Review of Fantasy and the Real World in British Children's Literature: The Power of Story

Melanie Griffin

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In *Fantasy and the Real World in British Children’s Literature*, Caroline Webb argues against the prevailing notion that fantasy is an escapist genre that offers its readers nothing more than a pleasurable diversion from the real world. Webb’s central thesis is, instead, that the “literary self-consciousness” (3) of J. K. Rowling, Diana Wynne Jones, and Terry Pratchett’s works engages and also educates the young reader, helping that reader to become mature and a more ethical individual. Reading these works, Webb argues, helps children achieve agency in the real world, “compelling [them] to evaluate for themselves both the power of story to shape our understanding of the world and the values and qualities needed for ordinary life” (4). As is to be expected in a volume that argues for the importance of the literary, Webb’s text relies heavily on extensive and elegant close readings, but it also displays a carefully nuanced critique of extant critical discussions of British children’s fantasy.

Webb’s tightly structured argument is divided into seven parts: five chapters, each of which considers a specific thematic element or generic convention, are bookended by an introduction, which frames the work as a whole, and a conclusion, which summarizes the main arguments. Each section contains numerous examples and textual explications to support the central thesis that literary fantasy enables ethical growth in the reader. Somewhat curiously, the only section to consider explicitly and at any length works by all three authors is Webb’s
introduction. The introduction provides a brief reception history of children’s literature in general, tracing the movement from moral didacticism to social concerns, and then narrows in on children’s fantasy fiction in particular, illustrating how many critics of the genre focus on the escapist elements of fantasy novels. Webb selects three contemporary British children’s fantasists to show how the genre can “make manifest the ethical power of fantasy and the imagination itself” (3) and then provides an overview of how each of the three authors utilizes art, the literary, and story to encourage ethical growth in young readers. While chapter four, which is devoted to Webb’s discussion of the witch figure, includes a brief discussion of the witch in the Harry Potter sequence before turning to the main characters and texts under analysis (Sophie Hatter in Jones’ Howls Moving Castle and Pratchett’s Tiffany Aching Discworld novels), Webb does not return to the synthesis displayed in the introduction, instead drawing extended comparisons between each of the authors in dyadic arrangement.

The first chapter, “Harry Potter and Tiffany Aching,” considers the different types of readers posited by the use of a fairy tale structure in Rowling’s Harry Potter sequence and Pratchett’s Tiffany Aching novels. This chapter, and its successors, is divided into two parts, with the first part devoted to close readings first of Rowlings’ work and the second devoted to Pratchett’s. Webb demonstrates how the first novels in both authors’ sequences “locate their protagonists as heroes within fairy tales” (24), with Harry Potter representing a male version of Cinderella and Tiffany Aching a critical reader of the western European fairy tale tradition. Webb argues that both Rowling and Pratchett exploit the fairy tale structure to make “appeals [to] readers” that demonstrate “a coherent and sophisticated vision of the function of their stories and the relationship of character and reader” (24).
The second and third chapters, “The Case of Heroic Fantasy” and “Ontologies of the Wainscot,” respectively, explore generic conventions and the roles that these conventions play in the fiction of Rowling, Jones, and Pratchett. In chapter two, Webb considers the critiques of heroic fantasy found in Harry Potter and Jones’ Dalemark quartet and Hexwood. This chapter argues extensively against fantasy as “consolatory escapism” (49), illustrating instead how Rowling “merges [the conventions of heroic fantasy] with the conventions of the school story, in ways that simultaneously allow her readers to enjoy the pleasures of the form and encourage them to move beyond it” (49-50) and how Jones’ work subverts the quest narrative to resist “the very tropes it exploits” (63). Chapter three, meanwhile, considers the wainscot fantasies of Pratchett and Jones. Webb begins with the definition of wainscot fantasies that John Clute created—that is, fantasies “in which the central characters are differentiated from humans by size and live hidden and unsuspected in the ordinary world” (76). Webb, however, moves beyond Clute’s definition to explore the “ontological justifications” that Pratchett and Jones use in their wainscot fantasies “to comment on the human capacity for self-deception and to encourage intellectual and emotional openness” (76-77). The section on Pratchett’s Bromeliad, or Nome Trilogy, is particularly compelling in its comparison of Pratchett’s wainscot society with Norton’s Borrowers.

The fourth chapter, “Representing the Witch,” marks a shift in Webb’s argument, moving from analysis of genre to issues of content and thematic motifs. This chapter begins with an excellent exploration of the negative, stereotypical figure of the witch in children’s literature and then examines how Jones and Pratchett subvert this stereotype in their use of the crone-witch “to represent their concerns with literary and social convention” (99) and to “underline the illusory nature of appearances and the extent to which stereotypes must be recognized and overcome”
The fifth and final chapter, “Resisting ‘Destinarianism,’” argues for the role of agency in Harry Potter and Jones’ Chrestomanci novels. This chapter’s discussion of Harry Potter is particularly compelling, balancing as it does previous readings of fate and free will in the series with Webb’s own arguments. My only minor quibble with this section is that Webb does not discuss the role of the sorting hat and its relationship to Harry’s destiny, which, Webb argues, “is dynamic, not static, because people grow and change” (128). This appears at odds with the sorting hat’s irrevocable decision that places students into houses in their first year and does not allow for change and growth (despite the fact that the sorting hat takes the student’s choices into account). This is, however, a minor quibble noted by a reader who wished to see more, and the omission in no way detracts from the overarching argument.

The conclusion is the only weak link in an otherwise excellent and superbly crafted volume. Weighing in at 4.5 pages, it is curiously short and completely summative in nature. This structure appears, however, to be a feature of the Children’s Literature and Culture series, of which Webb’s text is the most recent volume. This structure is unfortunate, however, as it does not allow for Webb to tie together completely her analysis of Rowling’s, Jones’, and Prachett’s fantasies. The bibliography and notes are tightly focused rather than exhaustive, illustrating the author’s command of relevant primary and secondary literature. The bibliography would serve as an excellent starting point for subsequent scholars of any of the three authors discussed in this work.

While reading the book in sequence highlights nuances in Webb’s arguments, each chapter can ably stand on its own and, given the familiar subject matter, would make for excellent selections to be read not only in children’s literature but also general literature classes. The chapters featuring discussions of Harry Potter, in particular, provide many instances of
sustained and sophisticated close reading that could serve as excellent exemplars for students learning the craft. This is not to suggest, however, that Webb’s text is of use only to the undergraduate classroom; instead, it is to point out the wide range of uses that this nimbly argued and well-crafted work could support. Indeed, Webb’s text is a nuanced addition to the corpus of criticism on children’s fantasy, expanding arguments around popular texts, such as Harry Potter, as well as opening new pathways for exploring less well-trodden volumes, particularly Diana Wynne Jones’ *Howls Moving Castle* and Derkholm sequences.

Melanie Griffin is Special Collections Librarian at the University of South Florida and curator of the science fiction and children’s literature collections. She is also pursuing a PhD in Children’s Literature at USF’s College of Education; her research focuses on the relationship among formal curriculum, girls’ culture, and children’s literature.