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***Jewish Fantasy Worldwide: Trends in Speculative Stories From Australia to Chile*, edited by Valerie Estelle Frankel**

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Jewish Fantasy Worldwide: Trends in Speculative Stories From Australia to Chile, edited by Valerie Estelle Frankel

Abstract

In *Jewish Fantasy Worldwide*, edited by Valerie Estelle Frankel, authors examine a wide variety of speculative fiction written by Jewish authors. Particular emphasis is given to understudied authors and cultures (such as Jewish speculative fiction published in Australia and Eastern European countries). Several essays deal with the nature of Jewish identity (Holocaust remembrance's role for post-WWII Jewish writers, changing identity markers as agnosticism or secularism becomes more popular among Jewish authors).

Additional Keywords

isaac asimov, khazars, neil gaiman, michael chabon, stanislaw lem, alejandro jodorowsky, leo perutz, chaim cigan, victoria hanna, philip roth, leybl botwinik, gennady gor, ilya varshavsky, william tenn, philip klass

they have no proof. If this were true, it would mean that recently people have been advocating additional moral views which were previously little discussed.

Markos is a professor of English at Houston Baptist University. At times I find myself wishing, as I did when I listened a few years ago to his audio course called *Life and Times of C.S. Lewis* (from The Great Courses), that it would have been better if some other scholar had gotten the contract to do an introductory course on Lewis. I find myself saying though that anyone wanting to know more about Lewis can just go ahead and read his books. One snide comment that has been made about the For Beginners books is that they offer sufficient knowledge of a subject that you will know enough that you can talk about the subject at a cocktail party. I don't know enough about cocktail parties to tell if that is true, but then the comment was probably made by someone who didn't go to cocktail parties much either.

—Wendell Wagner



JEWISH FANTASY WORLDWIDE: TRENDS IN SPECULATIVE STORIES FROM AUSTRALIA TO CHILE (JEWISH SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY NO. 4). Edited by Valerie Estelle Frankel. Lexington Books. 2023. **Hardcover:** 978-1-66692-660-6, \$120.00. **Ebook:** 978-1-66692-661-3, \$45.00.

FRANKEL BEGINS THIS COLLECTION BY OBSERVING, “New York Jews invented science fiction as it’s known today” when Hugo Gernsback founded *Astounding Stories* in 1926 (1). Comic book fans will chime in at this point, reminding scholars that during the same period, New York Jews like Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster were using less-respected publications to invent a new format for telling speculative fiction stories. From *Iron Man* to *I, Robot*, Jewish writers have invented and then redefined how audiences read speculative fiction for close to a century now.

Given how wide the Jewish influence is on speculative fiction, it’s not surprising that this is the fourth entry in Rowman & Littlefield’s series on Jewish speculative fiction.¹ Previous volumes have explored topics from Jewish speculative fiction characters to sympathetic portrayals of Goliath in various media. This volume takes a broad look at Jewish speculative fiction (science fiction as well as fantasy) in different cultures.

¹ Earlier volumes in Rowman & Littlefield’s Jewish Fantasy and Science Fiction series can be found in the Works Cited.

Roughly half the essays are devoted to Jewish science fiction. These essays range from Stephen H. Cohen's discussion of the first science fiction novel written in Yiddish (101-119) to Henri-Simon Blanc-Hoang's overview of how Alejandro Jodorowsky's science fiction stories dialogue with Jewish Messianic ideas (19-35). Blanc-Hoang's essay is perhaps the most topical because anything related to the *Dune* franchise has regained prominence, and Blanc-Hoang provides some insights on how Jodorowsky turned the plot for his never-made *Dune* adaptation into an original science fiction story.

The fantasy contributions are equally diverse—everything from discussions about Hebrew Bible elements in fan fiction based on the Netflix show *The Last Kingdom* (121-136) to how Leo Perutz's fantasy novel *Night Under the Stone* inserts Kabbalistic themes into Central European fantasy (153-166). Steven B. Frankel's essay on fantasy works about the Khazars, fierce Turkish nomad warriors who converted to Judaism during the medieval period (37-51), proves especially interesting as Frankel explodes the "Jews have never been heroic" stereotype.

The American side of "worldwide" gets less representation in these essays, but this is appropriate. Plenty has been said about the golden age of American science fiction (the period when Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, and Robert Heinlein defined the genre). Rowman & Littlefield's first volume in the series provides an in-depth look at this period. More work needs to be done, but especially more work needs to be done about writers outside America.

Thus, many essays reference the American greats, but few focus on them. Ilana Goldstein looks at Philip Roth's alternate history novel *The Plot Against America* as a speculative exploration of the Holocaust (87-100). Julie A. Hawkins provides a novel way of considering Asimov's work: comparing him to Polish science fiction writer Stanislaw Lem (167-183). Judy Klass' essay on teaching Jewish speculative fiction (269-289) succinctly covers many of the other key American Jewish speculative fiction authors. She describes how her uncle, Philip Klass (better known to the science fiction community as William Tenn) gave input for her class—recommending writers like Marge Piercy, Harry Harrison, and Ira Levin. Klass's love for Levin's work, including a fascinating theory about Holocaust subtext in *Stepford Wives*, comes out especially strong—and reminds readers how little has been written on Levin's work. Yes, plenty of Jewish writers have gone under-researched. Still, it's especially surprising for someone like Levin, who contributed a well-loved classic to every genre he wrote in—be it crime thriller (*A Kiss Before Dying*), supernatural horror (*Rosemary's Baby*), science fiction (*The Stepford Wives*), or whodunnit play (*Deathtrap*).

One essay may strike an odd note for some readers. Katharina Hadasseh Wendll discusses how Israeli artist Victoria Hanna's rap song

“Orayta” reinterprets many Jewish norms, particularly in the song’s 2017 music video (53-69). Wendll successfully shows how the video reinterprets Jewish heritage: an Israeli woman singing when orthodox Judaism limits female performers, her lyrics quoting a Kabbalistic text that women are discouraged from studying, her video’s images underscoring themes about mysticism and breaking boundaries. Still, whether the video’s images qualify as fantasy imagery may be debated. Wendll emphasizes how the video depicts “a female version of the fantastic journey to heaven that Rabbi Shimon takes in the Zohar” (63), and notes the “surreal, fantastic installation of various Jewish symbols” (61), implying that surreal or non-natural images qualify as fantasy. Specialists may argue that Wendll’s claim casts a broad definition—like saying Salvador Dalí’s melted clock paintings and Frank Frazetta’s *Conan the Barbarian* paintings are both fantasy art. Others may argue that the claim opens the door to calling any music video featuring non-naturalistic imagery a fantasy work. *Seder-Masochism*, Nina Paley’s 2018 feature film that uses surreal images to retell the Exodus story, might be a better case for exploring Wendll’s ideas without opening these doorways. However, having published a peer-reviewed essay that discussed no less than eight feature films, I appreciate how hard it is to write an essay describing any visual media. Choosing to analyze something shorter than a feature film has its benefits. Odd choice though it may be, Wendell does present solid insights on Kabbalistic scholarship and Israeli culture’s evolution as new generations push against norms.

Jewish Fantasy Worldwide is clearly not exhaustive, but it does an excellent job of giving wide-ranging perspectives on little-known authors, and new perspectives on well-known authors. Even contributions that go beyond the project’s parameters provide something substantial, well-researched, and well-written.

—G. Connor Salter

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