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Martin Shaw. *Smoke Hole: Looking to the Wild in the Time of the Spy Glass*. Chelsea Green Publishing, 2021. 144pp. $19.95. Reviewed by Connor Salter

Smoke Hole is not a long book, but may prove an important one in Martin Shaw's bibliography. Shaw is a mythologist, translator, wilderness guide, and founder of the Westcountry School of Myth in Dartmoor, England. He's written several books retelling mythic stories of various sorts. Some collect rare folk tales (*Scatterlings* collects oral folk tales from Dartmoor). Other books retell well-known legends (*The Snowy Tower* retells the Parzival story). Given that one of Shaw's mentors was poet Robert Bly, it's not surprising that some of Shaw's work resembles Bly's bestselling book *Iron John*. Like Bly, Shaw will retell a mythic story, exegete a lesson, and argues that readers must relearn this lesson to solve current struggles. The difference is Bly spoke exclusively to male readers in *Iron John*. While Bly's ideas influenced numerous male development books—John Eldredge quotes *Iron John* in his bestseller *Wild at Heart* (93-94)—his "for men only" mythopoeia has been criticized as simplistic. Shaw eschews gender differences, emphasizing lessons that men and women can each use.

In *Smoke Hole*, Shaw retells three mythic stories, recasting them as stories for grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic. In his first chapter, "Something to Hang Your Heart On," he contrasts two images: the spyglass and the smoke hole. The magic spyglass (featured in a mythic story that Shaw retells in full later) seems all-powerful but has a blind spot (3). The blind spot, the "ground the spyglass can't quite access" (Shaw 4), is the space where people reflect on their stories. Hence, humans must maintain "the stories we remember, sink our teeth into" (Shaw 6). The smoke hole is what's directly above humans when they gather in tents to tell stories, so it "brings in the timeless" (ibid), those stories that humans can learn from. In other words, the smoke hole is mythopoeia—stories retained over generations that can be retooled with useful lessons for crises. Having established that mythic stories (though Shaw never uses that word, preferring "stories") can help in a post-pandemic world, Shaw offers "three navigational tools for moving forward" (12)—three mythic stories with crucial lessons.

In the chapters where Shaw retells the stories, he alternates every few paragraphs between storytelling and exegesis (in the book's second half, he retells the stories with no exegetical breaks). Shaw doesn't give these three stories their common titles or cite where he got the stories from, so I will provide information about each one.

In "Growing Your Hands Back," Shaw retells the story of "The Handless Maiden." Jack Zipes' translation of the original edition of *The Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm* lists this story as "Maiden Without Hands" (99-103). Shaw uses the story to discuss the dangers of lacking self-awareness (the miller who doesn't realize he's made a deal with an evil

stranger), and the need for successful transitions (the miller's daughter coming in and out of the woods). Shaw phrases his insights in a fairly timeless way, but with some topical terminology. For example, he observes in the introduction that the lack of hands is appropriate after a pandemic period where hand-to-hand contact was forbidden (Shaw 12). When he discusses the lying messenger who tricks the miller into giving up his daughter, Shaw compares the deceptive messenger to "fake news flying around the psyche" (43). Thus, the story becomes about being discerning and how to transition in and out of rough periods like the pandemic: "how do we move back into the world in a new way?" (Shaw 12).

"Breaking Enchantments" contains a story that Shaw titles "The Bewitched Princess." Folklore specialists know this story as a variant of the Grateful Dead story—the variant Stith Thompson lists as motif 507B, "The Monster in the Bridal Chamber" (51). Shaw interprets the story's hero, Peter, as someone who thrives because he understands communal responsibility (he understands a corpse should have a decent burial), which gains him communal aid (the grateful dead man advised him, so he doesn't listen to the sorcerer bewitching the princess). Peter's clear-eyed vision means he sees past the ephemeral—for Shaw, the sorcerer is like "these berserk oligarchs of empty beauty who sit in their throne rooms of Instagram and TikTok, starving and disorienting their subjects with expectations that can barely be met" (71-72). Hence, the story becomes not a guide for handling post-pandemic shock, but the associated isolation and insularity—"many of us have spent far too long in our own head" (Shaw 12).

In "Kicking the Robbers out of the House," Shaw returns to the story he started the book with, "The Spyglass." In Margaret Hunt's translation of the Grimms' book *Household Tales*, this story is called "The Sea-Hare" (321-324). Shaw reiterates how the magic spyglass allows a princess to "see everything in the world" (89) and compares this tool to digital tech in its capacity for abuse. The pandemic has made reliance on digital tech easy. Humans must beware of becoming "a people tyrannized by a magical spyglass" (ibid). Hence why Shaw believes people must "understand the ground that technology *can't* bequeath to you" (Shaw 93), of myth and beauty. Shaw exhorts readers not to lose their mythic stories, or "there'll be no smoke hole, only the spyglass" (94).

As is probably clear by this point, Shaw takes a narrative approach over a precise academic tone. He explains he is working from "a tradition that belongs to what you could call a commons of the imagination: the fairy and folk tale," (9), but doesn't define those terms. Still, his argument that these stories have power for today makes it clear he is arguing for mythopoeic—narratives that can be retold for new needs. As a creative *apologia* for myth's power to heal in a critical time, *Smoke Hole* works quite well. The references to TikTok or Instagram may not age well, and only time will tell how pandemic literature will age. However, Shaw's essential vision (identifying timeless mythic stories, finding what the stories can say for modern audiences, identifying myth as part of what makes people human) will continue to be interesting and inspiring.

The statements that Shaw makes in *Smoke Hole* about the supernatural (an inevitable topic when discussing what mythopoeia is) prove interesting. Shaw eschews religious imagery from previous retellings of these stories. For example, the Grimms identify the evil stranger in "The Maiden without Hands" as the devil (Zipes 99-100), while Shaw calls him "the pale man" (24). At the same time, Shaw implies several times that he believes in something beyond the physical. For example, while discussing indigenous views of evil spirits, he calls it "an odd type of egotism to claim evil as entirely of a human's own making, any more than stating we created love, power or the gods" (72). Like his statements about mythopoeia, these statements are ambiguous and non-technical. Furthermore, Shaw has previ-

ously made statements suggesting a pagan view of myth. In an interview included on his website, Shaw discusses the period when he wrote *A Branch From The Lightning Tree*, *Snowy Tower*, and *Scatterlings*, books which he calls "the work of a pagan romantic, with all sorts of problems in them that I happily stand by" ("The Soul and the Star" 1).

However, Shaw's statement that he began writing this book during the pandemic proves telling. In a November 2022 interview with Rod Dreher, Shaw discusses a spiritual journey that began "just before lockdown, in October of 2019" and led him to convert to Christianity (1). In the same interview, he states, "Myth told me everything I needed to know about the conditions of life. Christianity showed me how to live it" (ibid). In other words, Shaw's statements about myth and the supernatural in *Smoke Hole* show him working out a new view of myth, a Christocentric view closer to what Lewis and Tolkien held.

Whether or not Shaw will use explicitly Christocentric language to discuss myth in later work remains to be seen. He has expressed reverence for the Inklings—"The Inklings, these are holy names to me" ("The Soul and the Star")—so he is clearly familiar with their work. Later works may dialogue with their ideas in interesting ways. Regardless of what Shaw writes next, *Smoke Hole* looks to be a hinge point. In the past, he has written as a pagan romantic. Here, he writes as someone who was reaching for a Christocentric view of myth. Whatever comes next, scholars following his work will want to pay close attention.

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