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Tales Newly Told

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Tales Newly Told

A Column by Alexei Kondratiev

Since "Women in Fantasy" is the theme chosen for this year's Mythopoeic Conference, it may be worth our while to focus on some women writers who are just now showing their potential to become major talents in the field. Fantasy publishing remains a fairly lucrative business, and many new writers — women among them — are being given the chance to display their own reworkings of perennial themes like the magic quest, the kingdom-in-peril, the recovery of ancient wisdom, etc. But only a few of them have the depth of vision, the inventiveness, and the command of language that will confer lasting value upon their work.

In the past few years Megan Lindholm produced several books about Ki and Vandien, an immensely likable pair of lovers leading adventurous lives in a world of alien wonders. The series was unusual in that its subject was, essentially, married life, the role of freedom and attachment in a mature love-relationship. This — together with Lindholm's obvious gift for world-building — would be enough to single her out as a writer to watch. But now, with Wizard of the Pigeons (Ace Books, 1986), she has shown the scope of her talent by attempting something very different, and far more difficult — and bringing it off. Lindholm's latest story is set in contemporary Seattle, which she depicts with the same eye for mythopoeic detail that Saunders Ann Laubenthal brought to her evocation of Mobile in Excalibur. This is not the tourist's Seattle, however, but a Seattle of street people who scavenge from dumpsters and sleep in abandoned buildings. One of them, a young man known only as Wizard, has the unique ability to tell people exactly what they need to be told; the gift is his as long as he holds to some necessary rules: he must never close himself off from those who come seeking him, and must never harm a pigeon. Wizard lives his day-to-day life on the streets with gusto and a sense of high purpose, sustained by his female mentor, Cassie, whose appearance is constantly changing to reveal different aspects of womanhood. She is the Goddess, the Muse, the Eternal Feminine in all its manifestations, the creative male power's Shakti. A heavy grey presence — somehow linked to a series of murders — weighs upon the city, and Wizard is called upon to resist it. But it soon becomes apparent that this lethal greyness — which Wizard calls Mir — is not external to him but is a projection of his repudiated old self, a Vietnam veteran obsessed with violence. At this point it would have been easy for the plot to follow the by-now familiar pattern of I Never Promised You a Rose Garden, in which the psychotic overcomes his "illness": the Shadow, unsavoury as it is, must be recognized and re-integrated into the self. Cassie is an imaginary companion, delusions of a special, supranormal calling must be dispelled so that the hero can regain his place in the "real world" of society. Lindholm, fortunately, does not give in to this facile solution. Wizard's old self is evil and must not be revived; and his gift (which he temporarily loses when he realizes Mir's true nature and comes close to doubting Cassie's existence) is real, though it is also a function of his madness. In the end the old self's positive traits (the ability to act decisively, and to use violence when necessary) are re-captured and Mir itself is destroyed through an act of magic, made possible by Wizard's love for

Cassie. His relationship with Cassie is altered, but fulfilled. And he does not return to conventional society (where he would be a mediocrity), but remains a wizard on the streets. Lindholm invites us to share in the kind of vision that can turn a discarded Halloween costume into the solemn regalia proper to a high spiritual calling. This, perhaps, is the creative use of the imagination which Owen Barfield sees as the means to achieve "final participation."

Sheri S. Tepper is another prolific writer whose work has immediate appeal but avoids solutions of facility. Her very popular "True Game" series (which, it seems, is ultimately to consist of nine volumes, grouped in three trilogies), is a showcase of adventure, romance, and wild invention, but also displays a thoughtful control over themes and structure. The tone of the narrative falls squarely into what Ursula Le Guin has called the "purple" area where fantasy and science fiction overlap. On a planet which its non-human inhabitants call Lom, reckless genetic engineering among the human colonists has produced mutants endowed with psi-talents. These mutants breed true and, generations later, have become an aristocracy, the Gamesmen, who use their talents against each other in a highly ritualized pastime, the True Game. Wisely, Tepper does not dwell too long on the intricate mechanism of the True Game but turns her attention to characters who do not fit well into its pattern and are searching for the meaning of it all. In the first trilogy, Peter, a young Gamesman with an unusually extensive set of talents, discovers the secret of the Magicians (as the descendants of the genetic engineers have come to be called) and puts an end to their covert influence. The second trilogy serves as a "prequel" to the whole series and deals with Peter's mother, Mavin Manyshaped, who as a young girl rebels against her society and journeys across the world, visiting a far continent where humans live on bridges suspended across a monster-filled chasm. Now the third trilogy is under way, with two volumes — Jinian Footseer (TOR Books, 1985) and Dervish Daughter (TOR Books, 1986) — out at the time of writing. Jinian, a young girl from a Gamesman family but with (apparently) no talent of her own, grows up in a hostile environment and soon becomes the object of mysterious assassination attempts. She is taken in and initiated by Wizards (or "wize-ards"), secret circles of women who teach true magic, which is attained by developing normal human faculties. It turns out that Jinian has a special link with the Dervishes, women who have transcended human limitations through ascetic practices, and are the positive "female" counterpart of the negative "male" Magicians. Eventually she meets Peter, and becomes his romantic interest; but she is destined to be more than just his sidekick, for her talent, once revealed, proves to be irreplaceable: she can communicate with the planet Lom through its native creatures, and will be instrumental in restoring the proper balance between humans and their adopted world.

Some of these are well-worn themes, and the main characters are adolescents very much in the Andre Norton manner, late-blooming misfits in conflict with their peers. But Tepper makes the themes her own and handles them masterfully, never letting the stereotypes

and cliches have their way. She takes stereotypes and stands them on their heads, or exaggerates cliches until they provoke laughter. Jinian's relatives are not just mean to her, they are awful beyond belief! Her girl's school is not just the nasty place such schools conventionally are in fiction: one of her classmates is a Basilisk. The young characters, refreshingly, have many of the positive attributes of youth: exuberance, curiosity, and a certain healthy ruthlessness (especially Mavin!). Above all it is Tepper's mythopoeic inventiveness -- her ability to evoke strange people and places -- that carries the series. Image follows upon startling image, passing through a whole gamut of moods and tones, ranging from stark horror (e.g. the anthropophagous giants on the Backless Throne) to broad satire (the Magicians are parodies of dry-as-dust academics, and by their manner recall the teachers in Mervyn Peake's Gormenghast; and the bridge-builders of the Chasm seem to be a spoof on construction workers' unions!). Lom's native fauna is a delightful menagerie of pombis, fustigars, fritchhaws, goles, bunwits and d'bor wives. I do not think it condescending to suggest that the whole series would work beautifully as an animated cartoon, something that could have been done with the full resources of the Disney studios in the golden age (without, of course, the cutesy sentimentality).

Behind the riotous invention, the adventures and the jokes, one can discern a broad structure to the whole series, in which -- as in all high fantasy, and indeed Magic itself -- the "masculine" and "feminine" aspects of the soul grow to maturity and learn to function together as a unit. Peter's "masculine" quest is that of the rational Ego; it operates through problem-solving and the correct application of power, and results in the elimination of the Magicians, who represent misuse of the Intellect. Jinian's is the "feminine" quest for wholeness, which calls for attentiveness and receptivity. One assumes that in the final volume she will achieve her goal, and we will find out just what the "Daylight Bell" -- a potent and mysterious symbol if there ever was one! -- is meant to be.

It is obvious that Tepper could go on turning out book after book about Lom and the True Game without losing her readers -- in fact, she would most likely gain a cult following. It is to her credit, then, that she, like Megan Lindholm, has chosen to go down some very different -- and often more treacherous -- paths. Two years ago we were given The Revenants, a vibrant, dark high-fantasy epic, totally unlike the madcap whimsy of Lom, and extremely memorable. She has been less successful with Marianne, the Magus and the Manticore (Ace Books, 1985). Marianne, a young student and librarian in an American university town, lives in terror of her cruel, incestuous half-brother Harvey. Their family has ties with Alphenlicht (Elf-light?), an imaginary country on the Soviet border, peopled by Zoroastrians and ruled over by benevolent Magi. Alphenlicht has a dark twin country, Lubovosk, whose inhabitants have fallen away from the true Magic and embraced "shamanism" (shamans get a bad press in this book). The Ruritanian premise is not one that works well in a contemporary setting: the existence of such countries on the Soviet border, in the age of the United Nations and the superpowers conflict, defies credibility, and Tepper does not try hard enough to suspend her readers' disbelief. In fact, the incongruousness of the premise is reflected in the writing, which, throughout the first half of the book (in which Marianne is the object of a struggle between the handsome Magus who loves her and the evil Madame --

Harvey's aunt -- from Lubovosk), tends to the outre and artificial, especially in the dialogues. But in the second half of the book, after the Madame has managed to spirit Marianne away into the "false worlds" of dream-symbolism, the fantasist's gift suddenly shines through with real strength. Tepper knows the power of dreams, and has the verbal skill to evoke that power. After spending a short time in a dream-world of helplessness and boredom (reminiscent of Menotti's The Consul) engineered for her by the Madame, Marianne escapes into her own dream-world which, as it reflects the insecurity of her adolescent personality, is a perilous place in its own right. The images here -- the library at night, Manticore Street, the cathedral and the Greasy Girls -- are as haunting as if they came from the reader's own dreams. Although Marianne's final exorcism of her evil brother is a bit too abrupt and too sweeping to be really satisfying, the dream-sequence itself impressively demonstrates the versatility of Tepper's mythopoeic talent, and I think we can look forward to seeing that talent put to many unexpected uses in the future.

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Mythopoeic Core Reading List

Mythlore frequently publishes articles that presuppose the reader is already familiar with the works they discuss. This is natural, given the special nature of Mythlore. In order to assist some readers, the following is what might be considered a "core" mythopoeic reading list, containing the most well known and discussed works. Due to the many editions printed, only the title and original date of publication are given. Good reading!

J.R.R. Tolkien

The Hobbit (1937); "Leaf by Niggle" (1945); "On Fairy-Stories" (1945); *The Lord of the Rings: Vol. 1, The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954); Vol. II, *The Two Towers* (1954); Vol. III, *The Return of the King* (1955); *The Silmarillion* (1977); *Unfinished Tales* (1980).

C.S. Lewis

Out of the Silent Planet (1938); *Perelandra* (1943); *That Hideous Strength* (1945); *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950); *Prince Caspian* (1951); *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (1952); *The Silver Chair* (1953); *The Horse and His Boy* (1954); *The Magician's Nephew* (1955); *The Last Battle* (1956); *Till We Have Faces* (1956).

Charles Williams

War in Heaven (1930); *Many Dimensions* (1931); *The Place of the Lion* (1931); *The Greater Trumps* (1932); *Shadows of Ecstasy* (1933); *Descent into Hell* (1937); *All Hallow's Eve* (1945); *Taliessin through Logres* (1938); and *The Region of the Summer Stars* (1944) (printed together in 1954).