

# FANTASTIKA JOURNAL

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Vol 7 Issue 1 - Fantastika Review

Stable URL: <https://www.fantastikajournal.com/volume-7-issue-1-may-2023>

ISSN: 2514-8915

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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.

#### WORKS CITED

Bloom, C. *Gothic Tales: The Taste for Terror, 1794 to the Present*. Continuum, 2010.

#### BIONOTE

**Alison Baker** is a senior lecturer and course leader of undergraduate Initial teacher education at University of East London, United Kingdom, and is module leader of the MA in Education. She recently submitted a PhD thesis on White Working-Class Children in Children’s Fantasy Fiction. She has published on girls’ horror comics, stepfamilies in Diana Wynne Jones’ novels and social class in Harry Potter and hosts the podcast Fantasy Book Swap.