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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

Abstract

The Nine Worlds: A Dictionary of Norse Mythology. Douglas Rossman. Reviewed by Nancy-Lou Patterson.

Mervyn Peake: My Eyes Mint Gold: A Life. Malcolm Yorke. Reviewed by David Bratman.

Vast Alchemies: The Life and Work of Mervyn Peake. G. Peter Winnington. Reviewed by David Bratman.

Book Reviews

Douglas Rossman, *The Nine Worlds: A Dictionary of Norse Mythology*. Bloomington: Skandisk Inc., 2000. 112 pp. ISBN 1-57534-014-3.

There was a time in the youth of C. S. Lewis when he became enamoured of what Rossman calls "Norse Spirituality." He spoke of "Northerness," and enjoyed the recordings of Wagner's works. As an adult, he drew upon this background for his poignant depiction of "Narnia and the North," in his *Chronicles of Narnia*. J. R. R. Tolkien, too, drew upon aspects of Norse mythology with his superbly realized dragons, trolls, elves, and mountainous landscapes.

Mythlore readers who have responded to these motifs but have not read the Eddas from which they are derived, can consult Rossman's new edition of *The Nine Worlds*, which, as a genuine dictionary, defines beings, places, and things Norse, from AEGIR to YNGVI.

Nancy-Lou Patterson

Yorke, Malcolm. *Mervyn Peake: My Eyes Mint Gold: A Life*. London: John Murray, 2000. 368pp. ISBN 0-7195-5771-2.

Winnington, G. Peter. *Vast Alchemies: The Life and Work of Mervyn Peake*. London: Peter Owen Publishers, 2000. Distributed in the U.S. by Dufour Editions. 263pp. ISBN 0-7206-1079-6.

Thirty-two years after Mervyn Peake's death, 2000 was finally his year. His Titus novels—*Titus Groan*, *Gormenghast*, and *Titus Alone*—are strange, sprawling, Dickensian semi-fantasies which received little continuing attention during his life, though they were adored by a small readership. His poetry likewise failed to win renown, though it was equally deserving. His excursion into drama was a commercial failure. The paintings which first made his name in the 1930s London art world, and the book illustrations with which he made his living after World War II, faded from view.

But he has never been entirely forgotten. A cohesive community of Peake admirers has grown over the years: it includes dedicated scholars such as G. Peter Winnington, author of one of the books under review, and fellow authors such as Michael Moorcock, who contributed the foreword to Winnington's book. Collections of Peake's fugitive writings and drawings appeared starting in the late 1970s, of which the first and most important, *Peake's Progress*, remains in print. Several books about Peake were published. The Titus novels remained in print, and were adopted by the burgeoning fantasy community as masterpieces of the form, which they barely fit except insofar as all pre-genre fantasists, including the Inklings, were *sui generis*.

In 2000, though, Peake came to more widespread attention. A fine BBC mini-series dramatization of the first two Titus novels, under the title *Gormenghast*, was broadcast. A book on its artwork was published by Estelle Daniel. The three Titus novels were reissued again. And now we have not one, but two, new biographies of Peake. Malcolm Yorke's is the better book, but Winnington's is more easily available in the U.S. and is also a worthy effort which should not be slighted. They are not strictly rivals. Yorke credits Winnington in his acknowledgements for much factual information. Each tells the biography in full, but with different emphases. Yorke's is the authorized biography, and this may be why Winnington was denied permission for more than minimal quotations from Peake's work, but the book does not suffer seriously because of this.

Biographical studies of Peake have been published before. John Batchelor's *Mervyn Peake: A Biographical and Critical Exploration* (1974) contains a short biography along with separate critical essays. John Watney's *Mervyn Peake* (1976) is a straight biography with no criticism. Both are out of print. Touching personal memoirs of Peake by his wife, his elder son, and his closest friend have also been published: the first two of these are still in print in Britain (as *Mervyn Peake: Two Lives*, by Maeve Gilmore and Sebastian Peake). The memoirs, of course, stand on their own as personal accounts; Batchelor's work is not primarily a biography; but Watney's book, until now the standard biography, has decidedly been superseded by these new books.

Superseding Watney was in fact one of Winnington's principal motives in writing. Alarmed by his discovery of factual errors in Watney's book, Winnington takes specific note of his corrections in his endnotes. As far as I can tell, Yorke conforms with Winnington on these points, but he sails ahead in confidence without concerning himself with pointing out corrections. Watney's errors are not as

significant as one might think—mostly minor errors in dates and the spelling of names—but they should be corrected.

More significant, but more subjective, is the depiction of Peake's character. Watney's Peake is a naïf, lost in the army and in the theatrical world, bewildered by personal finance, and cruelly struck down by a wasting disease before he could achieve his rightful success. That Peake was lost in his prime is undeniable—he died at 57, and had been unable to work for nearly a decade before that—but both authors believe that his tragic end should not overshadow his notable accomplishments. Winnington tells us that he “concentrates on the abundance of Mervyn's creativity and the pleasure he had in living” ([12]), while Yorke notes that “during his brief maturity Peake was astonishingly creative in a variety of disciplines” (11). Winnington is anxious to defend Peake from charges of personal naïveté; Yorke is less so, but does not emphasize this aspect as Watney did.

Winnington's book is subtitled “The Life and Work,” but it is not a life and works in the sense that Batchelor's book was. Rather than dealing separately with the life and works, Winnington recounts the life, with details on Peake's compositional process, pausing now and again to deliver little essays on aspects of Peake's work. These are of only tangential relevance to the particular chronological point that the narrative has reached, but they are the product of great scholarly insight. Those on Peake's practice of naming characters (in chapter 6) and on the role of the Gothic in his work (in chapter 16) are particularly fine. Their almost random placement, together with Winnington's exposure of the bones of his research methods—correcting Watney, verifying other facts—does not detract from the quality of his work, but it does give to his book a certain unpolished air.

Yorke, by contrast, is not a Peake scholar but a professional biographer, with biographies of three other British artists among his previously published work. Whatever his earlier interest in Peake, he has approached his task fully professionally, showing no less interest than Winnington in his subject. His book also is chronological, and more smoothly shaped. Where Winnington's interests in Peake as a writer are scholarly—the mechanics of how he went about his work, and a scholar's analysis of the accomplishment—Yorke's interests are more critical in the strict sense. His discussions of Peake's work focus not on how Peake went about drafting it, but on what he thought he was accomplishing, and above all on readers' and viewers' reaction to it. Yorke tells us that artists wishing to earn a living must be affected by how their work is received, and that this is accordingly crucial to understanding their biographies. He applies this most obviously in discussing the

critical and commercial failure of Peake's play *The Wit to Woo* in 1957, placing it in the context of the history of British theatre that virtually dictated the failure of such a play at such a time, whatever its inherent value. By the same logic, and in the tradition of Michael Holroyd's work on Bernard Shaw, Yorke devotes two full chapters to Peake's posthumous reputation, to which Winnington allots one page. Which approach a reader will prefer will depend on one's particular interests and predilections. I recommend that the comparative browser read the chapters on Peake's World War II military career, and on *The Wit to Woo*, for the clearest contrast.

Yorke's, as the authorized biography, contains more quotes from Peake's works, reproductions of illustrations, and photographs from all periods of Peake's life. Only a few of these are in Watney. Winnington, as mentioned, was denied permission to reproduce material available to Yorke. His illustrations consist of eight photographs of the artist at work, taken for a *Picture Post* article in 1946 (only half of which were published), plus an additional photograph dated 1957.

Mervyn Peake has been well served by both these biographers. Both the curious new reader and the old Peake fan will find much rewarding new information, and insight into a great and underappreciated artist, in either of these books.

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