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*The Ravenclaw Chronicles: Reflections from Edinboro.*  
Ed. Corbin Fowler and *Harry Potter for Nerds II:*  
*Essays for Fans, Academics, and Lit Geeks.* Eds.  
Kathryn McDaniel and Travis Prinzi

Jennifer W. Spirko

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## Mythcon 50

Looking Back, Moving Forward

San Diego, California

August 2-5, 2019

*The Ravenclaw Chronicles: Reflections from Edinboro.* Ed. Corbin Fowler and  
*Harry Potter for Nerds II: Essays for Fans, Academics, and Lit Geeks.* Eds.  
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first invented by Lovecraft and then continued by August Derleth and others. He compares Lovecraft with Tolkien, in that they both created consistent mythologies to serve as backgrounds for their stories, even though Lovecraft's stories are set here on this Earth rather than in a wholly invented secondary world. But the Cthulhu Mythos itself, Honegger points out, is itself a kind of secondary world.

Finally, Dick Vanderbeke compares works by two contemporary authors in "The Sub-Creation of Sub-London: Neil Gaiman's and China Miéville's Urban Fantasy." His focus is on how both writers have created alternate versions of the city of London, subterranean versions which he likens to Faëry realms from ancient (and not so ancient) folk tale traditions from Tír na nÓg to Rip van Winkle. Gaiman's *Neverwhere* and Miéville's *King Rat* and *Un Lun Dun* are the works to which he pays most attention, describing similarities in their approaches to creating these under-London settings.

On the whole, this is an interesting collection of different viewpoints on the different ways that different authors, over the century, have approached the concept, techniques, and execution of creating secondary worlds. The variety of those approaches is what becomes clear upon reading the entire volume.

—David Emerson



**THE RAVENCLAW CHRONICLES: REFLECTIONS FROM EDINBORO.** Corbin Fowler, ed. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014. 192 p. 9781443899413.

**HARRY POTTER FOR NERDS II: ESSAYS FOR FANS, ACADEMICS, AND LIT GEEKS.** Kathryn McDaniel and Travis Prinzi, eds. Oklahoma City: Unlocking Press, 2015. 328 p. 9780990882114.

**I**N THE DECADE SINCE THE FINAL HARRY POTTER NOVEL was published, scholarship inspired by the series has continued to flourish, alongside the pop culture fandom and merchandise. Two anthologies of criticism explore both the Potter canon and the fan culture.

*The Ravenclaw Chronicles* is the more specialized, being a collection of presentations at Edinboro University's Ravenclaw conference, the academic arm of a weeklong Potterfest. (Note: The university is located in Edinboro, Pennsylvania, hence the spelling.) In some ways, the book reads like a basic academic introduction to Potter studies—indeed, an apologia for the whole idea

of Potter studies. The articles cover a range of topics, from the safety of Hogwarts students to the place of real-world clergy in the mythos to quidditch as a metaphor for the struggle against evil.

Fowler's first essay, "The Intellectual Treasure of Harry Potter," is of particular interest to scholars of mythopoeic literature. He asserts that the series is rich in mythical connections, delving beneath the obvious allusions and iconography to the more complex themes, such as the hero's journey allegory. A professor of philosophy, as well as of English, Fowler finds more interesting arguments in his analysis of classical philosophy as refracted through J.K. Rowling's novels. For instance, Parmenides and Plato theorized about the relationship of perceived reality to an abstract state of being, and Fowler shows how the overlapping realities of wizard and muggle embody this tension (8-9). The willful blindness of Rowling's ordinary people in not perceiving visible evidence of magic has implications for our own reality: "if we normally perceive what we expect to perceive, we may be missing important parts of reality simply because we are accustomed not to look for them, or even *at* them" (author's emphasis; 10).

Fowler builds, in part, on the first essay in his second, "What Is Magic?" which speculates on whether magic, as described in the Harry Potter books, might not be real—a combination of advancing and changing culture with the problem of limited reality-perception. In other words, "Magic is when people do fantastic or unusual things, and *we* don't know how they did it" (author's emphasis; 23). The article's intellectual playfulness is appealing without undercutting Fowler's thought experiment, but that appeal doesn't really work to sustain the essay.

Many of the articles share Fowler's enthusiasm, even playfulness, about the Potter canon. Fowler intends to establish Potterdom as a legitimate realm for academic study—"I no longer looked at the Harry Potter saga as simply a fun kids' book" (viii)—but that is a defense that doesn't really need to be made. While there are skeptics in academia, of course, there is also a robust scholarly community, who will no doubt view *The Ravenclaw Chronicles* as tending toward the rudimentary. Earnestness is not necessarily a sin; nonetheless, the book would have benefited from a deeper and a more unapologetic approach.

The book's inclusion of a piece of fanfiction ("Druna: A Love in the Making," by Heidi Marie Weinelt) would, in that context, be an even bolder choice. Fanfiction is a growing and fascinating realm of study in its own right, as an example of how readers demonstrate ownership of texts. (And as a focus of scholarly research, it remains genuinely controversial, unlike Potter studies.) I wish the anthology included an analysis of fanfiction itself, or at least some commentary on "Druna," which is a disappointing example of the genre.

In “Druna,” Luna Lovegood argues that “the greatest witches and wizards aren’t those who possess the most power [...]. They are the witches and wizards with the most creative minds” (177). That seems like a tempting jumping-off point for a discussion of fanfiction, an opportunity missed.

*Harry Potter for Nerds II* is, by contrast, less limited by the lens of its origins and less limited in its audience. It is a follow-up to a similar wide-ranging collection edited by Prinzi, the webmaster of “The Hog’s Head.” Here, McDaniel applauds the tendency of nerds to pay attention to details and, more importantly, “to decipher what’s on the page” or screen (2). Her project does not differ profoundly from Fowler’s. She argues that her fellow Potter scholars “believe that fantastic stories have power, that they have wisdom to impart, [...] that they show us—like Snape’s riddle and Beedle the Bard’s tales—the way forward and the way back” (5).

What follows, however, is much more than an introduction to Potter studies or an apologia for the whole idea of Potter studies. *Harry Potter for Nerds II* offers rich variety in both subject and approach. Close reading enlightens many of the sixteen essays, notably “‘Shabby Robes’ and a ‘Swift Smile’: Remus Lupin’s Nuanced Characterization in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*,” by Katherine Sas, and “Twin Core: An Exploration of Twins in the Wizarding World,” by Carol Eshleman. Eshleman achieves a rare treat for the jaded academic: her essay made me want to return to read the series yet again, looking for the patterns she outlines.

Other critical perspectives include feminist theory (“The ‘Real House-Elves’ of J.K. Rowling: The Elfin Mystique Revisited,” by McDaniel); historicism (“Dumbledore’s Army and the White Rose Society: Youth Justice Movements in the Wizarding World and Nazi Germany,” by McDaniel); formal philosophy (“Who Deserves the Truth?: A Look at Veracity and Mendacity in *Harry Potter*,” by Laura Lee Smith); and genre studies (“*Harry Potter* as Dystopian Literature,” by Kris Swank). The variety and depth of subject matter makes the anthology particularly interesting. Some articles are too dry for the casual reader, such as “Un-Locke-ing *The Order of the Phoenix*,” by Madelyn V. Young. “The Dark Lord’s Descent: How Voldemort Falls from Soul to Body through Reverse Alchemy,” by Rochelle Deans, is another very specialized piece, though Deans manages to bring both historicity and literary comparison (with the work of John Donne) to bear in this dense but ultimately rewarding essay.

Critical race theory provides the lens to a favorite piece: “Seeking Dumbledore’s Mother: *Harry Potter* in the Native American Context,” by Amy H. Sturgis. Not, thank heavens, an analysis of the problematic Ilvermorny, the canonical American counterpart to Hogwarts, “Seeking Dumbledore’s Mother” is instead a compelling follow-up to Hollie Anderson’s essay, “Reading *Harry Potter* with Navajo Eyes” (cited 176, et al.). Sturgis begins with Rowling’s

Harvard commencement speech about the value of imagination, which enables readers to “think ourselves ‘into other people’s places’” (175). Thus, while there are few deliberate and direct allusions to First Nations culture or history in the Harry Potter novels, there are analogues and lenses whose study rewards us with an expanded vision.

Analogues include the contrasting roles of boarding schools in the fictional wizarding world versus those infamous in American history, and the exploitation of “Magical Creatures,” sentient beings who are literally dehumanized. Sturgis’s main focus, however, as her title suggests, is that intriguingly absent mother-figure, Kendra Dumbledore. Her appearance in a portrait — black hair, dark eyes, high cheekbones — suggests Native Americans to Harry (187). It’s only a hint in the text, but Sturgis speculates that racial difference might have exacerbated Kendra Dumbledore’s isolation, and she also wonders whether a heritage that is from “not only the ‘Old World,’ but also the ‘New World,’ as well” is important to understanding Albus Dumbledore, whose views on racial inclusiveness bordered on revolutionary (189).

While most of the articles are literary study of one kind or another, I was gratified to find an essay focused on fandom, a cultural-studies perspective that is often missing from academic collections. Such a perspective is especially important when the subject is as widely popular as Harry Potter. The essay, “Surviving the Potter-pocalypse: Keeping Magic Alive in a Post-Potter World,” by Hayley Burson and Michael Burson, is not a broad discussion of life without Hogwarts. Rather, it is the fascinating, autobiographical account of Potter Watch, the wildly successful club at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

Fittingly, it is less academic in tone; it works, though the third-person point of view is off-putting, given that the “Michael” and “Hayley” in the essay are the authors. As the piece has an appropriately conversational tone — “Boy, was he wrong” (141) — why not just abandon another layer of academic writing convention and incorporate first-person pronouns? That’s a very minor quibble with Burson and Burson’s article, which captures beautifully the dedication of true and self-professed “nerds”: “What do I now? How do I survive the Potter-pocalypse? The answer is to keep the magic alive, to keep having fun, and to keep celebrating the things we love most” (153).

This anthology is a testament to the power of doing just that. “Celebrating the things we love most” in a way that explores their cultural power and encourages further reading is, perhaps, the best tribute to Rowling’s work.

—Jennifer W. Spirko

