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Review by Chris Hussey

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CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND IMAGINATIVE GEOGRAPHY (2018) BY AIDA HUDSON

Review by Chris Hussey

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With burgeoning interest in criticism on Children's Literature and surrounding concerns for place and the environment, Aida Hudson's collection on this aspect of the genre and its relationship to what has been termed 'imaginative geography' appears timely. Hudson ambitiously sets the scope for this edited collection of academic articles and other contributions within her introduction, noting "many of these chapters grew" from a symposium to form the basis of the publication's conceptual direction (ix). The notion of these chapters growing appears entirely apt for this text, given prevailing concerns about the environment and the organic that pervade the many pieces included, which centre on this concept of 'imaginative geography,' that encompasses how places might be brought to life through the written word to be interpreted and perceived by a reader. Hudson draws on the etymology of these words to help define the concept as being the "image or picture to oneself of earth writing" or alternatively "imaged earth writing," with the text fundamentally focusing on how writers portray the worlds or places within their works of fiction, to present fully-formed, believable locations for their characters to reside within, where the narrative can take place, and how readers might subsequently relate to them (1).

The book consists of four sections, interspersed with interludes by authors reflecting on the writing process. While these are not in the same academically critical vein as the rest of the chapters, 'interlude' feels appropriate, and it is on reflection that one sees their value in charting the authorial perspective on textual construction relating to imaginative geographies. These sections, "Geographical Imaginaries – The Old World and the New," "Gardens and Green Places," "Fantasy Worlds and Re-Enchantment," and "Space and Gender", cover a huge amount of content within their pages, with each focusing on a particular text or texts of the genre. Hudson notes the majority of texts concentrate on the "Northern Hemisphere," and are primarily set within "Canada, Britain, the United States, and Ireland," but contains the analysis of certain fantastical locales too, including Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* (1968-2001) series (13).

The first section is one of contrast, juxtaposing the old and the new through the medium of experience. Cory Sampson's chapter examines the world of Philip Pullman and Imperialism through *The Golden Compass,* published as *The Northern Lights* for UK readers (2001), drawing parallels with Late Victorian Britain and culture with regard to the portrayal of Lyra's universe. The evocation of this era, and its inevitable links to exploration, are seen as being portentous for Lyra's own journey

throughout the novel, in a way that channels British Imperialism while simultaneously offering this critique. Similarly, Colleen M. Franklin's following chapter highlights how writing focusing on the 'North' boom after 1818, indicating the "hunger for tales of northern exploration and northern landscapes," as a place that was previously seen as perilously inaccessible and relatively unknown, thus inculcating an appetite for conquest narratives (46). She outlines the childlike fascination with the North, evoked through nursery rhymes or the configuring of the expedition as being female, which draws on key aspects of Children's Literature, including dual readership – whereby many adults would be aware of the grim reality of this romanticised venture. The next chapter by Margot Hillel feels as though it could round this section off nicely, where the previous chapters encompassed exploration from the perspective of choice, this considers a retrospective of those who were forced to leave, focusing particularly on the Irish landscape from which many people have had to emigrate. Hillel implies that Ireland becomes as much a "character" as a place, encompassing a multitude of elements so fondly remembered: "love, hope, nostalgia, longing, and patriotism" (82). The strong feelings that the authors she draws on evoke simultaneously communicate their own longing, while resonating with the seemingly similar perspectives of other emigrants, that serve to perfectly illustrate the power of imaginative geographies within literature more generally, and which may take people back to places they remember fondly, just as effectively as it may take them forward to imagine new places too.

Shannon Murray then highlights how Frances Hodgson Burnett utilised John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) within her writing of her own novel, *Two Little Pilgrim's Progress* (1895), taking the allegory in this preceding text to be one that her own protagonists explore. Murray charts the interplay between the differing narratives and their portrayals, with Frances Hodgson Burnett's characters retracing the steps taken in Bunyan's work in a suitable meta-fantastical manner, that Murray believes may convey a potential "air of familiarity" for a reader (95). Such interweaving may be more common now, but the varying ways in which these landscapes might overlay and intersect makes for an intriguing exploration within this chapter, as well as for our consideration of how other texts might playfully engage with representations in this manner. It is therefore useful in comparison to consider the following articles by Linda Knowles and Petra Fachinger respectively – where each looks to examine how Canadian authors have drawn on the indigenous histories of the nation to inform their writing, noting their significant interplay with the natural world and landscape. Knowles points to "Canada's immense and unsettling geography" and how this was tied in by Catherine Anthony Clark with myths from the First Nations and survival narratives to bring about her own Fantasy lands, supplemented with "many other elements of European folk and fairy tales" (101, 111). It is this recognition that links well with the authorial interludes in the overall work, but also demonstrates how the creation of such mythologies may spread and be similarly informed by the stories of others. Thus, as others demonstrate within the text, Knowles too reflects on how this interplay between realism and fantasy – and the blurring of borders thereof – allows for a reader to imagine exactly where such stories may actually take place. Fachinger's analysis in her chapter draws on how Aaron Paquette in *Lightfinder* (2014) "situates" the novel more specifically, while still drawing on the mythology of Canada and Australia through "nation-specific traditional stories" (122). Fachinger argues this leads to an "Indigenous futurism" that plays with a more familiar dystopian narrative,

with the intention of making the text accessible for young readers of any background (136). In so doing, these representations suggest a reclamation of a genre seen as being typically European, yet perhaps is equally indicative of a particular coming of age for works that artfully explore rich cultural histories and traditions within this prosaic form, encouraging such an engagement with the natural world and environment through writing.

Hudson's 'conversation' with Janet Lunn as to her background and inspiration for her writing leads nicely into considerations of the more ecological side of Children's Literature. Melissa Li Sheung Ying's chapter within this chapter focuses on the garden within contemporary children's books as a space that is balanced "between life and death" (153). She suggests there is a seriousness to the garden which might otherwise be overlooked, but denotes it is representative of both "growth and decay" and a space that a child may be accessing regularly (153). In line with other ecocritical approaches, helping to develop an awareness of wider environmental concerns is important – as much as is fostering "environmental imagination, curiosity, and awareness" – and this chapter purposefully suggests useful ways such texts might be approached to help facilitate this (167). The next chapter by Alan West considers the environment further in his exploration of *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), examining the interplay between the natural and built environment to contrast this with the human and the animal in the anthropomorphised characters of the text. He notes the "paradoxical" nature of Grahame's work, by making them "animal in shape but human in habits," noting the "rural landscape" that is then "cancelled out" by the end of the book (182). West's analysis is particularly astute and engaging, offering a refreshing perspective of the setting and characters alike within the text, and how they influence one another.

Deirdre F. Baker's interlude focuses on how she looks to tie her writing into a specific locality and the language choices utilised to convey this. The next chapter goes further to consider worlds of Fantasy more explicitly, starting with Joanne Pindon's article on Kernaghan's *The Snow Queen* (2000), a reimagining of Andersen's classic within the Canadian North. Pindon indicates this usefully juxtaposes the extremes of the environment with that of "adolescence," suggesting this includes "heroic love, rebellion against parents and the single-minded questing for new identities and a place in the world" (198). As with other authors, and as indicated by other critics within this text, utilising the environment in such a way offers this useful symbolism that mirrors the narrative in an allegorical manner that remains suitably effective. Sarah Fiona Winters then explores the symbolism of what she terms the 'landscape of boredom' in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (2007) by analysing the quest narrative undertaken by the protagonists to destroy the horcruxes, which contain the essence of Voldemort (215). She suggests the reflection of the landscape, both as portrayed within the film adaptations and novel, serve to showcase this boredom through the rugged, featureless vista to imply that "resistance to evil *is* often boring, and that the quest for a meaningful life involves large vistas of meaninglessness in time and space" (216, original emphasis). It is an interesting piece that goes against the traditionally perceived counter-narrative of this particular part of the series, drawing parallels to the work of J. R. R. Tolkien and Partisan Resistance that are equally illuminating.

Christine Bolus-Reichert addresses the re-enchantment of flight within works of Steampunk, exploring three recent texts in her contribution. She indicates the power of Fantasy might be linked to the capacity to "stimulate wonder," and thus within such texts has the chance to renew this for readers, particular strengthened by a genre "straddling as it does the border between aesthetics and science" (240, 241). Monika Hilder's next chapter takes this concept of re-enchantment further, but contrastingly to Bolus-Reichert, views the spiritual side of these imaginative geographies to contribute to the overall perspective that ties person to planet. It is, as Hilder notes, an invitation to consider the "emerging discourse of contemporary spirituality," with this particular linkage to the world around us (259).

The final part includes two chapters on gender and place. First, Peter Hynes addresses the "Female Places in *Earthsea,*" by contrasting those places that are interpreted or read as being masculine or feminine within Le Guin's work. Contemplating the gendering of space within the original trilogy makes for an intriguing interpretation of the imaginative geography depicted. Then, Heather Fitzsimmons Frey examines the power of dance in how it might "transform the tangible geography of the performance space" (282). The suggestion that it might be a communicative tool that may embody place represents a fascinating insight as to how we might both present and represent the world around us. It concludes with a postlude by Alan Cumyn, who indicates that much of his writing stems from his unconscious experiences of place – intimating that the interplay between those aspects of experience and memory in relation to place often become indivisible, and that these ultimately emerge through the writing process over time.

The overall impression of the edited collection is that it contains an excellent amount of content held together by the overarching theme in an appropriately imaginative way. The engagement with a wide range of fictional texts which may have previously had less critical attention helps draw the consideration of such issues to the fore, while also providing further useful ways for the material of multiple cultures and geographies to be explored. The application of theory is illuminating for awareness and future critical engagement with other texts, with the interspersion of the interludes adding authorial perspectives on textual construction that serve to complement the issues raised within the chapters effectively. This text represents a particularly useful way of considering imaginative geographies more generally, and the exploration of this within the context of Children's Literature looks to expand a new, exciting area of scholarship in future.

BIONOTE

Chris Hussey is a part-time PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge, UK, exploring real and literary place in Children's Literature. His research interests focus on aspects of space, place, and identity, in both realist and fantastic texts, particularly works by China Miéville and the Black Library's *Horus Heresy* series.