Tales Newly Told

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol12/iss4/8

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Additional Keywords
Lindholm, Megan. Wizard of the Pigeons.; Tepper, Sheri S. Dervish Daughter.; Tepper, Sheri S. Jinian Footseer.; Tepper, Sheri S. Marianne, the Magus and the Manticore.
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 K 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 Saunder's 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 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, supernormal 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 Lion, 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 rebelled 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 Footseeker (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 "wise-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 Lion 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 on their heads, or exaggerates cliches until they provoke laughter. Jinnian's relatives are not just mean to her, they are truly evil 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 mythopoetic talent -- the creative use of folklore, the ability to make 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 inhumanity 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 exercise 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 mythopoetic talent, and I think we can look forward to seeing that talent put to many unexpected uses in the future.

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Mythopoetic 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" mythopoetic 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


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).