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**Fairy Tales of London: British Fantasy, 1840 to the Present, by  
Hadas Elber-Aviram. Reviewed by Jessica Dickinson Goodman.**

Jessica Dickinson Goodman

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## REVIEWS

Hadas Elber-Aviram. *Fairy Tales of London: British Urban Fantasy, 1840 to the Present*. Bloomsbury, 2021. 312pp. \$35.095 paperback. Reviewed by Jessica Dickinson Goodman

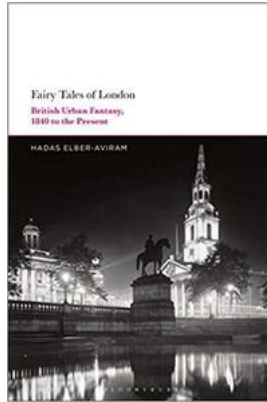
Hadas Elber-Aviram's *Fairy Tales of London: British Urban Fantasy, 1840 to the Present* is a precisely-wrought argument for backdating the origins of Urban Fantasy as a genre to Charles Dickens' Christmas stories. It traces the progressive path from Dickens to H. G. Wells, George Orwell, and Mervyn Peake; Michael Moorcock's editorship of *New Worlds* and M. John Harrison's books editorship of the same; novels by China Miéville, Neil Gaiman, and Ben Aaronovich; all authors, editors and artists who relied on each other's imaginations to build worlds where London served as the site and center of fantasy.

Reading *Fairy Tales of London* felt like opening the door to a long-familiar garden only to find the formerly singular path branching out, expanding greatly the contents and character of the garden. It was a pleasure to be reminded that fantasy encompasses the pastoral rural and the technological urban, not as an occasional fancy but as a core component of the genre. Elber-Aviram lays down cobblestone by carefully shaped cobblestone, giving her readers not only the foundations but the path to see the intended fantastic in Dickens' door-

knockers, Wells' radios, and Gaiman's doors.

It is not just London's fictional wonders that Elber-Aviram traces the authorial lineage of to Dickens, but its supernatural grotesqueries as well. For that is part of fantasy too, the underbelly that Dickens texturally layers, what he calls a "heaping up' of shadows" in a letter to Earl of Carlisle, dated 2 January 1849 and contextualized in this piece (29). The shadows over this urban path are where Orwell and Peake's dark creations flourish, thriving in the slimy decay of sidewalk weeds and the shattered bells of Blitz-bombed churches. It is in the tension between Wells' "common decency" (196) and Orwells "a boot stamping on a human face – for ever" (126), between the familiar strange and the strangely familiar where Urban Fantasy sets its roots.

I dislike when book reviews criticize books for what they aren't, rather than engaging with what they are. I can wish that London was not treated as a "synecdoche of the world" for my own anti-colonialist, anti-Eurocentrism reasons, but the author's forthright declaration of the intention to treat it as such is a feature and not a bug of this piece (10); many other authors would consider that a fact and not an opinion. I can be deeply curious as to what the author thinks of other fantasies set in London and whether they fit her explication of the urban fantasy tradition. I would love to see her views on K. J. Charles's *Magpie Lord* series and *Green Men World*, the deeply Londonish *Ankh-Morpork* of Sir Terry Pratchett's *Discworld*, and even American adventures into the fantastical topography of London, like Connie Willis's *Oxford Time Travel* series, particularly the still-heartbreaking *Fire Watch*. But as she notes in the Introduction, for this study she selected all white, "roughly lower-middle-class," British (specifically, English) male authors (3). At least she's up front about it. I appreciate that she teases that a companion monograph focusing on women



authors' of fairy tales staged in London is in the works; I can't wait to read it (3). This book is what it says on the tin: an excellent genealogy of urban fantasy set in London, with exciting and thought-provoking arguments about that subgenre.

Dr. Elber-Aviram's work to walk us through the family tree of the fantastic city, to borrow Miéville's play on words, is an important contribution to the ever present conversation on what fantasy *is* (196). I very much look forward to reading her piece in the upcoming *Religious Futurisms*, titled 'Slipping through history as though changing pyjamas: Judeofuturisms in Lavie Tidhar's science fictions' (co-authored with Jim Clarke), in Jim Clarke and Sümeýra Buran (eds), *Religious Futurisms* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming c. 2023). Her keen technical eye, clear love of the genre, and passionate precision seem a perfect match for further expanding the definitions and inclusions of fantasy.