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

Review by Tony Keen

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*.