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# "Countries of the Mind": The Mundane, the Fantastic, and Reality in the Landscapes of Diana Wynne Jones's *Hexwood* and Garth Nix's Old Kingdom Series

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## Mythcon 50

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### "Countries of the Mind": The Mundane, the Fantastic, and Reality in the Landscapes of Diana Wynne Jones's *Hexwood* and Garth Nix's Old Kingdom Series

#### Abstract

The landscape, in a piece of mythopoeic fiction, is more than a backdrop to the action- It is the story itself rendered static. The way each author arranges their landscape thus reflects their conception of continuities, discontinuities, and imbalances of power and reality between the mundane and the fantastic. I argue that by applying the postcolonial theories of Mary Louise Pratt, Michel de Certeau, and Homi Bhaba to the fantastic landscapes that are mapped or left unmapped by Diana Wynne Jones in *Hexwood* and Garth Nix in his Old Kingdom Series, it is revealed that the ideological divide between the mundane and the fantastic has been socially constructed to create a cultural hegemony for one zone at the expense of the reality of the other. The landscape each of these authors employs is therefore a judgment of the relative values of the mundane and the fantastic; while Jones finds that assignment of primary reality to either is ultimately harmful for the entire system, Nix counters that it is necessary to retain the divide if a multiplicity of viewpoints is to exist at all, revealing that the 'reality' of both zones is tenuous.

#### Additional Keywords

Diana Wynne Jones, Garth Nix, landscapes, borders

#### Cover Page Footnote

Footnote: The title was inspired by Edward Wagenknecht's claim that "the countries of the mind are real countries, legitimate to build, legitimate to inhabit" (235)

## “Countries of the Mind”<sup>1</sup>:

The Mundane, the Fantastic, and Reality in the Landscapes of Diana Wynne Jones’s *Hexwood* and Garth Nix’s *Old Kingdom Series*

The first step in reading any fantasy novel must be to “Find the MAP.” (Jones, *Tough*, 1). The map, Diana Wynne Jones advises, shows every place you will visit during the adventure: every bog, fen, and dilapidated village the heroes will be forced to slog through on their way to the inevitable happy ending. No matter which fantasy you pick up, the map will dictate the course of the narrative and the story told just as surely as a step by step account of the plot would.

Most critics of fantasy literature understand that the main appeal of fantasy is its ability to reframe and refocus our view of the real world, allowing us to step outside normative thought patterns, analyze them, and reconfigure them when they are found to be limited or wrong.<sup>2</sup> The primacy of the map in fantasy suggests that it is more than simple window-dressing for the secondary world each author constructs: the map must relate something vital about the construction of the normal, and, by the very fact of being part of a Fantasy, the construction of the fantastic as well.

Michel de Certeau argues in *The Practice of Everyday Life* that “in a pre-established geography, [...] everyday stories tell us what one can do in [that geography] and make out of it” (122). The map determines what can and cannot happen within the areas it has combined into a stationary tableau. In the case of Fantasies in which the landscape is divided into mundane and

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<sup>1</sup> Wagenknecht 235

<sup>2</sup> See Rosemary Jackson (37); Edward Wagenknecht (232); Jack Zipes 174); and Brian Attebery (*Strategies of Fantasy* 16).

fantastic areas, the map that demarcates the boundary between mundane and fantastic zones determines how the two can interact with one another.

It is not, then, a stretch to claim that that relationship between the mundane and the fantastic will be best understood when we look at novels in which the landscape engages with the divide imagined between the two by critics. Homi Bhabha argues that spatial difference is imaginary, constructed by the viewer to create cleanly defined identities (6). Thus I argue that the way in which each author I examine here arranges their fictional landscape reveals much about their conception of the relationship between the mundane and the fantastic: the landscape they use to tell their story reflects their conception of continuities, discontinuities, and imbalances of power and real-ness between the mundane and the fantastic.

Even the decision whether to include a physical map at the beginning of the work is revealing<sup>3</sup>: for, if cartography is the spatialization of ideas, the creation of the map itself is where those relationships are codified. As Edward Soja argues in *Postmodern Geographies*, “Concrete spatiality— actual human geography— is [...] a competitive arena for struggles over social production and reproduction” (130). The inclusion or non-inclusion of a map is thus a statement not only of the antagonistic relationship of the mundane and the fantastic, but of where the power to define reality lies, or ought to lie—with the authority of the author, or with the reader themselves. I will thus be looking at two fantasy texts: one which includes an actual map at the beginning, Garth Nix’s Old Kingdom books *Sabriel*, *Lirael*, and *Abhorsen*; and one which does not, Diana Wynne Jones’s *Hexwood*. I will explore what the landscapes of these two fantasies

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<sup>3</sup> Though (or perhaps, because) Jones claims the map as an essential component of Fantasy as written by most people in *The Tough Guide*, she rarely uses them herself: of the more than forty fantasy novels written by Jones during her life, only one has a physical map for the reader to peruse, *The Tough Guide* itself. This fits rather well with her claim that “In short, the map is useless” (3); she, as I will be arguing in my reading of *Hexwood*, sees a clearly defined landscape as constricting and ultimately harmful to all parties.

and Nix's and Jones's respective handling of them reveal about their visions of the relationship between the mundane and the fantastic and the reader's responsibility in defining it.

Each of Garth Nix's Old Kingdom books, which tell the adventures of a family of necromancers trying to prevent undead monsters from ravaging the world, opens with a map of the secondary world. In the north, there is the Old Kingdom, home to seers, monster-slayers, and magic; in the south, at the very bottom of the map, Ancelstierre, modern, mechanistic, and magicless.

In contrast, Jones's *Hexwood* includes no map. However, the characters are constantly attempting to create maps of the multiple mundane and fantastic zones they move between, erecting mental barriers at likely places in the landscape to assert some degree of control over their world. Though neither work has had much critical attention in general, and none on the topic of their respective landscapes, I argue that each author masterfully uses borders and landscapes to create almost post-colonial criticism on the relationship of the mundane and the fantastic. Through her exploration of her ephemeral borders and non-mapped landscape, Jones argues that the divide between the mundane and the fantastic has been socially constructed in such a way as to create a cultural hegemony of the mundane that is ultimately harmful for the entire system. A reading of Nix's manipulation of his divided landscape, on the other hand, reveals that while he recognizes that the divide between the mundane and fantastic zones is socially constructed, he counters that it is necessary to retain distinct mundane and fantastic zones if a multiplicity of viewpoints and ideas are to exist.

Before moving any further, it is imperative that I discuss terminology. As I am using and redefining several terms, both from fantasy criticism and from other branches of literary theory, I

must define those terms now if you are to understand what I mean by terms like “mundane”, “Fantastic”, “Secondary and Primary Worlds” and “zones.”

Joseph Campbell provides a neat foundation for the creation of viable definitions for the fantastic and the mundane when he divides fantasy literature and folklore into “the divine and the human [...] different as life and death, as day and night”(217). His dialectic is that of Gods versus humans, the supernatural versus the natural. However, though this does diametrically oppose the two, the bulk of fantasy literature does not uphold such clean distinctions. Early critics who grappled with the task of defining the fantastic encountered great difficulty in concisely doing so.<sup>4</sup> Later critics pulled from their attempts a single, unifying principle: the fantastic is that which is, in the broadest of terms, ‘other’ to the real world the reader lives in.<sup>5</sup>

However, while the idea of the fantastic as other than real conveys much of the tension surrounding the relationship of the fantastic to the mundane in these books, it does not provide a useful rubric for identifying part of a landscape as specifically fantastic. To that end I have condensed the following two part rubric for identifying fantastic zones in fantasy literature from the strategies of Todorov, Jackson, Brian Attebery and Kathryn Hume:

1. Magical. That which is impossible according to the laws of nature of the reader’s own world must be present within the borders of the fantastic zone.
2. Unfamiliar. The fantastic zone must defamiliarize the world in which the reader lives.

These traits will be used to identify a zone as fantastic in the paper to come.

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<sup>4</sup> Rosemary Jackson includes a twenty-page discussion of various extant approaches before suggesting that the fantastic is “that which cannot be said, that which evades articulation or that which is represented as ‘unreal’ or ‘untrue’” (37), while Tzvetan Todorov defines the fantastic as “the im-possible, the un-real, the nameless, formless, shapeless un-known, in-visible” (26).

<sup>5</sup> Michael Saler, defines the fantastic as the “the residual, subordinate ‘other’” (9); Colin Manlove calls it “departure from consensus reality” (21); and William Senior makes it “the seemingly impossible[...] the marvelous and uncanny” (116).

As the fantastic is ‘other’ to a non-fantastic place, the traits that provide a rubric for the definition of the fantastic area must be matched by a list defines its antagonist, the mundane zone.<sup>6</sup> The mundane zone is, therefore:

1. Non-magical. The natural laws of this zone are the laws of the reader’s own world.
2. Familiar. These zones require very little set-up and are unremarkable to the point of disinterest on the part of the text itself.

Having defined the divide in the landscape, I must explain my use of the term ‘zones’ over more commonly used phrases.

Though term ‘world’ has a long history in the field of fantasy literary criticism<sup>7</sup> both as a tool for discussing narratives that travel between realistic and fantastic settings, and as a way to acknowledge the legitimacy of imagined worlds,<sup>8</sup> it does not convey all that I need it to about the mundane and fantastic locations of these texts. Many critics have encountered this difficulty<sup>9</sup>; Given its creation by Tolkien to differentiate between the world of the reader and the world of fiction, it is hardly surprising that ‘world’ has proven too broad a term for close reading a fictive landscape alone.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The choice of ‘mundane’ to describe the nonfantastic zone is the result of the combination of Senior’s argument that “A fantasy world cannot be concomitantly mundane and fascinating” (100) and the realization that the terms most often used (‘The fields we know’ (used by Ekman, Attebery, and Mendlesohn), Manlove’s ‘consensus reality’, and Campbell’s ‘human world’) are either too cumbersome or ill-suited for accurately describing the landscapes of the novels I am looking at.

<sup>7</sup> Colin Manlove remarks “the basic problem [...] seems to be one of distance, distance between the ‘real’ world and fantastic worlds” (258); Mark Wolf argues “the nature of the borders separating a secondary world from the Primary World depends on the secondary world’s location and size” (23); and Ruth Bottigheimer claims “in these tales magic often operates from a parallel world” (1).

<sup>8</sup> Wagenknecht argues “The countries of the mind are real countries, legitimate to build, legitimate to inhabit” (235); one of the central issues being argued is thus how ‘real’ the fantastic actually is, beyond the internal coherence that Manlove argues constitute the realness of fantasy (260).

<sup>9</sup> Maria Nikolajeva uses ‘realm’ interchangeably with ‘world’, Brian Attebery utilizes ‘country’ and ‘world’ in the same sentence, and Joseph Campbell uses ‘land’ and ‘world’ to refer to parts of the same landscape in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

<sup>10</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien defined and popularized the terms “Primary and Secondary Worlds” in his essay “One Fairy Stories,” where ‘primary world’ refers to our world, that is, to the world of the reader and author, and the “secondary world” refers to that which the author creates.

I have therefore imported post-colonial and spatial theory into fantasy criticism to discuss these landscapes. The most important of these imports is the term ‘zone’, which I will use to describe the mundane and fantastic parts of each fictive landscape. “Contact zones”, or “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt 334) are uniquely suited to describe the geographically distinct fantastic and mundane areas on the landscapes I shall be discussing, as they encompass not only the spatial aspect of these areas but the ideological tension between the two that Nix and Jones are exploring in their respective works.

Indeed, as Certeau argues that the spatial aspect of any narrative consists of the interplay of “places”<sup>11</sup> and “spaces,”<sup>12</sup> it is apparent that although at first glance the secondary worlds of Nix and Jones are not post-colonial, they are. Quite apart from the antagonistic relationship between the mundane and the fantastic conceived of by critics<sup>13</sup>, both Nix and Jones construct contact zones of mundane and fantastic places in order to explore the relationship of the mundane and the fantastic. The use of the term ‘zone’ thus conveys the active antagonistic undercurrent to the relationship of the mundane and fantastic zones in Nix’s and Jones’s landscapes. Their narratives “carry out a labour that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places” (118); Jones by taking well-defined and separate mundane and fantastic zones and breaking down their borders until they become one new, overlapping and improper real space; Nix by reconstructing the borders he demolishes, making each zone a separate ‘place’ again in accordance with his vision of the relationship between the mundane and the fantastic.

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<sup>11</sup> Locations within which everything is ordered into a “‘proper’ and distinct location [...]it defines” (Certeau 117)

<sup>12</sup> “Composed of intersections of mobile elements” (117), the place made active, and thus, unstable.

<sup>13</sup> As Manlove argues, “one side comes to dominate the other” (258). The two zones are positioned to privilege the mundane and render the fantastic secondary: “At the story’s end the hero returns to reality [...] one devoid of magic” (Bettelheim 63).



The path each of these authors takes is a judgment of the value of intersection of ideas, Jones's choice to create a space out of places an assertion that the intersection is most useful, and Nix's creation of places out of spaces a rebuttal in favor of juxtaposition.

I will begin my discussion with Diana Wynne Jones's novel *Hexwood*. Though Jones's work is no stranger to critical attention,<sup>14</sup> when *Hexwood* is discussed at length, its complicated border politics are often set aside in favor of discussions of story-telling (Hixon 251), or the ways in which it blends genres or time (Mendlesohn, *Diana*, 41, 57), despite the fact that Jones's tendency to "[crosshatch] her worlds in ways that intensify their connection" (80) is recognized and investigated in some of her other books.

This is an especially egregious oversight given that in *Hexwood* Diana Wynne Jones has created a complex interlacing of fantastic and mundane zones. The book opens on an intergalactic Empire ruled by a corrupt oligarchy of 'Reigners'. It then follows the heroine, Ann, into a fantastic forest with both robots and dragons, moves yet again into her recognizably modern English town, and then spends the remainder of the novel shifting its focus between these three seemingly distinct and bordered settings, only to break the fantastic forest zone into two parts near the middle: the naturally-magical Wood and the technologically-magical Bannus. In a final twist, the novel ends with the revelation that both the (seemingly mundane) English market town and parts of the intergalactic empire were inside the fantastic Bannus-space the entire time, and moreover, that the naturally-magical Wood existed in all zones.

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<sup>14</sup> See: Mendlesohn, *Diana Wynne Jones: Children's Literature and the Fantastic Tradition*; Campbell, "Portals Between Then and Now: Susan Cooper, Alan Gardner, Diana Wynne Jones, Neil Gaiman, and Jonathon Stroud", *Portals of Power*; Hixon, "'Whose Woods These Are I Think I Know': Narrative Theory and Diana Wynne Jones's *Hexwood*", *Telling Children's Stories: Narrative Theory and Children's Literature*; Spragg, "True Dreams: The Fantasy Fiction of Diana Wynne Jones", *The Lion and the Unicorn*; Butler, *Four British Fantasists: The Children's Fantasy of Penelope Lively, Alan Garner, Diana Wynne Jones, and Susan Cooper*; Humble, "The Rewards of Intertextuality: The Mythic Dimensions of the Works of Diana Wynne Jones." *Pied Piper* 2005.

Jones's proliferation of mundane and fantastic zones as the text continues, and their increasing levels of overlap with each other, is a fascinating choice. As a careful read of Farah Mendelsohn's influential *Rhetoric's of Fantasy* reveals, it is easy to assume that the mundane and fantastic zones of a fantastic landscape will act like Certeau's solid and distinct 'places' (117). By including five zones with varying degrees of mundane or fantastic traits, Jones immediately challenges such a straightforward conception of the relationship of the mundane and the fantastic. Instead of transforming "places into spaces or spaces into places" (Certeau 118), she has begun by denying the title of "place" to either the mundane or the fantastic, as neither has been given a wholly "proper" place that "excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location" (117).

Furthermore, a closer look at the ways Jones's zones interact with each other along their borders reveals that they have been specifically constructed to upset the balance of power between mundane and fantastic zones, and in so doing cause us to question whether we can ever truly know what is 'mundane' or 'fantastic'. A close reading of the fluctuating borders and overlapping zones in *Hexwood* thus reveals that demolishing the notion of borders between the mundane and the fantastic, and with them, the idea of the superiority of the mundane, is the root of fully understanding the world. The landscape, Jones argues, is continuous, and any border wishful thinking which cannot reflect the lived experience of the mundane and the fantastic.

A comparison of the pay-offs of either constantly asserting immutable difference between mundane and fantastic zones or evolving one's understanding of the nature of the borders and thus, the complex relationship between the fantastic and mundane, makes it obvious that in Jones's estimation proper understanding of the continuous landscape of fantastic and mundane zones is necessary to create a better future. Faced with the sudden strangeness of walking out of

her ordinary British town into a wood where children can be created out of puddles of blood and clothes summoned from thin air, Ann proclaims to Mordion that “This whole wood isn’t real. You’re not real [...] Well, only *half* real. And stop looking at me like that just because I am telling you the truth. You think you’re a magician with god-like powers, when I know that you are just a man in a camel hair coat” (56-57). In expressing her belief in the reality of her own perception over Mordion’s, Ann reveals a set conception of ‘reality’. According to her speech, Mordion can be real, and true, or he can be fantastic, and false; he cannot be both a man in a camel-hair coat and a magician at the same time. Ann is quite certain that she knows what is real (men in camel hair coats) and what isn’t (magic) based on her belief in the reality of Wood Street. For her, the title “real” is limited to what is familiar: the “deliciously normal, wholesomely humdrum [...] safely gray” (106) world of the little market street with its greengrocers and cars and houses, and anything else is fantastic, and thus unreal.

Ann’s belief in the unequal balance of reality between the fantastic and the mundane is even more apparent in her hunt for a physical divide on the landscape that would legitimize her reading of the mundane and the fantastic as entirely separate zones. As she moves back and forth between her meetings with Mordion in the Wood and her life as Ann the greengrocer’s daughter, she “kept a careful lookout to see just when [...] the wood changed” (230) from “just trees round a small muddy stream” (20) to “peaceful arcades of greenness” (36). She is fixated on ‘catching’ the physical marker of the border she assumes must exist in the landscape she is crossing, so that she may pinpoint the exact moment she crosses from the mundane zone into the fantastic. And, as the marker she has chosen for her possible border is a “yellow pretzel bag stuck in the hollow tree” (230), a piece of everyday, familiar trash, it is apparent that in searching for the border she is hoping to assert the reality and power of the mundane zone over that of the fantastic. If the bag

were the border, it would be clear that the mundane zone determined the location of the fantastic rather than both zones existing with equal inherent realness.

She is thus revealed to be just as limited in her approach to the fantastic and the mundane at the beginning of the novel as the Reigners she ultimately replaces. Reigner One cheated his way into power a thousand years before by “grasping [the Bannus] in his arms before [its] programs commenced” (437). As the Bannus’ primary programming “makes use of a field of theta-space to give you live-action scenarios of any set of facts and people you are to feed into it” (9), he cheats, and by extension, his co-rulers cheat, by refusing to navigate the plethora of zones that the Bannus’ programming sets up, by denying the reality of the layered fantastic zones.

The fact that this is very much the wrong way to approach the mundane and the fantastic is made apparent when we look more closely at the fates of those who do not accept the reality of a multiplicity of zones. The people who believe most strongly that they can locate a physical divide between the fantastic zone of the Bannus and the mundane zone of Earth are the most easily victimized by the movement between zones. As Reigner One, leader of the oligarchy that cheated their way to power a millennium prior, congratulates himself on deducing that the “Bannus field’s spread during the night”(321) after he sees his companions Vierran and Reigner Three disappear long before reaching the place his technology said the border was the night before, “he did not see the trees appear behind him, softly springing into existence at intervals along Wood Street [...]Then there was nothing but forest, and old leaves carpeted the ground” (321). Thinking himself aware of where the ‘physical border’ was after seeing his companions walk into it, he does not manage to gain any degree of control over his experience of the fantastic as a result.

Instead, he seems rather to have lost control, as he is unable to recognize his deception. As “Reigner One paced on obliviously, breathing out smoke, considering his enemy” (323) following his entrance into the fantastic zone, it is obvious that he is entirely duped into believing that the fantastic zone is the true reality. Never in the following chapters does he express surprise at his form, or notice that he can suddenly breathe fire. He simply accepts that he can, as if he always could- as if no other reality could ever have existed for him. By the common real-world wisdom that a prepared mind is not easily surprised, Reigner One ought to have been far harder to trick than Vierran and Reigner Three. He was aware of the border and of the power the Bannus had to reshape reality. Vierran’s deception into believing that she is Ann upon entering the field is much more understandable than Reigner One’s deception into believing himself a dragon, given that she had no knowledge of where the border ought to be. She and Reigner Three simply disappear into the field mid-conversation (320), taken by surprise by the movement of the border of the fantastic zone.

However, it is exactly his belief in his knowledge of where the borders were between the fantastic and mundane zones that allowed him to get so thoroughly caught. His shift into fully believing in the reality of the fantastic zone reveals that the danger is not in not believing in the fantastic, but in privileging one zone over another— in setting up the imbalance of power that marks postcolonial landscapes. Reigner Four, who also arrives in Wood Street with a preconceived notion of the superiority of mundane zone over the fantastic zone, is easily pulled into the narrative that Bannus assigns him. Four does not question that the operations area he finds himself in after hopping the fence outside the Hexwood Farm facility is part of the ‘real world’, and as a result finds himself “riding a horse down a long green glade in a forest” (195) instead of walking to the end of a “record stack straight behind [him]” (193) to claim the Bannus.

He becomes trapped in a his delusion of himself as court champion as a result of his inability to acknowledge layering of zones. When Four leaves one of the fantastic zones (the Wood) and enters what appears to be the mundane world of the English market-street on a food raid, he does not notice that his medieval attire and manners are wildly different from the world the so-called “peasants” live in (242). His delusion into his role is predicated on his unwillingness to recognize that other zones, and thus, other roles, might be as real as the one with which he personally identifies. Taken into the reality of the fantastic Bannus zone, he disavows any other reality he was a part of and accepts only the one he is inside of as true. Thus his ultimate death in Reigner One’s new draconic jaws is the product of his and Reigner One’s mutual inability to grow to recognize that multiple layers of reality are at work. The Reigners, because of their steady belief in their ability to tell the mundane from the fantastic zones, and their belief that their own conception of what is real is the correct vision, are completely unprepared for the reality of the dangers of the fantastic zone. They fail because they are unable to acknowledge the possibility of the reality of each of the zones they pass into.

It would seem from this that Vierran/ Ann’s instatement as a new leader for a better, less corrupt system of government at the end of the novel is a terrible mistake, as she not only falls into the same problem of limiting reality to her own perspective as the Reigners before her, but also forgets who she was in the reality of the Reigner Homeworld in favor of the identity the fantastic zone provides. While the Bannus says that it chooses Vierran as one of the new heads of the government at the end of the novel because she is “very hard to deceive” (435), she spends over half the novel believing that she is not twenty-one year old Vierran Guarranty, aspiring rebel and costuming expert on the Reigner Homeworld, but is instead twelve-year-old Ann Stavely from Earth, the chronically ill daughter of a greengrocer. She has deceived herself as to

her own reality just as thoroughly as the Reigners. She would therefore seem to be no more cognizant of the multiplicity of realities that goes along with the multiplicity of zones than the Reigners are.

However, while Vierran does start in the same mentality as the Reigners, she demonstrates an ability to learn and recognize overlapping levels of reality as she goes, acquiring knowledge of the complex nature of her world as she moves between zones. For most of the third section of the book Vierran-as-Ann is stuck in a loop designed to dismantle the notion that Ann knows where the dividing line between the mundane and the fantastic actual is. Ann ‘enters’ the wood three times, passing by the same empty yellow pretzel bag on her way to the river each time without seeming to notice that she has already done so or ever passing it on an outward journey (112, 117, 128). Though it is obvious to the reader that something is afoot here, Ann is unaware.

She does not, however, long remain so. Ann begins to question whether the border is where she believes it to be quite soon after this repetitive scene. When she is told by her brother Martin that he has seen someone who looks suspiciously like Yam, a robotic inhabitant of the fantastic zone, enter the fantastic zone from mundane Wood Street, Ann wonders whether “the field was getting larger” (142). Though she still believes in the distinction of zones, she has begun to accept that they may not be static and unchanging places. Ann demonstrates further acceptance of the possibility that her own perception of what is real could be flawed when she laughingly notes that “the cunning Bannus had caused her to miss noticing just where its field started yet again” (234) after she finds herself in a recognizably fantastic zone unexpectedly. While she is still sufficiently enamored of the idea of a concrete division between the two to assume that a border is there for her to find at all, the fact that she is attributing agency to the

Bannus reveals that she has begun to accept the fantastic as being a “space [...] composed of intersections of mobile elements” (Certeau 117) that she can move around within, rather than a static and lifeless “place” that insists on stillness (117). The fantastic zone is becoming real to her.

This scene also signals that she has begun to reject the hierarchy of realities she had created in her own mind. Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture* that “the borderline arrangements of cultural difference may [...] challenge normative expectations” (3). The most vaguely defined areas are, by his reading, the most productive of culture, inviting by their very liminality recognition of the fact that binary identities are socially constructed by the imposition of hierarchies rather than reflective of inherent divisions in the world. Vierran’s more hesitant approach to the notion of the border between the mundane and the fantastic is a recognition on her part that while a border is a symbol of the divide between spaces, the one she is searching for does not necessarily reflect pre-given identities as mundane or fantastic places. Her yellow bag is an imposition of her own preferred hierarchy rather than an expression of reality.

Ann’s evolution from belief in clearly differentiated zones of the mundane and the fantastic that correspond to reality and unreality into acceptance of the reality of multiple fantastic and mundane zones is thus predicated on her recognition that her search for a border masked the continuities between the mundane and the fantastic. The very next time Ann appears in the narrative after her recognition of the Bannus as an actively real space, she chides a distraught Mordion, “After all, what’s real? How do you know I’m real or if you are?” (235). Having been taught by her own experience trying to navigate the zones the impossibility of mapping borders that segregate the mundane from the fantastic entirely, Ann revises her opinions



about the unreality of the fantastic. This is a very different Ann from the one who asserted that Mordion could either be a magician or a man in a camel hair coat, not both.

As she is not only able to assert the impossibility of knowing what is real in the fantastic zone, but in the mundane zone of Wood Street as well, it seems obvious that Ann has been led by her recognition of her inability to correctly identify the fantastic and mundane zones to accept that her own vision of reality is not correct. When she returns to Wood Street following her speech about reality to Mordion, she notices that the behavior of her parents, who she had earlier asserted “belong to the real world somehow” (241), falls suspiciously in line with that generated by the Bannus (247). As the next time we see Vierran/ Ann chronologically is also when she remembers that she is Vierran Guaranty, it is apparent that Ann’s recognition of the reality of multiple zones has broken the illusion. Her acknowledgment of her inability to assign ultimate reality to any one zone after experiencing the inherent reality of the multiple zones of *Hexwood* differentiates her from the Reigners.

Furthermore, as Vierran is the one to “break the illusion”(332) on each of the other characters who remembers who they truly are at the climax of the novel, and as she is made the second of the new Reigners despite her lack of participation in the final battle against the Reigners, it is apparent that her development of the ability to believe in multiple overlapping realities at once, all of which combine the mundane and the fantastic, is necessary for the creation of an optimistic political future. It must be *Ann* who lectures *Mordion* on what is real, rather than the other way around. Though they will both be chosen to be part of the replacement government because of their “strength of will” (348), though it is Mordion who tells Ann on their ‘first’ meeting in the Wood that they are inside of “quite a large hemisphere of a certain kind of force that has the power to change reality” (45), only the person who has been moving between zones

of mundane and fantastic area is able to discover that what is 'real' is not as apparent as we think. Though Mordion would seem to already recognize that the fantastic zones have more than just the internal realism Colin Manlove argues is tantamount for the creation of believable fantasy (260), he is unable to fully understand what that means. Only Ann, who has not only moved between zones, but has noticed and accepted that her own perception of the changes or lack of changes as she moves through physical space do not accurately reflect the fluid inscription of zones upon the landscape, can end the narrative eucatastrophically by bringing others to the same understanding she has reached. In throwing out her conception of the reality differential between the different zones, in resisting the colonial urge to create a hegemony that privileges the reality of one zone over the other, she succeeds.

Jones thus uses her layered landscape in *Hexwood* to suggest that the divide between the mundane and the fantastic erected by critics is itself unreal, for it denies the reality of the fantastic. *Hexwood* is an assertion that subcreations have an inherent reality, above and beyond their origins in our own minds, that must be accepted to create a better world. The fantastic and the mundane are a continuum, always bleeding into each other. To create eucatastrophe, we must give up trying to create a map that by its very nature denies an important part of reality, dooming its inhabitants to a less than ideal existence.

However, while Jones's conclusions about the connected nature of the mundane and the fantastic are fascinating, they do not offer the only possible insight into the relationship of the mundane and the fantastic that fantasy literature has to offer. Jones has taken the idea that the border is a social construct which imposes potentially harmful binaries on naturally cohesive systems (MaManzanas 11) and suggested that these borders and zones do not just create cultural

hegemony, but ideological systems that are ultimately harmful to the zone that seems to be privileged by the division.

Garth Nix, on the other hand, offers a different vision in his Old Kingdom books.<sup>15</sup> A close reading of the landscape of Nix's Old Kingdom Series reveals that though the mundane zone is not more 'real' than the fantastic, the border between the two is wholly necessary as the fantastic is far more dangerous to the mundane than the mundane is to the fantastic. The divide that has been erected between the two is thus a defensive mechanism, protecting the mundane zone and the identities within it from total annihilation.

As in *Hexwood*, a close reading of the landscape of the Old Kingdom Series reveals that the mundane zone is not more real than the fantastic. Each of the books in the series opens with a map showing a single continent that has been divided into two zones by the Wall.<sup>16</sup> The northern zone, called "The Old Kingdom," is assuredly fantastic; the southern zone, Ancelstierre, is presented as being magicless, scientific, and thus, by my definition, mundane. Certeau argues that "maps, constituted as proper places in which to *exhibit the products* of knowledge, form tables of *legible* results" (121). Nix's inclusion of a map of his world at the beginning of each text, a map, moreover, which reveals his landscape to be divided into mundane and fantastic zones, suggests from the start that the mundane and the fantastic are both meant to be taken as real. Both are legibly inscribed upon the landscape, easily locatable and thus, by Certeau's reading, granted a sort of undeniable existence.

It is odd, then, that it does not seem to matter to Nix whether this dual reality is acknowledged. Unlike Jones's heroes, who must come to understand and accept the coterminous

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<sup>15</sup> I have found only one essay which deals closely with this series, Lori Campbell's "And Her Will Be Done: The Girls Trump the Boys," which focuses on the construction of female heroic identities rather than landscapes.

reality of the fantastic and mundane zones, the heroes of Nix's books are not required to do so to achieve eucatastrophe. Despite the climactic final battle in Ancelstierre at the end of *Sabriel*, resulting in over forty deaths, Prince Sameth describes the Old Kingdom to his Ancelstierran school-friend Nicholas Sayre as being a place "not at all like Ancelstierre [in a way] that Nick wouldn't understand." (*Lirael*, 200) There has been no re-evaluation of the divide between the two countries, nor of the reality of the fantastic. Even more strangely, Nicholas Sayre's redemption from being the unwitting accomplice of the evil Orannis in *Lirael* and *Abhorsen* is accomplished by *his acceptance* of the Old Kingdom as something quite different than Ancelstierre and *his rejection* of his earlier supposition that the two zones must be united by same natural laws ("The Creature in the Case," 25). He does not recognize the continuity of the mundane and the fantastic zones along with his recognition of the reality of the fantastic zone; he simply, as the Reigners did in *Hexwood*, swaps one reality for another. The optimal ending occurs regardless of anyone's acceptance of the continuity of the mundane and the fantastic, suggesting that Nix is not actually trying to assert their dual reality.

And, as the fantastic zone always retreats behind the Wall again at the close of his books, reestablishing the dichotomy solidly around the dividing line of the border once more, it could seem that Nix is unaware of the potential narrative power of his zones. When Sabriel first enters the Old Kingdom in the first book in the series, she first passes through "the Wall [...] stone and old, about forty feet high and crenellated" (*Sabriel*, 32), which stretches the length of the continent depicted on the map. As a forty-foot wall cannot easily move, the "stone and old" nature of Nix's Wall suggests not only the long tradition of a divide between the mundane and the fantastic, but also an inflexibility in the demarcation of each zone which denies Nix much of the potential for the merging of fantastic and mundane zones used by Jones. As Richard

Robinson argues, “the border is a cordon, maintained to contain and exclude” (27). Nix’s choice to divide his zones via an immovable Wall constrains the mundane and the fantastic to their respective zones far more fully than Jones’s imagined border. The non-evolution into acceptance of the reality of the fantastic zone in Nix’s books is made necessary by his decision to incarnate his border into something solid rather than making it an incorporeal idea.

However, walls can be used to signal continuity just as well as discontinuity; as Robinson continues, “territorial borders subvert as well as attract binary thinking” (27). Nix’s man-made Wall could quite easily have been used to highlight the man-made nature of the border between the mundane and the fantastic. Though his wall is solid, it could have been pulled down to reveal that there had only been one continuous mundane/fantastic space all along, split into zones by an edifice humans had erected. Nix’s choice to maintain the separation of the two zones, to retain his man-made Wall as the location of the border in all the books in the series, is a deliberate choice. The mundane and the fantastic are purposefully neighboring lands, sharing only a border. The binary of the mundane and the fantastic must be inescapable for a reason.

But why is this? To understand what Nix’s purposeful separation is achieving, it is useful to return to Certeau’s theory of places and spaces once more. Certeau argues that the spatial aspect of any narrative consists of the interplay locations within which everything is ordered into a “‘proper’ and distinct location [...]it defines” (117), or ‘places,’ and ‘spaces’, which, being “‘composed of intersections of mobile elements” (117), are essentially places made active and thus, unstable. For Certeau, telling a narrative consists of one of two movements: either the author takes well-defined and separate places and breaks down their borders until they become new, overlapping and im-proper spaces; or he constructs borders on just such an overarching, active space to create multiple distinct places again. Which option an author takes is a judgment

of the value of intersection of ideas versus their individual worth, the choice to create a space out of places an assertion that the intersection is most useful, and the creation of places out of spaces a rebuttal in favor of juxtaposition.

Looking back at Nix's books, Ancelstierre and the Old Kingdom are recognizably made places by the map, as each one is the self-contained embodiment of its respective state (mundane or fantastic). They are distinct places that "exclude the possibility of two things being in the same location" (117). However, the Ancelstierre Sabriel returns to for the final battle at the end of *Sabriel* contains many of the hallmarks of the fantastic Old Kingdom: technology fails to work, undead creatures roam the land, and running water and magic become the only defense against the fantastic menace that stalks the heroes to the doors of Sabriel's old college (Nix, *Sabriel* 432). The fantastic encroaches into territory that ought to be solidly mundane, creating a space in which the two places cease to exist as contained entities.

While this does suggest that Nix is converting the places of his mapped zones into a continuous space, this transformation of the mundane zone is only temporary: when we return to Ancelstierre in *Lirael*, technology is once again working and magic is conspicuously absent (*Lirael* 200). Nix's 'space' is not a viable, long term zone; the places inevitably return, ideas in juxtaposition rather than ideas in communication. It is therefore apparent that Nix is testing both modes, and has deliberately chosen to end with the second movement to show that the juxtaposition of the ideas is the better arrangement

Indeed, a close reading of the power dynamics between Ancelstierre and the Old Kingdom reveals that the very idea of uninterrupted continuity between the mundane and fantastic zones as the optimal state is mistaken because of an inherently unequal power balance. Another look at the map reveals that although both zones may be real, they have not been given

equal power in the landscape as a result. This inequality is signaled by the map itself, for the Wall that marks the divide between the two zones has been placed nearly at the bottom of the map, making most of the mapped territory part of the fantastic zone. The mundane zone is miniscule in comparison. While this is recognizably the result of a phenomenon wryly observed by Jones that fantasy maps only show the places the characters visit during their quest (*Tough* 121), the visual imbalance reveals that the mundane and fantastic zones are not equally important to the accomplishment of the narrative in Nix's books. The fantastic zone quite literally hulks over the mundane zone, a menacing presence that threatens to take over the map. Furthermore, as Prince Sameth claims that Ancelstierre, the mundane zone, "always seemed less real than [The Old Kingdom] A really detailed dream, but sort of washed out, like a thin watercolor" (*Lirael* 584), it is obvious that Nix is asserting that, rather than an equality between the two zones, the fantastic zone has far more power than the mundane zone.

And, as what little place in the narrative Ancelstierre is given is invariably hijacked by threatening incursions of the fantastic into the mundane zone, it seems that despite Jack Zipes' claim that in modern fantasy, the fantastic is "on the defensive while appearing to be offensive" (171), Nix's fantastic really is on the offensive: the power that his fantastic zone wields is inherently dangerous to the mundane zone. *Sabriel* opens with the incursion of an undead creature into Sabriel's Ancelstierran school, and ends with her return to the mundane zone in order to defeat another fantastic being; In *Lirael* Sameth's school cricket match in Ancelstierre is overshadowed by a necromancer's attack; *Abhorsen* returns the whole cast to an Ancelstierre that is unrecognizable as the drearily mundane zone Sameth describes to Lirael for the final showdown against a magical creature called the Destroyer. The mundanity of the mundane zone disappears when the two zones overlap.

Furthermore, while magic is able to easily travel the forty miles from the Wall to Waverley College (*Sabriel* 16), and with a bit more difficulty crosses the two hundred mile distance from the Wall to Dorrance Hall (“The Creature,” 26), Sabriel comes across a soldier whose Ancelstierran manufactured, and thus mundane, uniform is beginning to disintegrate a mere six miles from the Wall on the Old Kingdom side (*Sabriel* 63). The destructive power of the overlap between the two zones is skewed almost entirely towards fantastic encroachment of the mundane zone.

While the destruction of the dead soldier’s uniform is helped along by Sabriel’s magical cremation of him, the tendency of objects created on the mundane side of the Wall to quickly and spectacularly decay when in the Old Kingdom is well attested: In *Lirael* we are told that “most products of Ancelstierran technology [begin] to fail upon crossing the Wall”(339), followed by the appearance of two letters in forty pages which have to be painstakingly reassembled from the pieces they have fallen apart into (339, 381), while an oblivious Nicholas Sayre quips in a final letter that “your Old Kingdom is certainly inimical to the products of Ancelstierre” (696). Though the fantastic regularly “[creeps] over the Wall” (*Sabriel* 31) into the mundane zone, the mundane does not in turn seep into the fantastic zone. That power belongs to the fantastic zone alone; paradoxically, blurring the border only serves to reinforce the hegemony of the fantastic zone.

Though the fantastic is shown throughout the series to be capable of wreaking havoc upon the mundane zone, the mundane zone is unable to retaliate, as is revealed by the advice given by the Ancelstierran authorities to “Be inside by nightfall. Lock all doors and windows. Deny entry to strangers. Shed light inside and out. Prepare candles and lanterns for when the electricity fails. Wear silver. If caught outdoors, find running water” (432) when the undead



necromancer Kerrigor begins his intrusion into the mundane zone in *Sabriel*. While these are familiar precautions, they are not as quintessentially mundane as the destructive forces are fantastic. This same list could be used to describe the precautions taken by the survivors of the Old Kingdom port-town Nestowe (*Sabriel* 268). All the power to destroy is given to the fantastic zone. The mundane can only batten down the hatches and hope for the best (of help in the form of further fantastic intrusions), or be sufficiently distant from the Wall that magic is only rarely possible.<sup>17</sup> No wonder Sameth is unable to imagine what “a necromancer of the Old Kingdom [could] hope to gain from the world beyond the Wall” (*Abhorsen* 83)! The mundane zone offers nothing that could destroy the fantastic, no grand power that could shift a battle in their favor. It offers only new stomping grounds to use the same old fantastic powers in.

Indeed, though Nicholas Sayre’s claim that “there is nothing for [him] in Ancelstierre” (“The Creature” 135) because he “had become someone else, and he could only find out who that was in the Old Kingdom” (9) suggests that the mundane zone is antithetical to the fantastic nature Nicholas has taken on, and thus that it is capable of attacking the fantastic, this problem in self-actualization is easily solved by Nicholas’s crossing into the Old Kingdom at the end of the story. Though the mundane may be antithetical to the full use of fantastic powers, it is nevertheless at a disadvantage in terms of destructive capability.

But why is Nix’s fantastic so dangerous? Bettelheim suggests that the fantastic is dangerous because it reveals “something normally hidden” (62); it pulls aside the curtains on private illusions, revealing the “internal processes taking place in an individual” (25) to the world. While fearing the baring of one’s soul to the world is understandable, the danger is even greater than that: as Mendlesohn argues, “the fantastic is the bringer of chaos [...] it takes us out

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<sup>17</sup> Though as “The Creature in the Case” take place two hundred miles away, it is difficult to determine how far is far enough to assure safety (26).

of safety without taking us from our place” (*Rhetorics*, xxii). The fantastic is dangerous not only to us, but to our world, because it turns it into an unfamiliar, and thus, unsafe space. Because the combination of the mundane with the fantastic suggests that “the real world is, to some degree, imaginary” (Saler 21), it fundamentally threatens the idea of mundanity. Such a reading is reinforced by Nix’s assertion that the fantastic which “crept over the Wall [...] widened the cracks in what they thought of as reality” (*Sabriel* 31). While this does suggest a coterminous nature for the mundane and the fantastic, it can also be read as an assertion that the combination of the mundane and the fantastic destroys any conception of reality for the mundane zone. As Sameth points out, “They’ll kill you whether you believe in them or not” (*Lirael*, 220). The fantastic zone is far more dangerous because the fantastic is inherently destructive. The people who die at the hands of fantastic beings are secondary to the destruction the fantastic enacts on ideas about reality itself.

This, then, seems to be the impetus for the return to the original “places” that occurs at the end of each novel: as Nix sees it, the two zones are *inherently* in direct, unconquerable opposition, for if the fantastic zone holds all the potential to destroy the mundane, there can be no hope for reconciliation without the essential idea of mundanity being erased. Nix’s maintenance of the border stems from his recognition that the fantastic has the power to utterly destroy the mundane world if allowed past the borders we have constructed for it. As King Touchstone argues, “The only reason Ancelstierre isn’t like Old Kingdom is the Wall” (*Lirael* 448). The borders that have been placed between the mundane and the fantastic protect the proliferation of viewpoints in his secondary world. They protect against the darker, less desirable parts of the unreal, as well as the ideology of the mundane. Nix shows in his refusal to enact the sort of dissolution between the dichotomy of the mundane and fantastic zones we see in

*Hexwood* the danger the fantastic poses to all people, not just those who have wronged others through their manipulation of the misconceptions the dichotomy nurtures.

Thus, through his exploration of mundane and fantastic zones in his Old Kingdom Series, Garth Nix demonstrates that a power that creates by the destruction of old modes of thinking is profoundly dangerous to the proliferation of viewpoints and cultures. Jones's book confines the negative impacts of the merging of the mundane and the fantastic into one world without zones to the Reigners, selling the combination of mundane and fantastic ideologies as a truer vision of reality. Nix, though enamored with the ideological possibilities of the fantastic, also recognizes an ideological benefit in having a mundane zone.

In placing a solid barrier on his landscape, Nix thus poses a quandary: even if the fantastic is real, even if it is more vibrant and fascinating and alive, it is also naturally deconstructive and thus potentially catastrophic to the culture it is brought into. Is the constant presence of the fantastic worth the loss of the mundane? Nix himself is not brave enough to set loose the very real danger he sees in the fantastic on the public at large for the sake of a 'realer' reality. He instead invites the reader to make that decision for themselves. They can move into the fantastic space if they wish, so long as they leave the mundane zone intact for the rest of the world to use in safety.

It thus seems that the mundane, at its heart, is at least a little bit imaginary. While Jones and Nix construct fantastic zones that have inherent realness to them, realness that goes beyond simply adhering to the rules the author sets up, the mundane world steps into the fantastic. Their visions of the possible relationships between the mundane and the fantastic are quite different: Jones argues that the socially constructed borders and zones of the fantastic are ultimately harming both sides of the binary by forging false divides, while Nix argues that those divides are

necessary for a multiplicity of zones and thus, viewpoints, to exist at all. Nevertheless, both authors recognize that both the mundane and the fantastic zones have been socially constructed. Neither, in the words of Bhabha, is a “reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits”(3); neither is wholly real, just as neither is wholly imaginary. Both exist on the same imagined landscape, and thus, are imaginary themselves.

The question then becomes what to do next. As my use of post-colonial theory throughout shows, though both Nix and Jones’s landscapes are imagined, that does not make them any less real. Though our discussion has been about the mundane and fantastic zones on a landscape in a work of fiction, what has been at stake is an ideological landscape that exists in the real world. In placing the binary of the mundane and the fantastic on a physical landscape, Jones and Nix ask us to consider our conception of the place of fantasy in our day-to-day lives. Is fantasy just an escape, low-brow literature for the undereducated masses or for mindless consumption after a day spent doing something more substantial? Is it a testing ground for new modes of thinking, useful but boxed off? Or is it the life-blood of our reality, necessary for survival and happiness?

Even more pressingly, Jones’s and Nix’s landscapes force us to think about the ‘other’ and whether that term has more to offer than the creation of a singular whole. In *Hexwood* Jones argues that in stepping away from maps and divides, in combining the fantastic and the mundane, a better reality is created, one that more accurately reflects the pre-givens of our world. Though neither zone is fully real, their partial realities fit together to construct the true nature of the world. Nix argues the opposite; though the mundane and the fantastic may both be imagined, and both be real, they both have something to offer that can only be grasped as long as they

remain separate ideological entities. Both perspectives on the place of the other have merit– and that is the problem, one that cannot be answered based on these two novels alone.

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