

# FANTASTIKA REVIEW

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

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A term appropriated from a range of Slavonic languages by John Clute. It embraces the genres of Fantasy, Science Fiction, and Horror, but can also include Alternate History, Gothic, Steampunk, Young Adult Dystopic Fiction, or any other radically imaginative narrative space.

The goal of Fantastika Journal and its conferences is to bring together academics and independent researchers who share an interest in this diverse range of fields with the aim of opening up new dialogues, productive controversies, and collaborations. We invite articles examining all mediums and disciplines which concern the Fantastika genres.

To 'review' comes from the French 'revior,' meaning to 'see again.' It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that for a journal that often focuses its content on spectres, the abject, and uncanny doubles, among other things, there are an increasing number of texts and critics for us to 'see again.' In this first issue of the Fantastika Review, the team at Fantastika Journal brings together a collection of reviews on the latest releases in Science Fiction, Fantasy, Gothic, Horror, Dystopia, Speculative Fiction, and more. With so many new publications over the last two years, we welcome you to 'see again' texts that you may have studied before from fresh perspectives and discover current criticism to add to your reading list.

A core goal of Fantastika Journal has always been to open new and interdisciplinary dialogues in diverse ways, opening up the hybridity of genres represented by John Clute's term for the fantastic in literature. The range of texts represented by these reviews is a testament to this journal's founding principles in foregrounding the resonances and ambiguities between the Fantastika genres. Within the non-fiction reviews, we look at criticism from various fields of Fantastika, including Science Fiction by authors of colour and Gothic fiction for young adult audiences. We range geographically from Science Fiction in India to post-apartheid Gothic in South Africa, urban fantasy in London, and Gothic prose in Ireland. Moreover, the non-fiction reviews encompass critical essays on witches in twenty-first-century television, an in-depth exploration of cyberpunk culture, and an investigation into the scientific theories that influenced Frankenstein. The fiction reviews expand this issue's extensive collection of all things Fantastika, including but not limited to ecoGothic video games, apocalyptic feminism, gender parodying robots, cannibalistic capitalism, mental illness in superhero narratives, and new vampires.

We are thankful for the efforts and contributions of all the writers and editors who helped bring this issue together. Everyone involved volunteered their time and expertise, bringing this open-access collection of reviews to life, and we are incredibly grateful for their collaboration and patience. We also extend our thanks to the publishers who helped make many of these reviews possible by sharing their latest publications with Fantastika Journal and our reviewers.

If you are interested in writing academic reviews of Fantastika fiction or non-fiction for the next issue, please [join our mailing list](#) or email us at [editors@fantastikajournal.com](mailto:editors@fantastikajournal.com).

We hope you enjoy the very first Fantastika Review!

Ruth-Anne Walbank  
Head Editor

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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# NON-FICTION REVIEWS

## **STAR WARRIORS OF THE MODERN RAJ (2021) BY SAMI AHMAD KHAN**

Review by C. Palmer-Patel

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**Khan, Sami Ahmad. *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj: Materiality, Mythology and Technology of Indian Science Fiction*. University of Wales Press, 2021.**

Sami Ahmad Khan's *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj: Materiality, Mythology, and Technology of Indian Science Fiction* (2021) offers an ambitious endeavour as a "fan's alternative to a Eurocentric perspective of SF, a beginner's guide which avoids an essentialist understanding of the genre [...] meant for those who may not have had much interface with SF, in general, and Indian SF in English, in particular" (xiii). While commendable for its attempt at decolonising studies in the Fantastika genres, Khan's objective is wrapped in complications; how does a scholar divorce themselves from the Eurocentric criticism that has come before while simultaneously acknowledging the existing scholarly field? Khan accomplishes this by presenting an extensive survey of Science Fiction (SF) criticism in his introductory chapters, touching on – amongst others, contemporary scholars such as Mark Bould, Pawel Freluk, Paul Kincaid, Patrick Sharp, and Sherryl Vint. Thus, Khan demonstrates a rigorous and layered comprehension of the works in question while simultaneously putting SF produced outside of India to one side. The effect this leaves on the reader is that Khan is certainly familiar with the field but that the study exists in a closed space, one which avoids taking part in or extending the existing conversation in SF criticism to include Indian authors and scholars. For instance, Khan begins Chapter 3, "Prayers in the Rain," with the statement that "Perhaps only *Indian* SF can be concerned with the *atman* (soul)" (33, emphasis original). Posing India as a "deeply religious country" (33), Khan avoids the intersection of SF with other religious traditions, a fact that would be taken at surface value if the intended audience of this book is indeed targeted towards those who "may not have had much interface with SF" (xiii). And yet, while Khan avoids Eurocentric scholarship in his own analysis, a significant strength of the book is Khan's presentation of several Indian-centric scholars in literature and Science Fiction, bringing much-needed attention to global scholarship in the field. Although Khan professes that this guide is intended for scholars who have had little immersion in SF, it certainly serves as an important eye-opener into global criticism in Science Fiction.

Khan's decision to present an alternative to a Eurocentric discussion of Science Fiction rests on his argument that Indian Science Fiction does *not* exist as a response to the current Western tradition but that it arose organically within India itself in parallel to other Science Fiction traditions. However, *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj* does not take this as its central position but assumes it as an evident fact shored up by Bal Phondke's argument for four stages of SF which can be seen in other global traditions.<sup>1</sup> I am not entirely convinced of this position, especially as the book



deliberately focuses on the fourth stage, or works produced in the new millennium, avoiding analysis of earlier texts which may have formed the first three stages. Consequently, the reader must assume that Khan's leap in logic is correct, as we do not witness the evaluation of how these stages may correspond to earlier Indian Science Fiction. That said, while Khan's framing may not convince me, it does not detract from the overall work, which offers an analysis of a range of Indian Science Fiction in English-Language (or ISFE, to use Khan's acronym) with both breadth and depth.

To explore ISFE alongside a mutating "technoscientific and socio-cultural transformation [... Khan] adopt[s] the "IN situ Model, which traverses the realms of space, time and being" (22). Utilising this model, Khan presents a parallel for ISFE: transMIT for space, antekaal for time, and neoMonsters for being. *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj* focuses primarily on the first of these, the transMIT, and thus does not spend much time explaining the other two models except fleetingly in later chapters. While this framing may be confusing – presenting an overly complicated model and jargon which does not add much overall to the central themes of the book – one assumes (and hopes) that Khan will address these gaps with later research. In *Star Warriors*, Khan proposes that:

the 'transMIT thesis' evidences how Indian SF (and, therefore, ISFE, specifically) exists across the intersecting domains of technology, materiality/politics/ideology and mythology within the emergent genre space of a developing country. *Through* its body, not only does ISFE *transmit* to its readers (emergent) technology, (sedimented) mythology and (mutating) ideology (in terms of its functionality), but, even more important, the basic operations of its texts operate across/beyond the three sets. (22, emphasis original)

The transMIT thesis is divided into three attributes: technology, ideology, and mythology (although, as the text's subtitle indicates, Khan replaces ideology with materiality), all of which give ISFE its defining characteristics. As evident in this presentation, Khan sprinkles scientific jargon alongside non-Anglophone slang throughout the book. While he helpfully provides a glossary of non-English-language terms at the back of the book, antekaal is notably missing from it. It should also be noted that the glossary does not specify what *language* these words originate from. As India has over twenty official languages (and an estimate of two hundred to two thousand regional dialects), it is an appalling gap to ignore the author's own subjective perspectives in the analysis of ISFE. As Khan is a novelist, the peppering of slang within his creative work would be inspiring and impactful. However, it falls outside the academic rigour anticipated from scholarship presented in the English language. By failing to acknowledge the linguistic nuances that inform ISFE, the book creates a homogenous 'India,' one that follows the colonial paradigm that it seeks to work against.

Thus, the jargon has the unfortunate side-effect of alienating people of Indian descent who do not identify with the author's own background (and perhaps also alienates the audience's presumably English reader), while also indicating that Khan's analysis of ISFE might be subjective

and rife with biases. For instance, Khan begins the section on “Materiality,” which an encapsulation of Indian identity:

The Union of India is not just a country which is – as per its eclectic, progressive constitution – a sovereign, secular, socialist, democratic, republic. It is also a geographically diverse entity of ‘Hindustan’ (the land of the Indus or ‘Sindhu’) and an ancient civilisation of ‘Bharat’ (or Aryavrata) which comprises multiple ‘nations’ within its territories. India, Bharat or Hindustan, three names for the same country, represent varying forces that seek to construct the idea(s) of India, and manifest conflicting approaches toward *bhartiyata* (or Indianness). These battles continue to rage in India of 2020s – and exhibit various strategies of defining, inscribing, and *being* Indian. (42, emphasis original).

Khan then presents three grades of Other, stipulating that “[a] higher grade corresponds to a more subversive and disruptive degree of alterity” (44). Grade III is The Civilisation Other: “The most dangerous form of Other, it emerges from a fusion of the national, political and religious Other, thereby becoming the Civilisational Other [...] an India caught between a Maoist China, Islamic Pakistan and the Capitalist west” (44-45). While Khan rightfully aligns Science Fiction as a genre which explores Othered identities, for Khan, India’s postcolonial literature appears to have less to do with Britain’s colonisation (from which the English part of ISFE originates) and, instead focuses on Hindu-Muslim relations dating back to the medieval ages. As Khan deliberately selects texts presenting these non-Hindu identities as the Other to demonstrate his transMIT thesis, the reader cannot confirm if these selections are representative of ISFE. A nod to ISFE written by Indian authors who do not identify as Hindu would have been welcome here. The remainder of the section on Materiality considers the other two grades of Other. Grade II is The Social Other, “compris[ing] caste and class paradigms. It is a source of threat to society, but somehow still regarded as ‘one of us’ who has gone ‘astray,’ and hence requires ‘checking’ and ‘correction’” (45). While the two, caste and class, are nearly indistinguishable from each other, a distinction still exists, as India’s caste-system has religious underpinnings. Khan’s analysis of tropes with clones, Artificial Intelligence (AI)/robots, and mutants focuses on the “class” of Social Other, sidestepping this connection to religion. In the Grade I, The Gender(ed) Other, “represent[ing] the least degree of disruption, one that can be relatively easily contained” (45), Khan briefly nods to the interconnection between the connection between gender unbalance and religious systems. He includes as examples here women (biological sex), “liberated” women (sexually empowered), and the LGBTQIA+ community. As with the discussion of class, the analysis of gender unbalance here is intrinsically connected to the discussion of religion and Social Other, which comes before it, and would have benefited from an intersectional analysis. For instance, one example in the section considers a character attempting to find a suitable bride for his firstborn son. While the social paradigm of marriage is bound up with social protocols of religion and class, Khan presents this conversation as one that is removed from current social constructs, focusing on a post-apocalyptic, imaginary society without mentioning religion or caste. Considering

Khan's framing in Part 1 that: "Perhaps only Indian SF can be concerned with the atman (soul)" (33), the sidestepping of religious intricacies in Part 2 feels like a crucial missing step.

Khan picks up the underpinning religious thread in Part 3, "Mythology," arguing that "India views science not as profane but as an extension of the divine" (96). Extending this perception to ISFE, Khan notes three paradigms: "(a) Gods as extraterrestrials (from other planets); (b) Gods as social-political indictments (from other temporal locations); and (c) Gods as hyperintelligences (from other technological axes)" (96). Part 3 is divided into these three sections, with an additional fourth chapter dedicated to "Mythic <=> Scientific." Together, "Mythology" functions to belatedly return to the argument on the question of whether Indian SF is an import, concluding that ISFE "employs the narrative structures and tropes of other genres with so much panache that the appropriation becomes utterly natural" (144). Thus, ISFE, and Indian fiction genre, arise from a mishmash of tradition with borrowed global literatures, resynthesizing the two together to create a new entity.

Finally, Part 4, "Technology," considers how ISFE deals with new technologies, or "how it appropriates, abrogates, resists and/or collaborates with new 'Empire(s)': hegemonic power structures that are no longer former-imperial nations but also current institutions" (150). This section has the most chapters, covering genetic manipulation, digital technology, biowarfare, aliens, and climate change. The result is an enticing introduction to the range of topics and ideas covered in ISFE, serving to wet the reader's appetite to dip their toes into ISFE themselves.

In the conclusion, "ISFE: A New Hope," Khan evokes the 'IN situ model' to return to his transMIT thesis, placing technology, mythology, and ideology as a triangular graph, with spheres of varying sizes representing SF texts. While each text may vary in its depiction of technology, mythology, and ideology, all three attributes, Khan argues, are essential features of ISFE, its atman or soul. Indeed, *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj* does a fantastic job of convincing the reader of the importance of all three attributes when considering ISFE or SF in general. As a result, the book serves as an excellent primer into an introduction to Indian Science Fiction, providing a structured overview of the genre's essential elements. However, with its explicit focus on English-language texts and its implicit perspective which frames major religions practiced in India as the Other, I would caution any scholar or fan from reading the book in isolation. *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj* is best read with other emerging criticism in the field, including another University of Wales Press production, Suparno Banarjee's *Indian Science Fiction: Patterns, History and Hybridity* (2020), alongside Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee's *Final Frontiers: Science Fiction and Techno-Science in Non-Aligned India* (Liverpool University Press, 2020). These works together signal an important turn into discussions of global SF more broadly and Indian SF specifically, and I anticipate more scholarly work to come.

## NOTES

1. Phondke's four stages includes: first, the birth and evolution of SF; second, science as a primary component and a quasi-scientific framework; third, disaster leading to a jolt out of scientific-romances; and fourth, a shift from SF for social purposes which focuses on content to SF which centres on form and style (paraphrased from Khan 19).

## BIONOTE

**C. Palmer-Patel** (she/her) is the founder and Co-Head-Editor of *Fantastika Journal*. Her first monograph, *The Shape of Fantasy* (Routledge, 2020), investigates the narrative structures of Epic Fantasy, incorporating ideas from science, philosophy, and literary theory. Her current research project, *Negotiating Motherhood and Maternity in American Fantasy Fiction* (Edinburgh University Press), investigates heteropatriarchal and colonial structures in Fantasy produced by a wide remit of American identities.

## **REMAINDERS OF THE AMERICAN CENTURY: POST-APOCALYPTIC NOVELS IN THE AGE OF US DECLINE (2021) BY BRENT RYAN BELLAMY**

Review by Ezekiel Crago

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**Bellamy, Brent Ryan. *Reminders of the American Century: Post-Apocalyptic Novels in the Age of US Decline*. Wesleyan University Press, 2021. 270pp.**

Frederic Jameson's famous aphorism about the inability to imagine the end of capitalism and the ease with which we can conceive the end of the world has become a cliché in the twenty-first century. Brent Ryan Bellamy extends this lack of imagination to nationalism in this brilliant book which posits that it is easier for Americans to imagine the end of the world than to conceive of the end of the United States' (US) hegemony over the globe, that indeed the end of the latter entails the end of the former.

Novels in the Post-Apocalyptic genre, the books argues, are not in fact about "the end of the world" as much as historical endings (1). There is an irony in the narratives in this regard, such that their protagonists live in squalor and compete with other survivors which mirrors the real world situation of those who have been forced to adjust to the demands of US capitalism and already live in survival mode. In these works, "crisis" becomes "opportunity" and the individual is more important than the community (2). They are self-fulfilling neoliberal fantasies imagining the collapse of society in order to bring back the 'American Dream' for certain men. Bellamy makes a distinction between the Post-Apocalypse as a genre of fiction and instead on the post-apocalyptic *mode*, borrowing the concept from Veronica Hollinger as a "method" or practice and not just a family resemblance of story elements, examining the "effects" of the mode instead of just the affinities of representation in the works (4). This allows for a "historical distinction" because genres change constantly and evolve over time, but "modes correspond to longer cultural periods" (6). Such investigation reveals how the work draws implicit comparisons between the worlds before and after the apocalyptic event and this allows for the modality to exceed genre with its expectations and conventions (8). The apocalyptic event of each narrative determines new social norms as it posits a never-ending crisis as the new norm in a post-hegemony world where privilege is determined by brutality and in doing so suggests that this might be the outcome of real-world catastrophe (10). These are speculations about ideological and real-world disaster.

Viewing the long twentieth century as the 'American century' posits the beginning of US hegemony as its entry into World War Two in 1941. It views the decline of this power beginning in the 1970s, which contradicts social theorists who locate US hegemony as beginning in the 1970s.



Beginning with the entry into World War II recognises the effects of the overt militarisation of American society brought about by the war, leading to the on-going state of conflict the country has experienced ever since. This hegemony is graphically represented by the proliferation of US military bases across the globe. However, this power is fragile, and as Bellamy notes in his analysis, makes America paranoid and dangerous (15). Any threat to US power is treated as apocalyptic and recent military failures only serve to demonstrate the fragility of US power (16). Perpetual war is no longer profitable. Bellamy utilises the concept of “remainders” to pose this argument because it means “the ill-fitting and the residual” simultaneously and can apply to “value, matter, and historicity” equally (18). These structures remain, but their operation has been altered by the apocalyptic event that begins or precedes the narrative, often rendering them obsolete. Some remain crucial aspects of life that protagonists use as a measure of who counts and who does not. In this way, Bellamy uses the post-apocalyptic mode to examine publishing remainders, the apocalyptic future of books in the current publishing industry if no one buys them. Bellamy addresses how many post-apocalyptic narratives imagine a world of hyper-masculine, white subjects as a remainder of social norms and how this demographic has shifted in the twenty-first century. Remainders exist diegetically as things left over from the previous world and also as literary tropes used by writers of novels and Bellamy uses them to examine conflict over the meanings of both the ‘end’ of America and survival as such.

The familiar tropes used in these narratives arise from the assumption that there are survivors of the cataclysm (31). We need heroes with which to identify. Bellamy examines early post-war Post-Apocalyptic novels that work through anxieties brought about by genocide, weapons of mass destruction, and the escalating Cold War and Civil Rights Movement. They are deeply invested in how their characters navigate the new world and their location within it. The most pervasive of the tropes inaugurated in these works are: listing the remainders of the past still extant; the forming of novel communities and enclaves; and the figure of a ‘last man’ trudging through post-apocalyptic existence as a living remainder of white male privilege. Bellamy then examines the many parts of modern life which become useless in the post-apocalypse, “reduced futures” that feature what has been lost (53). This is analogous to the experience of poor nations in our current global regime of austerity measures. World-building in Post-Apocalyptic novels occurs by way of subtraction. These removals indicate the narratives’ political valence as it defamiliarises the modern world and shows us an abnormal world as the new normal. These novels imagine an end to history as a way of understanding historical change (65). Bellamy then changes tactics to analyse the practice in book publishing called “remaindering” which removes works that are not selling from the shelves and sends them back to the publisher to be destroyed for a refund. The book notes a trend of literary authors writing Post-Apocalyptic novels in recent years in order to avoid this fate and that the genre has moved from a marginal niche audience to a more general readership, especially as Young Adult fiction. Bellamy makes a cogent argument for the paradoxical moment we find ourselves in where post-apocalyptic titles proliferate, meaning that many will be remaindered, while authors are drawn to writing such narratives due to their popularity and the threat of their work being remaindered (98).

The latter half of the book examines representative texts that show how the mode’s use has expanded and adjusted to a more inclusive society while depicting and working through the decline of American power. Such texts often set the post-apocalypse as a new frontier to conquer since the

US has always been imagined as pushing against boundaries as its destiny to manifest. In novels like *The Postman* (1985) it also means restoring the nation to something like its former glory. This entails ending the capitalist accumulation by dispossession, depicted as marauding raiders, rendering its violence as anathema to communication and the circulation of goods. But the 'saviour' in these novels tends to be a neoliberal cowboy who leverages disaster to his own benefit (118). Such novels present "a contest over the collective determination of the future" or what kind of America people we want (129). Bellamy investigates the ways that racialisation determines post-apocalyptic futures. For many such narratives, this results in overt white supremacy; if melanated people exist at all they are an oppressed minority. The apocalypse has become more diverse and equitable since work by Samuel Delaney and Octavia Butler was published, who used the mode to specifically examine the role of race in society. For African slaves and displaced or murdered indigenous people, the world has been post-apocalyptic for some time. The book examines the problem of reproductive futurity and the imperative in the post-apocalypse to have children to continue the species. He begins with a discussion of the troubled, although repressed, gender politics of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), arguing that the novel "grapples with the idea of the woman as a remainder" in a masculine world of fathers and sons (155). 'The woman,' a character never named, has a conspicuous absence in the novel's narrative, disappearing so the story of the men can begin. The imperative to reproduce is also an urge to reproduce the status quo. The novel elides the role of motherhood and posits reproduction as happening from male person to male person, a literal boys' club where women are not required (169).

The book ends with an examination of the significance of motor vehicles in these narratives, or the role of the oil industry in American economics, politics, and world dominance. It employs the term "petroculture" to denote the vast cultural and economic systems that rely on and perpetuate the use of petroleum products (172). The majority of Post-Apocalypse novels use some form of energy crisis to trigger the end of the world and their narratives are a speculation about how people will react to such scarcity, revealing how petroculture structures our daily lives. This demonstrates that oil acts as more than just commodity, but like currency, exchange value itself (179). Bellamy ends this analysis of the post-apocalyptic mode by reminding us that this is all a product of settler colonialism, which caused apocalyptic changes to those encountered by colonists, and that this means we already live in a post-apocalypse, but its "effects are uneven" geographically (207). He recommends, rather than the enclave reasoning of the characters in post-apocalypse narratives that America uses, we instead learn how to work together and make a new community for all.

This book is an important revelation of how the post-apocalyptic mode is used to speculate about the remainders of American hegemony and what these narratives reveal about our current cultural and historical conjunction. It balances depth with breadth to canvass seventy years of writing and history without being too general or abstract. Any scholar of the American hegemony would benefit from reading this work, but especially those interested in the post-apocalyptic mode.

#### BIONOTE

**Ezekiel Crago** specializes in apocalyptic media and teaches at the Early College Academy in Greeley, Colorado, US.

## **FAIRY TALES OF LONDON: BRITISH URBAN FANTASY, 1840 TO THE PRESENT (2021) BY HADAS ELBER-AVIRAM**

Review by Tony Keen

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**Elber-Aviram, Hadas. *Fairy Tales of London: British Urban Fantasy, 1840 to the Present*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, 294 pp.**

For at least two hundred years, London has been the subject of tales of the fantastic and is probably the dominant city in Urban Fantasy. London achieved this position partly through its antiquity, the city's history going back nearly two thousand years to the Romans and partly through being, so to speak, in the right place at the right time; when popular culture exploded in the nineteenth century, first through the appearance of weekly serial magazines, then cheap mass-market books, and finally early cinema, London was both the biggest city in the world, its population tipping over the million mark just as the century began, and the capital of the most powerful empire on the planet. Not for nothing did H. G. Wells' Martians decide to attack England first, before turning their attention to the rest of the world.

Other cities have developed their own traditions – I think of Alan Garner's *Elidor* (1965), located in Manchester, or James Oswald's Edinburgh-set Inspector McLean novels (2012 onwards), whilst Aliette de Bodard's *Dominion of the Fallen* series (2015-2019) is merely the most prominent (in Anglophone circles) of the Parisian fantastic. But London retains a gravity in this area that has persisted despite the end of the British Empire. This phenomenon manifests itself on television still in the form of some stories of *Doctor Who*, where London remains a regular setting. It means that British (and other) authors continue to be pulled in to the city, and new London-based Urban Fantasy series seem to appear all the time.

There is wide scholarly awareness of this phenomenon. A number of institutions either have, or have had in the past, courses on the London fantastic (I myself have taught three). In 2017, 'Fantastic London: Dream, Speculation, Nightmare' was the theme of the Literary London Society's annual conference. However, actual survey volumes on the topic, as opposed to studies of single authors, are a bit thin on the ground; few scholars seem to have the ambition to pursue such a project at book length. In this context, Hadas Elber-Aviram's excellent *Fairy Tales of London*, based on her PhD from University College, London, is most welcome.

At this point, I must declare an interest. Elber-Aviram is my colleague at the University of Notre Dame's London Global Gateway, where she took over the course 'London in the Literature of

the Fantastic' from me, and I am thanked in the acknowledgements of the current volume. I cannot, therefore, be wholly unbiased in my assessment of this work.

The book traces the development of a line of London-based Urban Fantasy, beginning with Charles Dickens, proceeding through H. G. Wells, George Orwell and Mervyn Peake, and Michael Moorcock and M. John Harrison, and ending with China Miéville, Neil Gaiman, and Ben Aaronovitch. From the start, Elber-Aviram eschews traditional debates about the division between Science Fiction and Fantasy. To her, these works, whether they be Wells' alien invasion in *The War of the Worlds* (1898), or Miéville's industrialised magic in *Perdido Street Station* (2000), belong to a tradition of the London-based urban fantastic, and thus have more in common than what divides them. She contrasts this tradition with a rural Fantasy, characterised by the works of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis (but, as she argues, both traditions go back further than has often been recognised (23). Elber-Aviram draws out how these two traditions have often been in conflict with each other, with Moorcock, Harrison, and Miéville openly disdaining Tolkien, though, as she shows (for example 132), sometimes unfairly (in contrast, Gaiman manages to be a fan of both traditions; see 21).

This new way of looking at the British fantastic hangs together extremely well in Elber-Aviram's argument. She refines considerably the view of Fantasy literature that sees everything in the genre as deriving from *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955). It is also extremely refreshing to read a text that has no interest in the constantly reheated debates about Science Fiction versus Fantasy. Elber-Aviram reminds us that there are other ways of interpreting the fantastic than those traditionally employed, and that it is possible to look at the various genres of the fantastic through engaging with their commonalities rather than their differences. Elber-Aviram's means of reading the London fantastic has the potential to be as influential a model for understanding these texts as Farah Mendlesohn's approach in *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008).

All that said, Elber-Aviram is clear that this is not *the* way of interpreting the London fantastic, but merely *one* way of interpreting *some* of the texts. She herself notes the all-male nature of the writers she has selected, and that a similar (but different) work could be made out of a female tradition that included Mary Shelley, Edith Nesbit, and various writers up to J. K. Rowling – indeed, she is working on just such a book, which must be eagerly awaited (3). Other male authors are omitted because they do not quite fit the tradition she is identifying. For instance, G. K. Chesterton she considers (3-4) too reactionary to fit in with the radical urban tradition espoused by Moorcock and Miéville, who see Tolkien and Lewis (fairly or not) as representing a reactionary tradition.

Elber-Aviram writes throughout with admirable clarity, and there is little in the way of impenetrable jargon to cloud understanding. The analysis of the texts covered is extremely sound. She recognises the important role of Dickens in establishing this tradition and highlights how important a writer of the urban fantastic he is, frequently noting how her later writers responded to his work. She broadens her discussion of Dickens as a writer of the fantastic beyond *A Christmas Carol* (29-60), and also includes some of his non-fantastical writing in her discussions. This last point could, however, perhaps have been taken further; the secret London of Gaiman's *Neverwhere* (1996), for instance, owes something, in my view, to the London underclass depicted in *Oliver Twist*

(1838). In fairness, however, Elber-Aviram does note other Dickensian features of Gaiman's London setting (178).

It is in her discussion of Gaiman's *Neverwhere* (173-182) that Elber-Aviram is at her best. She demonstrates that what marks *Neverwhere* out from what went before and arguably, therefore, why it was such a game-changer in the London fantastic, is that it is the first real attempt to create a secondary world fantasy out of London, rather than, as in *A Christmas Carol*, *The War of the Worlds*, and the like, a London that is essentially our London into which the fantastic leaks. Along the way, she astutely notes that, whilst attempting to avoid romanticising homelessness, Gaiman ends up doing precisely that, making the world into which some of the homeless fall an attractive prospect (180-181).

If there are aspects of the book that disappoint, they are not to be found in what the text includes, but in what is omitted. Of course, no book can cover everything. It would require a separate volume just to detail the post-*Neverwhere* explosion seen in the work of Charlie Fletcher, Tom Pollock, Benedict Jacka, and Kate Griffin, among others. But I feel that there are some important omissions when discussing the genre's taproot texts from the nineteenth century. True, Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), whilst set in London, is really about Edinburgh, but it seems a shame that no room could be found to mention Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), a novel that spends as much time in London as it does in Transylvania, even if later adaptations sometimes forget that. Most of all, I feel the absence of a discussion of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. True, the Sherlock Holmes stories are not, save occasionally liminally, works of the fantastic. But, like Dickens, Conan Doyle influenced how *everyone* wrote about London, and that influence is felt in the London fantastic just as surely as in the London stories of Agatha Christie.

A couple of other points: The discussion of Aaronovitch's *Peter Grant* series (2011 onwards, discussed at 190-192) seems short, and could surely have benefitted from some consideration of the contemporaneous blend of the fantastic and the police procedural in Paul Cornell's *Shadow Police* novels (2012-2016). At only four pages, the index seems quite slim for a work of this length. And occasionally items cited in the text prove hard to find in the bibliography – for instance, I was unable to track down the piece “Neil Gaiman introduces *Neverwhere*” mentioned at 258 n. 100.

But these are all minor points. Taken as a whole, *Fairy Tales of London* is an excellent contribution to scholarship on Fantastic London, and any decent collection of Science Fiction criticism should have a copy. Moreover, the book is now available as a much cheaper paperback, which should enable junior scholars working in this field to acquire their own copy, albeit that it may not be quite cheap enough for the book to take its rightful place as an undergraduate textbook. Recommended.

## BIONOTE

**Tony Keen** is an Adjunct Associate Lecturer at the London Global Gateway of the University of Notre Dame, UK, where he devised a course on 'London and the literature of the fantastic.' He has written widely on Science Fiction, including the works of Chris Beckett, Justina Robson, and *Doctor Who*.



## **THE NEW WITCHES: CRITICAL ESSAYS ON 21ST CENTURY TELEVISION PORTRAYALS (2021) EDITED BY AARON K. H. HO**

Review by Chloe Campbell

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**Ho, Aaron K. H., editor. *The New Witches: Critical Essays on 21st Century Television Portrayals*. McFarland & Company, Inc., 2021. 208 pp.**

The figure of the witch continues to fascinate audiences and scholars. As *The New Witches: Critical Essays on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Television Portrayals* (2021), edited by Aaron K. H. Ho, demonstrates, witch characters and narratives of witchcraft exist in abundance in popular culture, with many notable texts emerging in the 2010s. This edited collection attends to the popularity of the witch in twenty-first-century popular culture by considering a number of serialised narratives. The thirteen essays in the collection explore witches in television and streaming series such as *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-2020), *American Horror Story: Coven* (2013-2014), *The Secret Circle* (2011-2012), *The Magicians* (2015-2020), *Emerald City* (2017), *Charmed* (2018- 2022), and *Salem* (2014-2017). The contributing authors analyse these various popular televisual narratives of witches and witchcraft by exploring how the texts engage with feminism and feminist thought, heteronormativity and LGBTQIA+ representation, ecological and environmental concerns, sexual violence and trauma, representations of disabilities, generational relationships and familial structures, and political activism. Witches have been a popular subject for television series since *Bewitched* (1964-1972) introduced American audiences to the magical suburban housewife Samantha Stephens in the mid-1960s. Since then, witches have remained popular characters in film and television but, as the collection illustrates, their popularity increased notably between 2013 and 2019 (3). The edited collection's appendix details no fewer than sixty-five television and streaming programs, most of which are produced in the United States or the United Kingdom, which graced television screens between the years 2001 and 2020, attesting to the undeniable popularity of on-screen witches in this century (203-205). Though the geographical scope is not addressed in the Introduction, the collection evidently attends solely to the witch in twenty-first-century American television. In the Introduction Ho details that, following their popularity in the 1990s, the witch was cast aside for a time in the early 2000s appearing mostly as a secondary character in vampire or supernatural shows (3). This volume expertly situates the resurgent popularity of the witch in western culture within the socio-political contexts of the #MeToo movement and the Donald Trump presidency, offering readers and audiences an insight into how the supernatural, fantasy-adjacent figure of the witch corresponds with reality.

The Introduction, titled "'That's how I like my witches': The New Witches on 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Television," adeptly attends to the project of justifying such a study of the post-millennial on-screen witch. The chapter commences with a reminder that Sabrina Spellman, protagonist of *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018-2020), seeks an avenue to both "freedom and power" (1). In drawing readers' attention to Sabrina's self-articulated desire, Ho succinctly establishes the dual concerns of many twenty-first century witch characters suggesting how this contributes to the respective texts' engagement with feminism. However, Ho is clear that this volume of essays does not presume that contemporary representations of witches are inherently progressive or feminist just because they include supernaturally empowered female and non-binary characters, and many of the essays do demonstrate how contemporary witch characters are continually managed and controlled by patriarchal characters much like their predecessors. The Introduction does not presume pre-established knowledge ensuring that the collection is accessible for readers who may not have an in-depth knowledge of, or first-hand experience watching, television and film representations of witches and their socio-political context(s). Ho acquaints readers with the on-screen witches of the twentieth century, from *Bewitched* to the original series of *Charmed*, and proceeds to explore their prevalence and immense popularity from 2013 to 2020. Considering that this collection is the first to explicitly study witches on television in this period, this introduction situates and contextualises its particular focus. Each of the thirteen essays in *The New Witches* enhances understandings of the ways in which televisual representations of witches and witchcraft engage with feminism, patriarchy, and radical female power.

The collection's first section "Intersectional Politics and History: Race, the #MeToo Movement and the Witch" includes three essays. The first is by Katherine J. Lehman, titled "'This is a reckoning': Intersectional Feminism and the #MeToo Movement in *Charmed*." Lehman's chapter contrasts the feminist sentiment present in both the original *Charmed* (1996-2006) series and the 2018 reboot, with most of the analysis focusing on the latter. The analysis is compelling in its exploration of politics and patriarchy which is grounded contextually by explorations of magical activism, revealing how real-life politics influenced the series, by exploring how the text engages with sexual assault and violence, injustice and the criminal justice system, and topical commentary on the American presidency. The following essay, Johanna Braun's "From Witchcraft Activism to Witch-Hunt Sentiments: The Changing Political Landscape in *American Horror Story*," adroitly establishes the two witch-centric seasons of *American Horror Story* as corresponding sites that are ideally poised for political interpretation. By analysing contemporaneous political rhetoric alongside those expressed by different antagonists in the different seasons, Braun demonstrates how the four-year presidential term of Trump impacted the series' representation of the witches and their respective adversaries. Brydie Kosmina's chapter "Re-Remembering the Past: Hauntological Feminist Memories of Salem in *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*" identifies the presence of the 1692-1693 Salem witch trials in the series. Using Jacques Derrida's notion of hauntology, Kosmina conducts an engrossing reading of the series and analyses how it employs potent imagery of historical persecution to consider trauma, identity, vengeance, and the potential for "imagined feminist futures" (52).

The collection's second section, titled "Good Witch, Bad Witch: Identities and Ethics," develops by considering individual characters and their actions more closely. Charity A. Fowler's

chapter "Declawing the Jungle Cat: Caging feminine Power on the CW's *The Secret Circle*" evidences how the CW Television Network's adaptation of L. J. Smith's *The Secret Circle* book series relegates the second-wave feminism that is central to the original material, erasing the narrative's subversive and queer elements to instead focus more on hegemonic postfeminist concerns. The following essay, "The Witches of the West and the Boundaries of Goodness" by Lindsey Mantoan, considers a number of texts that draw from Frank L. Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900). In doing so, Mantoan charts the various cultural attempts that have been made to rehabilitate and redeem the antagonistic Wicked Witch of the West, offering analysis of underexplored series such as *Emerald City* (2016-2017). The section concludes with Emily Brick's "'When witches don't fight, we burn!' Monstrosity and Violence in *American Horror Story: Coven*." This essay employs Barbara Creed's theory of The Monstrous-Feminine, and Brick explores how the popular series utilises witchcraft to consider gender and monstrosity from multiple perspectives. Brick's precise analysis is multi-faceted and attentive to how the narrative subverts notions of femininity and masculinity by evaluating how the witch characters engage in sadistic and fetishist behaviours.

The collection's third section, "The Witchy Body: Sexualities and Disabilities," directs attention to interpersonal relationships, sexual and gendered violence, and the embodied experience of witches on screen. In "Condensing the Palate: Queer Representation and Heteronormativity in *Charmed*," Samuel Naimi determines the ways that *Charmed* (2018-2022) obscures and eradicates crucial elements of the series' primary lesbian relationship by adopting an assimilative approach that seems primarily concerned with heteronormative relationship models. Additionally, Naimi indicates how these strategies damage queer representation in twenty-first century television. In perhaps the most unexpected essay in the collection, Tanner Alan Sebastian reconciles sadomasochism with accounts of violence in the Salem witch trials and how this relates to the violence represented in *Salem* (2014-2017). Such an unconventional and prodigious reading of both the trial testimony and the television narrative leads readers to appreciate how these accounts observe and perpetuate the eroticisation of power dynamics between women. Through close reading, Sebastian emphasises the dual roles that marginalisation and sadism play in the witch trial-centric narratives. Continuing the theme of witches and gendered violence, in "Teenage Furies: The Rape-Revenge Genre in *American Horror Story: Coven*" Christine R. Payson astutely discusses how the young witches in the series both confront and engage in rape and sexual violence. Payson positions *Coven* in conversation with rape-revenge films such as *Last House on the Left* (1972) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), which results in fascinating parallels and promotes consideration into the potential for witches (as women with radical and extraordinary abilities) to avenge themselves and protect others. Ho's chapter, "Witches with Disabilities on 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Television Programs," poses a series of important questions prompting the reader to reflect on how disability is portrayed in a number of Fantasy and witch-centric narratives. Ho's suggestions to showrunners on how to navigate issues of representation ensure that this chapter is valuable reading and his commentary on how apocalypse narratives often allow for, or create, spectacles of disabled bodies is especially thought-provoking. The chapter analyses how certain popular witch characters correspond with stereotypes of the wise disabled, while exploring how witches with disabilities provide their communities with valuable power and insight.

The collection's final section, "Disembodiment of the Witch: Ecofeminism, Digital Humanities and Beyond Blood," considers the witch, their community, and sphere of influence. In "The Literal and the Metaphorical: Othered Voices in *Salem*," Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns focuses on how the series associates femininity with wilderness in this ecofeminist reading of how the witch is imagined as antithetical to patriarchy and civilised culture. The democratisation of both knowledge and magic is explored in Natalie R. Sheppard's chapter "'The world never did help a smart girl': Disembodies Digitalization, the Open Access Library and BuzzFeed in *The Magicians*." In Sheppard's reading of the series, the witch characters challenge patriarchal structures and revolutionise access to magical knowledge, effectively demonstrating how magical women figures harness, and act upon, their extraordinary potential to challenge elitist, discriminatory institutions and ideologies. The collection's final essay is Alissa Burger's "Beyond Blood: The Negotiation of Biological and Chosen Families in *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*." Burger diligently addresses each family unit in the series to illustrate how they confront the patriarchal order and invalidate traditional notions of the American nuclear family. Such an exercise highlights the subversive potential that diverse families can employ in Fantasy-adjacent narratives.

One limitation of *The New Witches* is that the thirteen essays collectively consider six primary texts, with most of the essays weighted towards *Sabrina* and *American Horror Story*. Though this attests to the popularity of those two series, other essays could have explored popular witch series such as *A Discovery of Witches* (2018-2022), *Good Witch* (2015-2021), *Witches of East End* (2013-2014), *Britannia* (2018-2021), and *Luna Nera* (2020). The strengths of the collection far outweigh any limitations of scope. The four sections of the volume persuasively unite and contrast the various analyses, providing readers with larger overarching frameworks in which to consider the individual chapters. Fowler's chapter provides a fascinating insight into *The Secret Circle*, a text that had not previously received significant scholarly attention. Similarly, Brick's engagement with "The Monstrous-Masculine" will interest scholars concerned with gender and monstrosity, while Sebastian's chapter offers an innovative approach in interpreting the witch in culture.

Readers of Owen Davies' *The Oxford Illustrated History of Witchcraft & Magic* (2017), Pam Grossman's *Waking the Witch: Reflections on Women, Magic, and Power* (2019), and Heather Greene's encyclopaedic *Lights, Camera, Witchcraft: A Critical History of Witches in American Film and Television* (2021) will enjoy this volume of essays about the contemporary on-screen witch. The collection is accessible enough for undergraduate and postgraduate students and it is suitably attentive for scholars who are interested in representations of witches and supernatural characters. *The New Witches* is an essential read for those who are interested in the figure of the witch and those who are curious as to how the witch continues to influence narratives and captivate audiences.

## BIONOTE

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## **POST-APARTHEID GOTHIC: WHITE SOUTH AFRICAN WRITERS AND SPACE (2021) BY MÉLANIE JOSEPH-VILAIN**

Review by Madelyn Marie Schoonover

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**Joseph-Vilain, Mélanie. *Post-Apartheid Gothic: White South African Writers and Space*. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2021, 258 pp.**

*Post-Apartheid Gothic* (2021) seeks to address the relevance of different physical spaces in post-apartheid South Africa and their Gothic constructions in fictional works by white South African authors. In doing so, Mélanie Joseph-Vilain aims to demonstrate the anxieties of identity for white subjects in the post-Apartheid state. Joseph-Vilain explores spaces familiar to many Gothic scholars but in specific South African contexts. For example, the home is distinctively the rural platteland of the South African *plaasroman* and semi-desert Karoo region, while the urban cities of Johannesburg and Cape Town contrast this natural space. Joseph-Vilain also explores what she terms a “non-place,” drawing on Georges Didi-Huberman’s examination of “the complex relationships among place, time, and haunting” (194). Joseph-Vilain allocates each of the above spaces a chapter, using twenty-first-century texts such as the works of Lynn Freed and Henrietta Rose-Innes; Damon Galgut’s *The Imposter* (2008); André Brink’s *Devil’s Valley* (1998); Justin Cartwright’s *White Lightning* (2002) and *Up Against the Night* (2015); Lauren Beukes’ *Zoo City* (2010) and *Moxyland* (2008), Margie Orford’s *Like Clockwork* (2006); the crime fiction of Mike Nicol; and Deon Meyer’s *Fevre* (2017). The book uses this extensive selection of texts to demonstrate the Gothicisation of particular spaces and the anxieties of identity for white South Africans when the memory of Apartheid is repressed but still present.

The last chapter, and its concept of the “non-place,” shows exciting potential regarding the critical overlap of Gothic and Speculative Fiction. Unfortunately, Joseph-Vilain spends so much time proving that the texts she explores ‘are Gothic’ and that a character’s subjectivity influences their perception of space and time – what one might consider a given truism of fiction at this point – that Joseph-Vilain’s argument fails to do much meaningful work about *why these observations might be important*. As such, while Joseph-Vilain offers insight into their chosen texts, the analysis is often cursory and lacks the depth one would hope to find in literary criticism.

To foreground my criticism of this book, one must understand how post- and, more recently, decolonial criticism functions when paired with Horror or Gothic studies. Crucial to arguing how any text ‘is Gothic’ in a post- or decolonial context is understanding how the author and/or character’s position shapes a given work; what is horrific or transgressive, to who, and why? When examining



literature written by colonisers (or their descendants) in colonised spaces, these answers are rooted in race due to the colonial paradigm, which for colonisers often has strong links to Enlightenment philosophy and the Cartesian binary.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the examination of the colonial paradigm in colonial literature and the foundations of the Gothic share preoccupations with dividing mind and body, the interior and exterior. For scholars of the colonial or post-colonial Gothic, explaining the specific tools of colonisation – the *specifics* of how the colonial state carries out economic and social repression based on race/religion/blood – and referring to these tools in all other discussions or analysis is paramount. Thus, critical works about Gothic colonial spaces need to account for how the colonial paradigm perpetuates or undermines itself through horror and/or terror. This is, I believe, the ethical as well as the scholarly bedrock of colonial Gothic criticism. Therefore, it is difficult to comprehend why a monograph about white writers in a colonised space claims to participate in post-colonial Gothic scholarship when there is a minimal critical engagement with how a white character's subject position *is a colonial one*, altering this monograph's engagement with sources of horror and fear.

While Joseph-Vilain foregrounds identity as a focal point of the book, her analysis lacks specific details about the material space of post-Apartheid South Africa that would have elevated the textual analysis. Except for a few sentences or footnotes, the book's methodology focuses solely on the fact that the policy of segregation ended with Apartheid, ignoring the existence of other Apartheid-era policies as well as segregation's historic role in the overall machine of the Apartheid state. This downplays the entire weight and number of Apartheid atrocities and their impact on the social, political, or economic fabric of South Africa and, therefore, the white South African psyche. The absent context leads to confusion and means that, while Joseph-Vilain certainly centres her focus on white writers, the significance of *their whiteness and what that means for the people around them who may or may not be white* is unexplored. For example, after a lengthy examination of how multiple white women protagonists in Lynn Freed's works feel unsettled in multiple potential 'homely' spaces and how this relates to Freed's own choice to leave South Africa, Joseph-Vilain writes that in Freed's *The Servant's Quarters* (2009), "[t]he servants, for instance, are all rather similar and often fulfil the same function; considered as members of the family, which is not without posing a number of ethical and political problems in novels written by a white South African writer, they usually provide a form of comic relief" (38). Beyond the acknowledgement that "problems" exist, Joseph-Vilain does not elaborate on what might constitute these ethical and political problems. Furthermore, because of this surface-level glance at the (black?) servants, any potential subversive reading of their existence in the text is unacknowledged. Are the narrators perhaps purposefully unreliable in their mental construction of black servant characters? Is there any nuance to this depiction? In leaving this avenue under-acknowledged and unexplored, Joseph-Vilain negates a deeper reading of how the text reflects – or does not reflect – the colonial paradigm that race and identity *as defined by the colonial state* are and were a tool of violence in South Africa.

Additionally, because of the indiscriminate way Joseph-Vilain deploys critical terms such as "Gothic" and "monstrosity," it is not always apparent how Joseph-Vilain is engaging with the scholarly debates of Gothic studies and how loaded these terms can be depending on the context in which they are used. Although Joseph-Vilain claims in a footnote to have "consistently" (143) defined

what she means by “Gothic,” her use of the term is anything but, deploying Gothic as a genre and as a mode where it suits her analysis and often brings in examples of early British Gothic works to explore concepts like the uncanny in South African fiction of the twenty-first century. Missing from Joseph-Vilain’s bibliography are also foundational works in female Gothic studies and post-colonial Gothic studies that would have turned pages of Joseph-Vilain’s argument into footnotes, such as *Art of Darkness* (1995) by Anne Williams or *Imperial Leather* (1994) by Anne McClintock. The book’s sources for what constitutes twenty-first-century Gothic demonstrate a lack of in-depth research and analysis and would have benefited from referencing up-to-date scholarship in the field, such as *The American Imperial Gothic* (2014) by Johan Höglund or Neil Lazarus’ *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011).

Subsequently, Joseph-Vilain’s exploration of monstrosity as Gothic often results in broad claims that detract from the monster’s unique function in their specific South African context. In the final chapter, while examining the character Kendra in Beukes’ *Moxyland*, Joseph-Vilain claims: “Gothic monstrosity is about reaffirming boundaries. The monster is the one who helps reaffirm boundaries in a given cultural system, particularly in the contexts of cultural change” (209). This conception of the monster as the double and as *specifically reinforcing boundaries* demonstrates how Joseph-Vilain utilises an exclusively Freudian lens rather than drawing on more recent Gothic criticism such as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s *Monster Theory* (1994) which would more effectively highlight the complexities of monstrosity as a mechanism for horror. Instead, Joseph-Vilain offers a formulaic description of Gothic monstrosity: that ‘X character is a double for Y, which is Gothic, and which destabilises Y’s identity.’ This definition of Gothic monstrosity would have also benefited from a comparative analysis with non-Gothic scholarly works like Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) to highlight the nuances of subjecthood and monstrosity in post-colonial contexts. In another example, Joseph-Vilain focuses on a different Gothic trope of the ghost, summarised by her observation that “Kendra’s posthuman identity raises disturbing questions about the boundaries of the individual, the boundaries between nature and technology, but also about artistic creation and social boundaries” (207). In offering only passive acknowledgements that these “social boundaries” in urban spaces and boundaries of “artistic creation” are entangled with issues of race, Joseph-Vilain’s core theme of identity lacks depth. While Joseph-Vilain technically points out that Gothic tropes such as the double, the monster, and the ghost are common methods for destabilising identity in Gothic literature, this is more a given of Gothic criticism at this point. The reader is left questioning why such tropes are important for a South African context.

The result of leaving the intricacies of contemporary Gothic studies unexplored is that Joseph-Vilain’s articulation of how her research fits into existing critical work remains unclear. This issue was apparent within the first chapter when Joseph-Vilain attempts to critique Rebecca Duncan’s *South African Gothic: Anxiety and Creative Dissent in the Post-apartheid Imagination and Beyond* (2018). She states, “[Duncan] considers Gothic only those novels that explicitly stage horror, particularly body horror,” which is a complete misunderstanding of Duncan’s work (19). Duncan does not deny the existence of non-body-horror-focused texts as South African Gothic but rather uses body horror to ground her argument and bring depth and focus to her analysis. Considering that

Joseph-Vilain's argument regarding post-Apartheid space is often broad and lacks focus, the irony of her critique of Duncan is difficult to miss. Furthermore, Joseph-Vilain claims that Duncan's *South African Gothic* tries "to assess the specificities of post-transitional literature, while my contention is, rather, that post-apartheid literature still explores the wounds left by colonization and apartheid" (19). Having read and reviewed Duncan's *South African Gothic* and used it in my own analysis of decolonial literature in the United States, I question this claim's logic; Duncan also argues that post-Apartheid literature is riddled with themes of trauma concerning colonisation and Apartheid. In fact, in her analysis of Beukes' fictional Johannesburg in *Zoo City*, Joseph-Vilain frequently cites Duncan's work regarding the subterranean nature of the city and how it is a reference both to the hidden memory of Apartheid and to the colonial history of extrapolation of resources through mining.

All these multiple breakdowns of context, close reading, and critical reflection are doubly confusing in a work that claims *place* and *identity* are key to understanding white writers in South Africa after, as Joseph-Vilain frequently calls it, "the demise" of Apartheid (149). The lack of focus or depth, unfortunately, makes it difficult to identify who would benefit from using this book in their own analysis. Deconstructing the complexities of whiteness and place in South Africa is a worthy and necessary endeavour, but the text does not do this with enough critical strength and specificity to set it apart from existing criticism. Though some of the work, particularly the work Joseph-Vilain does regarding the deconstruction of the pastoral space of the Karoo, is well-grounded in existing criticism in contrast to her work with Gothic and monstrosity, Duncan's *South African Gothic* frequently does a much more thorough job of explaining similar concepts. Similarly, while the final chapter on the "non-place" is very thought-provoking with its statement that "space becomes place and acquires meaning when it is haunted; this is [...] the genius of the non-place," not enough is done with such an interesting thought to recommend the chapter – or book – as a whole for exploration of the idea (194). Therefore, while *Post-Apartheid Gothic* touches upon the critical possibilities for examining white identity in colonised spaces, it also clearly demonstrates the need for rigorous and specific methodology when discussing colonisation and its impacts.

## NOTES

1. See Walter D. Mignolo "The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference." *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 101, no. 1, 2002, pp. 57-96; Anibal Quijano. "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America." *Nepantla: Views from the South*, vol. 1, no. 3, 2000, pp. 533-580; Andrew Smith and William Hughes. "Introduction." *Empire and the Gothic: The Politics of Genre*. Edited by Andrew Smith and William Hughes, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, pp. 1-12.

## BIONOTE

**Madelyn Marie Schoonover** holds an MLitt in the Gothic Imagination and PhD from the University of Stirling, United Kingdom. She studies erasure and depictions of Indigenous Americans in contemporary Euro-American and Indigenous Gothic fiction, focusing on Euro-American Imperial Gothic, decolonial studies, masculinity studies, and eco-Gothic.

## **CYBERPUNK CULTURE AND PSYCHOLOGY: SEEING THROUGH THE MIRRORSHADES (2021) BY ANNA MCFARLANE**

Review by Esko Suoranta

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**McFarlane, Anna. *Cyberpunk Culture and Psychology: Seeing Through the Mirrorshades*. Routledge, 2021, 168 pp.**

Having reviewed several scholarly works that tackle, more or less, William Gibson's full oeuvre, let me begin by saying that Anna McFarlane's recent volume *Cyberpunk Culture and Psychology: Seeing Through the Mirrorshades* (2021) is a stellar accomplishment in studies on the 'godfather' of Cyberpunk. The book emerges from McFarlane's PhD work and her continued engagement with Gibson, building toward understanding his writing, as well as cyberpunk culture more generally, as connecting visual culture and the posthuman via a gestalt approach. In so doing, McFarlane argues for a project of gestalt literary criticism as a way of understanding the tensions inherent in Gibson's fiction and Cyberpunk at large. For McFarlane, gestalt literary criticism represents "the nature of science fiction and cyberpunk as interface literatures, literatures which bridge the gap between the arts and the sciences, between the human and the non-human," coexisting facets emerging when appraised from a gestalt perspective that does not privilege one over the other (6).

Dealing mostly with Gibson's novels, with some reference to his short stories and other contributions to Science Fiction since the early 1980s, McFarlane addresses all of Gibson's solo-authored major works to date, up to and including his most recent novel *Agency* (2020). Her gestalt psychology approach to reading Gibson charts and explains central trajectories and developments through his career, such as the author's shift from the original imaginings of cyberspace that privileged the visual to his current interest in the haptic, which are convincingly laid out. Through McFarlane's account, motifs of touching and being touched upon by systems that influence our experience of the world are revealed to be central to Gibson's contemporary speculative futures.

One of the strengths that sets the book apart from some earlier forays into covering Gibson's career is McFarlane's choice of emphasis. In seven chapters and an introduction, she goes through Gibson's novels in traditional, chronological order, but dedicates only a collective chapter to both the three *Sprawl* novels (1984-1988) and the *Bridge* trilogy (1993-1999). In contrast, the novels of the *Blue Ant*, or *Bigend*, trilogy (2003-2010) are each treated in their own chapters, as are Gibson's latest two novels *The Peripheral* (2014) and *Agency*. This move sidesteps the canonicity bias which is often evident in contemporary Gibson studies. *Neuromancer* particularly keeps hogging much of the critical attention as the foundational Cyberpunk text while less in-depth analysis is reserved for

Gibson's later works. McFarlane is thus one of the few Science Fiction scholars to have engaged with the Blue Ant trilogy in its entirety and at any depth since its completion in 2010, which is especially laudable as several volumes on Gibson have been published since then – Henthorne (2011), Westfahl (2013), Miller (2016), and Murray and Nilges (2020) come readily to mind. Furthermore, one must emphasise that McFarlane is one of the first to offer an extended critical account of *Agency*, even dealing carefully with the novel's shortcomings. Highlights include McFarlane's reading of the novel's conclusion – and whether it should be read fully in earnest – as well as its representation of race and artificial intelligence.

Each chapter approaches its primary subject matter through a different concept which provides mileage for McFarlane's critical interpretations. By drawing from autopoiesis and chaos in early Gibson to psychoanalysis, the parallax view, and the haptic in his later works, McFarlane argues for a gestalt understanding of both the author and Cyberpunk in general. By seeing the different ways in which Gibson's works engender gestalt shifts for his readers, and how different interpretations become available through such perspectival changes, McFarlane centres the role of different modes of perception in Gibson's works. For example, while thought experiments on enhanced and extended perception remain central throughout his novels, the inescapable visuality of the *Sprawl* trilogy transforms into a focused treatment of haptics, the dimension of touch, by *The Peripheral*.

As I hope my admiration for McFarlane's work, and the pleasure I derived from reading *Cyberpunk Culture and Psychology*, is now established, there is a two-pronged criticism I wish still to mount in this review. The first prong touches upon the title of the book which, to me, is somewhat misleading as both "gestalt" and "Gibson" could have warranted a place in the title (my guess being that the publisher might have had their hand in the final choice). Even when McFarlane connects her approach, and the project for gestalt literary studies, to cyberpunk at large this is still very much a book in Gibson studies. The tight focus of the chapters plays into this effect, and even if there are some comparative readings between, for example, Henry James and Gibson, the connections to the overall phenomena of Cyberpunk remain somewhat limited, mostly gestured at in the introduction and the concluding sub-chapter. It might be that the volume would have benefited from one more chapter for a more in-depth conclusion, especially as it is in no way too long. Furthermore, the choice of the stock Cyberpunk figure of mirrorshades and the metaphor of seeing through them also works against the ethos of the book. One of McFarlane's central points is the embodied nature of perception and the multisensory ventures evident in Gibson's writing. Therefore, in a sense, the title of the book both casts its scope too wide and unnecessarily narrows it at the same time.

The second prong of my criticism picks on the different conceptual frameworks McFarlane mounts to motivate her analysis of Gibson's novels. To offer full disclosure, my biased assumption is that an approach grounded in, for example, cognitive narratology or N. Katherine Hayles' recent accounts of cognitive assembling could have offered an alternative, and at times more contemporary, theoretical base for much of the readings. It is, of course, possible to disagree fruitfully on this, and it would be unfair of me to assume that my preferred theoretical background

would have been readily available for another scholar. That said, however, the concept of autopoiesis deserves scrutiny as McFarlane's handles it. She sees autopoiesis, or the self-generative impulse of organisms, as a concept that reveals interesting dynamics especially in Gibson's *Sprawl* trilogy, but also beyond. For example, the megacorporations and artificial intelligences (AI) populating the novels are seen to make themselves into being in an autopoietic fashion. In her treatment of the concept, McFarlane disregards the second condition inherent to autopoiesis: that in addition to self-production by taking advantage of their environments, organisms must also realise self-distinction, that is, to resist dissolving into those same environments, maintaining boundaries against them. In so doing, McFarlane misses out on further insight into the *Sprawl* trilogy and some connections to Gibson's work overall. One might argue, for example, that while the corporations and AI engage in autopoietic processes to define themselves, they approach the threat of dissolution into the systems in which they are embedded very differently. In the case of the megacorporations, they maintain corporate identities marked by branding, distinguishing themselves from other similar beings and guard their integrity through elaborate legal and business arrangements. For the AI, the response is even more interesting, as *Neuromancer* and *Wintermute* ultimately give in to the drive to become one with their environment: they join together and become one with the totality of cyberspace, inseparable and unperceivable from the environment they previously roamed as individual entities – they relinquish autopoiesis altogether. As McFarlane also conducts character-analysis through the concept of autopoiesis, the struggles of Gibson's characters in capitalist environments bent on the dissolution of agency and difference could have been further illuminated through explicitly discussing the self-distinction condition of autopoiesis throughout the volume.

Still, the strengths of McFarlane's argument especially come to the fore when she shows the robustness of her approaches, has them resonate with the work of other critics, and as she builds on the work of others who have studied Gibson. I, for one and from a very different theoretical standpoint, have made similar arguments to McFarlane's on how Gibson's characters cannot escape the systems that constitute and exploit them, but seek agency within them nonetheless. McFarlane also skilfully and concisely develops the findings of Jaak Tomberg and Neil Easterbrook, on Gibson's style registering simultaneously as science-fictional and realist as well as the seeming struggles he has in concluding his novels and trilogies, respectively.

As such, *Cyberpunk Culture and Psychology* is a much-needed addition to the ongoing interrogation of Gibson as a still-publishing author whose career spans five decades. It is recommended reading both to seasoned Science Fiction studies veterans and Gibson aficionados, but also to students beginning their explorations of the author's work. McFarlane writes in a very approachable academic style and excels at critical reading that strikes a balance between attention to detail and overarching themes and conceptualisations. While it does not address Gibson's contributions to other Cyberpunk culture media (which other collections have engaged with, at least to an extent), as a study into his literary significance, style, ethos, and even shortcomings the volume promises to become a founding stone for future endeavours into his work. From McFarlane's study, Gibson emerges as both a canonical author of Cyberpunk fiction as well as a writer refining the field of science-fictional contemporary literature.

**BIONOTE**

**Esko Suoranta** is about to finish his doctorate at the Department of Languages, University of Helsinki and works as a researcher in the Kone Foundation funded project “Imagine, democracy!” at Tampere University. His forthcoming dissertation is called *The Sky Above the Port Was the Color of Capitalism: Literary Affordance and Technonaturalist Speculative Fiction*. He has published on William Gibson’s contemporary novels, Malka Older and Dave Eggers, utopian/dystopian dynamics in Thomas Pynchon’s *Bleeding Edge*, as well as pants science in Cyberpunk. Esko co-edited the World Fantasy Award winner *Fafnir – Nordic Journal of Science Fiction and Fantasy Research* between 2019-2022.



## **THE GOTHIC NOVEL IN IRELAND C. 1760 – 1829 (2018) BY CHRISTINA MORIN**

Review by Kyle Brett

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**Morin, Christina. *The Gothic Novel in Ireland c. 1760 – 1829*. Manchester University Press, 2018. 228pp.**

Christina Morin's *The Gothic Novel in Ireland* (2018) charts new territory in the field of Gothic and literary studies by actively challenging the myopic view of what we call Gothic and Irish literature. *The Gothic Novel in Ireland* combines well-honed close readings of Irish texts spanning from the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries with distanced reading practices which favour literary empiricism to carve out a space for reinvention of both 'Irish Gothic' and the 'Gothic Novel.'<sup>1</sup> Morin provides readers not only with a compelling reorganisation of the field, but also a reclamation of an often-maligned literary practice of distanced reading. *The Gothic Novel in Ireland* is a much needed, well-researched, and highly important piece of new criticism that scholars should celebrate for its clarity and its impact on literary history.

Morin's text is comprised of four central chapters, each focused on a specific argument concerning the qualities we use to describe both 'Gothic' and the 'Irish Gothic.' These temporal, generic, geographic, and material descriptors are ultimately far from what contemporary readers and authors of eighteenth and nineteenth-century fiction understood and thus limit our current understanding of what can be called 'Irish' and 'Gothic.' Chapter One focuses on the "competing connotations of the term gothic" in popular culture which "very few" writers adopted when promoting or describing their work (27). Using Thomas Leland's understudied *Longsword, Earl of Salisbury* (1762) as a starting point, Morin traces how both the historical novels and the history of 'Gothic', as we defined it off Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), were not unified in their understanding of the Gothic past and what it could and could not represent. In Chapter Two Morin then interrogates how writers within the period described their own work in terms of genre from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Morin links the works of Irish Romanticism, which critics often associate as being "dominated by regional, national, and historical literary forms that rose to prominence" in 1801, to the long history of the Gothic (15). Ultimately, Morin contends that these nineteenth-century genres "virtually co-existed" with the Gothic (16). In Chapter Three, Morin turns to examine the geographies of the "Gothic" and "Irish Gothic" to challenge "our assumption that contemporary English gothic literature almost universally deploys Catholic Continental locals" (115). Using texts from Fuller, Milliken, and Selden as evidence, Morin underscores that Irish writers frequently rejected such continental settings "traditionally associated with gothic fiction" to describe English settings "as equally dangerous as foreign climes" (118). Doing so resituates the

Irish landscape away from just representing barbarity or Celtic otherness. The final chapter focuses on the Minerva Press and Regina Maria Roche's literary reach and modes of production to showcase how readers and authors built ideological and literary networks to best understand their place and participation in a global marketplace forming around them (158-159). Ultimately, this final chapter argues that Irish print culture remained more than an afterthought in the minds of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century readers; instead, such fiction formed the backbone of these readers' understanding of the literary world.

Both Morin's clarity and her thoughtful organisation allow readers to trace the complicated print history of Ireland without feeling stressed by the magnitude of the project. The chapters blend with each one building to the more abstract Moretti-inspired work that concludes the text. Instead of jumping into the maps, figures, and data points, Morin remains disciplined and firmly rooted in carrying her readers into deeper theory and distanced reading practice. *The Gothic Novel in Ireland* does not evangelize only literary data to readers. Instead, Morin conducts her close readings of works like Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and Leland's *Longsword* into a crescendo of literary history and print culture-detective-work in its broader analysis of the Minerva Press and its publications. The scope of Morin's work alone is astonishing for any scholar of literary history, as is her ability to guide readers along this sixty-nine-year history coherently.

I truly appreciate the focused interrogation of the more traditional elements of what we may typically expect from Gothic novels in Morin's work. Such an organisation allows Morin to not only challenge the Gothic label, but also advocate for the inclusion of a more expansive definition of both 'Gothic' and the 'Irish Gothic.' Her chapters push back against the traditional tendency to place what we study in tidy and separate generic boxes. Yet, to only view Morin's argument in this way is missing the anticolonial work she attempts in each chapter. By first deconstructing the temporal, generic, geographic, and material qualities of supposed Gothic texts, Morin can more easily focus on the exclusion of texts outside of the traditional English Gothic realm. While this book is focused on making the case for the inclusion of Irish texts, one could easily see how this model could be applied to other texts from within and outside of the English empire. The circulation of print in the eighteenth and nineteenth century was a transnational phenomenon that often muddied the national and geographic boundaries we use to make sense of the historical periods of our choosing today.

While I found the work in the first two chapters engaging and immaculately researched, I really believe that the final two chapters of *The Gothic Novel in Ireland* showcase the impact of Morin's methodology. In both "Gothic Geographies" and "Gothic Materialities," Morin revives the often-maligned practice of distant reading coined by Franco Moretti.<sup>2</sup> Moretti often eschewed the individual examination of certain authors and texts. Instead, Moretti challenges us to aggregate large swathes of literary data, crunch numbers, and make figures, graphs, and maps that help bring more empiricism to our conclusions. Most exciting about Morin's brand of distant reading is her ability to temper Moretti's quantification to suit her argument for the "dismantling of the restrictive, largely artificial, formal, and generic categorisations" in our understanding of what counts for both

Irish and Gothic literature (11). Her figures, graphs, and maps showcase the sheer number of literary texts lost to history by our narrow conceptions of the field. By using Moretti's distant reading in this way, *The Gothic Novel in Ireland* literally shows us the sheer volume of texts and authors we've overlooked, with her appendix forming a "working bibliography" of Irish Gothic fiction for further research (201).

The only figure I found a bit wanting was the heatmap of reprinting and circulation of Regina Maria Roche's texts (166). This figure highlights the reach of Roche's work internationally, showcasing density in larger geographic regions. While intriguing, the visualisation left me wanting more of a deep dive into some of these hotspots to really understand the networks represented in the map. For instance, we see that Roche's work was reprinted up and down the Northeast Coast of the United States, but we do not get a sense of where those happened specifically. My grumbling here is slight to be sure. The fact that I want to explore these networks more completely is precisely the challenge Morin asks of us.

*The Gothic Novel in Ireland* is a powerful display of the reparative work contemporary critics must do to further our understanding of the literary periods we study. As such, I would recommend Morin's work to any scholar who has an interest in the Gothic or literary history. For graduate students and early career scholars, I find that Morin's text is an exemplary display of critical focus and organisation. What is most admirable in Morin's work is the set of doors she leaves open for future exploration. Morin concludes her text with lengthy bibliography of primary and secondary texts and, more importantly a working appendix of Irish fiction spanning from 1760-1829. Certainly, there is more buried in the annals of eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth century literature that this book does not cover. However, this volume clearly demonstrates not only that this material exists but also how it can be approached and so should be considered wildly successful.

## NOTES

1. Morin insists that these terms should be offset in inverted commas. The inverted comma places, she argues, a frame around these terms which draws our attention to the history of these terms as modern critical inventions.
2. I should note that Franco Moretti's alleged sexual abuse of a student at UC Berkely also paints my reaction to his work.

## BIONOTE

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# **THE SCIENCE OF LIFE AND DEATH IN FRANKENSTEIN (2021) BY SHARON RUSTON**

Review by Ruth-Anne Walbank

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**Ruston, Sharon. *The Science of Life and Death in Frankenstein*. Bodleian Library Publishing, 2021. 152 pp.**

From the numerous film adaptations to the supermarket Halloween costumes, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a culturally pervasive text from which it is difficult to escape an encounter. Academic scholarship reflects this influence, with countless articles, monographs, and study guides published on Shelley's famous novel each year. However, while one might consider this a saturated area of literary criticism, Sharon Ruston's *The Science of Life and Death in Frankenstein* (2021) makes a truly original contribution to Frankensteinian discourse. Ruston thoroughly examines how the scientific and medical debates prevalent in the Romantic period influenced Shelley's iconic creation, ranging from figureheads like Humphry Davy to John Abernethy and Joseph Priestly.

The key scientific debate for Shelley, Ruston argues, was the different elements in contention for the "vital principle," that "'something' added to the material body, which made it move and live" (81). Ruston interweaves a historical evaluation of scientific and medical thought on "what life was and how living bodies differed from dead ones" in eighteenth and nineteenth-century public forums into their literary analysis of Victor's creation process in *Frankenstein*), demonstrating how Shelley used her knowledge of scientific discourse to create what is often called the first Science Fiction novel (81). More than that, Ruston articulates how Shelley intricately stitched the competing theories on life and death into the fabric of her novel, exploiting "the uncertainty caused by the new scientific and medical ideas [...] to produce [a] disquiet and unease" that continues to impact readers in the twenty-first century (3).

The introduction and first chapter begin with an overview of "Life and Death in Romantic Literature," including biographic and historical context to foreground Shelley's familiarity with these central themes. Ruston's carefully formulated rationale is clear and precise, reasoning their decisions in calling Frankenstein's creation "the Creature" as a less biased and "more positive [term] than 'Monster'" and their focus on the 1818 edition of *Frankenstein* as this version "focuses on the contemporaneous scientific explorations of life and death" compared to the 1832 edition, which reconfigured these themes through a Gothic lens (16, 17). These opening sections also consider other Romantic writers and their contemplations on life and death, such as Anna Barbauld's attempt to establish which innate rights living beings possessed in "The Mouse's Petition" (1792), the constitution of life and death in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

(1798), and the dangers of gaining illicit knowledge about life/death in Lord Byron's *Manfred* (1817). Coupled with the historical backdrop of The Royal Humane Society's foundation in 1787 and both Mary and her husband Percy's intimate knowledge of the latest scientific discoveries in their journals, Ruston provides a convincing argument for the intersections of science, poetry, and fiction in the Romantic period.

Having established *Frankenstein's* place among Romantic re-imaginings of scientific and medical debates, Ruston analyses the first contender for the source of life, "Vital Air." The book follows a pattern of introducing a new scientific discovery concerning life and death in the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, illustrating its influence in art and literature before demonstrating Shelley's familiarity with the concept by comparing this discovery to its representation in *Frankenstein*. In this segment, Ruston highlights that oxygen, called vital air at the time, was discovered within three decades of Shelley's publication. While twenty-first-century readers may take for granted knowledge of photosynthesis and resuscitation procedures like cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), Ruston considers how these new developments influenced Shelley's conception of *Frankenstein*, placing a high value on air quality as that vital element that could restore and heal.

While the thought of electricity in *Frankenstein* might bring to mind Colin Clive exclaiming, "It's alive!" in James Whale's 1931 film adaptation, chapter three, "Electric Life," reveals how Shelley embeds ideas on electricity as a contender for the vital principle into her novel. Despite the repeated association of the Creature's creation with thunderstorms, Ruston reminds readers that there is "no explicit mention of the use of electricity in the creation scene, [but] there are tantalizing references [...] to a vital 'spark' throughout" (62). Instead, Ruston argues that Shelley intentionally drew on scientific debates that would terrify her audience, specifically that these discoveries could hold the power of resurrecting or extending life. The astonishing level of Ruston's analysis is evident, pinpointing Victor's use of specific phrases from the writings of scientists like Giovanni Aldini in the novel, foregrounding Shelley's detailed familiarity with electrochemistry and other new sciences.

The fourth chapter, "The Vital Principle," further emphasises the influence of prominent medical and scientific thinkers on Shelley's work, notably the very public debate between the surgeons John Abernethy and William Lawrence. Just as two celebrities arguing on social media would attract audiences today, Ruston illustrates how the contention between Abernethy and Lawrence was openly controversial, drawing the media's attention and resulting in censorship of Lawrence's "radical" publication (105). Abernethy emphasised electricity in his theory as that additional 'something' added to the body to create life. Meanwhile, Lawrence saw vitality as a summation of the body's functions in one organised system, an opinion too closely related to materialism for nineteenth-century Britain's conservative audience. Adding further contention to the field, another contributor to the debate, John Hunter, "thought that blood was a good candidate for the principle of life" (91). Air, electricity, and blood were just some contenders in the vitality debate, forming a complex tapestry of what life might be; a tapestry Victor sews into his Creature's body to create a visceral representation of these anxieties in a composite of potential sources for his creation's life.

While much of the book focuses on the question of life, Ruston dedicates the final chapter to death, specifically, the possibility of "Raising the Dead." Ruston considers how life and death were thoroughly connected in the Romantic period, both for the medical community as they attempted to determine what constituted death and for Victor in *Frankenstein* as his creation rests on his realisation that "death creates life just as life creates death" (113). According to Ruston, it is Victor's belief "that life and death exist[s] on a continuum" which makes Shelley's novel so haunting, especially for a nineteenth-century audience grappling with the growing problem of body snatching and fear of their body's safety in death's uncertain state (111).

A great strength of Ruston's analysis is its interdisciplinary aspect, bringing together scientific discourse, art, philosophy, and literature. For example, in chapter two, the reader seamlessly moves between an examination of how the Creature in *Frankenstein* values "the benefits of air upon his mood and sense of well-being" to an analysis of the painting *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* by Joseph Wright of Derby (1768) and a discussion on the scientific discovery of oxygen by scholars including Joseph Priestley and Antoine Lavoisier (41). The book, therefore, forms a case study for the importance of interdisciplinary research, with its rich academic tapestry only made possible through combining science and art. In fact, Ruston highlights in *Frankenstein's* manuscripts how "Percy crossed out Mary's choice of 'chemist' [...] to replace with 'natural philosopher'" as "a broader and more genteel term [...] indicating the philosophical study of nature" (14-15). For Mary Shelley, the distinctions we have today between art and science were more ambiguous, especially given that the "word 'scientist' had yet to be coined" (15). In its contents, methods, and organisation, Ruston's study is a vital contribution to Romantic scholarship that blurs the binaries of science and art as well as life and death.

The book's detailed use of primary sources, including diary entries and letters from Mary and Percy Shelley, her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, and others, gives Ruston's analysis an engaging, narrative quality. For instance, Ruston opens with the heart-breaking account of the "life and death of Mary Shelley's first child," using Mary and Percy's shared journal to illustrate their first-hand experience of the precarity between these two states that form the book's central theme (3). In turn, this narrative account allows Ruston to draw careful parallels between Mary and Percy's journal entries and the language Victor uses to describe his creation, right down to the non-gendered pronoun "it" shared by the Shelleys' first child and Frankenstein's Creature (5). This book's addition of scientific diagrams, paintings, and manuscripts heightens its narrative quality in a visually stunning layout fitting of the Bodleian Library's publishing house. As such, Ruston's analysis is accessible to both seasoned academics and newcomers to literary criticism, presented with a quiet wit, beautiful design, and reassuring authority.

While perhaps beyond the scope of this book, I would be interested to see how other scholars use Ruston's analysis with wider criticism on *Frankenstein*, particularly those generic discussions around the novel as an early exemplar of the Gothic and Science Fiction. For instance, while Ruston briefly notes how Shelley's novel "seems to anticipate our current worries about artificial intelligence," a comparative analysis of *Frankenstein* with a more recent reimagining such

as *Frankissstein* by Jeanette Winterson (2019) in the context of the nineteenth century's vitality debate could produce exciting results (121). Similarly, though Ruston draws parallels between the "first recorded successful blood transfusion," vampirism, and the discussion of whether Victor or his Creature is "the real monster," there is room for a thorough examination of how uncertainties about life and death informed the Gothic novel's conception of monstrosity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (31, 34). While Ruston's book provides a definitive guide to *Frankenstein* and its contemporary debates about vitality, there is much more to say on the implications of this intersection between literature, science, and medicine.

Overall, *The Science of Life and Death in Frankenstein* is a fresh and original analysis of Shelley's well-loved novel. Its strengths lie in fusing scientific and literary discourses in a nuanced way, demonstrating Ruston's specialist knowledge of this period as they draw out lesser-known figures and reveal their significant influences on Romantic writing. While its meticulous focus on the themes of life and death in Mary Shelley's seminal work is the book's central concern, it also encompasses commentary on animal rights in scientific experiments, medical consent, censorship, what characterises personhood, and much more. As Ruston highlights in their Afterword, "many of the debates discussed in *Frankenstein* are complicated and [...] have not yet been fully resolved," making this book urgent for the twenty-first century in understanding life, death, and all the gruesome possibilities in-between (121). *The Science of Life and Death in Frankenstein* asks its reader to reconsider our separation of science and art, fiction and non-fiction, revealing their explosive imaginative possibilities.

#### BIONOTE

**Ruth-Anne Walbank** is an MA graduate from Lancaster University, United Kingdom (UK), specialising in nineteenth-century literature, religion, and the Gothic. She is commencing her PhD on hellscapes of ecological crisis in the long nineteenth century in 2022 at the University of Warwick, UK. She also co-founded the creative writing outreach programme, the Literary Lancashire Award, and has organised conferences such as "New Thinking for New Times" and "EDI for the Modern University." As a research associate at St Mary's University, Twickenham, Ruth coordinates fieldwork with Catholic schools around environmental education and theology.



## ***DIVERSE FUTURES: SCIENCE FICTION AND AUTHORS OF COLOR (2021) BY JOY SANCHEZ-TAYLOR***

Review by Alexandria Nunn

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**Sanchez-Taylor, Joy. *Diverse Futures Science Fiction and Authors of Color*. The Ohio State University Press, 2021. 188 pp.**

Joy Sanchez-Taylor's *Diverse Futures: Science Fiction and Authors of Color* (2021) hits a sought-after middle point between a work long overdue and a study that could not be more relevant to our current cultural moment. Critical Race Studies and Science Fiction (SF) have converged for years, of note in the critical work of Isiah Lavender III's *Race in American Science Fiction* (2011) and especially in the literary canon of Octavia Butler. Nevertheless, it is only in recent history that the extent of their intersection has been fully appreciated. Emboldened by renewed public interest, Sanchez-Taylor calls to attention the work that has already been done in the field while gesturing to imaginative possibilities for SF authors and critics in our modern moment. Social media (a near SF concept in and of itself) has given authors of colour a new means of being heard and understood within and outside of their fiction. *Diverse Futures* is best understood as a time capsule for SF authors of Black, Indigenous, and peoples of colour (BIPOC) in the last thirty years. It functions especially well as an introduction to the form, the history, and the rise of SF with a Critical Race bend. I would argue the best way to approach this book is as a primer for BIPOC SF rather than a laser focused analysis.

Sanchez-Taylor opens *Diverse Futures* on a personal note, as she shares her experience growing up as a woman of colour and lover of classic SF. For Sanchez-Taylor, the two identities particularly felt at odds in a culture where SF frequently meant male-dominated, majorly white protagonists bent on conquest and exploration. Sanchez-Taylor saw that her identities were being 'missed,' both in predominantly white SF spaces and in her community of origin which often questioned the merit of this supposedly white genre for non-white persons. This personal bend proves to be the perfect beginning point because, as Sanchez-Taylor discovers, she is but one person in a sea of other readers of colour wondering the exact same thing. Underlying questions of belonging pushed Sanchez-Taylor to further research the history of SF by people of colour for readers and fans of colour in order to, in her own words, "raise awareness about how authors of colour are combatting the idea of SF as a 'white' genre by writing their racial and cultural experiences into these genres" (2). The text goes on to demonstrate how authors and readers of colour have been speaking back to SF's homogenous standards for decades, though due recognition of their revolutionary advocacy is comparably recent.

Sanchez-Taylor's theoretical framing is intriguing. She emphasises futurisms, that is, Afrofuturism, Chicanafuturism, Indigenous Futurism, etcetera, as a means by which to conceive the past and presents of BIPOCS in the US. All these futurist forms emphasise what it means to exist as a person of colour in the future, whether it be as a black, as Latinx or as any other non-white person.<sup>1</sup> Authors and creators of colour frame Futurism as the realm of possibility while still acknowledging the reality of a present in desperate need of improvement. Sanchez-Taylor lends voice to that present, which is easily the book's greatest strength.

As *Diverse Futures* gets into chapters, however, it foregrounds a lot of large topics in quick succession. Each chapter discusses a different concept as portrayed by various authors of colour. Chapter One, "Space Travel and First Contact Narratives," lays the study's foundation by attending to the troubled portrayals of alienness and alien being in SF discourse. Aliens, after all, are seldom allowed to be truly alien but rather draw upon something with which we are already familiar. For example, a many-tentacled many-eyed alien still has eyes and tentacles because the author can only fathom what they have already seen. This becomes a particular problem when aliens are coded as a racialised or gendered Other. Utilising the works of Octavia Butler, Gina Ruiz, Celu Amberstone, and several others, Sanchez-Taylor illustrates how authors of colour return to invasion narratives and reshape them into their own, whether it be in featuring 'unconventional' heroes or by putting characters in uncomfortable situations. Authors of colour, Sanchez-Taylor argues, are particularly attentive to the intricate relationship between the colonised and colonising because of their own relationships with ancestors, family members, and peers living under colonial rule. The black female protagonist of Octavia Butler's *Dawn* (1987), for example, is brought to mediate on behalf of the extra-terrestrials and reluctantly bear their children, paralleling the fraught and painful history of women of colour in the United States who were often forced to bear their oppressors' children. Of all the chapters, the first is the fullest and sets the foundation for later chapters. However, it may be best understood as two chapters in one, with invasion in the first half and the aftermath of invasion/colonisation in the second. Sanchez-Taylor presents indispensable research in an inviting manner, moving seamlessly from topic to topic, but includes upwards of five authors per chapter and cannot always give each writer the full focus they may receive otherwise. It would be best to re-read this chapter before continuing, or utilise it in a teaching seminar where the works and authors can be discussed in depth.

Building on the opening chapter, Chapter Two, "Race, Genetics, and Science Fiction," participates in the ongoing work to break biology away from cultural constructions of race. Sanchez-Taylor explains how the conflation between race and biology is nothing new, coming to popularity in the early and mid-nineteenth century as a justification for the mistreatment of enslaved and indigenous peoples since they were not viewed as equally human in comparison to their white counterparts. Genetics and genetic engineering have played a significant role in SF as in bad-faith science like eugenics, so the overlap between fact and fiction here is less hypothetical than in some more light-hearted examples. The brutal way in which Butler's Lilith has her DNA and child stolen can only be so distant from the forced sterilisations and child separations of twentieth and twenty-first century America. Once again, Sanchez-Taylor works with several key texts and their authors to

assess how persons of colour have rewritten the script in response to real-world biological racism. Each author gets equal focus here and a lot more time to develop. Sanchez-Taylor draws a parallel between the technologizing of non-white flesh made into machinery or bare life in service to a capitalist upper class and the literal cyborging of flesh in SF in service to corrupt dystopias. This is the same parallel noted by Wendy Hui Kyong Chun in her article "Race and/as Technology" (2009) wherein she argues race exists comfortably between a technological creation and a lived reality that forms and re-forms against biological constructions of race (although Sanchez-Taylor herself does not reference Chun's work).

Chapter Three, "The Apocalypse Has Already Come," offers a sobering challenge to how we perceive SF and reality as separate. Sanchez-Taylor begins with an exploration of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, where the American public and media criminalised and dehumanised starving black families amidst the wreckage of a destroyed New Orleans. Using the works of Colson Whitehead, Gabby Rivera, Ling Ma, and others, Sanchez-Taylor asks her reader to consider if the post-apocalypse of fiction can really be distinguished so much from the reality of daily oppression for select non-white peoples. In particular, this chapter's focus on how Colson Whitehead and Ling Ma's zombie novels reframes the act of killing monsters as horrible, insisting that characters develop empathy with creatures often depicted as mindless and sub-human. Sanchez-Taylor reveals how the inability of Whitehead and Ma's protagonists to kill zombies or enjoy zombie-hunting is because they can empathise with individuals who have been made zombies/monstrous authors by their country, integrating questions of race, monstrosity, and the human instinct for self-preservation in a nuanced analysis. Likewise, the fact that the zombie cannot be mindless machine-gun fodder is an active talk-back to the dehumanisation that often accompanies who the zombie has been written to represent. The final chapter and conclusion shifts to restorative work, answering the question: if SF habitually and consistently works against authors of colour and their creations, how do we proceed? In Chapter Four, "Our Knowledge is Not Primitive," Sanchez-Taylor recognises the significant progress of the 2010s. In a world where indigenous knowledge and non-western knowledge is construed as outdated or foolish, Sanchez-Taylor considers the possibility that non-western medicine, practices, and even rituals can be just as scientific as the spaces we may traditionally conceive as part of SF. Of the texts she uses to convey that point, Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl the Ring* (1998) most clearly elucidates this tension between Western and non-Western forms. Resisting SF expectations that the scientific answer be the Western one as well, Hopkinson's protagonist sees the potential horror that comes with a detached and opportunistic western approach to medicine and embraces the empathetic even subjective indigenous practices her grandmother and mother teach her. Similarly, what western society relegates to a home remedy is lacking not in science or practice but in the perception of being scientific. The book convincingly argues that SF as a category must grow to accommodate all science, not simply the science with which the western world is familiar. In essence, Sanchez-Taylor rightly argues a re-definition of science is at hand.

One indispensable contribution Sanchez-Taylor introduces throughout the book is the idea of double estrangement; that is being estranged from your own existence through the other world of SF and being estranged by your real existence through lived encounters with racism. Estrangement

happens twice over when a reader of colour finds a racist caricature of what is apparently the distant, utopic future. Double estrangement acknowledges and defines that sense of removal from future narratives and is an incredibly helpful means by which to describe BIPOC interactions with SF. Any critique or praise of *Diverse Futures* would begin and end with its information load. Sanchez-Taylor discusses an average of four texts per chapter across four chapters, excluding a hefty conclusion. Every ounce of the information worthy of books onto itself and, while it never steers from its core point, it can be overwhelming. As an introductory guide, it is rather formidable. Persons looking to learn more about a topic they have never considered would do well to start here before moving on to more narrow studies, such as Sami Schalk's *BodyMinds Reimagined: (Dis)Ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (2018), which as the title implies takes up a particular subset of BIPOC and SF by examining black women and posthumanism. *Diverse Futures* book has a great assemblage of ideas and literary texts to draw in any readers new to the intersections of race and SF.

Throughout this text, Sanchez-Taylor questions what constitutes science, art, being, and which parts of these definitions have been limited or erased by westernisation. I suspect the book is rather involved because it would be much easier to write a book about the ways in which BIPOC lives and culture have not been limited or erased by westernisation. It is hard to call a book too full when not a word on the page is inaccurate or irrelevant to what SF is becoming. Every bit of it needs to be heard and heard again, if only over several books and several dialogues. In this regard, Sanchez-Taylor's reading may be best viewed as an exploration of things that have been and of things that must come. *Diverse Futures* has the DNA of a love letter to what has been done, a literary study of what might be, and a survey of American Race and SF in the twenty-first century.

## NOTES

1. Sanchez-Taylor uses the term Latinx to refer to persons of Latin American background across the gender spectrum. While the term has been subject to controversy outside and within Latin American communities, I use it here in conjunction with Sanchez-Taylor's original intent for the purposes of this assessment.

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## BIONOTE

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# **YOUNG ADULT GOTHIC FICTION (2021)**

## **EDITED BY MICHELLE J. SMITH AND KRISTINE MORUZI**

Review by Alison Baker

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**Smith, Michelle J. and Moruzi, K. (eds) *Young Adult Gothic Fiction: Monstrous Selves/ Monstrous Others*. University of Wales Press, 2021, 320 pp.**

The possibilities of the Gothic to subvert the familiar and make it uncanny is a topic widely discussed by scholars; for example, Clive Bloom's definition of the Gothic sensibility states that its concerns are "the bizarre and wild," that in art and literature it features the supernatural, "with the inexplicable monsters of the forest and castle" (3). More recently, Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Donna Lee Brien's *New Directions in 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Gothic* (2018) seeks to identify the Gothic in a wider range of creative endeavours, from online games to wedding cake decoration via Urban Fantasy fiction and queer sensibilities in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). In this volume, the authors of each chapter argue that the discussed texts subvert heteronormative sexuality (Patricia Kennon) and neoliberal late capitalism (Bill Hughes) but can also diminish heroic girls to the object of a love triangle (Sean P. Connors and Lissette Lopez Szwydky). In the introduction to the book Michelle J. Smith and Kristine Moruzi state that, despite the Gothic tropes of transgression and boundary-crossing in adolescent protagonists, such as Jane Eyre, Cathy and Heathcliff in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), and Emily St. Aubin in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), contemporary Gothic young adult (YA) novels reinforce white, cissexual, heterosexual, nuclear family norms. Smith and Moruzi note that Ebony Elizabeth Thomas's monograph *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to The Hunger Games* (2019) has argued that the Fantastic has a need for Dark Other to "produce villains and evoke fear" (7). Smith and Moruzi call for future scholarly work on race in Gothic YA fiction. It is notable that there is very little consideration of social class in these chapters and none of disability. Characters such as disabled polio survivor Nessa from Peadar Ó'Guilín's YA Gothic Horror novels *The Call* (2016) and *The Invasion* (2018) deserve consideration as Gothic heroines.

While many of the texts covered are familiar and well-researched, such as Holly Black's *The Coldest Girl in Coldtown* (2013) and Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* saga (2005-2020), there are other, less discussed texts, and discussion of the Gothic in other arenas. Because of this, the volume adds new research to the field of Gothic studies. Sarah Olive's chapter on Romeo and Juliet narratives through a Gothic critical lens was of particular interest. It includes John Ajvide Lindqvist's *Let the Right One In* (2004) as a gender-queer Romeo and Juliet narrative. The issue of age and, therefore, power imbalances between a centuries-old vampire who appears as a child and a twelve-year-old

boy is considered in depth; the inversion of the stereotypical hunter/hunted, powerful/powerless unpicks the taboo and transgressive nature of the relationship between Hakken and Eli, as well as the turning/ transition of Eli from a boy to socially presenting as a pre-teenage girl and from mortal to immortal vampire. The Gothic tropes of haunting and horror are centred within the body of Eli through Haken's desire for them. *Let The Right One In* is the only text in translation considered within this book; like its authors, the texts considered are American, Australian, British and New Zealand; future considerations of Gothic YA texts should seek out work on authors outside Anglophone countries.

Adam Kealley's chapter on Australian YA Gothic novels about lost children in wildernesses is also a stand-out chapter. The sublimity of the landscape is a repeated feature of the classic Gothic, from Radcliffe and Horace Walpole's novels (for example *The Italian*, 1796, and *The Castle of Otranto*, 1746) set in the Continental European landscapes, such as to the Brontës' transportation of the sublime to West Yorkshire. Kealley argues that Australian YA authors Craig Silvey and Sonya Hartnett describe a landscape that is vast, wild, and changeable, one that is uncanny and defamiliarised. Kealley goes on to argue that these texts also serve to critique nineteenth-century colonial ideas of family, home, and patriarchal supremacy that have been features of Australian children's and youth literature, privileging white European ideals over indigenous ones.

These landscapes are depicted in Gothic terms, notably in their intimidating vastness, wilful changeability and disorientating qualities, and through imagery of the liminal and abject. They are both familiar yet defamiliarised; uncanny places by which the protagonists are simultaneously lured and terrified. (154)

Describing Australian landscapes as wild, uncanny, and unknowable reclaims them as sublime without comparing them to European norms.

Chloe Germaine's chapter on the recent novels of Frances Hardinge makes a New Materialist and onto-ethical argument that in *The Lie Tree* (2015) and *Skinful of Shadows* (2017) Hardinge rejects a purely scientific engagement with the world. In *The Lie Tree*, science is demonstrably not neutral; Darwin's theories are used to reinforce patriarchal norms by some characters, and narratives of progress and human pre-eminence are undercut by the symbiotic relationship between Faith and the lie tree. Germaine's use of quantum physics as the lens through which she reads Hardinge makes for a fascinating chapter; the refusal to consider humans as separate from nature or as transcending ecology. Further, she argues that the Gothic nature of "entangled relationships of past, present and future" relates to onto-ethics and quantum physics (211). This chapter looks at the Gothic in an innovative manner and, for me, is a highlight of the book. Germaine argues that, while Hardinge's protagonists Faith (*The Lie Tree*) and Makepeace (*A Skinful of Shadows*), have both material and supernatural struggles; the entangled nature of the material and supernatural Hardinge does not reject the spiritual or the scientific. The novels are embedded, or entangled, in both.

However, it would have benefited the collection to have a slightly sharper editorial eye; the interchangeable use of “Victorian” and “nineteenth century” in Sean P. Connors and Lissette Lopez Szwydky’s chapter on Kenneth Oppel’s *Frankenstein* prequels (*This Dark Endeavour*, 2011, and *Such Wicked Intent*, 2012) implies that Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) was a Victorian novel when it was published close to twenty years before Victoria became queen; the blurring and conflation of *Frankenstein* and *The Strange Tale of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Robert Louis Stephenson, 1898) published eighty years apart, seems ahistorical. By discussing the novels as “neo-Victorian” Connors and Szwydky miss the opportunity to discuss the scientific theories of Galvanism and the depiction of *Frankenstein* as a “modern Prometheus,” and thus the Gothic impact on what has been described as the first Science Fiction novel by Brian Aldiss (1995) among others. Whether Oppel continues with this Gothic Science Fiction cross-genre history would be a useful point of discussion.

This is a useful text for scholars of speculative fiction and YA fiction. The post-colonial, New Materialist, and queer studies contributions to Gothic scholarship demonstrate that it is a genre ripe for innovative study.

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#### BIONOTE

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## **FICTION REVIEWS**

# APOCALYPSE IN THE MAKING

Review by Christina Lake

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**Beresford, J. D. *A World of Women*. The MIT Press, 2022. Novel. 317 pp.**

*A World of Women* (2022) is an apocalyptic novel about a deadly pandemic that mainly kills men. First published under the title of *Goslings* in 1913, MIT recently republished it as part of their Radium Age series, which focuses on forgotten proto-Science Fiction from 1900 to 1930. Its English author, John Davys Beresford, was a prolific writer of novels and short stories, many of which tackle Science Fiction themes such as the evolution of super-intelligence in *The Hampdenshire Wonder* (1911) or utopian futures in *What Dreams May Come...* (1941). But Beresford, who wrote the first major critical work on H. G. Wells in 1915, was also a realist writer interested in early psychoanalysis, social satire, and metaphysical speculation. This amalgam of speculative realism and fantastical imagination makes *A World of Women* interesting as both a meticulous study of the breakdown of early twentieth-century civilisation and a horrifying depiction of the dark all-conquering return of nature. The new edition also contains a short introduction by writer, activist and filmmaker Astra Taylor who finds much to admire in Beresford's socialism, feminism, and ecological consciousness. Musing on the theme of catastrophe as a trigger for social change, Taylor takes a political rather than academic approach to *A World of Women*, reading it in the context of Covid-19 and US politics to find cautious hope in Beresford's vision of women building a new society from scratch.

For any reader who remembers the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is certainly a lot to relate to in the first of the three books that form *A World of Women*. "The New Plague" begins with the mundane life of the Goslings, a lower-middle-class family, and describes the arrival of an unknown virus which starts in Asia, spreads to Russia, and soon finds its way to the rest of Europe. The press run scare stories but is not interested in scientific facts. Food wholesalers try to corner the market in scarce commodities. Even when people are dying in Europe, no one expects the plague to come to Britain and schemes to close the borders to all trade and travel are described as "alarmist, far-fetched and utterly impracticable" (61). Meanwhile, the shortcomings and lack of leadership from a government only interested in party politics become abundantly clear. However, where Beresford's fiction diverges from recent experiences of Covid-19 is in the high mortality rates of the new plague, allowing an exploration of what societal breakdown might look like in London, the largest city of its day, where lack of food leads to rapid depopulation through emigration, starvation, and the plague. The breakdown is accelerated by the virus targeting mainly men in a social environment where they still carry out most key roles. After a few months, London is a dead city, vividly experienced by Blanche and Millie Gosling as they walk through silent streets of broken trams and overturned buses before ransacking a Knightsbridge clothes shop and trying on all the dresses they once coveted in what is clearly intended as a critique of the futility of the desires created by industrial capitalism.

The societal factors that have rendered suburban middle-class women unfit for any purpose other than marriage, consumerism and policing morality are a major theme of the book. Beresford's critique echoes some of the points made by early twentieth-century feminists such as Charlotte Perkin Gilman, who saw women's subjection to men's idealised version of womanhood as restricting their potential to contribute more fully to society. But Beresford, in line with contemporary theories of sexual behaviour, evolution, and Freudian psychoanalysis, is more concerned about how this moralistic version of femininity is damaging society by restricting men's libido and undermining the forces of natural selection. The second book, "The March of the Goslings," emphasises the problems with this brand of suburban femininity as it follows the fate of Mrs. Gosling and her two daughters trying to adjust to the new reality. Mrs. Gosling is described in evolutionary terms as "a specialized creature, admirably adapted to her place in the old scheme of civilisation" but unable to cope outside the ecological niche of her house in Kilburn (155). Her daughters are not much better, but their adaptation and survival skills develop as they set out on an odyssey to the countryside, pushing their mother in a trolley through nightmarish scenes of unburied bodies and women dying of starvation and dysentery.

The third book, "Womankind in the Making," focuses on a more successful adaptation to the new situation, a farming collective in Marlow. Its title, clearly borrowed from Wells' *Mankind in the Making*, a 1903 collection of essays on the future of humanity, suggests the emergence of a new type of woman, ready to throw aside middle-class standards for the sake of survival. In so doing, this new society arrives at the utopian socialist rule that "every woman had a right to her share in the bounty of Nature" provided that she "earned her right by labour" (227). However, some members of the collective have trouble adapting to the morality of the new world, where women are lured away to get pregnant by a male survivor in the next village and reject the idea of sharing men to ensure a future for humankind. Their refusal to abandon middle-class morality causes the community to fracture and reinforces Beresford's critique of the anti-evolutionary force of human moral laws.

In identifying the issues facing women both before and after the plague, Beresford demonstrates a proto-feminist awareness of the patriarchal forces ranged against women, but in failing to move beyond contemporary masculine concerns over repressed desire and restrictive moral standards, Beresford's depiction of a world of women falls far short of the type of explorations of matriarchal societies of powerful women undertaken by twenty-first-century writers such as Naomi Alderman and Christina Sweeney Baird. However, despite sharing many of the misogynistic assumptions of the age, Beresford does avoid some of the pitfalls of previous masculine imaginings of all-female societies, such as Walter Besant's satirical *The Revolt of Man* (1882). In this role reversal anti-utopia, women take over the government with disastrous consequences. The women of Marlow are shown as capable and efficient once they have thrown off their fashionable clothing. They learn how to farm with the help of a knowledgeable farmer's wife and deploy a man who has escaped the plague to train them to run the surviving agricultural machinery. Ultimately though, despite the initial success of the Marlow community, Beresford sees little hope for humankind as the machines built by "man's devilish and alien intelligence" break down (256). Beresford revels in images of nature overrunning civilisation and barren humanity in a futile fight against nature but sees little

prospect of humans, women included, living in balance with nature as, from Beresford's Darwinian viewpoint, the two are implacably opposed in the struggle for existence. The image of humans as "some horrible, unnatural fungus" disfiguring the Earth takes Beresford towards the anti-humanism of a radical environmentalist position (258).

Although the start is quite slow, the book builds up to an evocative depiction of a dying land with something of the atmosphere of George R. Stewart's *Earth Abides* or Richard Jeffries' *After London* (1885). While it does not live up to the promise of a feminist utopia, neither does it treat women as inferior to men and it ends with some utopian suggestions for how women's lives might be improved in a future where all men and women are equal. There are a few jarring notes. The attempts at a phonetic rendering of the Goslings accent are off-putting and the stereotyping of a Jewish character is shockingly antisemitic. In general, the characters are often hard to relate to and some are simply forgotten by the author partway through the narrative. Clearly, Beresford was more interested in a sociological study than fiction and uses the novel to examine his Wellsian-style fears for the future of the human species and where modern civilisation was taking it. Nevertheless, it is surprising that a book with so much to say about how humans behave in times of crisis is not better known, but the weight of an early twentieth-century social study on an otherwise inventive novel may have led to its neglect. While the book's evolutionary framework and class and gender politics will be predominantly of academic and historic interest, the warnings about consumerism, dysfunctional politicians, and lack of foresight are still relevant today as the Covid pandemic and the current climate crisis so clearly demonstrate.

#### BIONOTE

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# A 'FRESH' TAKE ON CANNIBALISTIC CAPITALISM

Review by Barnaby Falck

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***Fresh*. Directed by Mimi Cave, Performances by Daisy Edgar-Jones, Sebastian Stan, Jonica T. Gibbs, Charlotte le Bon and Andrea Bang, Searchlight Pictures, 2022. Film. Disney+**

### **Content Warning:**

**This review contains discussions of gender-based violence, misogyny, and cannibalism.**

*Fresh* (2022) begins with a date – a bad one. Our main character, Noa (Daisy Edgar-Jones), has spent the evening being bored and casually insulted by a condescending man named Chad (Brett Dier). To make matters worse, when Noa rejects him, he responds in a verbally aggressive manner, leaving Noa shaken and worried about her immediate safety. But life starts looking up for her in the days following this incident – Noa meets Steve (Sebastian Stan) in a grocery store and quickly falls for him. Noa's best friend Mollie (Jonica T. Gibbs) sarcastically describes this new romance as "A straight girls fantasy come true."

All of this occurs within the first 30 minutes of the film's opening act, presenting itself as a standard romantic comedy, but *Fresh* soon takes a sharp turn into the Horror genre. It turns out that Mollie had every reason to worry, as Steve is a cannibal butcher/chef for hire called Brendan, who kidnaps women to slowly harvest their meat for his own consumption and the enjoyment of his rich customers. When the women have been 'used up' he disposes of them. The rest of the film follows Noa's struggle to escape as we see her face off against all the horrors of the patriarchy, morphed into and personified by one easily recognisable and tangible villain, Brendan.

*Fresh* is an extremely well-written, acted, and technically put-together film, an impressive feat for director Mimi Cave's first feature and writer Lauryn Kahn's second. The clarity and purpose of these driven creators help to sell this film as a biting commentary on modern-day misogyny while still working as a gruesome yet accessible Horror film. Kahn stated in an interview with Abbey White for *The Hollywood Reporter* that when she set out to write *Fresh*, she wanted to create a film where "people that are Horror fans and people that aren't could somehow find a common place to enjoy this movie" (2022, n.p.). The result is a film that is simultaneously subtle and extremely blunt with its social commentary. The film draws sharp parallels between real-world misogynistic attitudes and the kidnapping and dismemberment of women within the film's world. Yet, contrasted against this blunt messaging is the film's surprisingly reserved use of cannibalism, leaving most of the gruesome flesh consumption to the viewer's imagination. This expertly handled balancing act helps to easily place *Fresh* into the canon of classic 'cannibal' Horror films, joining the ranks of *The Texas Chainsaw*

*Massacre* (1974), *Ravenous* (1999), and *Raw* (2016).

The way *Fresh* uses the idea of humans eating other humans, while reserved in terms of gore, is a perfect embodiment of Naomi Merritt's concept of "Cannibalistic Capitalism." Initially published in 2010 to discuss the classic Horror film *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* through a new lens, Merritt's piece, "Cannibalistic Capitalism and other American Delicacies" (2010), provides an excellent framework to view *Fresh* through. To Merritt, "Cannibalistic Capitalism" presents a world in which the "transgressive excess of capitalism" has led to humanity "devouring itself" (217; 228). *Fresh* iterates upon this idea by using its surface-level subject matter, literal cannibalism, as a way of giving shape to and shining a light on the daily horrors of gender-based violence. A kind of existential and all-pervasive horror that exists because of the dating 'market,' where the idea of a perfect relationship is thrust upon individuals as the ideal form of human interaction within a patriarchal society, which can often lead to women in particular feeling as though they are part of a dating 'grind.'

The film takes this idea of being part of a patriarchal dating 'grind' literally. Every female character introduced in *Fresh* becomes just another commodity in Brendan's flesh-collecting operation. First, starting off as objects of desire for Brendan to seduce or manipulate in some way, they are soon kidnapped and quite literally used to help satiate both his own and his client's desire for women's flesh. Even women who are seen to be part of Brendan's operation are revealed to be his past victims, only later to have been 'converted' to his way of thinking in an extremely eerie indoctrination into a lethal patriarchal system. At first, Noa is no exception to this. Although Brendan reveals that he has developed 'real' feelings for her, we have seen that he has developed 'feelings' for previous victims, going so far as to live with and marry one of them, his accomplice, Ann. This inescapable feeling of being trapped in this situation feeds directly into what writer Lauryn Kahn describes as the "all-encompassing fear of violent men" (White 2022). However, while Noa starts out as another victim of Brendan's brand of violent misogyny, as the film progresses she becomes determined to break out of this violent cycle and start anew. Building on this determination to break free, her struggle becomes possible because she does not do it alone. Noa is not presented as being 'exceptional.' She is depicted as brave and intelligent yet she only manages to get through this ordeal with the aid of her fellow captives, both alive (through direct action) and dead (through hidden messages), in the form of a survivalist sisterhood.

The fact that all the flesh consumed by Brendan and his secretive selection of clients is harvested from women is no coincidence, exemplifying the logic of Cannibalistic Capitalism in the film's constructed world. Brendan states that women "just taste better" and cites this as the only reason the group focuses exclusively on women. This is brought into question through the small glimpses of his clientele. They are all men, and they all choose to opt for a personalised element that accompanies their meal. This extra service sees them receiving a picture of their food before the 'meat' was harvested, as well as some personal effects of the victims, including items of clothing or other significant belongings of the victims. These pictures are gazed at longingly while their subject's flesh is consumed, while the personal items are groped and sniffed at. The way these small segments are constructed gives the horrific impression that this operation exists just as a way

for these powerful men to commodify and fetishize women. As Cave put it in an interview with Margaeux Sippel for *Movie Maker* (2022): "This script is not based on anything real. So, it's 100% fiction [...] However, we've seen cases of men that are in scenarios that are the 1% of the 1%, who are so wealthy that no one has ever said 'no' to them. [...] How far can you push it?" This power, combined with the commodification of specifically female flesh, fits perfectly into a 'Cannibalistic Capitalism' symptomatic of Western patriarchal society.

It is quite clear in the film that Brendan is not a victim of this culture of misogyny but rather someone who benefits from and enjoys being a part of it. Although he is quite literally commodifying and parcelling up women, to him, this is just how he makes his money. As such, his status as a rich white man seemingly acts as a shield to protect himself from any repercussions that his actions might hold. In fact, the only danger that ever comes up for Brendan is much later in the film, when he begins to develop a non-cannibalistic sexual desire for Noa. This desire changes the entire dynamic of the film, switching the tension from 'what body parts will he take from her next' to 'how will Noa work her way out of this situation?' Two contrasting scenes exemplify this tension. Earlier in the film, after a botched escape attempt, Noa is drugged and restrained on an operating table while Brendan removes pieces of her flesh. The tension and fear in this scene are aided by Cave's decision to show only brief glimpses of the mutilation, with the camera's primary focus being Noa's terrified (yet subdued via drugs) reaction and Brendan's matter-of-fact attitude to his violation of Noa's body.

Meanwhile, later in the film, when Noa has gained Brendan's trust, the main tension comes from watching the cogs in her head turn as she takes in her surroundings and contemplates her exit strategy while Brendan is not paying direct attention to her while immediately turning her focus back onto him, feigning interest in what he has to say when he does look in her direction. In both cases, the tension is aided by the clear and purposeful scene composition, the wonderfully gruesome and squishy sound design, and the muted yet chilling score. However, what truly sells both these scenes are the wonderful performances from Daisy Edgar-Jones and Sebastian Stan, who both offer the audience nuanced and human performances. The two actors create genuinely charming chemistry with each other that only helps to sell the deeply troubling power imbalance between the two characters.

*Fresh* works extremely well as a Horror film that is gruesome enough for fans of the genre with its implied bodily dismemberment and expertly crafted tension while still being accessible for those who may otherwise avoid this type of film. It works as a sharp critique of how cultural misogyny can lead to twisted expressions of romance and affection. Perhaps most significantly, it is as an excellent contribution to the idea of 'Cannibalistic Capitalism' by using fears surrounding twenty-first century dating in a patriarchal, capitalist culture. In short, the film is a wonderfully produced piece of Horror that can thrill its audience while leaving enough room for social commentary, making an original contribution to the existing canon of Cannibal movies.



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## BIONOTE

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# THE ANGEL OF CROCKETT ISLAND: IS *MIDNIGHT MASS* (2021) A VAMPIRE STORY?

Review by Kat Humphries

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**Flanagan, Mike, director. *Midnight Mass*. Performances by Zach Gilford, Kate Siegel, Hamish Linklater, Samantha Sloyan, and Rahul Kohli. Intrepid Pictures, 2021. Television.**

Over the past decade, Mike Flanagan has become a household name in Horror. His early feature films, *Absentia* (2011) and *Oculus* (2013), met with positive responses from audiences and critics alike, followed by *Hush*, *Before I Wake* (2016), and *Ouija: Origin of Evil* (2016), and the subsequent Stephen King adaptations *Gerald's Game* (2017) and *Doctor Sleep* (2019). Yet Flanagan's greatest success to date has been on the small screen, where a deal with Netflix has produced three critically acclaimed horror television series – 2018's *The Haunting of Hill House*, 2020's *The Haunting of Bly Manor*, and most recently, 2021's *Midnight Mass*.

Unlike his first two series, which were adapted from classic works of Horror fiction, *Midnight Mass* is Flanagan's first original story for television.<sup>1</sup> Heavily influenced by his childhood experiences with the Catholic Church and subsequent struggles with alcoholism, Flanagan admits in a guest essay for *Bloody Disgusting* (2021) that "there has probably never been a project more personal to me." Yet there is still a great deal in *Midnight Mass* that feels familiar, particularly to Horror fans – there is the bleak setting of Crockett Island, a declining community isolated from the rest of the world. There is the religious iconography, the Catholic church's influence, and a suspicious, charismatic new priest. And then, of course, the mysterious creature arrives at the same time as Father Paul (Hamish Linklater) and begins to exert an insidious influence over the island and its people.

In our position as viewers, familiar with the generic conventions of Horror and Flanagan's previous work, we go into *Midnight Mass* with certain preconceptions. This context leads us to identify the creature – unable to emerge in daylight, drinking the blood of other living things – as a vampire. Yet to Father Paul – a devoted Catholic priest on the verge of death whose life is miraculously saved by a winged figure – it is unquestionably clear that the creature is an angel. The juxtaposition of these two interpretations demonstrates a key theme running through *Midnight Mass* – the way in which events, symbols, and words can be re-purposed and manipulated to reinforce the desired narrative.

It is Father Paul's complete and utter faith in the narrative of the angel and his determination to enact that narrative on others, with or without their consent, that ultimately leads to the downfall of Crockett Island. By focusing on signs and events that reinforce his beliefs, such as the improving health of the islanders and the 'miracles' that occur, he overlooks those that contradict them – being

burnt by the symbol of the cross, mysterious deaths and the immoral act of tricking his congregation into unknowingly drinking vampire blood. Yet despite his undoubtable culpability for the horrors in *Midnight Mass*, Hamish Linklater portrays Father Paul with charisma, nuance, and empathy that we cannot help but lapse into occasionally rooting for him. It helps that Father Paul's motivations are repeatedly reinforced to be altruistic, if misguided, and by the end, he realises that he's made a terrible mistake.

However, Crockett Island's other prominent Catholic figurehead is another matter entirely. Samantha Sloan's portrayal of Bev Keane perfectly encapsulates what can happen when religious devotion tips into zealotry, fanaticism, and downright evil. Like Father Paul, Bev justifies her actions via religion, claiming she is acting according to the will of God. She reels off Bible verses to justify increasingly immoral acts, from poisoning a dog to covering up a murder and finally advocating the mass slaughter of the 'unfaithful.' Unlike Father Paul, however, it becomes increasingly clear that Bev acts according to her own self-interest and doling out judgement on those she considers unworthy or less pious than herself.

Where does the angel fit, then, in all of this? One might expect that in a show featuring a monstrous vampire that infiltrates a small island community, the vampire would be the focus, the evil to be overcome. Yet, throughout *Midnight Mass's* seven episodes, no one mentions the word 'vampire.'. In an interview for *Netflix Geeked* (2021), Flanagan explains that this was a deliberate omission because "the minute you say that it changes the story into a vampire story" (n.p.). In a sense, then, it seems that Flanagan is attempting to exert his own narrative control by distancing *Midnight Mass* from other 'vampire stories,' suggesting that his use of the vampire is somehow distinct from what we may traditionally associate with the classic archetype in Horror.

There is no single blueprint for a 'vampire story' following the ever-changing depiction of vampires in Horror throughout the years. Early vampires were generally antagonists, monstrous invaders threatening the stability of civilised society, as in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). Gradually we saw the rise of the sympathetic vampire to a point where modern Horror media is more likely to depict vampires as potential love interests, allies, or even protagonists themselves, as in Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* books (2005-2008) and their adaptations or television shows like *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-2017) and *True Blood* (2008-2014). The vampire has always been a malleable symbol, utilised by storytellers to suit the changing times and evolving appetites of their audience – which is exactly how Flanagan uses it in *Midnight Mass*.

In *Vampires Among Us* (2012), Linda Heidenreich writes: "Popular culture uses vampiric discourse to voice fear of change, fear of the other, fear that the other is bringing change into our communities" (93). While these fears certainly exist in *Midnight Mass*, it is not the vampire itself that represents them. These fears are, instead, demonstrated most plainly through Bev's treatment of the 'outsiders' on Crockett Island – Riley, an ex-choir boy, turned atheist and recovering alcoholic who returns to the island after serving a prison sentence for killing a young woman while drink-driving; Erin, a pregnant schoolteacher who comes back to her hometown with no husband; and most of all Sheriff Hassan, a single father and Muslim trying to fit into a predominantly Catholic community.

These are the threats Bev sees on Crockett Island and attempts to control, ignoring and indeed becoming a far greater threat herself in the process.

The angel, then, is not a symbol of an external threat invading a safe community but instead represents a threat from within – the threat of fanaticism and fundamentalism. The angel itself may come from another place, but it is brought to Crockett Island by Father Paul – a man of faith and someone whom the islanders implicitly trust. It is Father Paul who conceals the angel's presence and spikes the communion wine with its blood, and later it is Bev and himself who cover up a murder to keep their secret and continue with their plan. Eventually, even as Father Paul comes to his senses, Bev is the one who unleashes a horde of newly turned vampires out into Crockett Island, encouraging them to murder their unsuspecting neighbours. As Flanagan states in his interview with *Netflix Geeked*, "the vampire isn't the thing that tears this community apart" (n.p.).

So – is *Midnight Mass* a vampire story? The fact that there is no simple answer to this ostensibly simple question demonstrates that Flanagan has utilised the vampire in *Midnight Mass* in a complex and interesting way. Much like *Hill House* and *Bly Manor* are ghost stories but not *about* ghosts, it could be said that *Midnight Mass* is a vampire story that is not about the vampire. Yet is this not the nature of the vampire and, indeed, often of Horror as a genre – the use of something monstrous, supernatural, or otherwise horrific to interrogate something far more human?

Following on from the success of *Hill House* and *Bly Manor*, as well as his wider cinematic works, *Midnight Mass* is another triumph for Flanagan. It is a touch self-indulgent, undoubtedly due to the extremely personal nature of the story (which Flanagan had been trying to bring to life for many years before Netflix gave it the green light), and some viewers might find themselves frustrated by the slow pace and long, expository monologues. The build-up is certainly worth the wait, though, for the show's frenetic and violent conclusion. As well as the stellar performances from Hamish Linklater and Samantha Sloyan as mentioned above, there are also fantastic turns from Flanagan regulars Kate Siegel and Rahul Kohli. After the intensely personal nature of *Midnight Mass*, Flanagan's next television projects all take him back to the realm of Horror adaptation with three more upcoming Netflix series with Flanagan at the helm. Judging by the quality and the richness of his efforts to date, both fans and scholars are likely to find much to enjoy and explore in Flanagan's works for the foreseeable future.

## NOTES

1. *Hill House* is based on Shirley Jackson's 1959 novel of the same name, while *Bly Manor* is an adaptation of Henry James' 1898 novella *The Turn of the Screw*.

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## BIONOTE

**Kat Humphries** completed the MLitt in Fantasy Literature at the University of Glasgow, UK. Her dissertation focused on the figure of the monster hunter hero in American Fantasy television, specifically on how *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) influenced subsequent shows *Supernatural* (2005-2020) and *Grimm* (2011-2017).

# POKÉMON'S FIRST ECOGOTHIC NARRATIVE

Review by Liam J. L. Knight

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***Pokémon Legends: Arceus. Version 1.0.1, Game Freak, 2022, Nintendo Switch, 2022.***

Since the 1996 release of *Pocket Monsters Red* and *Green* in Japan, Game Freak has produced over thirty core *Pokémon* video games. These role-playing games (RPGs) follow a similar formula: players catch, train, and battle with Pokémon in their quest to become each game's ultimate trainer. Game Freak's 2022 offering, *Pokémon Legends: Arceus*, borrows elements from the action-adventure and action role-playing game (ARPG) genres to deviate from this formula. A pseudo-open game world, stealth mechanics, and players' use of an on-screen crosshair to take aim and throw Poké Balls are among the innovations offered by *Arceus*. This first deviation is a particular strength, for the game world's nonlinearity affords players a sense of autonomy, empowering them to freely discover the charm and whimsy of *Arceus'* diverse biomes. Moreover, Jordan Middler praised the game's reimaged catching mechanics in *Nintendo Life*, calling them "the best part of the game by far," an evaluation that is by no means an overstatement (2022, n.p). Such praise for *Arceus* is commonplace, suggesting that it constitutes a successful reinvigoration of the *Pokémon* series.

Uniquely, *Arceus* reconfigures the series' preoccupation with ecological matters. The *Pokémon* franchise has always harboured ecological concerns, thanks to creator Satoshi Tajiri's desire to share his childhood pastime of collecting insects and other wildlife with urban children. Ecological barriers, however, are often presented as minor obstacles for players to overcome in their quest to become Pokémon masters. For instance, the devastating implications of summoning Kyogre – a Pokémon with the ability to raise sea levels – are understated in *Pokémon Sapphire* (2002) and overt ecological statements tend to be hidden in Pokédex entries or other optional flavour text. Conversely, ecological matters lie at the heart of *Arceus*, culminating in an EcoGothic narrative. The interaction between humans, Pokémon and their surrounding environment reflects Andrew Smith and William Hughes' observation in *Ecogothic* (2013) that the genre "illustrates how nature becomes constituted [...] as a space of crisis which conceptually creates a point of contact with the ecological" (3). Subsequently, *Arceus* is exciting because it offers a more mature, thought-provoking narrative that sets it apart from other *Pokémon* games.

*Arceus'* EcoGothic qualities quickly become apparent to the player. After falling through a space-time rift in the present day, they awake in a pre-modern, pre-colonised version of *Pokémon Diamond's* and *Pearl's* (2006) Sinnoh region, now named 'Hisui.' Players are taken to Jubilife Village, the game's hub world and only town and soon learn that most of its residents fear Hisui's wild Pokémon. For many Non-Player Characters (NPCs), Pokémon are monstrous entities from which the village's walled perimeter provides protection. Following Simon C. Estok's article "Theorising the

EcoGothic” (2019), such foregrounded ecophobia suggests that *Arceus* is an EcoGothic narrative, especially given that such fears are born out of the villagers’ ignorance. This orients players to what Dawn Keetley and Matthew Sivils call “the more disturbing and unsettling aspects of [humans’] interactions with nonhuman ecologies,” inviting them to question how and why people find the natural world unnerving, thus providing a more stimulating gameplay experience (1). The game begins in earnest once Jubilife Village’s Galaxy Expedition Team recruits and assigns the player to its Survey Corps. They order players to record information about Hisui’s Pokémon by compiling the region’s first Pokédex, teaching the villagers about the monsters to allay their fears. As such, the mission to complete the region’s Pokédex does not just possess a scientific purpose but an affective one. This reframing of one of the *Pokémon* series’ core objectives is one of *Arceus*’s highlights, for players are motivated to complete what could be considered an arduous task – catching more than 200 different species of Pokémon – by the knowledge that their actions have meaning within the game world.

Another of the game’s EcoGothic characteristics manifests in the player’s second mission to investigate a series of mysterious lightning strikes that originate from the same space-time rift through which they fell. These atmospheric disturbances enrage Hisui’s five ‘noble Pokémon’ (powerful guardians that oversee the game’s main areas) and thus threaten the region’s ecological harmony, for they influence both their fellow Pokémon’s behaviours and their environment’s climates. Such disruption recalls Smith’s and Hughes’s definition of the EcoGothic, in which *Arceus* constitutes nature as a space for ecological crises. This effect is heightened as the player progresses through the game. Although they quell the five noble Pokémon’s rages, the atmospheric disturbances caused by the space-time rift worsen. Several NPCs suspect the player, as the atmospheric disturbances have only worsened since they arrived in Hisui, so the player’s presence in the region must be to blame. Consequently, the player is banished from Jubilife Village and must explore Hisui again to identify the cause of the space-time rift. Here, *Arceus*’s narrative allegorises anthropocentric climate change precisely because it is a human – a modern human, no less – that is suspected of causing environmental catastrophe. Navigating tensions around climate change and environmental damage are central to the EcoGothic, and so by locating the origins of environmental catastrophe within human actors instead of the nonhuman, *Arceus*’s narrative makes a timely political statement that invites players to consider how they may likewise be imperilling the natural world.

As the player undertakes their two missions, *Arceus*’s last significant EcoGothic quality emerges to question the anthroponotic nature of the franchise. The EcoGothic, writes David Del Principe, takes a “nonanthropocentric approach to reconsider the role that the environment, species, and nonhumans play in the construction of monstrosity and fear” (1). Principe’s argument reflects how players are forced to confront – perhaps for the first time in the *Pokémon* franchise – the monstrous potential inherent in Pokémon. As players explore Hisui, Pokémon in the overworld react to them. Some flee, others show curiosity, and others directly attack the player. Similarly, players are attacked by the noble Pokémon when investigating the region’s atmospheric disturbances. Such a monstrous presentation of Pokémon legitimises the villagers’ fear, creating a level of tension that has so far been absent in the series’ video games. This tension urges players to make use of the stealth mechanics available in the game so that they may avoid sustaining damage, blacking out,

and losing a portion of their progress. Indeed, as I explored the game's first area, I found myself anxiously tiptoeing around an Alpha Luxio – an especially large, aggressive, and strong variant of the Pokémon species – as I explored the first area, which resulted in a much more captivating and exciting play experience precisely because the threat levels felt higher. Furthermore, this monstrous presentation of Pokémon is characteristically Gothic insofar as it estranges the creatures for players, which are much more threatening than in previous *Pokémon* titles. This disconnect may disturb players, who are invited to question why Hisui's monsters are presented differently: do they appear monstrous only because the villagers are ignorant about them, or is this aggressive, wild, pre-modern depiction of Pokémon simply them in their natural state? Subsequently, is their non-threatening presentation in other *Pokémon* games because they have been tamed, domesticated, and their wildness conquered by man? Ultimately, *Arceus*'s narrative does not completely answer these questions. Still, the fact that it raises them demonstrates that Game Freak has created a more thematically mature and analytically rich game than its previous efforts.

Despite its depiction of ecophobia, environmental crisis, nonhuman monstrosity, and the questions raised, *Arceus* does not satisfy its EcoGothic potential. The villagers' fear of Pokémon subsides when they learn to domesticate and enslave them. The game's EcoGothic allegory for anthropocentric climate change falls short because nonhuman actors are shown to cause the ecological disaster that permeates the Hisui region. Last, the monstrosity of Pokémon is diminished because players can defeat or capture even the game's most threatening creatures. Instead, *Arceus* reverts to the anthropocentrism that characterises a multimedia franchise in which nonhuman entities are routinely depicted as tools for humans to use, human settlements are prioritised, and human autonomy is privileged above all else.

While its anthropocentrism offers a potential shortfall, *Arceus* remains a notable contribution to games with Gothic potential. For returning fans of the *Pokémon* series, *Arceus* is a must-play title. By adapting the tried and tested *Pokémon* formula by reimagining its thematic concerns and core gameplay mechanics, Game Freak has created a simultaneously familiar and exciting game that may frequently surprise and delight players. Likewise, *Arceus* should be recommended to newcomers to the series because by blending elements from the RPG, action-adventure, and ARPG genres, Game Freak has created a game that will likely appeal to fans of popular games such as *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (2017), the *Dark Souls* series (2011-2016), and the *Monster Hunter* franchise (2004-present). Ultimately, *Arceus* is great fun to play; it is captivating and charming, and the gameplay loop that reinforces the "Gotta Catch' Em All" mantra is, perhaps more than ever, compelling.



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**BIONOTE**

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# PARODYING GENDER AND THE ROBOT APOCALYPSE IN *BIGBUG* (2022)

Review by Chase Ledin

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**Jeunet, Jean-Pierre. *BigBug*. Performances by Isabelle Nanty, Elsa Zylberstein, and Claude Perron. Netflix, 2022. Film.**

Jean-Pierre Jeunet's film *BigBug* (2022) tells the tale of a modern family trapped in a smart house as the human-like Yonyx androids domesticate and force humans to live under an autocratic robotic rule. The film illuminates the eccentricities of suburban life on the brink of an apocalypse. It humorously follows the antics of characters whose larger-than-life personalities resemble the plastic poses of actors on a Blockbuster VHS tape box. *BigBug* takes classic Science Fiction (Sci-Fi) tropes – including robot overlords, simplistic gender roles, and a general fascination with Artificial Intelligence (AI) – and saturates them using farce. Jeunet uses dramatic neon lights, characters directly addressing the camera across multiple screens, and the narrative blurring of the human-android boundaries to unsettle a naturalised viewing practice within Sci-Fi film: namely, the role of heteronormative gender and sexuality. Unlike other recent Francophone Sci-Fi, which reflects on the seriousness of heterosexual relationships in the face of sheer doom, I suggest that *BigBug* upends traditional anxieties about heterosexual gender and sexuality through a parodic reframing of the robot apocalypse.

Fluctuating colours saturate the house's spaces. Rich pastel-coloured walls, neon purple accent lights, and spotlights in the greenhouse are matched with harsh, iridescent lighting that follows the Yonyx androids. This polarising light is an effect often seen in deep-space Sci-Fi narratives. Claire Denis's *High Life* (2018) provides an interesting recent example, which softens the deep-space colour palette but inevitably contributes to the legacy of the high-technoscience drama of the tinned interior. Similarly, from the start of *BigBug*, this lighting contrast establishes a fantasy setting of the 1950s-inspired French home. The lighting and colour provoke levity and laughter as the mother, Alice (Elsa Zylberstein), floats about the house. But this lighting is not simply to set *BigBug* apart from more traditional, hyper-realist Sci-Fi, as in Ridley Scott's 2015 film *The Martian*. This lighting effect creates an absurd space to see and contest conventions within the robot apocalypse sub-genre.

Both the robotic maid Monique (Claude Perron) and the human mother Alice configure gender stereotypes and, through parody, upend more traditional Sci-Fi tropes. By parodic, I mean a "form of imitation or mimicry" which leads to a "doubling" of narrative and visual signification, as in Marilyn Manners and R. L. Rutsky's definition in "Post-Human Romance" (1999 121). In the opening scenes, the viewer sees through Monique's robotic eyes as she measures the increasingly

lavish romance between Alice and her love interest Max (Stéphane De Groodt). The viewer sees Monique's statistical analysis of hormones and (interpreted) emotions, revealing Max's hidden erection. Monique thus visualises the gendered stereotype of the 50s housewife attracting a man. This stereotype is then 'doubled' through Alice's outrageous performance. For a contemporary viewer, the grand gesture of seeing the hand-written journals filled with Alice's emotions and desires saturates and exceeds the boundaries of the robot's statistical analysis. The crossover of the robotic lens and Alice's viewpoint unsettles the idea that Alice's affection manifests as simply a traditional housewife. We see an absurdity that exposes the scene for what it is: a backwards looking farce akin to an alien encounter.

This gender parody is then deepened through the robots' collective effort to identify with the humans – and thus become more like them. Out of earshot, the robots discuss the increasing threat of the evil Yonyx androids. The robots are convinced that they must emulate human emotions to aid the humans in overcoming the impending Yonyx takeover. At first, the humans recognise their uncanny attempts. Monique changes her hair to resemble Alice, seducing Max in the closet. When Max discovers the imposter, he reveals the double gesture of the sexual advance and traditional gender performativity. Monique cannot occupy the same gendered role in any meaningful way to resemble Alice's femininity precisely because her android-ness is exposed through the removal of her hair and the exposure of the coils and wires within. But this scene, like the one above, has a doubling effect. It again shows the absurdity of Monique's and Alice's feminine gestures. In place of focusing on Max's repulsion and later his denial of Alice, Jeunet brings these females together through their absurd gender performances, creating a more-than-human relation – that is, mirroring Monique and Alice, creating sameness – through parody.

This gender parody is not exclusive to female-identified characters. Greg (Alban Lenoir), the malfunctioning workout-turned-sex robot, is a primary example – both literally and metaphorically – of the dysfunctionality of human masculinity. Due to an accident, Greg glitches, leading to several scenes in which he proclaims his love and sexual desire(s) for the neighbour Françoise (Isabelle Nanty). This malfunction is no mistake. Indeed, the glitch highlights a hyper-masculine trope which predominates in Sci-Fi narratives – specifically, a man lusting after the female, often through lavish sexual gestures and dialogue. It also short-circuits this trope when Françoise wilfully turns off Greg to spare herself the embarrassment. The doubling effect, here, is not only this feminist gesture of turning off the hyper-masculine advance. It also highlights the profound effect of women responding to and resisting traditional, male-dominated gender tropes in contemporary Sci-Fi films.

*BigBug* builds on Jeunet's pronounced history of esoteric filmmaking, especially drawing out unusual representations of emotion and gender. While *Amélie* (2001), in which the eccentric and mischievous Amélie plots to improve the lives of people around her, is a good example, *BigBug* takes Jeunet's esoteric and quirky filmmaking to another level. As seen in televised sequences within the film, the human-faced Yonyx enslave humans as dogs and later grind them into pâté. The emotions represented here are starkly human. Yet they are uncannily robotic, potentially rupturing the viewer's understanding of human empathy and relationships. Where the domestic robots expose their android nature, the Yonyx remain closer to human identity. But it is precisely the proximity

between the Yoynx and the humans that creates a severe division between them – and it is here the androids' learned emotions provide a mechanism to overcome the robot apocalypse.

At its height, the film pits the Yoynx against the human. The domestic robots, in turn, employ their newfound emotions to distract the Yoynx – allowing one of the humans to short-circuit the Yoynx. Nearing the end, and after watching an hour of bizarre seduction between the humans and robots, the viewer might not assume the robotic revolution will lead to the destruction of all humans. I suggest that the dramatic climax is not designed to draw attention to potential enslavement or destruction, despite the warning signs on the television screens and the floating billboards. Rather, the main narrative is built around other kinds of human-android relations. I argue that *BigBug* uses the narrative of emotional growth to foreground entanglements between humans and androids. This narrative reframing of the apocalypse – focusing not on the death of humans but on emotional growth between humans and androids – makes *BigBug* unique. It is also this focus on emerging human-android ties that enables *BigBug* to reinvent the robot apocalypse sub-genre.

*BigBug* is original in its parody of human-android ties, but other recent Sci-Fi films and television have explored love/ing robots. In the Anglosphere, Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013) and Alex Garland's *Ex Machina* (2014) are key examples of growing interest in emotions, romantic ties, and anxieties surrounding AI technologies. In the Francosphere, Audrey Fouché's television series *Osmosis* (2019) and Alexandre Aja's film *Oxygen* (2021) take an ambiguous approach to human-android ties, ultimately severing them by the end. Jeunet's film is remarkable in its focus on the human-android relation. It uses parody to avoid negating or severing this relationship. Scholars Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora (2019) have raised interesting questions about how humans map their own anxieties and gender biases on gendered and sexualised robots. I would suggest that *BigBug*, through its doubling of heterosexual gender and sexuality, raises similar questions about what anxieties and biases we bring to Sci-Fi imaginaries, and more specifically, the robot apocalypse sub-genre.

*BigBug* is crammed full of surprising and quirky imagery that upends tropes of gender and sexuality in contemporary Sci-Fi cinema. Specifically, the film uses parody to challenge the severity of heterosexual relationships within the robot apocalypse. It takes a step back to acknowledge the very humanness that emerges from exchanges between AI and humans during a societal crisis. I have paid critical attention to *BigBug*'s parody not simply to remark on its difference from existing Sci-Fi but also to illuminate how this film provides playful methods for reinventing the robot apocalypse sub-genre.

The film's parodic frame foregrounds absurdist gender and sexual relations that are normalised within Sci-Fi narratives generally – and this provides viewers with different ways of seeing and engaging the urgencies and absurdities of the apocalyptic genre. Jeunet's latest film has much to offer the evolving Sci-Fi imagination, specifically through its departure from its severe narratives and anxieties about heterosexual relationships and family-building. *BigBug* highlights and redefines the relationship between humans and androids and, in doing so, provides interesting insight into the embodied human-AI ties that make up the ever-expanding archive of apocalyptic scenarios in film.

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**BIONOTE**

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# BRIGHT YOUNG THINGS THROUGH THE FRACTURED LIMINAL GLASS

Review by Ksenia Shcherbino

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**May, Francesca. *Wild and Wicked Things*. Orbit, 2022. Novel. 437 pp.**

*Wild and Wicked Things* (2022) explores a rite of passage – into adulthood, womanhood, witchhood, and personhood – against the lush background of the roaring twenties, the restless vagaries of the first post-war generation, and bootlegged magic. It glorifies the transformative possibility of love that triumphs against all the odds, but it also challenges the silencing and suffocating rites of society that entrap the main characters in the encasement of privilege and prejudice. The book's interaction with liminality, as a threshold state, is of particular interest, resulting in a re-definition of self and acquisition of voice and action, through which the interwoven narratives of this book come together in the moment of shifting the established power bringing to light secrets and previously silenced voices.

Annie, the main character, comes to Crow Island to reclaim her estranged father's inheritance. We first meet her crossing the water on a ferry from her old established life into the unknown, symbolising her liminal social state. The first words she speaks are those of haunting: "Crow Island might be haunted, but it couldn't be much different than the rest of England had been since the war, life trudging on despite the ghosts" (13). We see Annie passing through the first stage of the rite of passage, separation. She is all alone: estranged from her father (his family name, Crowther, is reminiscent of Aleister Crowley, notorious nineteenth-century occultist and magician), detached from her mother, and separated from her friends. She does not move into the big mansion her father left and chooses a small cottage on the outskirts. She does not try to mix in the life of the isle; she observes it from the threshold, avoiding her father's friends, lingering in the shadows of her neighbour's house without joining the party. Yet her coming to the Crow Isle marks the second stage of her rite of passage: she enters a magical/spiritual realm that has few similarities to the one she left. Here, she will undergo a transformation that will allow her to return to her previous life, empowered and ready to challenge the world.

The story vacillates between the two narrators, Annie and Emmeline, a strange and powerful woman she is attracted to, and short insertions from the diary of Annie's father. The poly-perspective narratives are poised in a delicate balance between contested territories of identity and belonging. The country is ravaged by war and the gap between the rich and the poor is ever-expanding. It is worth noting the book's parallels with the Prohibition-era society of *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and its echoes of Britain's between-the-wars golden youth. It is sound to suggest that the *Wild and Wicked Things* of the title are just the other side of the Bright Young Things, the young partygoers of the

twenties who were, in their times, referred to as both wicked and wild and even vile as in Waugh's *Vile Bodies* (1930).<sup>1</sup> Aristocratic, attention-seeking, flamboyant, decadent, rebellious, promiscuous, irresponsible, outrageous, and glamorous, they could be guests populating Emmeline's parties – "all young, beautiful strangers dressed in bright party garb, their headdresses sparkling, their peacock and dove feathers wilted and crumpled [...] a cacophony of noise, the heat of bodies crushed against one another, the light of a thousand twinkling electric stars" (29). Yet behind all this razzle-dazzle lies a haunting un-rootedness and a desire to belong.

In her analysis of *The Great Gatsby*, Meredith Goldsmith suggests that Gatsby's parties were an exercise in performative assimilation, an act of passing for, rather than being, authentic: "Shadowed by the excision of racial and ethnic performance, Gatsby's parties simultaneously celebrate the power of popular entertainment and manifest the efforts of the bourgeois culture to contain it" (453). Gatsby himself is excluded from the power structure and is forced not just to reinvent himself but to perform himself to fit in. Similarly, none of the young characters in *Wild and Wicked Things* are societally authentic. No wonder we first meet Emmeline and her family at a party: the party is a liminal space between the accepted boundaries, a carnival where one can pretend they belong. Most of the key moments happen at a party, too. Emmeline and others write themselves into the constrictive world of Crow Island through make-belief and magic, societal transgression, and taboo. One of the visual symbols of this transgression is the immaculately tailored man's suit worn by Emmeline as she first appears to Annie: a statement of both her self-identification and a tool of her social mobility, as power on Crow Island is concentrated in the hands of rich white men.

The old and the mighty – the unnamed Council of Witches who watch over the Island – are not quite embodied, yet the weight of their power shapes the young generation's perspective. The antagonism between the old and the young – Annie's estranged family, Emmeline's childhood abuse, the background noise of prohibition and disapproval – breaks out into a fight for survival, a fight to reclaim one's place in the world. Our main characters are outsiders – to the system with its strictly defined classes and gender roles and to the Island itself. The old money – property, ancestry, title – gives you a position in this world. The young are only accepted if they follow the rules of the pedigree and give up on their desires. Thus, Arthur, Bea's young and rich husband, is a walking dead even before his death, "stunted and mutilated" by the Establishment, to quote Evelyn Waugh's apt description of the war generation in *The Spectator* (1929). Despite all his wealth, Arthur, with his disapproval of glittering parties and fear of magic and change, is displaced and lost. Society had broken him long before magic did. The society of Crow Island stands for the dead, not for the living. Those who refuse to die inside are marginalised, ousted from the narrative of power through the secrets left untold; half-truths invented for the sake of (self-)preservation, or lies.

Being bright, young, and full of life is often chastised as being wild, as opposed to the settled conformity of power. Wilderness is a liminal landscape, not conforming to the property, propriety, and tradition hierarchy. And as such, it is not just a danger to the established norms but invites transgression. The warning voiced by Arthur could not be less ambiguous: "You shouldn't get involved with them. Those people are courting trouble" (44). Annie's neighbours did not just have parties; they were challenging the accepted course of social interaction. Their seemingly innocent

pastime was a disruption, a deviation, a challenge to the patriarchy (young people, moreover, young women running a business of their own, and a business that is borderline illegal!). No wonder the name of Annie's love interest, ruthless and manly Emmeline, echoes that of Emmeline Pankhurst, the leader of the suffragettes. The suffragettes' fight has an indirect echo, too – the fight for independence, for a break from convention, for a right of their own, be it right to practice magic, love who you want or lead a carefree life. Using Victor Turner's description of liminality in *From Ritual to Theatre* (1982), the suffragettes' movement forms part of the liminal where "profane social relations may be discontinued, former rights and obligations are suspended, [and] the social order may seem to have been turned upside down" (27). And, like the suffragettes, the young women of *Wild and Wicked Things* are prepared to use force to ascertain their rights.

This fight for acceptance defines the two main love stories of the novel. Love is so deeply intertwined with power that it is hard to determine which conditions are which. On the one hand, there is Bea, who uses love and magic as a tool to attain higher social standing and pursue a conventional Cinderella-style rags-to-riches romance. Her doomed marriage with Arthur is both performative and restrictive. She tries hard to fake happiness and fulfilment but her non-belonging shows through her desperate desire to party, suppressed by her husband. Still, the spectacle of Bea's social advancement pursued with vehement single-mindedness is tinged by her belief in true love and a fairy-tale ending – did she play with magic because she wanted to marry the elites or because she was desperately hoping for love? Was her marriage's dark and macabre end prompted by her willingness to trade her identity in exchange for acceptance? Was her socially acceptable strive for advancement through marriage a denial of her power, and was it this treason, coupled with her betrayal of Emmeline, the reason for her downfall?

But the truly transformative force that allows the characters to be re-integrated into society on their terms is the love between Annie and Emmeline, unaided by performance or magic. Early Modern British society, though quite tolerant about romanticised female friendship, would have never approved of such an overtly physical passion nor accepted their position of strength and ability.<sup>2</sup> The limits of societal tolerance lie within covertness and powerlessness: as Martha Vicinus suggests in "The Historical Roots of the Modern Lesbian Identity" (1992), "women's deviant sexual behaviors [...] continued to be male-defined transgression dominated by male language, theories and traditions" (484). Yet Annie and Emmeline refused to be framed by male language or male power. The forbidden, unimaginable, unacceptable love challenges the make-belief of societal norms and offers the characters a chance to speak for themselves. By accepting it, they break out of their chrysalis, prompting the most violent pages in the book, peeling off all the rules that bound them to reclaim their voices. They speak up for themselves in different ways – confessing their love, weaknesses, secrets, and faults in liberated speech as they forge their own future – that, despite all the tragic events, holds a ray of hope for a better life. This conclusion to Annie's narrative represents the third stage of liminality that marks a return to a higher-level status, having completed her rite of passage. She re-joins the world as a different person – equipped with knowledge, experience, magic and, most importantly, love.



As a book, *Wild and Wicked Things* offers a lot of things at once. It plays with the tropes of Gothic romance and societal comedy of manners, though personally, I found some of the scenes too Gothic in a somehow Hollywood way. It is a defiant coming-out narrative that highlights the silenced LGBTQ+ voices in an imagined neo-Victorian setting, and it is also a steampunk re-writing of the suffragette movement and an adamant renunciation of male patriarchy. It is a story about female friendship and female empowerment and how any empowerment can taint your life. It is also a very touching and emotional response to coping with grief, loss, and letting go. But all these possible readings intersect to form a story about finding one's true self and one's place of belonging.

## NOTES

1. For a discussion of Bright Young Thing see D. J. Taylor's *Bright Young People: The Lost Generation of London's Jazz Age* (2007).
2. For discussion of acceptability of romantic relationship between women see Martha Vicinus "'They Wonder to Which Sex I Belong': The Historical Roots of the Modern Lesbian Identity." (1992) and Amanda Herbert's *Female Alliances: Gender, Identity and Friendship in Early Modern Britain* (2014).

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## BIONOTE

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# REPRESS ME NOT, FOR I AM YOUR SUPERPOWER: SUPER-HEROISM AND MENTAL ILLNESS IN *MOON KNIGHT* (2022)

Review by Aicha Daoudi

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**Slater, Jeremy, creator. *Moon Knight*. Performances by Oscar Isaac, May Calamawy, F. Murray Abraham, Ethan Hawke, and Antonia Salib, Marvel Studios, 2022. Television. Disney+.**

When Thor appeared in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) with a completely changed physical look fans met a different version of the God of Thunder. He became a depressed, overweight alcoholic with unkempt long hair and a shaggy beard instead of the charismatic hero who tries to save the world as usual. In so doing, the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) offered the potential to subvert the audience's superhuman expectations of their superheroes. However, they kept this representation of mental illness in the storyline's periphery, downplaying it for jokes, much like Tony Stark's post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in *Iron Man 3* (2013). Yet, mental illness has become more perceptible in Marvel's television series, including paranoid schizophrenia in *Legion* (2017-2019) as well as trauma, grief, and PTSD in *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (2021), *Hawkeye* (2021), and *WandaVision* (2021). Its latest mini-series, *Moon Knight* (2022), is no exception offering a centralised experience in the mind of a character with dissociative identity disorder (DID). Unlike its predecessors, *Moon Knight* emphasises the main character's inner struggle and mental health over their super-heroism. It achieves this through two major factors: the centrality of the character's mundane life and the focus on the inner dynamic between the alter-characters while they search for unity and wholeness, presenting a new kind of super-heroism.

*Moon Knight* tells the story of a lonely gift shop employee, Steven Grant (Oscar Isaac), who at first believes that he is sleepwalking. He performs a unique ritual every night to ensure that he does not leave the room. He restrains himself to the bedpost, tapes the edge of the door, and draws a circle of sand around his bed. Then, he discovers that his efforts are in vain because he had not been sleepwalking but blacking out as another alternate identity takes over his body. This alter identity is Marc Spector, a mercenary who functions as an avatar of a powerful Egyptian God, Khonsu (F. Murray Abraham). The two personalities try to navigate their inner conflict as the dual character is drawn into a battle between the gods.

The series' plot line reads as a routine story of Steven Grant, a lonely man with childlike innocence who suffers from DID and happens to be the alter of a vigilante/superhero, not the other way around. This focus was largely achieved through the change of perspective as the comics typically read from the point of view of Khonsu's avatar. The alteration also served as a shift of focus

in the story, offering a different angle for the narrative by marginalising the super-heroic element, a thing that is further emphasised by the screen time that Steven's character occupies, unaware of his superpowered alter-ego. As the director, Aaron Moorhead, stated in *Marvel Studios: Assembled* (2022): "It takes almost the entire length of a featured film until [one] see[s] the titular Moon Knight doing anything." This focus on Steven's mundane life and exploration of his blacked-out periods heightened the humanised portrayal of the superhero in *Moon Knight*. Steven is allowed to be seen as a separate authentic identity instead of the symptom of an illness. The subsequent conflicts between him and Marc continue to dominate the show's screen time, foregrounding their inner struggle rather than the flashy fight scenes in the series' central plot line.

Given the nature of the fantastical genre aspects of the cinematography reflect the conflict between Marc and Steven, visually externalising the fragmentation of character that is symptomatic of DID. When Steven is unaware of Marc's existence he suffers from blackouts and memory gaps, which are common symptoms of DID; these memory gaps turn into cinematic time-lapses that are removed from the eyes of the viewers. After he learns about Marc their co-consciousness and negotiations become visible using props like mirrors and reflective surfaces (which function as visualisers, much like Wanda's red hex). These props not only form external visual reflections of two different identities with the same physical appearance but symbolically reflect the importance of perception and reality as concepts in a DID system. The repeated close-up shots of Marc and Steven, whether directly or from a reflection, refocus the storyline on the character rather than the events surrounding them. In addition, there are often questions for both the characters and the audience concerning the reality of the perceived scene, where mirrors and pools of water are used to invert or subvert it. In the first episode, the show's cinematography utilises shots of Steven from the reflection of water on the floor. There is one scene, in particular, where he is talking to the street performer and the scene is actually upside down, shot as their reflection in a nearby fountain. When Steven is about to leave a leaf falls on the water and disrupts the reality of the characters' interaction.

This theme of perception versus reality is further developed in later episodes of the series. During the episode "Asylum," Marc and Steven wake up in a psychiatrist hospital which is supposed to represent their unconscious mind and the guiding path to their afterlife. An Egyptian goddess explains that the hospital is an imagined space. It symbolises the system's reality informing Marc and Steven's perception of their lived experience. Having this episode dedicated to exploring the intricacies of their mind and the root of their illness, while the plot still proceeds in the periphery, recentres the narrative around a character study as opposed to a typical action-packed superhero movie. The ability to visually see the origins behind Steven's traits, like the British accent and the childlike innocence, from materials around Marc's childhood in this imagined space adds greater depth to the series' understanding and representation of DID. In the process, the show also subverts the typical benevolence of gods in the MCU, revealing Khonsu's manipulative and exploitative treatment of Marc/Steven that blurs the lines between hero and villains.

Although the creators of the show and the actors in it never claimed to present an accurate representation of DID, they took a lot of effort to make an authentic one. Not only did they hire specialised psychiatrist consultants to assist with the portrayal, but the main actor Oscar Isaac who

plays all the system's characters, did substantive research on DID including reading Robert Oxnam's *A Fractured Mind* (2005) which documents the author's personal experience with DID. This effort shows through in *Moon Knight*, offering a credible and sympathetic portrayal of mental illness that neither villainises nor seeks to cure it. The show offers the system a chance for harmonious cooperation instead of treatment. This is evident in two cinematographic elements it deploys. Firstly, the moon symbol in the series' credits starts as a thin waxing crescent when Steven and Marc are either in denial or rejection of each other and then it gradually increases to become a full moon as they accept one another and reach cohabitation by the final episode. Secondly, the music reflects this progression since the series' staple song is Engelbert Humperdinck's 'A Man Without Love' (1968), which echoes from the first episode to the last, hinting at the character's past. In the last episode, the show features titles such as Hesham Nazih's 'Befriending Myself' (2022) and Frank Sinatra's 'My Way of Life' (1969) that match the characters' dynamics as they navigate their mental illness and reach wholeness.

The declaration that navigating mental illness is the real superpower which Marc possesses moves the MCU away from its previous villainous or dismissive representations of mental illness. Although, this new attitude was clearly short-lived following the latest portrayal of The Scarlet Witch in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022). Nonetheless, *Moon Knight* delivers messages of self-love and self-acceptance to achieve cohabitation and wholeness, as well as the necessity of having support systems in times of mental distress. The series represents mental illness credibly as a personality trait instead of a trope used to advance the plot. By narrating a hero's journey navigating their mental illness simultaneously with their acquired superpowers, Marvel created more space to understand characters with mental illnesses, a space that was previously denied. Not only does *Moon Knight* get to represent characters that are much more complex and nuanced, but they also transcend their material from pure entertainment to more inclusive representation, portraying superheroes battling inner demons as well as outer ones. Perhaps, *Moon Knight* indicates that Phase Five of the MCU will emphasise the human aspects of the superhuman.

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## BIONOTE

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## MAPPING FOLK HORROR THROUGH HISTORY'S DAMNABLE TALES (2022)

Review by Marietta Kosma

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**Wells, Richard. *Damnable Tales: A Folk Horror Anthology*. Unbound, 2022. 448pp.**

*Damnable Tales: A Folk Horror Anthology* (2022) is a collection of 22 tales selected and illustrated by Richard Wells. It features classic short stories and lesser-known texts from the Folk Horror sub-genre, which first rose to popularity in the late 1960s and has enjoyed a resurgence in the 2010s. The collection features supernatural fiction, including the work of M. R. James, Sheridan Le Fanu, Thomas Hardy, and Arthur Machen as famous maîtres of the Horror genre, alongside authors such as Eleanor Scott, E. F. Benson and Margery Lawrence. The tales in the anthology are presented chronologically, showing how the genre of Folk Horror developed stylistically, particularly across the twentieth century. In doing so, *Damnable Tales* echoes the mutable nature of the genre observed in Gothic criticism, agreeing with Catherine Spooner's observation that contemporary "Gothic is no longer where it used to be, but rather than lament its passing, seeks to map its new territories" (8).

Each story is accompanied by one of Wells' full-page original lino-cut illustrations, including a series of prints based on the ghost series of Emma James, making the anthology unique. What is interesting is how the editor of the collection immerses the reader into further dwelling on a disturbing subject matter through his illustrations. He depicts historical horrors in a way that, at first glance, appears as images from a children's picture book yet manages to perfectly capture the eeriness of each story using the dark humour in his illustrations. These black and white outlines, depicting scenes from each story in a simplistic manner, leaves space for the reader to imagine sinister associations for themselves. The book includes a foreword by the author Benjamin Myers whose quirkiness and humour suit these Folk Horror tales well, finding the macabre in the mundane.

Grounded in Well's extensive knowledge of the field, the breadth of the book's scope is remarkable, moving from early nineteenth-century Folk Horror narratives to postmodern Gothic narratives of the twenty-first century. Wells is attentive to the question of which narratives get labelled as 'Gothic.' He decisively contributes to the project of articulating the relationship between Folk Horror and the Gothic beyond genre, bringing into this conversation the role of the uncanny in Gothic literature. *Damnable Tales'* movement from the nineteenth century to early twenty-first-century literature foregrounds the presence of the Gothic uncanny through the development of Folk Horror, enacting what Fred Botting describes as "the despairing ecstasies of Romantic idealism and individualism" contrasting "the uncanny dualities of Victorian realism and decadence" (1). Many of the tales in Well's collection consist of what we may call the tales of the uncanny or the unheimlich, featuring the occult, hauntings, the supernatural and the peculiar to create creepy, frightening, and

shuddersome settings. As such, the author exposes the widespread impact of the *unheimlich* in Gothic literature from the nineteenth century onwards, a fact that has remained obscured by critical attention.

As many of the short stories in the collection are of British or Irish origin, Wells represents the relationship between folklore and landscape in Folk Horror, alongside the pervasiveness of the occult. As a collection, the stories eschew or radically reinterpret the ghosts, vampires, werewolves, and other supernatural figures from Gothic and Horror fiction. Instead, they depict unholy rites, sinister traditions and ancient horrors through the uncanny, immersing the reader in the dark side of folklore in unsettling homesteads. In fact, a strength of this collection is that it delves into the history of the occult and the movements of the nineteenth century, more particularly the movement of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and the cult of the soil. These movements are part of that retreat from the industrial culture, which looked for a more rooted mythological past, claiming an unbroken transfer of lineage back to ancient Egypt. In doing so, the anthology highlights the importance of these real-life movements in the development of Folk Horror as a literary development.

Many tales use out-of-the-way places and remote locations, a staple of Gothic literature, where folk traditions linger which are pagan and potentially satanic. From people in rural Wales to protagonists in New England, these landscapes are haunted by old religions and folkloric traditions. In focusing on lingering beliefs often from a pre-Christian era, a potential shortcoming of this collection is its focus on the 'othering' of non-European populations and beliefs represented by many of the early Folk Horror tales. If this collection represented the classics of the genre, which have the power of authority to associate normative images of the individual and the nation as predominately white, male, and European, then the Gothic and Horror traditions can re-conceive this power as "a spectral power [that] haunts modernity with a superhuman power of its own", as Charles Martindale argues (216). So, while this collection is especially focused on British and Irish narratives, future collections may wish to consider Folk Horror in more global contexts and expand the genre's scope.

A further recurring theme through the anthology is the adverse effects these Folk Horror topographies have on their inhabitants' social and moral identities. Simon J. Bronner observes that many communities represented in Folk Horror narratives are "bound up in the processes of intergenerational transmission and localized culture" (1). As previously explored in the presentations of folkloric landscapes and the occult, the otherness characterised by the local communities in several stories are reminders of the past. However, the same otherness sometimes expresses their society's concern about the members of it depicted in these stories as not controllable or conforming. For example, in Thomas Hardy's "The Withered Arm" (1888), the folkloric figure of the incubus represents one female character's fear of a new arrival in their local community replacing her, commenting on the restrictive social roles available to women in rural nineteenth-century England. In another story, John Collier's "The Lady on the Grey" (1951), the isolated location and imperial history lead to a complex set of moralities in which the ghostly lady bewitches the story's protagonist for his pursuit of her fellow countrywomen and his English ancestor's colonisation of Ireland. The topography of the tale isolates the protagonists, who become "cut off from some established social progress of

the diegetic world," as Adam Scovell describes in *Folk Horror: Hours Dreadful and Things Strange* (2017, 17). Scovell continues that these isolated figures are led to the adoption of "skewed belief systems and morality," which ultimately leads to a sacrifice (18). The interplay of these "skewed belief systems," isolated topographies, intergenerational horrors, and othered outsiders is a key concern in Wells' anthology that offers an original contribution to Folk Horror scholarship and an immersive induction to new readers of the genre.

*Damnable Tales* is essential reading for anyone interested in the origins of Gothic folklore. This anthology offers a dynamic compilation of Folk Horror, drawing in readers and scholars looking to explore the Gothic, the uncanny, and manifestations of Horror in rural settings. By recounting the unfamiliar in a familiar way, Wells provides a vivifying archeology of the origins of Folk Horror, illuminating the evolution of this recently popular sub-genre and the power of the uncanny to unsettle its readers. It is a good choice for those new to the Folk Horror genre as it encompasses well-known and lesser-known short stories with folkloric elements. While some of the stories use heavy vernacular dialect, making them potentially inaccessible to a wide readership, the short story mode ensures that there is a spooky atmosphere for everyone. The collection's Bibliography of primary texts makes it an ideal teaching tool, encouraging further reading and independent research. *Damnable Tales* offers a collection of tales particularly selected to exemplify the changes and developments of the Folk Horror tradition, challenging disciplinary categories and forcing us to reconsider the familiar spaces of Gothic and Horror.

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#### BIONOTE

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