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Tales Newly Told

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Abstract  
Hand, Elizabeth. Æstival Tide. Hand, Elizabeth. Winterlong
A striking literary phenomenon of the last two decades is the gradual blurring of the boundary between the genres of fantasy and science fiction. That boundary had itself been established rather recently: until this century, all literature that imagined a world different from the one we inhabit from day to day would have been thought of as “fantastic,” “romantic” or perhaps “Utopian,” regardless of its degree of plausibility. But in the early part of this century a new subgenre of pulp fantasy, devoted to technological speculation and animated by a scientist philosophy, gained so much commercial popularity that it eclipsed all other types of fantasy in the literary field. Established as science fiction, the new genre grew in variety and sophistication, but remained faithful to its original assumptions — most notably, to a materialistic world-view, in which all reality was defined by what mechanistic science considered possible. This became one of the most important defining characteristics of science fiction: even though it often dealt with scientifically impossible themes (e.g. faster-than-light vehicles, teleportation, time travel, etc.), so long as both the author and his audience thought that this was consistent with a future state of mechanistic science, the materialist canons were felt to be inviolate. Works that dealt with themes unquestionably contrary to those canons (such as magic, the gods, etc.) now found themselves within the distinctly minor genre of “heroic fantasy.” Before long it was assumed that tales of the future (in which machines, space travel, etc., appeared) belonged to science fiction, whereas fantasy was naturally identified with the pre-technological, “pre-rational” past (thus, in practice, relegating most fantasy plots to pseudo-Medieval settings). A stylistic dichotomy also emerged: a simple, transparent style, suited to clear exposition of intellectual arguments and quick plot developments, was favored for science fiction, but in fantasy one could still indulge in verbal pyrotechnics, lush description, and a dwelling on subjective experience for its own sake.

Of course, the boundary between the genres was never quite that rigid. Many works marketed as science fiction actually explored the spiritual and psychological depths of “inner space,” and some works generally felt to be “fantasy” (for instance, the Gormenghast Trilogy) dealt with worlds as scientifically “plausible” as any in science fiction. C.S. Lewis’ space-travel stories were written as science fiction, but really had more in common with the literary fantasy of previous centuries. Still, the boundary has remained enough of a reality for both readers and publishers that its growing irreverence is felt to be a major change. Much new “science fiction” writing is more consciously mythopoetic, more willing to adapt the style and manner of traditional fantasy, and even willing to challenge the materialist canons (which are in any case now less “plausible,” since recent developments in science have made traditional materialism outdated) Elizabeth Hand’s Winterlong and its sequel Estival Tide (Bantam 1992) are an outstanding example of this process: they take a well-established science fiction theme — the post-holocaust story — and move it into new, uncharted realms.

The post-holocaust story — describing what the world would be like after our civilization has perished in a global catastrophe — had its main flowering in the 50s and 60s, when the Cold War made such a catastrophe all too possible. Only rarely did writers dare to envisage the complete extinction of humanity. More usually, the plots adhered to one of two scenarios: 1) A few individuals keep the knowledge of our civilization alive in an otherwise dislocated, barbaric world, and eventually, through missionary work, re-create a civilized society based on our own; or 2) Humanity as a whole regresses to a post-technological, pre-scientific state, but then evolves, through a recapitulation of history, back to the materialist technological civilization we know today. In both cases a “return to normal” is expected: there is an almost naive trust in the “truth” of our modern perception of reality. Gradually, however, writers dealing with this theme have come to entertain the possibility that, if the circumstances that uphold our current perception of reality are removed, reality itself might change, and the human world might re-organize itself in a completely different — but equally valid — manner. John Crowley’s Engine Summer was a fine, moving example of this kind of “revisionist” post-holocaust story. Elizabeth Hand’s recent novels are a highly original development of the theme along similar lines.

In the world of Hand’s narrative, our civilization has refined its technology of genetic manipulation to the highest level — producing a wide variety of half-animal “geneslaves,” among other things — before collapsing as a result of germ warfare between enemy states. The collapse, however, has not been sudden and uniform, so that islets of technological materialism survive here and there, desperately trying to re-assert their control over wide areas of the globe that have not only returned to barbarism, but where people have fascinating ways of adapting to their new, frightening environment. In Winterlong a girl with destructive psychic powers she cannot control, originally an experimental subject in one of the last bastions of

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the techno-military establishment, escapes from her handlers and flees to a surrealistically transformed Washington, D.C. The political intrigues of the plot however, take a back seat to Hand’s sensitive, wonder-filled evocation of the strange world she has created. Her writing is polished and intensely visual, full of bright colors and suggestive shapes, very much in the tradition of the high-fantasy authors who have been most strongly driven by the need to express their private universes. There is much darkness and horror in her vision, of course — a legacy of the authors who have been most strongly driven by the need to express their private universes. There is much darkness and horror in her vision, of course — a legacy of the authors who have been most strongly driven by the need to express their private universes. There is much darkness and horror in her vision, of course — a legacy of the authors who have been most strongly driven by the need to express their private universes. There is much darkness and horror in her vision, of course — a legacy of the authors who have been most strongly driven by the need to express their private universes. There is much darkness and horror in her vision, of course — a legacy of the authors who have been most strongly driven by the need to express their private universes. There is much darkness and horror in her vision, of course — a legacy of the authors who have been most strongly driven by the need to express their private universes. There is much darkness and horror in her vision, of course — a legacy of the authors who have been most strongly driven by the need to express their private universes. There is much darkness and horror in her vision, of course — a legacy of the authors who have been most strongly driven by the need to express their private universes. There is much darkness and horror in her vision, of course — a legacy of the authors who have been most strongly driven by the need to express their private universes. There is much darkness and horror in her vision, of course — a legacy of the authors who have been most strongly driven by the need to express their private universes. There is much darkness and horror in her vision, of course — a legacy of the authors who have been most strongly driven by the need to express their private universes. There is much darkness and horror in her vision, of course — a legacy of the authors who have been most strongly driven by the need to express their private universes. There is much darkness and horror in her vision, of course — a legacy of the authors who have been most strongly driven by the need to express their private universes.