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## ***Myth-Building in Modern Media: The Role of the Mytharc in Imagined Worlds*, by A.J. Black**

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*Myth-Building in Modern Media: The Role of the Mytharc in Imagined Worlds*, by  
A.J. Black

makes of these comments, the presence of Moorcock's own thoughts and words adds considerable weight to this volume.

On the whole, these two books are welcome additions to the study of mythopoeic fantasy. They both function well as introductions to Moorcock's life and works, as well as his predecessors and successors. For those who are already fans of this author, there will be plenty of details and insights that would be valuable even to experienced readers. A great benefit to researchers for further study of Moorcock are the frequent mentions of the various sources and influences on many of the works discussed (and the extensive citations in Scroggins), as well as historical perspective of what was going on in the fantasy field, the publishing industry, and the world in general in all the phases of Moorcock's writing career.

—David L. Emerson



**MYTH-BUILDING IN MODERN MEDIA: THE ROLE OF THE MYTHARC IN IMAGINED WORLDS.** A.J. Black. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2020, 213 p. ISBN: 978-1476675633. \$39.95.

FROM THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE (MCU) to the recent influx of new *Star Wars* content, some of the most visible texts in contemporary popular culture reveal a certain feature in common—an overarching narrative arc that, across various installments, both connects and informs a wide variety of characters, events, and settings through some organizing mythos. In his new book *Myth-Building in Modern Media: The Role of the Mytharc in Imagined Worlds*, author A.J. Black calls this phenomenon the “mytharc,” taking up a term popularized (and possibly even introduced) by fans of the television show *The X-Files* during the 1990s. The mytharc, Black maintains, is distinct both from the chronological progression of prequel to sequel, and also from stories that just so happen to be set in a shared secondary world. Unlike simply following the same characters into new situations or revisiting a particular secondary world to see the changes time has wrought there, an arc “directly continues narrative beats and character points” (Black 4), providing an overarching mythos for the television show, film franchise, or series in question. To Black, this difference is important because arcs enable us to tell, recognize, and enjoy stories that provide a form of escapism while simultaneously inviting us to ask questions about who we are as human beings. And, to this end, *Myth-Building in Modern Media* examines several examples of the mytharc in popular culture through a quest-like structure of its own.

*Myth-Building in Modern Media* is a compelling exploration of how the colloquial, fan-created term “mytharc” actually dovetails quite well with existing discourses regarding seriality, myth-making, and storytelling itself. Throughout his book, Black takes readers through a seven-part exploration of what the mytharc is and how various iterations of it function, drawing deftly from examples across twentieth- and twenty-first-century Western media, particularly American television shows with a fantastic and/or sci-fi bent. He explores the mytharc's predecessors, elaborates on specific types of mytharc—the monomytharc (22) versus the divine (56-57) and the cultural (90-91)—and speculates about possibilities that never quite materialized as well as what future iterations might look like given a fast-paced, ever-changing digital ecology that is “just the beginning of a media renaissance which looks set to propel jointly technology and storytelling into whole new realms of possibility” (131). With such large, distinct topics to get through, *Myth-building in Modern Media* is set up to cover quite a bit of ground, but Black manages the range quite well, theorizing the term “mytharc” thoroughly while keeping such theorizations accessible to a wide variety of readers.

Black's journey begins with a preface investigating the origins of this term, first connecting it to its more well-known counterparts such as character arcs and story arcs, and ultimately rationalizing Black's interest in mytharcs given the plethora of recent—and highly popular—examples. This preface also sets the tone for the rest of *Myth-building in Modern Media*, as Black notes that his book will explore the genesis, properties, and evolution of the mytharc but also starts looking forward to the larger pay-off of this exploration, which is his idea that this phenomenon “has become central to our modern mythology as audiences in the early 21st century” (6). Following this preface, Black moves into a section on proto-forms, “Before the Mytharc,” in which he discusses Lovecraft's mythos, the “layered, ongoing storytelling” (12) of comic books, and other forms of “escapist” literature that preceded the mytharc, which “[in the form] we know it today was born from television” (20). Black then delves into “The Monomytharc,” a type that follows “a protagonist whose journey [...] is internalized through external forces” (22): Black's examples here include Mulder of *The X-Files*, Jack Shephard from *Lost*, and Frank Black from *Millennium*. From here, Black continues with a section on “The Divine Mytharc,” which is predicated on the idea that, despite differing creeds, “We all have faith in something” (56) and so our stories remain fascinated with the nature of and search for the divine: of the many examples here, Black's reading of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* is far and away the most fascinating. Next up is a segment on “The Cultural Mytharc,” which builds from a well-theorized point—that popular media reflects the cultural zeitgeist—in order to discuss how the addition of mythology to such media accesses even deeper cultural touchpoints:

here Black looks to some of his most contemporary examples yet, with *Game of Thrones* and *Star Trek: Discovery* alongside another revisitation of *The X-Files* for context. A very short “Mytharcs That Never Were” section is quickly followed by a more substantial “Future of the Mytharc,” in which Black digs into the technological, cultural, and generic shifts that will likely influence future mytharcs. And finally, *Myth-building in Modern Media* concludes with another short section on “Finding the Mytharc” in an increasingly complex and fast-paced media ecology that seems to be uncovering new cinematic possibilities, changing viewer expectations, and even reinventing elements of television itself.

As previously mentioned, Black sets himself an ambitious theoretical project with this book, but several features help him meet this project successfully. His own writing style, for instance, remains accessible even as he detours into more obscure shows and their minutiae, while the book's overall structure is clear and easy to follow even as it also feels a bit on the nose at times. Taken together, though, these features make *Myth-building in Modern Media* feel like an accessible read, even for those who might be less familiar with many of the texts it discusses.

Particular moments also stood out to me throughout. One of the first occurs in the section on proto-mytharcs, as Black confronts the often deeply racist and anti-Semitic elements of H.P. Lovecraft's work. Given this book's dependence on mythologist Joseph Campbell—whose racist, sexist, and homophobic comments have become widely known and should, along with its assumption of cisgender white male heroes, further inform any future reference of the Hero's Journey—I was concerned that Lovecraft would get a similar treatment: that his admittedly foundational work might be simply built upon, without any examination of its own troubling foundation. Black, however, confronts Lovecraft in ways he doesn't with Campbell, acknowledging Lovecraft's unmistakable and virulent racism and tracing how it affected his Cthulhian mythos to create a legacy that later creators continue to grapple with even as they adapt features of Lovecraft's Old Ones. (Does 2020's own *Lovecraft Country* come to mind as I write this? Why yes, in fact, it does . . .)

Another powerful moment, this one provoking more a slow nod of dawning comprehension than an exhale of relief, can be found in the “Future of the Mytharc” section. Here Black maintains that, by all rights, it should have been DC rather than Marvel that first managed to create a successful cinematic universe: after all, he points out, the MCU “was created with characters that mainstream audiences outside of the United States simply did not know in the way they knew the DC headliners (Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman, etc.)” (143). As Black intimates here, Marvel happened to luck out, with savvy leadership, charismatic star power, and strong writing talent coinciding to make the first few MCU films shine, thus setting the stage for the rest of this cinematic

universe in ways that DC simply hasn't been able to seriously compete with yet (142-144). The second I read this, it seemed like such a simple and important insight, but I have not encountered anyone save Black putting it in these terms, which is commendable. In addition, too, Black's insight here also gestures toward the ways in which a popular culture mytharc—and its success—are now inescapably influenced by the technology, timing, and talent available with which to tell it.

Overall, Black's *Myth-building in Modern Media* is well worth the read, whether its audience is looking for an interesting personal journey into ways of thinking about popular culture or else seeking scholarly ways of analyzing pop culture's structures and narratives.

—Maria Alberto



**THE NIBELUNGENLIED: WITH THE KLAGE.** William T. Whobrey. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2018. 308 p. 978-1624666759. \$16.00.

THIS WORK IS A WELCOME ADDITION TO *NIBELUNGENLIED* STUDIES. There are several reasons for this, related below. First though, for those who may not be familiar the lay retells the story of Sigfried and Kriemhelt (known from Norse as Sigurd and Gudrun), how Sigfried won his wife, how he lost his life through treachery, and how Kriemhelt gets her revenge. Wrapped up in this tale are other heroic characters such as Ditrich of Bern (also known in other tales and history as Theodric the Great), Hildebrand, Attila the Hun (rendered as Etzel in Middle High German and Atli in Old Norse). The tales of Sigfried/Sigurd were well known in twelfth century NW Europe: long before the *Nibelungenlied* was composed circa 1200 CE Sigfried/Sigurd appears in art work in Scandinavia bearing witness to his popularity there already. The second part of this edition contains the first-ever in English translation of *The Klage*, a poem that takes the task of completing the tale of *Nibelungenlied*, the latter ending abruptly and without telling the audience what has happened to the characters. *The Klage* is rarely included in editions or translations of the *Nibelungenlied*, deemed by many as of less literary value. Certainly to modern readers' tastes an extended poem of lament is not desirable reading. *The Klage*, however, is included with the *Nibelungenlied* in most of the major manuscripts indicating that for the medieval audience, the poem was of interest and a necessary part of *Nibelungenlied*. In my view, modern audiences lose something by not reading these texts together.