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## ***The Invention of Angela Carter: A Biography* by Edmund Gordon**

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## Online Winter Seminar



### Online Winter Seminar

The Inklings and Horror: Fantasy's Dark Corners

February 4-5, 2022 (Friday evening, Saturday all day)

Via Zoom and Discord

## Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico; July 29 - August 1, 2022

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therefore right to note how significant those choices, even the small ones, are” (238). If Christ is within us, and works within, He makes us wish to follow the heavenly will of His commands. The Great Physician performs spiritual surgery daily, and we must allow Him to do it. Lewis himself knew, even as he became a Christian, that he would be invaded, meddled with, and in the end, he permitted the invasion else he would not have surrendered to become the great Christian writer he became. Lewis’s treatment of choice does indeed inspire me to examine my smallest attitudes, ways of thinking, and the ramifications of how my words might inspire or hurt others. Am I crawling back to that dragon skin that God sliced open when I cried out to Him?

Aside from a few quibbles, Williams’s *Deeper Magic* presents a valuable addition to the library shelf of anyone who loves Lewis, is interested in theological questions, and enjoys a highly intelligent approach. Williams’s study is greatly needed in this current culture, which is shrouded in shadowy confusion, more so than when C.S. Lewis wrote his fiction and his Christian essays. It’s well worth the interested reader’s time.

—Diane Joy Baker

#### WORKS CITED

Lewis, C. S. *Mere Christianity; a Revised and Enlarged Edition*. Macmillan, 1952.



**THE INVENTION OF ANGELA CARTER: A BIOGRAPHY.** Edmund Gordon. New York: Oxford UP, 2017. 525 p. 9780190626846. \$35.00; also available for Kindle.

CONSIDERING THE SHEER IMPRESSIVE RANGE of Angela Carter’s writing—journalism, literary criticism, poetry, film adaptations, radio plays, nine novels, even a libretto—it may be hard for some readers, especially those familiar with only a portion of her work, to pin her down. In a way, the lack of any core or essential identity is the primary theme of Edmund Gordon’s captivating and meticulously researched new biography, *The Invention of Angela Carter*. The word “invention” in his title is intentionally ambiguous. First and foremost, Gordon uses the word to indicate Carter’s talent for *self*-invention, her tendency to construct a self through a conscious performance in the public and private spheres. An ardent individualist, reveling in asserting her independence even from causes she admired (such as feminism), Carter crafted for herself a “vibrant, defiantly humorous personality,” characterized by “strong opinions and outrageous jokes” (408, 72), and becoming someone simultaneously

"[r]ude, warm, romantic, funny" (65). Even her novels, Gordon argues, are about "performance and self-invention" in one way or another (375). His title also indicates the comic and fantastic invention within Carter's own works as well as the invention of an "Angela Carter" by her critics and admirers alike. Among this last group, Gordon tells us, the "myth-making has largely gone unchecked" in the absence of any full biography (417). One result of this mythologizing is a frequent misappraisal of her work—the academic literature on Carter, for example, has "tended to stress her feminist consciousness at the expense of everything else" (417). Such views, including the frequent image of Carter as a grandmotherly teller of literary folk tales, ignore or downplay her "intellectual sharpness, her taste for violent and disturbing imagery, and her exuberant sensuality" (xv).

Carter's instinct for self-invention, however, poses intense challenges for any biographer intent on accuracy. "She wasn't," Gordon says with deadpan earnestness, "always a reliable witness to her own life" (xvi). Carter loved to exaggerate and even romanticize; she never stopped constructing her selfhood even in private letters. Hence, although Gordon possessed a biographer's dream in unfettered access to all Carter's existing diaries, letters, and other documents, he often had to treat these primary sources with a healthy dose of skepticism. Occasionally, Gordon treats a fictive and non-fictive account of Carter's life as having "equivalent biographical value" (187). More often and more impressively, Gordon undertakes a heroic amount of legwork by interviewing people important to Carter's life and even re-tracing her steps in some of her world travels. The individuals he interviews are treated quite fairly, and they often provide valuable correctives on Carter's own colored recollections. Nonetheless, perhaps inevitably, Gordon treats Carter's version as authoritative "when I haven't encountered anything that obviously undermines it" (xvii). Although such a methodology leaves room for future biographies, Gordon could hardly have done otherwise under the circumstances.

The biography is divided into three parts; each corresponds to a major segment of Carter's life. As might be expected, Part I concentrates on Carter's early life and immediate genealogy, including Jane Stones, the grandmother who provided Carter with her role model for many strong female figures as well as the peasant teller of folk tales—although Carter's frequent claim that her grandmother was "functionally illiterate" almost reaches the level of "outright falsity" (4). Gordon then describes the smothering atmosphere of Carter's childhood home life and her early marriage to Paul Carter; importantly, though, Paul introduced his wife to folk music and the British folk scene of the 1950s, perhaps Angela Carter's first major adult foray into subversiveness. The middle section of Gordon's biography focuses on her three-year residence in Japan. This experience transformed Carter greatly, strengthening her feminism, and while

Gordon limits himself to citing only Carter's own judgment that her Japan experience helped her "come to terms with being peculiar" (199), Gordon's account also seems to suggest that Carter finally became comfortable with the identity she had spent so long trying to forge. The last third of the biography begins with Carter's return to England amidst a "national mood of derangement and decay" (204). For those interested primarily in literary history, this section contains the most gems. Gordon presents Carter as someone at the center of British literary culture, involved with numerous universities and the rise of MFA programs, a key author for Virago Books (a feminist press), friends with Salman Rushdie and Ian McEwan, a mentor to Pat Barker, even a judge for the Booker Prize. Carter's reputation also rose substantially throughout the 1980s, partly thanks to the surge of interest in Latin American magical realism—something she had discovered a decade earlier. Gordon handles these final years of Carter's life with particular narrative skill, and he even rises to the level of pathos when describing her tragic early death from cancer.

For *Mythlore* readers, the most intriguing part of Gordon's biography may be his comments on Carter and her conceptions of folklore, myth, and the fantastic. Although Carter's lush prose and instinct for magical realism challenged the "formally stiff and verbally gaunt" British fiction of the 1950s and 1960s (49), Gordon's account makes clear, at least through implication, that Carter's mode of the fantastic differed quite greatly from those popular genres that normally serve as vehicles for the fantastic—i.e., science fiction and fantasy. Not that a writer as rebellious as Carter ever disdained such popular writing. Her favorite childhood reading included Lewis Carroll, George MacDonald, and the Grimms' fairy tales; as an adult, she admired H.P. Lovecraft as well as *New Worlds*, Michael Moorcock's revolutionary magazine of New Wave British science fiction. (She even befriended Moorcock, who late in Carter's life gave her medicinal cannabis to offset the side effects of her chemotherapy [407]). Still, while Carter's fiction lent greater literary cachet to the fantastic in general, her work bears little resemblance to the speculative fiction tradition. Her greatest influences are all canonical modernist and postmodernist writers: James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov, and especially Jorge Luis Borges. Anthony Burgess, author of the science fiction classic *A Clockwork Orange*, championed her work from an early date, but he cannot easily be labeled a science fiction writer. The index, furthermore, never cites a single Inklings or any works by them—perhaps as much a sign of Carter's atheism as anything else. Tellingly, when Carter taught a creative-writing module entitled "Science Fiction and Fantasy" at Brown University in 1981, her reading list included "works by Borges, Italo Calvino and Bruno Schulz" (315) rather than the likes of Tolkien, Dunsany, or Arthur C. Clarke.

In fact, one of the more intriguing revelations from Gordon's biography is that, despite Carter's ardent admiration for fairy tales and magical realism, she was a rampant de-mythologizer and implicitly hostile to the goals of mythopoeic literature. According to Gordon, Carter always took "pains to distinguish myth from folklore" (228). She saw folk tales as representing "authentic" English national character (65), but she saw myths "as 'extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree'" (228). Myths were things in need of debunking—and Carter considered herself a prime debunker. To put Carter's attitude another way, when C.S. Lewis famously remarked that myths were lies breathed through silver, Carter would have agreed only if Lewis had removed silver from the equation. Gordon himself shares the demythologizing attitude through his desire to correct the image of Carter as "a primitive, quasi-mystical teller of tales," an image that only became more prevalent "after she stopped dyeing her hair in the 1980s" (278); such views, Gordon feels, give short shrift to the many qualities in Carter's writing that challenge the grandmotherly tale-teller image. Her magical realism, then, might be described as anti-mythopoeic in both intent and accomplishment.

Only a few quibbles can be raised about such a well-researched biography. Two are more observations than anything else. For one thing, Gordon pays little attention to Carter's early poetry; for another, the technical side of Carter's literary achievement does not interest him much. Although he explains that Carter herself preferred "juicy prose" to "formal experiment" (207), works like *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman* and *Nights at the Circus* are still often considered exemplars of historiographic metafiction, a hallmark of postmodern aesthetics, and so might have merited discussion on that score. The only really troublesome point, though, comes in Gordon's evaluation of Carter's journalism. As can be seen from her tendency to romanticize and exaggerate, Carter had a less than positivistic attitude toward facts. Sometimes this quality can be amusing, as during her early misadventures as a court reporter, or forgivable, as in her mistranslations of Charles Perrault's fairy tales. Her journalism about Japan is more problematic, however. Gordon argues that, despite Carter's failure to learn the language, she had "become a keen and discriminating student of the culture" (171), but Carter's outsider status and her blasé attitude toward facts constitutes a nearly insurmountable hurdle for any journalist describing a different society. As important as her time in Japan was to Carter personally, her comments *about* Japan run the risk of a sort of feminist Orientalism, creating rather than discovering knowledge of the Other for the benefit of Western gender politics. Her Japan journalism is actually less about Japan and more about England and Angela Carter herself. This is one of the few places where Gordon's final judgment must be taken with a grain of salt.

All told, though, Gordon creates a compelling and fascinating account of an important figure of 20<sup>th</sup>-century British literature. *The Invention of Angela Carter* provides many important correctives on Carter—her life and personality, for example, but also her feminism. Gordon amply demonstrates that, although Carter “described herself for a while as a ‘radical feminist,’ her politics always had as much in common with the libertarian and socialist tendencies” (215), a judgement that will significantly help hone future feminist appraisals of her work. Indeed, it seems safe to say that all future work on Carter, in one way or another, will have to consult this valuable (and highly readable) new resource.

—Dennis Wilson Wise



**FORGOTTEN LEAVES: ESSAYS FROM A SMIAL.** Edited by Jessica Burke and Anthony Burdge. Staten Island, NY: Myth Ink Books, 2015. 285 p. 9781534923461. \$20.00.

*FORGOTTEN LEAVES: ESSAYS FROM A SMIAL* (a smial being a recognized offshoot of the Tolkien Society in the UK, and the first official Tolkien group) is meant to “showcase fans as the first scholars. We wanted to present a scholarly discussion that was open to scholars and non-scholars alike. [...] Here we have discussions that are academic, fannish, and pleasant blends of the two” (5). This volume succeeds in its goals, though the connections to fan scholarship are not as explicated or as forthright as they could have been, especially given certain contributors’ bona fides. Indeed, co-editor Jessica Burke’s forward lingers over the disconnect between book and film fandoms that has turned toxic for some; she assigns the popularity of the films as the source of the greed of the Tolkien estate, which demands a great deal of pricey permissions for the use of the name alone, which subsequently bankrupted the smial whose members created the volume and led to an end of their activities and a hiatus for the organization. This bitterness casts a pall on the collection, which is otherwise an interesting and pleasurable read. *Forgotten Leaves* is more of a collection for fans than academics, despite some academic-esque entries. Most of the essays are lightly written, focusing on the core texts of Tolkien’s work and its offshoots, though sporadically contributors do make use of some of Tolkien’s other work or his letters, or of some of the scholarship that has been written for a popular audience.

Topics vary widely, recalling the wide-ranging discussions many Tolkien enthusiasts will cheerfully indulge in repeatedly. The book begins with a series of more conventionally literary readings: Melissa Snyder discusses