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Bushes and Briars: Women in Fantasy

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Abstract
Guest of Honor speech. Notes the changes brought to recent fantasy by the increasing number of women writers, particularly more focus on characterization.

Additional Keywords
Fantasy—Characterization; Fantasy—Women authors; Women in fantasy
BUSHES AND BRIARS: 
WOMEN IN FANTASY

Hard as it might be to imagine, with the vast quantity of fantastic literature made available in the past ten years or so, there was a time in the recent past when it was next to impossible to track any of it down—if one even knew that the titles existed in the first place. Looking back a mere twenty years ago, we can see that there were no specialty book shops, book stores carried only science fiction, and the few films that Hollywood gave us were low budget B-movies that didn't exactly capture the otherworldly wonder of a Dunsany or a Tolkien—though to be honest, current films, for all their numbers, don't capture it either.

I'm speaking from personal experience now—remembering what it was like for a high school teenager at the time. I had an interest in the fantastic, but other than Tolkien's trilogy and the Lancer Conan editions, there was little for me to find. It was all bushes and briars—looking for roses in the thorns.

I was vaguely aware of the newstand magazines, but they all appeared to be science fiction by their covers. Space ships and bug-eyed monsters did nothing for me. I was looking for Yeats' Celtic Twilight. I knew nothing of fandom until Charles Saunders introduced me to it in 1976. I was aware of Poe and some of his ilk, but their work had none of the resonance that Tolkien's did. The closest I could find to Tolkien were the myths, folk tales and traditional music that I'd already had a keen interest in. Seamus Ennis and K.M. Briggs were my guides. I found that Celtic Twilight through Merlin and other legendary figures; my sense of the strange was fueled by groups like the Incredible String Band.

The turning point came in 1969 when Ballantine Books began its Adult Fantasy series of reprints under the Unicorn logo. No matter what can be said about Lin Carter's derivative fiction, I'll be forever grateful to him as an editor. The entire genre should be. Almost single-handedly, he brought about the upsurge of fantasy that we have today—not simply by showing the publishers that fantastic literature was viable in the marketplace, but by stimulating so many aspiring writers through the publication of classic works of which they had never been aware. Those writers had their own contributions to the genre waiting inside them, but they needed a key to unlock those novels and stories from where they were hidden.

I wasn't one of those aspiring writers at the time. My creative interests ran more towards verse and music, though somewhere in a deep dark drawer I still have forty-or-so pages of a painfully

GUEST OF HONOR ADDRESS
derivative
William Morris

novel that I wrote
at the time. But as a
reader, Carter opened up a
whole new world for me. His introductions,
anthologies, and non-fiction studies such as
Imaginary Worlds gave me something to look for
in secondhand stores and libraries.

And the Adult Fantasy series itself—what a treasure trove it proved to be. Every month I went out looking for something with that Unicorn logo
in the corner and the dreamy artwork of Gervasio Gallardo or Robert Pepper
on the cover. The books were primarily reprints, but they were all new
to the majority of readers, myself included. Lord Dunsany. William
Clark Ashton Smith. H.P. Lovecraft.

There were a few original novels published under the Unicorn logo
as well, and that's what brings us to the theme of this conference.
I wasn't aware of this at the time, but hindsight proves that all the
classic reprints were books written by men, while the original novels were by women.

At the time I simply devoured the books, never taking into account the sex of the writer, which is how
it should be. But as time passed, and more publishers jumped on the fantasy bandwagon, I realized that
I was not so interested in reading about mighty—thewed barbarians—nor when I could read more humanis-tic books by the likes of Ursula LeGuin, Susan Cooper, or Patricia McKillip. And to this day, my
favorite writers—be they women like Megan Lindholm, Barbara Hambly or Jane Yolen, or men like Parke
Godwin or John Crowley—are those who have more emotional content to their books.

A strong, well-paced plot is always appreciated, though not necessarily essential. Some books—Crow-
ley's Little, Big or James Blaglock's more recent books come to mind—make up for a loose or non-exis-
tent plot with the richness of their style. Fascinating ideas can help as well—a curious new world
such as Philip Jose Farmer's World of Tiers, or aspects of Zelazny's Amber, for example—or the jux-
apositioning of the strange with the real as in R.A. MacAvoy's Tea With the Black Dragon or Jonathon
Carroll's Land of Laughs. But without well-rounded, believable and likeable characters (at least one,
please!), a story, fantastic or otherwise, falls flat.

To a large degree, that vitally important and often missing aspect of fantastic literature is what
women, as both writers and editors, have brought to the genre. Characterization. It isn't that there
weren't any well-rounded characters around before that time. It's just that the main thrust of fantasy
was more towards the fantastic itself—the odd beings and settings in which the novels took place.

As both a reader and a writer, my main interest is in the characters—first and foremost.
My writing always starts with the lead characters. Once I know them well enough, I can
move them into the situation that makes up the main thrust of the book. I'm writing to
find out how they will react in a given situation. What are they like as people? How do
they react with the other characters? What's important to them? How do they think, what
do they feel?

I want the same thing when I'm reading a book—real people. I want to see them react
against the strange—be it a fantastic setting, or a fantastic being. Horror literature
has known this for years. The best horror novels are those in which the characters and
everyday settings are so real, that we inevitably accept the supernatural element.
Until recently, science fiction has been more concerned with the strange itself—the
ideas, the concepts, but not necessarily how they relate to people. Fantasy has lain
somewhere in between the two.

Charles de Lint

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way to get rid of an ancient artifact of power that is
threatening the world is to jump with it inside a
volcano in the far southeast. In Williams, it is only
a notion, and not really a serious one. In Tolkien, it
has become the only righteous choice.

In connection with Melanie Rawls' excellent
comparison (Mythlore 48) of Herland with Out of the
Silent Planet, I can suggest a possible bridge between
Gilman and Lewis; H.G. Wells, whose short novel Men
Like Gods is also about a Utopia that is briefly (and
foolishly) invaded by a small group of people from our
civilization. As Rawls stated when she read her paper
at the Mythopoeic Conference, it is rather unlikely
that C.S. Lewis read Charlotte Gilman's obscure
sensation novel, H.G. Wells, who was deeply interested
in socialist, feminist and utopian issues and
writings, may have read it. And we know for a fact
that Lewis read Wells -- and enjoyed his writing,
though often disagreeing with the ideology.

I do not know if it has been pointed out that
some of the names in Perelandra - Baur and Barus,
Yatsur and Yatsurah -- are Hebrew, and all four mean
"created." In standard Hebrew, however, the feminine
forms would have been Beruh and Yetsurah. The lack of
vowel shift may have been an error in Lewis' part, or
a deliberate simplification.

Has anybody ever wondered why the hero of
Pilgrim's Progress is named John? Because the name
comes from the Hebrew Yehohanan, "the Lord is
Gracious"? In honor of John Bunyan? The most likely
explanation, in my opinion, is that John is the name for
which "Jack" is commonly the nickname.

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new Steward: David Lenander, 293 Selby Av.
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That women are responsible for this depth of
characterization that has come about since they have
entered the field might be construed as a sexist
statement, but it isn't meant to be. Women are just as
capable of writing shallow stories with flat
characters as men are. But because they haven't always
been involved with the nuts and bolts, because they
came fresh to the genre when men had been reworking
the same themes for too long, they've been able to
imbue their writing with more realism -- read, better
class citizens in the first place -- has added a
dimension to the characterization of fantastic
literature that gives it a new depth.

Because the fantasy genre -- less so than science
fiction, but still to some degree -- was largely
produced by men, for men, the stories tended to be about
men, with women relegated to vague support positions,
often only as an object to be rescued or
chased. Women working in the genre in its earlier
years tended to go by their initials or a man's name
so as not to scare off the male readership.

(As an interesting -- if somewhat depressing--
aside, I fill in the odd day at the local sf bookstore
in Ottawa and still run into men who won't read a book
because it's written by a woman. It's no use trying
to tell them what they're missing -- that they're losing
out on half of the good writing in the genre
because half of its population, like the real world's,
is made up of women. Unfortunately, the reverse is
true as well and that same bookstore has many woman
customers who will read only books written by women.)

What's happening now, though, is that there are
men writing books with strong sympathetic female
leads. I don't think that this is a calculated move. I
don't think men are thinking, hey, I'd better touch
base with that growing female readership. I do think
it's happening because there are more women writing
today and anyone reading broadly in the genre will
come across both strong male and female lead
characters. If such readers are writers themselves,
this new trend can't help but have an influence on
their own work -- perhaps only on a subconscious level,
but an influence that makes its presence known all the
same.

Or it could be more complex than that.

I use a lot of female leads myself, but it wasn't
until sitting down to write this speech for this
Mythopoeic Conference that I asked myself why. I
realized that my writing from a woman's perspective
helped me give a better understanding of women myself.
All good writing should be an exploration, a pushing
of one's abilities, a search for an understanding of
the world at large through the microcosm of stories
and novels. Because women make up half our
population, and because I'm not one myself, it makes
sense that I would want to understand them and would
look to do so through my own creative expression--
which happens to be writing.

It's been said before, that when one stops
learning, one might as well stop living. I expect
every book I start -- whether it be something I'm
writing myself, or something I'm reading -- to teach me
something. In fact, I demand it. And while the bushes
and briars are still out there, albeit in new
disguises, I'm happy to say that I'm working in a
genre that has a great many roses to offer amongst the
world's thorns.