasy criticism. He discusses Colin Manlove (1975, 1983), Rosemary Jackson (1981), and Ann Swinfen (1984), but Williamson could have just as easily discussed the much more recent *A Short History of Fantasy* by Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James (2009), which would only have bolstered Williamson’s larger point about post-BAFS discussions of the pre-BAFS fantasy canon. Additionally, Williamson might have complicated his discussion in a few more places. For example, since he has a strong grasp on Tolkien, he surely knows that Tolkien (one of the antiquarians) believed that his literary aesthetics reflected those of the *Beowulf*-poet, whom Tolkien considered almost an antiquarian himself, thus making *Beowulf* a “fantasy” text (under Williamson’s terms) prior to the eighteenth-century. In response Williamson *might* have said, as he does of Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, that the *Beowulf*-poet “did not follow on or accompany an intellectual *movement* bent on recovering a lost past” (42, my emphasis); still, the point might have been worth a discussion. Nonetheless, the many valuable distinctions and nuances introduced by *The Evolution of Modern Fantasy* might make it the most definitive history of fantasy literature yet written.