Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene, edited by Marek Oziewicz, Brian Attebery and Tereza Dědinová

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Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene represents a major and overdue intervention in fantasy studies: in contrast to the long presence of ecocriticism and environmentalist thought within science fiction studies, fantasy has received only sporadic and admittedly often superficial attention from such critical perspectives over the past few decades. At the same time, the book is also not a typical collection of academic essays, its highly heterogenous contents including, among many other surprises, a number of pieces of visual art; poetry from both Native storyteller Joseph Bruchac and Katherine Applegate of Animorphs fame; and short fiction by both leading scholar of Indigenous futurisms Grace Dillon and magisterial fantasy scholar Brian Attebery, the latter also being one of the book's three editors. Attebery joins Czech scholar Tereza Dědinová—herself also a co-editor of the 2021 collection Images of the Anthropocene in Speculative Fiction: Narrating the Future—and noted scholar of literature for young people Marek Oziewicz, whose 2008 monograph One Earth, One People: The Mythopoeic Fantasy Series of Ursula K. Le Guin, Lloyd Alexander, Madeleine L’Engle, and Orson Scott Card broke considerable ground in bringing insights from ecocriticism to the study of genre fantasy. The three members of this editorial team obviously bring very different perspectives that have enhanced the range and depth of the collection, which as a whole pays more attention to children’s and young adult literature than we might expect, and—while covering mainly Anglophone literature—also works to move beyond Anglo-American traditions and conceptions of the fantastic, particularly via Indigenous imaginaries, a vital move for a project that aims to advocate for truly “planetarianist” thinking, to use one of Oziewicz’s key terms (58). While some of its individual essays naturally articulate more substantial or more compelling arguments than others, the collection deserves to be read by anyone interested in how non-realist genres have risen to the challenge of imagining other worlds in the shadow cast by human industrial civilization.
The volume contains 16 conventional academic essays by scholars and an even greater number of short contributions from artists and authors of ecofictional works—including Jane Yolen, Nisi Shawl, and Shaun Tan—which may take the form of poems and/or brief reflective essays. I should note at the outset that the different academics contributing to the book find the concept of the Anthropocene itself more or less useful to think with, often preferring one of the many alternative terms in ecocritical discourse that do not center the human (such as Donna Haraway’s Cthulhucene), or no such term at all; for example, Kim Hendrickx’s chapter “On Monsters and Other Matters of Housekeeping: Reading Jeff VanderMeer with Donna Haraway and Ursula K. Le Guin” concludes that “the ecology and story of the Southern Reach make a case against the Anthropocene as a concept to think with beyond its geological designation” (230). Oziewicz’s introduction likewise explains the editorial perspective: “In this book we invoke the Anthropocene at once as a synecdoche of human supremacist worldview and as a humbling recognition that the planet has been irrevocably altered by human activities” (3). Overall, Fantasy and Myth in the Anthropocene showcases a diversity of perspectives on a diversity of texts, although a few common points of reference soon emerge: Donna Haraway’s Staying with the Trouble (2016); Attebery’s own Stories about Stories (2014); Ursula Le Guin in her capacity as both theorist of fantasy and storyteller; N. K. Jemisin; Jeff VanderMeer; Rebecca Roanhorse; and even John Crowley’s Ka (2017), among other authors and texts referenced in more than one essay. Notable, too, is the near-absence of Tolkien, the fantasy author to have attracted the bulk of the existing scholarly attention when it comes to environmentalist concerns in the genre: more recent fantasies take pride of place here, and often those explicitly engaging with climate change, extraction, and other specific features of our own world’s Anthropocene.

Glancing through the index, one will in fact notice that among the longest entries are not individual authors or works, but abstractions such as “hope” and “responsibility,” the second often tied to Haraway’s concept of “response-ability.” (Haraway’s work occupies a place of such prominence in this book that one wonders if its blending of academic discourse, poetry, and parable emulates Haraway’s own inclusion of “The Camille Stories” in Staying with the Trouble.) Oziewicz’s polemical introduction and his later chapter most clearly articulate his own vision of a “fantasy for the Anthropocene” that might “assist us in the transition to an ecological civilization,” a kind of “applied hope articulated through stories” (64), but similar conceptions of fantasy as a technology of hope appear throughout the collection. Jacob Burg, for one, finds in fantasy and fantasy scholarship the potential for “the makings of an ideological resistance starter kit […] to conceptualize and, more importantly, act upon the Anthropocene” (209). Although its editors thus intend the collection as in part a celebration of fantasy’s capacity to imagine alternatives to and ways out of Anthropocenic and otherwise ecocidal patterns of thought and action, individual contributions prove perfectly willing to critique the limitations of some of the genre’s most beloved texts and authors in this arena, both historically (Tolkien) and much more recently (China Miéville in Un Lun Dun [2007] and even Jemisin herself).
By way of illustration, Derek J. Thiess’s “Convert or Kill: Disanthropocentric Systems and Religious Myth in Jemisin’s Broken Earth,” sure to be the book’s most controversial chapter, approaches Jemisin’s trilogy quite skeptically and understands it very differently from Burg, who frames it as a radical kin-making project at odds with Thiess’s assessment of its limitations: in Thiess’s reading, “by privileging our society’s dominant religious myths,” the novels “subvert their own disanthropocentrism and reinforce a Christian exclusionary religio-politics” (195). Burg’s chapter, by contrast, praises the works of four 21st-century fantasy authors, including Jemisin’s Broken Earth books, as “myths of (un)creation” that “adopt a salvaging spirit by articulating possibilities of life outside of the Anthropocene’s linear progress narratives and teleological thought” (208). While I personally find Burg’s analysis much more persuasive and am not certain that I would arrive at quite the same conclusions as Thiess—that for instance the novels run the risk of “re-entrenching the very divisions drawn in the colonial project” and “recreate mythic structures indistinguishable from the missionary Christian beliefs that have informed colonialism for centuries” (202, 205)—I agree with him that the relationship between Jemisin’s works (as well as other contemporary fantasies) with “mythic” Christian narrative structures merits more attention. More generally, this kind of against-the-grain reading strategy is one we need more of in fantasy studies, and also serves as but one example of how the collection as a whole does not engage in naïve or otherwise Pollyannaish polemic positioning of fantasy as some simple solution to the climate crisis. Burg articulates very well the more modest but still optimistic perspective that characterizes the book: “Of course, fantasy is not a magical balm for all of our planetary woes, but its ability to combat crisis comes just as much, paradoxically, from its ethical and imaginative failures as from its rich store of environmental symbols” (209).

Burg’s chapter also capably covers four authors and a substantial body of theoretical material in an impressively efficient manner, as, I came to notice, do so many of the other chapters. I suspect that the editors restricted contributions to a fairly tight word count, but the authors typically make excellent use of the length they have been allotted, whether their chapters require, for example, an explication of Indigenous epistemological frameworks alongside analysis of two contemporary retellings of niuhi mo’olelo, or traditional stories about Hawaiian shark shapeshifters (Caryn Lesuma’s chapter); or an examination of a transhistorical, transcultural tradition of imagining “oceanic-chthonic hybrids” (150) spanning, among many more, Hans Christian Andersen’s version of “The Little Mermaid” (1837), Hayao Miyazaki’s Ponyo (2008), and Guillermo del Toro’s The Shape of Water (2017). In the latter case, Prema Arasu and Drew Thornton argue compellingly that “these films are part of the contemporary search for re-entangling humans with other forms of life, including those despised or monsterized” (150), although their chapter does represent an instance where I would have appreciated another thousand words or so in which the authors could have covered the contemporary fishman’s less sympathetic precursors, such as H. P. Lovecraft’s Deep Ones. As written, the chapter can mention Lovecraft’s name but little more, and the shadow of “Innsmouth” looms large over this otherwise excellent piece. Sometimes the challenge the contributors face is simply covering a big book in the depth it requires in a relatively short space, a challenge to which John Rieder’s unexpected
piece on Kim Stanley Robinson’s *New York 2140* (2017) rises particularly well. The inclusion of this notably realist piece of hard science fiction under the umbrella of fantasy and therefore in this volume may perplex, but Rieder examines how the novel “engages in rewriting one of Western culture’s founding myths, the myth of the Flood” (137), and argues that it concerns itself with the fantasies of capitalism and capitalism’s possible counter-fantasies, such that “its main thrust is counter-fantastic, not so much in its realistic detail as in its overarching project of undermining the fantastic inevitability of the neoliberal capitalist status quo” (146).

Other chapters cover a multitude of texts and subjects, including: the striking resonance between Terry Pratchett’s Tiffany Aching series and the principles of permaculture; a complex but finally misdirected critique of extraction as a driver of climate change in Disney’s *Moana* (2016); Nnedi Okorafor’s *Akata Witch* series (2011-) and how both play and YA might address the crises of the Anthropocene; New Zealand YA author Margaret Mahy’s tree-filled fantasies from the perspective of critical plant studies; the “hopescapes” of the Harry Potter franchise and how we might understand even the theme parks to provide, in a limited way that I think I ultimately find yet more limited than the author does, “opportunities for ecological literacy” (103, 110); and the emergence of a fundamentally “queer ecology” in recent television shows that “model queer ecologies for their young viewers to learn from,” namely *Steven Universe* (2013-2020), *She-Ra* (2018-2020), and *The Legend of Korra* (2012-2014) (116-117). I would also highlight Alexander Popov’s chapter “Staying with the Singularity: Nonhuman Narrators and More-than-human Mythologies” as especially illuminating: with a charming narratological penchant for diagrams, Popov argues that some modern fantasies have begun processing the Anthropocene “by shifting nonhuman perspectivization and focalization from the supernatural to the natural” (41), a maneuver that allows works such as Crowley’s *Ka* to explore “the very possibility of inhabiting shared semiotic worlds” beyond the human (45). The collection also finishes strong with Markus Laukkanen’s valedictory chapter “Literalizing Hyperobjects: On (Mis) representing Global Warming in A Song of Ice and Fire and *Game of Thrones*.” Laukkanen deftly avoids simplistic readings of George R. R. Martin’s series that would declare it some kind of direct climate change allegory, instead mobilizing Timothy Morton’s concept of the hyperobject very persuasively in order to demonstrate that what the books may suggest about climate change they accomplish through a broader thematic emphasis on phenomena at the same incomprehensible scale: “[T]he books incorporate the logic of hyperobjects and thus render global warming available for representation and understanding” (242). Laukkanen judges the HBO adaptation to be increasingly less invested in such tremendous elemental forces in favor of the anthropocentric political intrigue to which its own new title gestures. While Attebery’s opening chapter on *Ka* and the variously anthropocentric and disanthropocentric trajectories of genre fantasy writ large matches Laukkanen’s well as the other solid bookend for the collection—and Attebery’s series of framing elemental parables interspersed throughout provide this collection with a productively disorienting character—it is Oziewicz’s writing that is finally the most forceful and indeed moving in its emphasis on what he diagnoses as “the ecocidal unconscious” and how fantasy might defuse it (58). His concept of “planetarianism,” defined as “at once, a biocentric philosophical commitment
to standing up for the planet and an applied hope articulated through stories” stresses the need for a “hope-oriented imagination” to move us towards a biocentric future (58-59). If he is correct in his hope that “fantasy for the Anthropocene can disrupt the fantasy of the Anthropocene” (58), fantasy authors and fantasy scholars alike may have a larger role in bringing about a more just and inhabitable future than we think.