BRIAN ATTEBERY

FANTASY

HOW IT WORKS

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Introduction

Speaking of Fantasy

The nature of fantasy literature keeps changing. New voices come into the field, new traditions are drawn upon, innovations from other genres cross over, markets shift, social and philosophical concerns are different. A comprehensive survey from a decade or two ago now feels like a threadbare blanket covering some spots but leaving others exposed. And theories of fantasy developed to fit the eras of George MacDonald and William Morris or, more recently, Diana Wynne Jones and Terry Pratchett must be reformulated to fit Marlon James, Ken Liu, Aliette de Bodard, and Nnedi Okorafor. Yet the newer writers are also responding to their predecessors; there is continuity as well as change. This book is a snapshot of the current moment but it is also an attempt to read the present through the past and the past in the present.

Fantasy in any era presents some of the same challenges: to go outside conventional notions of the real, to trace connections that evade common-sense thought, and to tell lies that ring true. The answers keep shifting but the questions are pretty much inescapable. I believe that they all come down to variations on two central lines of inquiry. First, how does fantasy mean? How can a form of storytelling based on altering physical laws and denying facts about the past be at the same time a source of insight into human nature and the workings of the world? Second, what does fantasy do? What kind of social, political, cultural, intellectual work does it perform in the world—the world of the reader, that is, not that of the characters?

Each chapter of this book addresses these questions by focusing on a particular aspect of fantastic world-building and storytelling. It is impossible to separate those two activities because fantasy creates story-worlds: narrated spaces in which causality and character and consequence are inextricably entwined. This notion of a world that is also a set of narrative practices and possibilities is very close to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of chronotope or time-space. Story-worlds are different from settings as perceived in realistic fiction—though not completely different. Real-world settings and plots are always more conventional, more genre-driven than they appear. It's just that the setting of a non-fantastic story can be assimilated into and extended by our knowledge of mundane history, geography, and society. Dickens's London is adjacent to, though not identical to, the Victorian London reconstructed by historians. Looking at realism from the standpoint of fantasy can make us more aware of the choices that go into the illusion that any stories adequately represent or reproduce reality. In realism, a lot of work goes into concealing the constructedness of the situation and the mechanisms of the plot. The subgenre of children's literature known as the family story is a good example of this willed invisibility. It is also a test case for the idea that fiction cannot be both realistic and fantastic at once. My first two chapters are thus mirror images of one another. The first asks how fantasy is true, the second looks at the artifice that underlies one variety of realism.

Chapter three is about the mythic sources of fantasy: something I have previously devoted an entire book to. This time around I'm looking at the way contemporary fantasies address the clash between mythic systems. In the modern world, particularly in urban environments, groups who might once have lived in isolation from one another and thus never faced serious challenges to their world views or the sacred stories through which those world views are passed on, now live beside and interact with people with radically different cultural narratives. The integrative structure that fantasy inherits from fairy tale offers glimpses of reconciliation between competing

stories and the people whose understanding is based on those stories. Helene Wecker's *The Golem and the Jinni* (2013), for example, depicts diverse groups of immigrants in early 20th-century New York City and imagines that they have brought with them not only their foodways and family structures but also their supernatural beings. If a single neighborhood can house both a Jewish homunculus and an Arabic fire spirit, then interactions will extend from shop and street corner to the realms of the Platonic ideal and the divine. Neighbors nod to one another and universes collide, perhaps to find some sort of detente. Fantasy offers ways to situate conflicting beliefs within alternate narrative frameworks—alternate in the sense of both "other" and "alternating."

Chapter four focuses on the dynamics of story: the mechanism that impels the narrative and engages the reader. This narrative mainspring is usually described in terms of conflict, and yet conflict is only one form of resistance to the characters' desires, one hurdle between them and a happy ending. Most uses of the word are metaphorical: the "conflict" between humans and nature, for instance, is something else entirely. Fantasy offers other ways to engage us, to keep us in suspense, to reward our anxieties. By doing so, it offers alternative scripts for interaction, ways to bypass rather than engender conflict. A major example here is Patricia McKillip's *The Bards of Bone Plain* (2010), which frustrates attempts to read it in terms of an overreaching conflict but richly rewards analysis of its multiple forms of illusion and misperception.

In chapter five, I propose a way to look at the interconnectedness of literature. Source and influence studies, theories of intertexuality and metafiction, and the very notion of genre are all attempts to explain how works of literature talk with one another. Like human beings, they assemble selves out of bits of other subjectivities and echoes of other voices. My proposal focuses on one particular branch of the fantastic, science fiction, and yokes together two metaphors. In the first, literature is a book club, a

social structure built around shared experiences and an exchange of insights. In the second, texts are cells deriving their energy from other organisms that they have taken in and incorporated into their metabolisms: mitochondria. The latter metaphor is fetched pretty far and undoubtedly dependent on my imperfect understanding of the science involved. But what could be more appropriate for an exploration of science fiction, which does glorious things with imperfectly understood science?

With chapter six, the emphasis shifts from the semiotics of fantasy to its social functions. Part of the cultural work of the fantastic is to tell us that things need not be the way they are. The world could be, if not better, at least run on different principles. We generally separate this function off into a separate genre—utopia, accompanied by its evil twin dystopia. Yet the utopian impulse runs through many forms of the fantastic, from arcadian romance to science fiction. In this chapter, I look at the young adult dystopia, which became a publishing fad in the early years of this century in the wake of Suzanne Collins's wildly popular Hunger Games trilogy. Taking cues from Tom Moylan's notion of the critical utopia and Ursula K. Le Guin's sorting out of yin and yang utopias, I suggest we look for the glimpse of hope in the darkest dystopias and seek out stories that offer more positive social visions even for teenagers, who, as my friend Mike Levy used to say, love dystopias because they live in dystopia.

Chapter seven moves to fairy tales, and specifically to fairy-tale retellings by male writers. The impact of fairy tales on girls and women has been reported extensively and studied intensively by cultural critics, folklorists, and scholars and producers of literature. Important examples include Kay Stone's 1975 essay "Things Walt Disney Never Told Us," Jack Zipes's anthology *Don't Bet on the Prince* (1987), and Angela Carter's subversive takes on Perrault's tales in her collection *The Bloody Chamber* (1979). It wasn't until I was teaching a course in gender and fantasy at Hollins University, and one of my students asked where were the fairy tales for

abused boys, that I began to realize how little had attention had been paid to uses of fantasy for exploring and revising models of masculinity. In this chapter I look at stories by Neil Gaiman, Michael Cunningham, Hans Christian Andersen, and other men who have employed fairy-tale motifs in exposing damaging patterns of masculine behavior and attempting to construct more eutopian models of gender.

Chapter eight comes back to fantasy proper and asks what is political about the form itself. Is fantasy an inherently reactionary genre, as many (especially those who contrast it with science fiction) claim, or do its disruptions and revisions of the world offer something politically progressive or even radical? The trial run for this chapter was an address from a couple of decades ago that I titled "The Politics (if any) of Fantasy." In the meantime, both the political landscape and the genre have changed. I have dropped the parenthetical quibble and written a new analysis that, though tacitly in dialogue with the original speech, brings in a number of new examples and a new framework based on the idea of fantasy's particular affordances. Considering fantasy as a tool, what is it good for, and why, with regard to political analysis and activism?

Chapter nine is about what fantasy has to offer in the way of addressing fear. It may not be obvious that the impetus for this chapter, too, was political. Increasingly, fear and suspicion are roused by politicians and media conglomerates to attract supporters and subscribers and to keep them in line. If you can make strangers look like enemies and enemies look like monsters, you can justify any form of abuse—and make people pay for their own oppression. Fear turns off rational thought and alters perceptions; it can also be exciting and even addictive. There are works of fantasy that resort to pushing these sorts of emotional buttons, but the genre also offers ways to turn mindless fear into something else. Anyone who works through the fantasies of Tolkien, Le Guin, or their peers—or rather, anyone who lets

those fantasies work through them—will find new resources to deal with fears great and small, even *timor mortis*, the dread of death.

These chapters represent my usual working method. I'll notice a loose thread in the fabric of literature, start tugging at it, see where the seams come apart, and ask what that tells us about the original garment. If I'm lucky, some sort of thesis emerges along the way, but it's never something I started out to prove, nor do I begin with a particular theory that I want to demonstrate. This method doesn't make it easy to extract the core ideas for application elsewhere. Accordingly, I have added a short final chapter summarizing discoveries, as plainly stated and as logically organized as I can make them, my very modest version of a Wittgensteinian *tractatus*. I would not recommend skipping ahead to this chapter for the good stuff: the fun is in the unfolding, at least for me in writing, and, in my experience, for audiences as well. The summary may be most useful for people who want to raise objections, since I make all my claims there as baldly as possible.

And I know that some will disagree, since I have tried all these ideas out on audiences. The title of this introduction is literal. Each chapter is based on a public talk about something related to what John Clute calls fantastika, meaning the larger territory of the fantastic, which extends from fairy tale to utopian science fiction. I have been fortunate enough to have many chances to think out loud, in public, about the literature of the unreal. That means I have watched audiences respond with varying mixtures of amusement, boredom, surprise, confusion, and enlightenment. When invited to speak on the same subject more than once, I've had the chance to try out different formulations, to throw out obvious clangers, and to update references. I have also had to listen to myself repeatedly. Since no one is easier to bore than oneself, I have been motivated to be more succinct, more concrete, more entertaining. I've grown conscious of habits of speech and thought, but also noticed lines of inquiry I didn't realize I was pursuing. Two of those emerged

over time to become the core questions of this entire project: how fantasy means and what it does.

The first question echoes a title by John Ciardi: *How Does a Poem Mean?* (1959). Ciardi, a practical critic in the tradition of I. A. Richards, rightly shifted the emphasis from *what* poetry means to *how*, since any poem worth the breath it takes to utter it means both too many things to reckon, and nothing but itself. "Meanings" as we usually assign to them to poetry, are interpretations, and thus translations of the poem into more expository, less powerful language. Despite the well-known Italian saying about translation as betrayal—*traduttore, traditore*—some interpretations are not so much traitorous as illuminating, never replacing the poem itself but embellishing and enhancing our readings of it, like illuminations in a medieval manuscript. With fantasy, the problem is less with interpretation than with application. A mode that begins by denying its own veracity is hard to pin down to any truth. How can an unreal world represent real experience? What do elves and dragons have to do with the price of eggs or the value of friendship?

Since a problem is also an opportunity, I take fantasy's apparent disavowal of reference, relevance, and realism as an invitation to think laterally, symbolically, and structurally. In the chapters that follow, I am deeply indebted to the insights of fantasy writers such as J. R. R. Tolkien, George MacDonald, and Ursula K. Le Guin, as well as to fellow readers and scholars of the fantastic. I have been speaking of fantasy—and listening to others speak about it—for pretty much my entire academic life. Each of these chapters is an extension of a conversation begun in a classroom or at a gathering such as the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts. Each is full of borrowings from and unconscious echoes of my students, friends, and colleagues. Many of them were in the audiences I was speaking to as I developed impressions into more formal arguments. They didn't hesitate to pin me down or correct my worst mistakes. I am grateful to have

had the opportunity to look people in the eye as I made statements about fantasy's capacity for meaning, statements that often felt outrageous or banal or both at once when I wrote them, but which sometimes seemed to strike a chord in listeners.

If my first question is indebted to Ciardi, my second is an outright theft from Jane Tompkins, whose book *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1850* (1986) introduced me to the idea that literature might actually *do* something other than just sit there and look pretty. The word "work" might make literature sound earnest and drab, but if we think of fiction not as performing good works like a charitable Victorian but as working *on* us, changing us, challenging us, and enabling us to remake the world, then Tompkins's notion of cultural work becomes a powerful tool for investigating power and pretense and injustice and ignorance through the reading of literature. And, yes, fantasy too performs work in the world, though perhaps not in ways as obvious as Tompkins's core example *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which made it impossible to claim that slavery was anything but evil. Fantasy tends to work indirectly, just as it means obliquely. And its work is bound up in its playfulness: to read fantasy attentively and seriously is to value its capacity for fun and games. It often works—that is, does its work—by undercutting the solemnity with which we approach love, or authority, or the gods.

So I have been going around saying to audiences that fantasy does this or that, and I can attest that it does those things for at least some of the people who listened and questioned and reacted. Their nods and frowns and laughter have shaped this book. Criticism is conversation, as Kenneth Burke reminded us with his parable about learning to write critically: the beginning critic has just entered a room where a lively discussion has been going on for some time and must listen, gradually venture a comment or two, and adapt to the tone and temper of the room. With some literary topics, that conversation is pretty obscure, owned by a few cognoscenti and couched in

insider language. But with fantasy, the conversation sprawls from classrooms to coffee shops to basements where a lively game of Dungeons and Dragons has been going on for years. People read fantasy for pleasure, and they talk about it online and IRL. That is both a challenge and a boon to the academic critic—which is to say, to me. When I write about fantasy, I know I am making claims about something people care about and something about which my listeners might have exhaustive knowledge. If those people matter, then fantasy matters.

Earlier work on fantasy—and not just mine—tended toward the apologetic. Going back at least to Tolkien and Lewis, commentators on the fantastic could assume a skeptical reception from the literary establishment. Hence the need to establish a pedigree for modern fantasy: this is the stuff Homer sang and Shakespeare's troupe played; modern fantasy deserves respect as the true heir to medieval romance and surrealism and contemporary magical realism! All that is still true but it's less necessary: the battle has been won in all but a few snobbish magazines and classrooms where aging professors lecture from yellowing notes. Fantasy pervades modern culture, and not just print culture. Now it seems to me that a more urgent defense is needed to justify studying stories at all. The humanities, including the once respected English major, are under attack from politicians and career counselors and bean-counting administrators. Never mind how many studies show the career benefits—even in the business world—of studying history and philosophy and languages and literatures. There may be a political motivation behind this attack: people who read well and carefully are harder to fool. They are likely to think for themselves, and to empathize with the Other who is being so carefully set up as a scapegoat.

So how does fantasy fit into this new battle plan? No longer outcast within elite culture, it may well be the humanities' new champion. Its pervasiveness might well be the strongest argument for the value of making up and studying stories. One of Ursula K. Le Guin's short stories, "Ether, OR,"

(1995, about a little Oregon town that wanders from mountains to desert to seacoast), is dedicated "To the Narrative Americans." We are all Narrative Americans, or Africans, or Australians; we are all descended from storytelling ancestors with whom we might or might not share blood or genes. It behooves us to know ourselves and our cultural DNA. One of the oldest strands of that DNA is visionary storytelling, which is to say, fantasy. By speaking of fantasy, we pass it on and maybe give it a boost along the way.

Even if I had room to thank everyone with whom I've had instructive and encouraging conversations over the years, I would be sure to forget someone important, so I won't try to list them all. I owe special thanks, however, to those who made it possible for me to spend half of 2019 as Leverhulme Visiting Professor at the University of Glasgow, with frequent excursions to other parts of the UK and France. A majority of these chapters were tested on audiences during that stay. Rob Maslen wrote the proposal which the Leverhulme Trust funded; Head of School Alice Jenkins was tremendously supportive. Farah Mendlesohn, Maria Nikolajeva, Andrew Butler, and Marek Oziewicz offered invaluable assistance and advice. Students, faculty, and staff at the School of Critical Studies were amazing, as were my hosts everywhere I went. I have had wonderful conversations closer to home with my graduate students and assistants on the *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*: Monty Vierra, Kristi Austin, Tiffany Brooke Martin, Jennifer Cox, Paul Williams. You are all my collaborators, but the mistakes are mine alone.

1

How Fantasy Means

The Shape of Truth

It cannot help having some meaning; if it have proportion and harmony it has vitality, and vitality is truth. The beauty may be plainer in it than the truth, but without the truth the beauty could not be, and the fairytale would give no delight.

George MacDonald, "The Fantastic Imagination", 1893

Fantasy is the lie that speaks truth. The lying part is easy to point to: dragons, spells, places that never were. The question of how fantasy tells truth is a little trickier, and more interesting. I will suggest three ways. First, it can be mythically true: true to the traditional beliefs and narratives through which people have long understood the world and ourselves. Mythic stories not only delineate the universe but also authorize social structures like clans, classes, and gender roles as well as rites and religious obligations. They are tremendously important whether we believe in them or not, but they often come packaged in ways that signify the past rather than the present or the future. They reside in books, covered in footnotes and dust, rather than emerging from living performance: dance, ritual theater, painting in sand or mud, stories recounted by elders. In *Stories about Stories* (2014), I argued that fantasy is one of the main techniques for reimagining our relationships with traditional myth—for instance, trying to

move a mythic idea out of what Raymond Williams calls residual culture and into dominant or emergent culture (Williams 1977, 122).

A second way fantasy can be true is metaphorically. A dragon might not be a dragon but a human tyrant, or a desire to talk with animals, or an uncontrollable force of nature like a tidal wave or a volcano. Or all of those things at once, since a single text can support more than one analogical reading. This is the kind of reading that can look like allegory, but Tolkien warns us against equating the two. Allegories set up a one-to-one correspondence between, say, a historical event and a fantastic quest, and they are essentially closed systems. But metaphors, according to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), are ways of using one entire realm of experience to puzzle out another, as when we compare love to a battleground. They are open-ended: limited only by our familiarity with what Lakoff and Johnson call the source domain and our ability to imagine the target domain. Most importantly, metaphors carry us across the gap between the known and the unknown. Metaphor is a mode of thought, a way to comprehend new experiences in terms of older ones without claiming identity between them—even though the classic verbal formula for a metaphor looks like a statement of identity: my love is a rose, your boss is a pig, the day is on fire. All those metaphors depend not only on our recognition of the aptness of the comparison but also on the incompleteness of the equation: on the "not really" implied in the "is." If I actually fell in love with a flower or you truly worked for a barnyard animal, there would be no shock of discovery.

Many of the core functions in fantasy—which is to say, the magical operations—can be read as literalized metaphors. George MacDonald, whose comments on fantasy and truth are quoted at the top of this chapter, understood this very well. His most transparent example is the tale "The Light Princess" (1864), in which the title character lacks gravity, both literally and figuratively. The metaphor is deftly sustained from the early

scene in which the infant princess is inadequately secured to her crib and nearly floats out the window to the resolution in which love and sorrow finally anchor her to the earth. Lightness and weight, levity and gravity, restriction and freedom are running themes throughout, as MacDonald reminds us that the linkage is already there in our language but that we forget to imagine it concretely. He gives us back the living metaphor and at the same time reminds us that the claim "Love is Gravity" is as untrue as it is true, even according to the ground rules of his fantastic tale. To literalize a metaphor is not to collapse it into a tautology.

Many metaphors, and especially the ones we find in tales like MacDonald's, come from folk tradition, as myths do. Traditional riddles are based on unexpected metaphoric linkages: an egg is a box with a golden secret inside, silence is the thing that can be broken just by saying its name. Because such riddling is rare in contemporary culture, we are less adept at thinking metaphorically than our ancestors were. Folklorist Barre Toelken makes a strong case for the sophisticated metaphoric cognition recorded within traditional ballads such as "One Morning in May." Traditional singers and their audiences didn't need scholars to tell them that a fiddle and bow might stand for body parts, or that one could talk about sex in terms of making hay or plucking cherries. As Toelken says of a ballad in which a fiddle is smuggled out of Italy hidden in the fiddler's pants,

> The flap of the pants does indeed conceal something, but it is perfectly clear to everyone just what is being concealed. The concealment itself is not a secret, nor is it a euphemism. It is a culturally meaningful way of playing with what everyone knows is there.   (19)

What flatfooted, Freudian explanations of traditional songs and stories lose is the playfulness that comes from saying and not saying at the same time, and from relishing the paradox of the *is* that *isn't*.