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Tales Newly Told

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Tales Newly Told

Abstract

Hand, Elizabeth. *Æstival Tide*. Hand, Elizabeth. *Winterlong*

Tales Newly Told

a column on current modern Fantasy by Alexei Kondratiev

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 irrelevance is felt to be a major change. Much new "science fiction" writing is more con-

ciously mythopoeic, 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 *Aestival 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

Continued on page 21

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TALES NEWLY TOLD

(continued from page 15)

the techno-military establishment, escapes from her hand-drawers and flees to a surrealistically transformed Washington, D.C. The political intrigues of the plot however, take a back seat to Hand's sensuous, 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 suffering visited upon the world by our civilization in its death-throes; and when, with the decay of Cartesian thinking, a god is again free to incarnate in our midst, it is a god of death and destruction. Yet his coming is a catharsis, a way of cleaning the slate — a weird beauty has, paradoxically, come into being among the ruins.

Æstival Tide depicts the situation in even more archetypal terms. The city of Araboth, which has for long years been sealed off from the war-scarred chaos of the world Outside, is ruled over by the three Orsina sisters, who each typify a different sort of vice. Like the Green Witch in *The Silver Chair*, they have consolidated their power by claiming that their city is all that there is, and instilling in their people a terrified loathing of the natural world beyond the city's walls, periodically reinforcing this with a Feast of Fear, in which a brief glimpse of the sea and sky outside is accompanied by mindless violence and death. Yet the evil of the Orsinate goes far beyond that of an unusually oppressive political tyranny: it has genuinely diabolical, soul-destroying ambitions. Throughout its domain, the symbols and values of religious traditions are systematically derided and robbed of their imaginative power. The nine levels of Araboth are named after the nine choirs of angels,

though the cruelties committed there are in no way angelic. Organized religion is allowed to survive, but only as grotesque parody (e.g. the Church of Christ Cadillac). The Compassionate Redeemer is a horrible monster who kills innocent people during the Feast of Fear. Assailed by so many attempts to numb their sense of humanity, the inhabitants of Araboth have adapted in a variety of ways: some practice the art of "timoring" — i.e., trying to shock themselves into some kind of emotional response by torturing fellow humans.

Yet there are weak points in the defenses of this closed fortress where pain feeds upon pain. The rulers of Araboth have no control over the elaborate technology that sustains the city. A mythology has grown up about the great tidal wave Ucalegon, which will some day bring destruction and retribution. At the lowest level of the city in dreaded contact with the living earth, is the beautiful android Nefertity, a nemosyne — a talking literary archive originally designed by a feminist church — who keeps the healing art of mythopoeia alive by telling stories to an audience of dehumanized outcasts. Zalophus, a huge whale-like creature prophesies the destruction of Araboth and dreams of joining his "sisters" in the world Outside — a seemingly impossible dream, since he is the product of a laboratory. But the focal point of change comes to be Reive, a gynander (one of a caste of hermaphrodites who fulfill the function of soothsayers) who is actually the forgotten child of one of the Orsina sisters, and whose unique psychic talent finally unsettles the hierarchy of Araboth.

Retribution does indeed come, and possibilities are re-defined (even Zalophus' dream comes true), but not before Hand's superbly controlled writing has led the reader on an unforgettable roller-coaster ride of varied emotions and sensations. As the book ends, the remnants of military-technological civilization are still desperately holding on to survival, still trying to maintain power through war. A sequel is evidently planned, in which, one presumes, some of the characters from *Winterlong* will re-appear and join forces with the survivors of Araboth. With these first two volumes her tale, Elizabeth Hand has proven herself as a master of her craft, whether one thinks of it as science fiction or high fantasy, and the third will be awaited with eagerness and high hopes.



ERRATUM OF TALES NEWLY TOLD: in issue 68, page 10, column two, the end of the paragraph should read:

Harry's Turtledove's "The Decoy Duck" is set in the universe of his "Videssos" books, exemplifying the world-building genre of fantasy which, in its most intricate and intellectually demanding form, was certainly instituted by Tolkien. Peter S. Beagle's "The Naga" is feigned to be a lost chapter from Pliny the Elder's *Historia Naturalis*, echoing Tolkien's device of giving his works sources in supposed ancient manuscripts.

Apologies for the previous omission of the words in bold type.