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Tales Newly Told

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Tales Newly Told

Abstract

Duane, Diane. *The Door into Sunset*

Tales Newly Told

ALEXEI KONDRATIEV



he popularity of the works of the Inklings (and of Tolkien especially) has, of course, had an inescapable influence on the writing of fantasy in the last thirty years. This influence has appeared most clearly on the level of narrative structures: the shape most often given to fantasy universes (humans share the world with older, more magical races, and are involved in a cosmic confrontation between Good and Evil), and the most favored plot outlines (a band of disparate characters embark on a quest that takes them through a world vaster and more dangerous than they had ever imagined). A few writers of exceptional talent have breathed a new spirit into these by now over-familiar elements by focusing them on a unique personal vision; but in most commercial fantasy the basic "Tolkienian" plot has turned into something formulaic and lifeless. This is usually because the more mediocre writers have concentrated only on the most external layer of plot mechanics and completely overlooked the philosophical, spiritual and moral concerns that the Inklings' narratives express, and that give those narratives their depth and their power to move. The most interesting and profound aspect of the Inklings' influence on modern fantasy is to be found, then, in the works of that handful of writers who have truly appreciated the world-view that the Inklings shared, and who have continued to explore the implications of that world-view in new and convincing ways.

This question of philosophical and spiritual influence comes to mind with particular force after reading Diane Duane's *The Door Into Sunset* (Tor, 1993 [pbk 1994]), the latest installment in the story that was begun in *The Door Into Fire* and *The Door Into Shadow*, and which is to be concluded in *A Door Into Starlight*. At first glance, Duane might seem an odd candidate for inclusion in the pantheon of Inklings successors. Thanks in part to the observations of critics like Ursula Le Guin, we have become sensitive to the role that language plays in establishing the tone that sustains successful high fantasy, and Duane's language does fall somewhat short of Elfland: while her characters certainly don't sound like they come from Poughkeepsie, their speech — even though it avoids gratingly obvious modern colloquialisms — does seem rooted somewhere in contemporary America (California, perhaps?). Added to the jocular breeziness that pervades most of the characters' interactions, and which can become irritating when it gets in the way of the more serious and numinous episodes (a friend of mine once described *The Door Into Fire* as "a symphony made up entirely of scherzos"), this would seem to be the makings of "low" rather than "high" fantasy.

And yet, reading Duane is an experience completely

unlike reading the kind of "low" fantasy that is being churned out for the mass market — or even good, literate "low" fantasy that is successful within the limits it has set itself, like Terry Pratchett's. In Duane's work we are at once compelled to see the characters' lives as having a spiritual significance that transcends the particular role they are made to play in the narrative. Whether they are given "heroic" or "villainous" parts, we are required to be completely sensitive to their sufferings and to the limitations that may have informed their choices, and there is always an opportunity for redemption open to them at some point. Such concerns appear in all of Duane's writing, from her children's fiction to her "Star Trek" novels. It is the expression of a world-view much like that of the Inklings: rooted in a spiritual understanding of existence, imbued with hope, and aware of the creative and redemptive power of love. Nowhere is this better articulated than in "The Tale of the Five" (as the sequence of the "Door" novels is called); it even develops into a brilliant and poignant illustration of the theology of romantic love — a realm which few fantasy writers have dared to explore since Charles Williams.

The cosmology of "The Tale of the Five", filled as it is with themes from *The White Goddess* and Pagan-seeming ritual unions of rulers with their Land, might superficially suggest Wiccan beliefs, but a closer reading will reveal that its flavor is far more Christian than it is Neo-Pagan. This is a world that has suffered a Fall, and is in need of Redemption. However, just as C.S. Lewis gave Christian doctrine a fresh power to excite the imagination by presenting it in the language of science fiction, so does Duane startle us into re-examining the basic themes of Western religion by expressing them through imagery hitherto unfamiliar in (and, in some cases, seemingly antithetical to) Christian tradition. Thus God, instead of appearing as a stern Father who commands and punishes, is seen exclusively as God-the-Mother, a Goddess-figure using the mixture of guile and tenderness a human mother would use to win Her children back from the Shadow that has marred Her creation. And the spiritual dimensions of romantic love (one of the weapons that can be deployed against the Shadow) are illustrated by the relationship between a pair of gay lovers: the implications of mutual self-giving can thus be examined without reference to the social institutions that have grown up around childbirth and its consequences (Duane, of course, does take such institutions into account, but she revises them radically).

Even in Duane's geography, the two main countries, Arlen and Darthen, exist in a relation of complementarity, their rulers being bound, for complex historical and

mythological reasons, in a ritual union that is necessary to the health of both lands. Freelorn, the son of the king of Arlen, is in a love-relationship with Herewiss, the son of a Darthen nobleman. Before Freelorn can undergo Initiation — the ritual experience that establishes a ruler's true bond with the spirit of his land — he loses his father and is driven out of Arlen by political machinations related to the purposes of the Shadow. Since the usurper who takes over Arlen doesn't have the proper ritual qualifications either, the magical balance between Arlen and Darthen is broken, and the forces that maintain the fertility of the land are in danger. It is Freelorn's duty to his own people to return and assume his ritual function, but his sense of inadequacy (and his fear of Initiation) holds him back. Herewiss, however, is bonded to the strange fire-spirit Sunspark, and can access the primordial Fire that is used to make magic, and that is normally available only to women. But whereas women are not harmed by Fire, a man shortens his life every time he uses it. So although Herewiss performs awesome feats, literally moving mountains to further Freelorn's cause, he is actually giving up his life for his lover's sake; and to return that love properly, to give that sacrifice its true value, Freelorn is forced to overcome his fears. But the extraordinary power of substitution that is present in passionate love, which Duane understands so well (another friend of mine has referred to this aspect of her work as "California Charles Williams"), ensures that he need not rely on his strength alone. By the time we reach *The Door Into Sunset*, Freelorn is ready to face the implications of his kingship again.

Although the love between Freelorn and Herewiss dominates the story, we are given a stranger and even more striking illustration of coinherence and substitution in love in the relationship between the human woman Segnborra and the dragon Hasai. When Duane's dragons die, their spirit must be taken in by a living host, who also accepts all the spirits that had been housed by the newly-dead dragon. If the spirit cannot find a living host, it will dissipate and die in truth. Hasai dies with no living dragons at hand, but Segnborra, although she is a human, freely takes it upon herself to share her body with him. Out of this gift something utterly new and beautiful is born, changing the natures of human and dragon alike.

The dragons are perhaps Duane's most felicitous creation. They have all the awe-inspiring traits of traditional dragons, yet Duane has modified them in one crucial way : they feed on sunlight rather than flesh. Thus their relations with humans can be the result of free moral choice, rather than the consequence of a predatory nature. They are given a fascinating set of cultural traditions; and the deliciously alien-sounding Dracon language, which Duane has obviously gone to some pains to perfect, is used liberally throughout this volume (there is even a complete poem in it), and will no doubt provide material to those who like to study the languages of Faerie.

Duane's treatment of the dragons is consistent with her

nuanced and scrupulous attitude towards the problem of Evil. Evil, while it does great harm, can never completely drive out Good : this is not a black-and-white world, with unambiguous "bad guys". Cillmod, the usurper of Arlen, is a likable person. Even the sorcerer Rian, who has given up his soul to the Shadow, is a family man still capable of feeling affection for his young daughter. Every strike at Evil carries the risk of destroying Good. Every act of aggression or violence, even for the best of causes — and even when it becomes unavoidable — does some harm and leaves behind its own taint. The "heroes," then, are always faced with agonizing moral choices : there are no "expendable villains" to kill.

This scrupulousness extends to Duane's portrayal of the Fyrd, her equivalent of Orcs : creatures whose physical nature has been so warped that they can no longer resist the Shadow. Even Tolkien (as we know from the essays in *Morgoth's Ring*) was troubled by the moral problems his Orcs posed him : how could creatures deprived of the ability to do Good (and thus incapable of salvation) still have souls? And how, in a moral universe, could they be deprived of souls against their will? Duane grapples with the same problem, and goes Tolkien one further : in one of the book's most breathtakingly daring scenes, Herewiss, inspired by pity, magically transforms the biological structure of a Fyrd so that its nature will no longer be dominated by the Shadow. One should note, finally, that although Duane's most significant contribution lies in her spiritual and moral vision, her inventiveness as a fantasist is considerable. The scenes in which Herewiss communes, by turns, with the "consciousness" of such seemingly inanimate things as a mountain, a river, a bridge, and a cloud are unquestionable masterpieces of modern imaginative writing.

Although Freelorn's venture may be crowned with triumph, his love for Herewiss must, like all loves, eventually face death. This will, no doubt, be the focus of the remaining volume, to which Duane can be expected to contribute her usual sureness of vision, as she continues to explore those spiritual territories that the Inklings first contributed to the map of fantasy.

