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Abstract

Keywords
Fantastic
This eclectic study has strengths. The fantastic needed revisiting and the
great merit of this collection is to demonstrate that the genre continues to be a
dynamic field of research in literary studies and beyond when read through the
lenses of social change, urban studies, women and gender issues, and popular
culture. With this collection, readers will learn something new about the
ramifications and themes of the fantastic such as non-monogamous relationships,
Christian post-apocalyptic narratives, utopian societies, African science fiction,
even monster porn.

What the texts under analysis do rather than what they are is really what
makes the collection relevant. Many of the featured authors read fiction as a vector
for, or a manifestation of, social change. They also bring to the conversation new
themes and new media that, when analyzed in conjunction with their fantastic
connections, raise questions and open paths for research unusual in academe, such
as romance novels and internet memes. Larissa Lai’s piece on insurgent utopias, to
which I will come back, is a good example. Also of interest is the notion of “organic
fantasy” developed by Johanna Pundt in her article about the African science fiction
novel Lagoon by Nnedi Okorafor. Her approach further blurs the boundaries
between different types of alternative realities that the collection strives to explore
and offers an applicable approach to fantasy when it incorporates elements of
science fiction (two genres that should not be confused but that can be combined)
in the postcolonial African context. Considered all together, the articles presented
here demonstrate how the fantastic or fantasy is concerned with both “re-enchanting
the familiar” (Pundt 167) and challenging literary, social, and sexual norms.

The first part of the collection offers productive new approaches to the
definition of the fantastic as well as, in the case of the third piece by Irina
Golovacheva, a useful review of what has been said so far. The fourth and last
article by Lai, mentioned above, seems out of place as the author does not discuss
the genre of the fantastic but instead advocates for “insurgent utopias.” It would
have found a better home in the second part of the collection “Ideology.” When it
comes to (re)defining the genre for today’s context, nothing new emerges. The
fantastic remains the genre of liminality, estrangement, the uncanny, with close
proximity to fantasy, magical realism, utopia, and science fiction. In the second and
third parts of the collection, however, they all get mixed up.

It is also important to note that there is much confusion between the fantastic
and fantasy throughout the collection, and these terms are at times used
interchangeably. This confusion, I believe, emerges out of the “everything goes”
approach of the editors while the fantastic refers specifically to the eruption, in an
otherwise ordinary setting, of an illogical phenomenon whose presence, much like the novum in science fiction, provokes a shift in the readers’ cognitive approach to the story that forces them (as well as the characters) to reroute their understanding of the text’s diegetic world. In other words, as explained in the Guide des genres et sous-genres de l’imaginaire (‘Guide to the Genres and Sub-Genres of The Imaginary’) the fantastic confronts rational characters with the sudden appearance in their lives of something irrational (11).¹ It is not the case in fantasy where the overall fictional context or universe is irrational. Some, including myself, would cringe at the idea of confusing science fiction with the fantastic even though, as narrative devices, they can be used conjointly in the same story. Science fiction creates an entire story-world where fantastic elements are defined as such only in relation to the established science fictive context—not our empirical world. Fantastic stories keep us grounded in a recognizable empirical reality where the uncanny, the strange, or the monstrous materializes. It is this central counterpoint that makes the fantastic unique as a literary genre.

Regardless of its weaknesses, I suggest reading the entire collection to get a broader sense of what the fantastic means to others and to learn about new texts, new readings, new ramifications in alternative reality literature that matter in the twenty-first century with regard to women’s rights, immigration, internet phenomena, and human desires.

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