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Tales Newly Told

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Tales Newly Told

Abstract

Clough, B.W. *The Name of the Sun*. Lee, Tanith. *The White Serpent*.

Tales Newly Told

A Column on Current Fantasy by Alexei Kondratiev

Some works of fantasy strike the reader unquestionably as the revelation of a new world of human experience, an epiphany of an uncharted realm. There is, in such works, a powerful unity between the author's particular world-view and its universal applicability – in which lies the very essence of mythopoeia – and the whole vision is made fresh and compelling by the discovery of a new dimension of language that suits it perfectly. The great masterworks of mythopoeic fantasy – the works of the Inklings, of Lord Dunsany, Mervyn Peake, E.R. Edlison, Ursula Le Guin and many others – owe their success to such characteristics. Yet, as every reader knows, not all fantasy works aim so high, nor do they in fact have to explore with equal depth all aspects of their subcreation in order to produce a pleasing and rewarding effect. A memorably depicted character, a gift for describing places, a unique theme will often give distinction to a work that is conventional in all other respects – and earn it a lasting place in the hearts of fantasy readers.

Tanith Lee has by now established herself as one of the foremost fantasy talents of our time. Her particular gift is an awesome control over the poetic properties of prose – sound, rhythm, deep word-associations – and an ability to very her register so as to suit precisely the expressive needs of each one of the many different themes she sets herself to write about. She displays this meticulous attention to linguistic details not only in her large-scale high-fantasy creations (like the "Flat Earth" chronicles) but also in works that are much more closely related to current genre conventions. Her novels of Vis, for instance, appear at first glance to be fairly ordinary heroic fantasy: exotic adventures stories set in a pre-industrial (vaguely Hellenistic) world, where the heroes get by with the help of muscle and magic in about equal proportions. Yet beneath the familiar plot-elements there is an intricate substructure of symbolic images with far-reaching archetypal resonance, carefully developed and balanced against each other. From the beginning of the series in *The Storm Lord*, through *Anackire* and now *The White Serpent* (DAW, 1988), this symbolic framework has grown in definition and expressiveness. The premise of the series is that two human races – polar opposites of each other – share a world: the dark-skinned Vis, who are ruled by their bodily passions, especially their uncontrollable sexual arousal at the rising of the star Zastis, and the fair Lowlanders, who are immune to Zastis but have great psychic abilities, which can at times give them a collective, ego-transcending identity, manifested as the serpent-goddess Anackire. The two races contend for supremacy, one sometimes enslaving the other, but neither ever prevailing completely. This night-day, dark-ness-light, body-mind, id-superego duality is a recurring

theme in Lee's work (the demon-god opposition in the "Flat Earth" books is a familiar instance of it), as is the need to reconcile the extremes in a harmonious whole. *The White Serpent* deals with a particular episode in the attainment of that balance. At the far end of the "white" range of the Vis-Lowlander spectrum are the albino Amanackire, freak-born individuals who possess immense powers to control and transform their environment. Gathered together in their hidden city of Ashnese, the Amanackire are on the

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verge of conquering physical death, but in the process are endangering their souls, their link to the rest of humanity. It is through the convoluted, slowly developing relationship between the Amanackire girl Aztira ("the White serpent" of the title) and the dark-skinned athlete Rehger – who is the descendant (and probably the reincarnation) of a famous oppressor of the Lowlanders – that an element of Earth-bound Vis vitality integrates itself into the emotionless eternity that the Amanackire are creating for themselves. This rather simple theme is enriched by changing viewpoints, some non-linear elements of narrative, extraordinarily vivid depictions of place, and a succession of dramatic scenes that seem in no way forced. The style is greatly toned down from the deliberately early-Romantic lushness of the "Flat Earth" books, but preserves the same visual qualities and attention to detail. The duel between light and dark takes place not only through the interaction of the characters but throughout the perceptible world: everywhere we are shown how a "dark" element can become a part of a "light" pattern, how something "dark" can become the medium for a "light" action, and vice versa.

If one compares the present book to the first volume in the series, *The Storm Lord*, one can appreciate the progress Lee has made in her craft over the past ten years. While *The Storm Lord* contained stretches of beautiful writing, there was a disturbing clockwork quality to the characters, a sense that all their actions were predetermined and that free will played no part in their choices. In *The White Serpent*, by contrast, both appealing and unappealing characters display a reassuring complexity: we are never quite sure of how they will react in a given situation, of which facet of their personality will take over at a critical moment. When, at first, we see her only from a Vis viewpoint, Aztira appears as a cold, threatening figure of power, a

true "white serpent"; only gradually, as her portrait is fleshed out, do we discover that she is vulnerable, finite, unsure of her destiny. Some aspects of the earlier novel are even corrected in this one: the morally attractive Rehger becomes the vindication of his ancestor Amrek, the doomed villain of *The Storm Lord*.

Thus, although it begins with the makings of a minor heroic fantasy work, *The White Serpent* manages, by craft and poetic vision, to transcend the limitations of its genre. It is a beautiful artifact, memorable enough, perhaps, to become a classic.

When *The Crystal Crown* – the first of B.W. Clough's Averdean novels – came out a few years ago, I passed it over (deceived by its packaging) as just one more undistinguished commercial fantasy. Only when subsequent volumes appeared did I realize that it was in fact a delightfully original series, quite individual in style and atmosphere. The land of Averdean is the home of the self-contained, proudly independent folk, the Shan. There is a strong Chinese flavor to Shan culture, obsessed as they are with both gastronomy and family politics. But they are also very much like hobbits: homebound and parochial, capable of worrying about the quality of their meals even in the jaws of death, soft and timid at first glance, but amazingly tough, brave and resilient, when put to the test. The plot deals with the career of Liras-ven Tsormelezok, a young man interested mostly in gardening and his own personal comfort, who is chosen (quite against his will) to be Shan King. His transformation from private to public person is symbolized by his putting on the Crystal Crown, an ancient talisman handed down over the generations that links its wearer with the power of the Sun – the god of Averdean – and gives knowledge of the hidden side of things. Although there are many comical goings-on involving his family and his dealings with the Cayds – stock "Nordic" barbarians from the kingdom next door, complete opposites of the reserved, comfort loving Shan – the main thrust of the narrative is concerned with Liras-ven's love-hate relationship with the Crown: he is terrified of its assault upon his individuality, its ability to turn him from a "normal" human happy in his limitations to an archetypal figure of myth, yet he is more and more compelled to assume such a role by a moral sense of his responsibility to his people. In the second volume, *The Realm Beneath*, tragedy comes into the story as the Cayds invade Averdean, and the Shan are defeated (it is a measure of Clough's talent that the humor is kept up alongside the tragedy, and that the two modes reinforce, rather than impede, each other). Discouraged by the Sun's apparent betrayal, Liras stops wearing the Crown, but retains it in his possession, thus refusing to completely abandon his responsibilities.

Now, in *The Name of the Sun* (DAW, 1988), Liras, his

Caydish wife, his infant daughter, and his magician-friend Xalan are forced to leave Averdean and undertake a "There and Back Again" journey that will expose them to the infinite variety of human experience and broaden their parochial vision. They are subjected to the values of alien cultures, risk the effects of foreign cooking ("like explorers testing a quagmire"), and have more than one brush with annihilation. In all this they are sustained by their earthy common sense, their matter-of-fact appreciation of the here-and-now, and by that peculiarly Shan quality called *chun-hei* (described as "crazy honorableness" or "unreasonable and romantic high-mindedness"). After a long sequence of colorful adventures they reach the strange land of Rriphirriz, which recalls some of the utopias in early philosophical romances. It is there that Liras comes to terms with the Crown and learns that the Sun had not abandoned him, but had allowed his defeat in order to prepare him for a larger role he could not have anticipated. He also discovers that he can enter the "realm beneath" – the unconscious world of archetypes – without sacrificing his humanity. Armed with this destruction of a world-threatening monster in a far land. And he then has acquired enough inner strength to return triumphant to Averdean, much as the hobbits return to the Shire with an increased stature earned on their initiatory journey.

Judged by the highest standards of fantasy writing, the series is wanting in many respects. Though generally well-defined, the characters sometimes behave in untypical fashion to expedite the plot. The final confrontation with the monster Ixfel, though chilling enough, is hardly the revelation of universal evil we had been led to expect. And Clough's style, though competent and witty, is far from being as creative and polished as, say, Tanith Lee's. Yet the unique charm of the series is undeniable, and is a perfect example of how a potentially minor work can rise to distinction through unusual excellence in a particular area of subcreation. One would not object to another stay in Averdean.



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