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The Gothic Fairy Tale in Young Adult Literature: Essays on Stories from Grimm to Gaiman Eds. Joseph Abbruscato and Tanya Jones

THE GOTHIC FAIRY TALE IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE: ESSAYS ON STORIES FROM GRIMM TO GAIMAN. Edited by Joseph Abbruscato and Tanya Jones. Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2014. 208 p. ISBN 9780786479351. \$29.95.

C O-EDITOR JOSEPH ABBRUSCATO FINDS TREMENDOUS STAKES at play in the fairy tale, and he makes this concern clear from his introduction to this collection of essays. Like many scholars past and present, Abbruscato sees fairy tales as performing important work for young readers, bolstering their abilities to deal with the real world by letting them distance themselves and internalize important lessons (2-4). Abbruscato immediately compounds this claim, though, by warning against contemporary “sanitizations” (4) that deprive fairy tales of their original power and intent to let children project, identify, and conquer their fears and uncertainties. To this end, Abbruscato envisions this collection as dealing with three categories of analysis—“the structure of the modern, Gothic fairy tale, recurring themes and motifs, and the relationship between the reader and dark fairy tale” (9)—and also as seeking out particular authors who have begun to “rehabilitate” the genre against “today’s popular and best-selling (and psychically empty) stories being incorrectly paraded and passed off as fairy tales” (9). The included essays echo this call to action with varying degrees of success, but despite some significant weaknesses, Abbruscato and Jones’s collection ultimately offers readers noteworthy questions and issues for consideration.

The collection is comprised of Abbruscato’s cautionary introduction and ten essays examining contemporary genre literature. Essays treat with names that readers will probably recognize immediately in conjunction with fantasy—Neil Gaiman, Robin McKinley, the late great Terry Pratchett, and Holly Black—but may also surprise with the inclusion of science fiction writer Orson Scott Card and the uncategorizable Lemony Snicket. Each chapter also treats with the structures, themes, and/or relationships identified in Abbruscato’s introduction as encapsulated in a particular work or series.

Following Abbruscato’s rallying introduction, Carys Crossen examines the stakes in reading David Almond’s *Skellig* as a work of magical realism, a fairy tale, or a Gothic text. Tanya Jones revisits Gaiman’s *Coraline* and John Connolly’s *Book of Lost Things*, exploring cannibalism and consumption as versions of power and love. Erin Wyle Newcomb examines the significance of the mind game Fairyland in *Ender’s Game*, drawing connections between the game’s escapist functions and Ender’s need to accept difficult realities about good and evil even as he embodies them himself. Abbruscato then returns with a chapter on Gaiman’s woefully underpraised *Graveyard Book*, observing the gradual construction of identity through compounding trial and adversity, and Sarah R. Wakefield offers a chapter treating incest in McKinley’s *Deerskin* in

relation to real-world survivors, sexual trauma scholarship, and incest as a fairy tale theme. Lisa K. Perdidago deconstructs *Coraline* in metafictional terms, Tim Sadenwasser explores acting “in loco parentis” in Lemony Snicket’s *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, and Eileen Donaldson argues for the stakes of female monstrosity and identification in Terry Pratchett’s four *Tiffany Aching* books. Rhonda Nicol tackles two series, Holly Black’s *Modern Tales of Faerie* and Melissa Marr’s *Wicked Lovely*, to attempt a definition of the “urban gothic fairy tale heroine” (165) who gains power and agency, and Carissa Turner Smith closes the collection with an essay on Merrie Haskell’s *Princess Curse*, examining how metafictionality enables a narrative reframing of fairy lands and figures.

The three categories of structure, recurring themes, and reader relationships that Abbruscato promises in his introduction can also serve as a means of surveying and evaluating the collection as a larger whole. For instance, the ten collected essays are fairly cohesive along the axis of structural analysis, revisiting and troubling common concepts of what constitutes a specific genre, and how specific texts might conform to or push against such constitutions. While most do so holistically, a few essays approach this analysis almost mechanically, creating overly simplistic call-and-responses that either treat fairy tales as a monolithic corpus, or else cycle through multiple tales to explain instances in the source text: this aspect corresponds to *Sleeping Beauty*, this to *Cinderella*, this to *Donkeyskin*, and so on.

One truly glaring omission in the structural analysis category, though, is that neither Abbruscato in his introduction, nor any of the collected authors in their essays, really troubles the second part of the collection’s title: young adult, or YA, literature. While Abbruscato, Jones, and several of the collected authors rightfully note that the fairy tale and the Gothic are slippery terms, and offer valuable examinations of this difficulty within their essays, no one really treats YA in the same way. This is a critical oversight because YA brings its own baggage to the discussion: in its construction by commercial concerns, YA is a market-made genre, where fantasy and science fiction are convention-made genres. In other words, YA conventions—and thus the YA genre—are shaped by the presumed demands of an assumed readership, while the fairy tale and the Gothic that otherwise predominate this collection are identified by proximity, however imperfect, to genre conventions (8-9). Thus YA literature can be marked or prefaced (fantasy YA, sci-fi YA, LGBT YA, realistic YA) in ways unavailable to most genres, which were already delineated along those lines in the first place.

While the full treatment of this complex subject probably falls outside the parameters of this collection, Abbruscato and Jones would have been better served to at least acknowledge it—especially as authors reference J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* as a touchstone multiple times. Without the aforementioned

framing of YA and its complexities as a constructed genre, readers may be left wondering if *Harry Potter* is being invoked as a fairy tale or Gothic narrative—either of which is inaccurate and seems like it could cast the whole project’s credibility into question.

The ten collected essays fare better in terms of Abbruscato’s second promised category, themes and motifs. Despite their range of subject texts, these essays do offer a fairly comprehensive and unified picture of ideas and concerns that often characterize the Gothic fairy tale: readers see self-identification, storytelling, fallibility, and awakening understandings of the world play out across multiple authors, texts, and secondary genres (fantasy and science fiction). In addition, too, the ten collected essays also identify common themes at play in the texts’ own constructions of narrative. The collection’s authors demonstrate again and again that contemporary fairy tale reworkings are concerned with metafictionality, hypertextuality, and reinscription, as audiences are presumed to be conversant with certain storylines, stock characters, and tropes (145). Most of the collected essays also mention or at least gesture towards the role that popular culture has come to play alongside the fairy tale, and the specter of Disney is discernible behind many claims that fairy tale motifs are familiar, even though the corporation is brought up by name only a few times (165, 167).

The collection is at its weakest, though, with its overall treatment of the modern Gothic fairy tale’s relationship to readers. To begin with, its various authors seem to be working from different ideas of audience: Abbruscato’s introduction positions fairy tales as beneficial for children, but the title’s collection names young adults, and the essays themselves are about equally split between the two. This disparity is an issue because it seems to presume that the two age groups have the same needs and abilities. Then, too, Abbruscato and Jones’s aim to show the benefits of a return to traditional fairy tales is commendable, but some of the collected essays slide from showing the ways in which readers can benefit from reading fairy tales into projecting responses onto readers. This slippery slope is an issue because it generalizes readers and their needs (already complicated by the conflation of age groups discussed above), while also attempting claims that literary criticism doesn’t quite have the authority to make.

Sarah R. Wakefield’s chapter on McKinley’s *Deerskin* and Eileen Donaldson’s chapter on Terry Pratchett’s *Tiffany Aching* series both exemplify the shortcomings, and even fatal downfalls, of this slippery slope: Wakefield comes perilously close to claiming that all victims of incest will find certain narratives empowering, and Donaldson seems to be making claims and prescriptions about mitigating anxiety disorders that would need qualitative backing to really be credible. Both chapters do offer valuable readings of their