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## **WEIRD FICTION AND SCIENCE AT THE FIN DE SIÈCLE (2020) BY EMILY ALDER**

Review by Fredrik Blanc

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**Alder, Emily. *Weird Fiction and Science at the Fin de Siècle*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. 250 pp.**

Weird fiction, much like Gothic or modern Horror, seems to revel in its effortless capacity to remain unnervingly relevant. While Emily Alder's *Weird Fiction and Science at the Fin de Siècle* (2020) neither focusses on twenty-first century fiction nor does it dwell on the subject of contagious diseases, its careful consideration of the interrelationship between science and the Weird finds additional purchase in the current climate of fear and unfamiliarity as it relates to the Coronavirus pandemic. Indeed, the Weird is not content to be uncomfortably suitable to contemporary discourses surrounding climate change, for example, it must also perfectly encapsulate the feelings of dread and the unfamiliar that accompany our struggle against an invisible killer, one which has made even the most mundane social interactions ultimately uncanny, mediated as they are through masks and hand sanitisers. Covid-19 once more lays bare humanity's vulnerability in a world it had once thought tamed, but which now seems more than rebellious. This pandemic is another example of the Weird, a testament to the ontological strangeness of the human condition, that is, the gradual unmooring of humanity's own understanding of itself, as well as the epistemological difficulty to understand the world around us, which now appears ever heightened, as Ben Woodard argues in *Slime Dynamics: Generation, Mutation, And the Creep of Life* (2012), that "fears of the viral place human beings in a biological ecology full of unfriendly entities" (20). In many ways, this collapse of the familiar into a concatenation of ever-shifting boundaries that highlight new, and oftentimes terrifying, perspectives of the world around us corresponds to Mark Fisher's definition of the Weird, where the irruption of the former corresponds not in a change in the world, but as an affirmation of how wrong we are in our understanding of it. The Weird, as Fisher notes, is "not wrong, after all: it is our conceptions that must be inadequate" (*The Weird and the Eerie* 15).

In her monograph, Alder explains how the advent and popularity of the Weird tale are deeply intertwined with scientific discourses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, so much so indeed, she argues, that a "close relationship with science is essential to the Weird's existence," a relationship made all the more salient and compelling in our era of climate change and struggles against an invisible, but deadly, virus (5). The Weird tale, with its collapsing of genre, ontological, and epistemological boundaries and its exploration of a universe often greater and more terrible than previously anticipated by its unsuspecting protagonists, ostensibly turns to science as an instrument of both doom and discovery. H. P. Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu" (1928), for example, points clearly to the "sciences" as the particular apparatus through which the terrifying Weirdness of the world around us can be known (139). Alder's study carefully engages with this

characteristic of the Weird and slowly unravels how the Weird fiction of the *fin de siècle*, notably that of such authors as Arthur Machen, Robert Louis Stevenson, Edith Nesbitt, H. G. Wells, Algernon Blackwood, and William Hope Hodgson, is profoundly influenced by the scientific discoveries of that era.

In her introduction, titled “Weird Tales and Scientific Borderlands at the *Fin de Siècle*,” Alder underscores the ability of the period’s Weird tale to explore “radical new forms of knowledge” that not only draw inspiration from scientific inquiries of the time but push readers to re-evaluate what is and can be known of the universe around them, highlighting the “Weird’s capacity to offer alternative, non-hegemonic ways of knowing the world” (3-4). Here, Alder explains her use of the *borderland* as the interplay between the scientific frontiers of the period, be they the first forays into evolutionary biology, the physics of thermodynamics, or the stranger ventures into psychical research and the possibilities of a scientifically determined afterlife, and the heterotopic spaces of fiction in which these discourses can be explored and their implications developed through the prism of the Weird. Borderlands, in Alder’s analysis, foreground the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of the latter, and indeed are exemplified by William Hope Hodgson’s “The Derelict” (1912) and H. G. Wells’ *The Island of Dr Moreau* (1896) which “take place in liminal locations, borderland spaces in which both marginal and mainstream scientific principles can be reconsidered and reconstructed” (165). Here Alder compellingly unravels how the history of the Weird tale is largely co-dependent with the history of sciences that in themselves were enweirded, arguing that “*fin-de-siècle* science is not made Weird by fiction, but was already Weird to start with” (5). The monograph explains how, from nineteenth century occultists and spiritualists, like Helena Blavatsky, who would “saturate [her writing] with scientific language,” and others such as Guthrie Tait and Balfour Stewart who, in *The Unseen Universe* (1875), drew on physical phenomena to construct a model of reality that “equivocate[d] at all points between physical and metaphysical realms,” scientific discourses of the period were themselves at the heart of a renewed sense of the world’s strangeness (20-21). Along with evolutionary discourses that drew attention to the weirdness of biological entities and liminality of the animal, plant, and fungal kingdoms, these metaphysical stances posited a bizarre world, one that Weird fiction would, in turn, explore, distort, and question.

The rest of the monograph is comprised of two parts. The first part, “Borderlands of Mind, Body, and Spirit” delves into such tales as Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and Arthur Machen’s “The Great God Pan” (1894), to eloquently highlight how both the scientific stances of the period and the Weird fiction that they influenced “challenge assumptions of human intellectual superiority, capacity to know, mastery over nature, and teleological centrality in the cosmos” (33). While the Weird has long been critically articulated as challenging humanity’s understanding of epistemology and intellectual certainty, the strength of Alder’s analysis lies in its thorough and in-depth close reading of these particular tales and the corresponding scientific discourses that influenced them. She unveils how these tales, much like science itself at the *fin de siècle*, disconnect themselves from a traditional view of reality as a steady and monolithic entity in favour of a multiplicity of ways of knowing and experiencing the world around us. All three chapters in this section explore how such tales expand upon scientific reconsiderations of

knowledge and the self. They contest what Alder calls a “deterministic, mechanistic, [and] positivist worldview,” yet at the same time borrow much from contemporary research into psychology and even psychical endeavours of the 1880s, which themselves saw vast revolutions “that challenged not only assumptions about the nature of human consciousness and selfhood, but also those about the stability and comprehensibility of reality itself” (45-47). Psychology, occultism, and the figure of the scientist are at the centre of Alder’s discussion. The first chapter of this section, “Weird Selves, Weird Worlds: Psychology, Ontology, and States of Mind in Robert Louis Stevenson and Arthur Machen,” as well as the second chapter, “Weird Knowledge: Experiments, Senses, and Epistemology in Stevenson, Machen, and Edith Nesbit” highlight the mutability and fragmentation of the human psyche as the vision of a wholeness of the self is replaced with “ideas of the multiplicity of human consciousness or soul” (70). Stevenson’s novella, in particular, underscores this fragmentation, yet, beyond the well-studied interplay between depth and surface, Alder interestingly stresses that Hyde functions not only as a polar opposite to Jekyll, but as the product of an experiment that collapsed all boundaries between the two and dissolved, rather than strengthened, ontological barriers.

The last chapter in the section, “Weirdfinders: Reality, Mastery, and the Occult in E. and H. Heron, Algernon Blackwood, and William Hope Hodgson” examines a hitherto underexplored aspect of the Weird tale, as it carefully investigates the figure of the occult investigator. Character such as Hodgson’s Thomas Carnacki and Blackwood’s John Silence, rather than fall prey to their conceit as other scientific experimenters often do in *fin de siècle* weird tales, are experts of the supernatural and the psychical. Through their careful uncovering of weird phenomena, whether by ritualistic or scientific means, their weirdfinding capabilities allow for a recalibration of what can be seen and understood in an enweirded ontology, the particularity of which resides not in the understanding of a universe suddenly made strange but, rather, in a universe that was always already strange to begin with. They pointedly represent what Alder argues is “both the success and the failure of positivist science to explain and contain the phenomena of the universe” as these stories “attempt to align borderland science with the mainstream” (150). This enlightening chapter, along with the rest of the monograph, delves deep into a relatively untrodden feature of the Weird tale, eloquently offering a careful reading of the occult investigator that proves invaluable to the study of the Weird.

In the second part of Alder’s monograph, “Borderlands of Time, Place, and Matter,” the fifth chapter, which I personally found was the most compelling of the monograph, is entitled “Meat and Mould: The Weird Creatures of William Hope Hodgson and H. G. Wells” carefully examines how the Weird tales of Hodgson and Wells explore the implications of nineteenth century evolutionary biology. These tales question the clear-cut separations between animal, vegetal and, particularly, fungal kingdoms, eschewing traditional ontologies that required stable boundaries in order to alleviate the often uncomfortable reality of humanity’s kinship with the rest of the planet’s lifeforms; an anxiety that in many ways twenty-first century humans still share with their Victorian counterparts. Alder’s discussion of the ‘morphic potential’ of the tree-like, fungal monster adorned with a human-like face in Hodgson’s *The Boats of The Glen Carrig* (1907) emphasises the blurring of these categories and elicits an exceptionally interesting dive into the scientific discussions of nineteenth

century biological science. The “greedy, excessive form of life” that is the fungus becomes the embodiment of anxieties of decay at the same time as it appears overly fecund and monstrously generative (178). Tales of moving fungi and carnivorous mould as they appear in Hodgson’s fiction articulate how “a resolutely material universe is nonetheless textured with wonders and terrors just beyond the limits of normal experience and comprehension” (179). The Weird, indeed, scorns the narrowing notions of ontological classification, exploring instead the possibilities of lifeforms at once far removed and yet unnervingly related to humanity, thereby further decentering the human within the vast tree, or rather rhizome, of life. The last chapter in Alder’s study, “Weird Energies: Physics, Futures, and the Secrets of the Universe in Hodgson and Blackwood” examines how texts such as Hodgson’s *The Night Land* (1912) and Blackwood’s “The Willows” (1907) reconfigure contemporary understanding of physics, particularly the laws of thermodynamics. For Alder, the elusive and unseen characteristics of energy in physics “provided a language for conjuring non-living agency and power, a discourse for talking about interactions with the more-than-visible world” (195). At the confines of Science Fiction and the Weird, texts such as *The Night Land* utilise thermodynamics and notions of the sun’s heat death to explore the strangest of borderlands, a “sun-dead abfuture,” where the intricacies of physics meet the unknowable reversals of the Weird (209). Alder’s detailed analysis highlights in no uncertain terms how *fin de siècle* research into the realms of physics unravels a Weird world of deep time and entropy that Weird tales, in turn, can explore, reconfigure and bring to their philosophical implications.

Alder’s *Weird Fiction and Science at the Fin de Siècle*, in sum, provides a detailed close reading of the interrelationship between science and the Weird tale and, although, her study primarily concerns itself with British Weird fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, much of what is explored in this volume remains relevant to the subsequent development of the Weird tale as well as to contemporary scientific advancements. It paints in elegant details the intricacies of the Weird and how the later can inform both vigorous and unnerving accounts of humanity’s own position within an ever-changing and mysterious universe.

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**BIONOTE**

**Fredrik Blanc** is a PhD student at the Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. His thesis, titled “‘In Deep Waters’: Thalassophobia and Oceanic Transcorporealities in Modern and Contemporary Weird Fiction’ explores the materiality of the sea as a Weird space and ontology. Focussing on sea monsters and hybrids as representational intermediaries between human and other-than-human agencies in the oceanic context, it investigates and re-evaluates literary and cultural discourses surrounding the sea, from evolutionary controversies of the nineteenth century to the ecological crises of the present day.