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Tales Newly Told

Alexei Kondratiev

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Tales Newly Told

Abstract

Bull, Emma. *War for the Oaks* Paxson, Diana L. *The Paradise Tree*. Zimmer, Paul Edwin. *A Gathering of Heroes*.

Tales Newly Told

A Column by Alexei Kondratiev

Emma Bull's *War for the Oaks* (Ace, 1987) is, essentially, a book about elves and rock-and-roll. Knowing this much, we expect something satirical, perhaps a little strident, a parody of conventional fantasy, playing for laughs but hardly profound, and certainly light years away from the genuine experience of Faerie. It is with delighted surprise, then, that we find in this demented juxtaposition of themes a truly mythopoetic freshness, a means of depicting the real beauties and perils of the Otherworld. There are plenty of laughs here, to be sure, but the characters face serious choices; tragedy can and does strike as a result, the gravity of the laws of Faerie is in no way diminished by the strangeness of the setting.

Emma Bull belongs to a remarkable "school" of Minneapolis fantasy writers that includes Steven Brust, Will Shetterly, Phyllis Eisenstein, Ruth Berman, and Eleanor Arnason. She has displayed her competence as a fantasist in a number of short stories, but none of it prepared us for the likes of this book. It is, as far as genre is concerned, contemporary urban fantasy very much in the manner developed by Charles De Lint, and uses Minneapolis as a half-realistic, half-fantastic setting in the same way De Lint uses Ottawa. But the human protagonists, far from having any "Celtic" cultural interests that might facilitate their contacts with the otherworld, are immersed in the modern rock-music subculture. Instead of playing ethereal chords on harp-strings (though they do display a greater acquaintance with the traditional folk ballads than the average rock musician). They go for electric guitars and synthesizers. Eddi McCandry, the heroine, is in the process of breaking up with both her lover and her band when she dragged, very much against her will, into a war between the two kingdoms of Faerie, the Seelie court and the Unseelie court (who here seem to correspond to the Dananns and Fomorians of Celtic tradition). The presence of a human is necessary in a war between immortals in order to give the events of the conflict the final reality that only comes with mortal existence. If the Unseelie Court should win, Minneapolis would suffer a Fomorin blight, and become a joyless, hungry, cruel place. Eddi is put in charge of a *phouka*, whom she at first resents bitterly (not without cause), but then gradually comes to see as a person. When Eddi and her human friends put together a new band, it is quickly infiltrated by elvish beings with consequences at once amusing and poignant. Each character is given a fine-tuned ear for both dialogue and description. The war proceeds with its share of gore and terror, but the final outcome is decided through music: it is a measure of the author's skill that L, a lukewarm rock fan at best, warmed instantly to her evocation of rock music as a healthy, life-affirming power, a "good" magic.

Most refreshingly, Emma Bull's faeries are not stereotyped icons lifted directly from folklore sources, but composite beings -- immigrants in America, like everybody else -- affected by their environment, so that they blend naturally with the setting. The queen of Air and Darkness, derives much of her glamorous image from old movies (the mythic dimension of the new land, as it were). Yet where in a less remarkable

book this hybrid material would have been used for ludicrous or comical effect, it here serves to enhance, rather than mask, the archetypal power of the Otherworld beings, the emotional situations are as soberly real as in a mediaeval romance, and the pattern and spirit of the mythology are scrupulously respected. Purists might object that the fated withdrawal of Faerie from Eddi's life does not in fact take place, that the conclusion of the story seems like a case of having one's cake and eating it; but it would come across as psychologically wrong if Eddi -- who, by her choices and experience, has surely earned her place in Faerie -- should lose control over that side of her life. All in all, the book is a little *tour de force* put together from the most unlikely elements.

With Diana L. Paxson's *The Paradise Tree* (Ace, 1987) we have another urban fantasy, set this time in Berkeley. It is in fact a "spiritual Thriller" in the tradition of Charles Williams and Dion Fortune. Ruth Racusak, a rather lonely computer hacker, is trying to help her friend Ariel, a beautiful but psychically frail woman, who has come under the influence of Joseph Roman, a shabby guru who exploits his followers. After partaking of the "Paradise Drug" -- a superhallucinogen developed by a well-meaning but naive lab technician -- in an irresponsible experiment of Roman's Ariel is shattered, forced to face aspects of herself she had sought to repress. When Ruth would help her recover by removing her from Roman's influence, a powerful secret organization of black magicians steps in, seeking to gain control of the Paradise Drug and to use Ariel as a psychic tool (recalling Betty's role in *All Hallows' Eve*). In the headlong adventure that follows, Ruth receives the help of Del Eden, an older woman who runs an occult bookstore and is a white magician in the Dion Fortune manner. Where in a Williams' novel only the evil characters would actually use magical forces, it is here shown that the same forces can be used for good, if a pure conscience directs the operation.

In the first half of the novel the descriptions of Berkeley lack the vibrancy of, say, Emma Bull's Minneapolis, or the other Berkeley in Peter Beagle's *The Folk of the Air*, and the characters are a little too flat, too obviously "types" (a criticism that has been levelled at Williams' novels as well). But as soon as the story moves into the inner realm, the realm of archetypes and immortal powers, all the themes and figures suddenly come alive, and the author's style takes on a renewed assurance. The situations convey a clear sense of what ceremonial magic is really about how it works. There are scenes of diabolical temptation that have a Lewis flavor to them. The final showdown, in which the archangels are invoked to combat their demonic counterparts, has echoes of *That Hideous Strength*, but it transcends any such derivation and stands thrillingly on its own. This passage contains, I think, Paxson's strongest writing to date.

Also from Berkeley, through in a vastly different mode we get Paul Edwin Zimmer's *A Gathering of Heroes* (Ace, 1987), set in the same universe as *The Dark Border*, and focusing on earlier adventures of

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eradicating, and not less tempting to the characters for all that. Alas, the later work seems to have more plausibility on its side; between the two books lies the dark chasm of the two world wars and the present threat of nuclear annihilation. It is amusing but also somewhat shocking to perceive that Stoker in 1897 just did not imagine that evil could be so evil, or that so many souls as Tolkien imagines could sell themselves into a state so negative and self-contradictory. Indeed, the nightmare of modern civilization has deepened.

On the brighter side, the sweet dream is sweeter, since Lorien and Valinor are more idyllic and grander than the domestic happiness achieved by Mina and Jonathan, pleasant though that was. The very desperation also adds a note of hope, since just as the acts of Frodo's true personality continued to affect the outcome of the quest even after it had capitulated to the Dark Lord personality, so could ours. Entanglement in evil does not prevent a character's good acts from intertwining with a Providential pattern to produce a good result. So, no matter how deep the nightmare gets, we still all have our motives to keep on our journey through Middle-earth, with Elbereth and Luthien the Fair firmly in mind, and a friend nearby to hold our hands when we reach convulsively for that Ring.

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the swordsmen Istvan Di Vega. Sword and Sorcery, in the Robert E. Howard tradition, is a much-maligned genre today; and it can indeed inspire the shoddiest kind of commercial fantasy, yet in its celebration of individual bravery and endurance in the face of darkness it has roots in the sagas and epics of the ancient world, and it cannot be separated from the history of Fantasy literature as a whole. Paul Zimmer (like Howard at his best) is clearly in tune with the heroic philosophy that gives life to such stories, and willing to put some stylistic effort into expressing it. He makes much use of discreet alliteration and metric prose (I am sensitized to this, perhaps, by having heard the author read aloud from his work on many occasions): in some passages the writing is overdone and falls short of the mark, but in others it is strikingly effective. There is, in the descriptions of physical combat, a sensuality, grace and precision which I have found in no other writer. It is indeed fortunate that the heroic fantasy genre, with its many inherent limitations, should have a modern exponent of this stature.