Notes

1. John Storey, *Radical Utopianism and Cultural Studies: On Refusing to be Realistic* (London: Routledge, 2019); John Storey, *Consuming Utopia: Cultural Studies and the Politics of Reading* (London: Routledge, 2022).
2. Miguel Abensour, "William Morris: The Politics of Romance," in *Revolutionary Romanticism*, ed. Nicholas Blechman (London: City Light Books, 1979), 146.
3. Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2011).
4. William Morris, *News from Nowhere and Selected Writings and Designs* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 138.
5. William Morris, *Political Writings* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979), 83.
6. Morris, *Political Writings*, 74, 82.
7. William Morris, *On Art and Socialism* (London: John Lehmann, 1947), 129.
8. Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980), 252.
9. E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (London: Pantheon, 1976), 806.
10. Storey, *Radical Utopianism and Cultural Studies*; Storey, *Consuming Utopia*.
11. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 175.

Brian Attebery. *Fantasy: How It Works*.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. 208 pp., hardcover, $29.99. ISBN 9780192856234.

Reviewed by Ana Tejero-Marín, University of Salamanca

https://doi.org/10.5325/utopianstudies.35.1.0260

Fantasy is a literary genre often associated with the unreal. As it deals with imaginary worlds or magical feats, its tools and strategies for making meaning differ from those of realist literature. In the past, this has sometimes led to misunderstandings about the merits of fantasy and to its dismissal as escapist literature. Fantasy has also been seen as the reactionary reverse of science fiction, as a genre that looks into a mythical past with reverence and longing and that perpetuates unjust systems of oppression.

Downloaded from http://scholarlypublishingcollective.org/psup/utopian-studies/article-pdf/35/1/260/2102442/utopianstudies_35_1_260.pdf by elisabeth.reichel@uni-osnabrueck.de on 10 June 2024

Brian Attebery sets out to respond to these old conceptions of fantasy in *Fantasy: How It Works*. As a scholar who has devoted most of his long career to advocate for the value of fantasy literature, most notably in his 1992 study *Strategies of Fantasy*, Attebery has witnessed the transformation of the genre from an academic outcast into a subject that is considered worthy of systematic research. He further acknowledges that the current vitality of the conversations concerning fantasy literature cannot be solely attributed to academia but also derives from the pervasiveness of fantasy in contemporary culture, which extends the discourse from "classrooms to coffee shops to basements where a lively game of Dungeons and Dragons has been going on for years" (7). Fantasy is a genre that attracts devoted fans and practitioners, and their passion is the driving force behind Attebery's work: "When I write about fantasy, I know I am making claims about something people care about and something about which my listeners might have exhaustive knowledge. If those people matter, then fantasy matters" (7).

Contrary to earlier theorists in the field, like Tzvetan Todorov, Kathryn Hume or Rosemary Jackson, Attebery does not intend to provide a definition or a classification of fantasy, since genres are mutable and constantly evolving, he asserts. His main objective is to explore two questions instead: "how does fantasy mean?" and "what does fantasy do?" (1). Each chapter engages with these questions by examining a distinct facet of fantastic storytelling or worldbuilding. According to Attebery, storytelling and worldbuilding cannot be separated when it comes to fantasy, for "fantasy creates story-worlds: narrated spaces in which causality and character and consequence are inextricably entwined" (1). The introduction then explains the method that Attebery follows in the subsequent chapters: "I'll notice a loose thread in the fabric of literature, start tugging at it, see where the seams come apart, and ask what that tells us about the original garment. If I'm lucky, some sort of thesis emerges along the way" (4–5). As he himself admits, this method implies that many thoughts arise and circulate in each of the chapters and, usually, no central thesis follows, which "doesn't make it easy to extract the core ideas for application elsewhere" (5). However, he believes that this process of uncovering latent meanings of fantasy, instead of arriving at a solid conclusion, is the most interesting part of his work. The analyses of contemporary fantasy novels complement the ideas that he brings forward, and in many cases they become the backbone that sustains his theses.

Chapter 1, "How Fantasy Means: The Shape of Truth," delineates the development of the first half of the book. Attebery asserts that "fantasy is the lie that speaks truth" (9), and it does so in three different ways: mythically, metaphorically,

Downloaded from http://scholarlypublishingcollective.org/psup/utopian-studies/article-pdf/35/1/260/2102442/utopianstudies_35_1_260.pdf by elisabeth.reichel@uni-osnabrueck.de on 10 June 2024

and structurally. Although the chapter mainly focuses on this last dimension, all three of them are connected. Attebery claims that, structurally, fantasy "represents the shape of the world" (12); fantasy can reflect the underlying structures of society because it is able to ignore mimesis. Fantasy worlds can be read as models of how the world functions, filtered and reorganized through the fantastical. To be sure, the spaces that realist literature presents are also constructed, ordering the world in ways that render the story legible to its readers; the difference lies in how the two genres are conceived and understood. This relationship between fantasy and realism is further explored in the second chapter, "Realism and the Structures of Fantasy: The Family Story." Through an analysis of mid-twentieth-century family stories, a popular subgenre of children's literature, Attebery illustrates the ways in which fantasy can become realist and realism can resemble fantasy, since they are not so much opposite modes as different properties of literature embedded in different generic expectations.

The next chapters engage with the other two ways in which fantasy creates meaning according to Attebery, that is, mythically and metaphorically. In "Neighbors, Myths, and Fantasy," Attebery asserts that fantasy is characterized by a return to traditional worldviews, myth among them, and its denial of what Kathryn Hume has deemed "consensus reality"[1]; nevertheless, this consensus is not universal and what some people view as fantasy can be understood by others as realism. Contemporary fantasy writers have reinterpreted and updated traditional myths, keeping them relevant and, at the same time, recognizing that knowledge is never fixed and absolute. The chapter "If not Conflict, then What? Metaphors for Narrative Interest" discusses the diverse ways readers may engage with narrative—not necessarily fantasy, though Attebery illustrates his ideas with examples from fantasy novels. Narrative is often understood in terms of conflict, but Attebery is dissatisfied with this image: "It must be paired with resolution, like war and peace. And the resolution is, or should be, the more significant half of the pairing" (67). He encourages readers to engage with narrative through alternative metaphors, which in turn open alternative ways of interpreting a work of literature. For instance, reading narrative in terms of dissonance implies "searching for the underlying harmonic structures that the dissonance transgresses" or "to see characters relationally, not as opponents but as collaborators" (76).

Chapter 5, "A Mitochondrial Theory of Literature: Fantasy and Intertextuality," continues Attebery's use of metaphors to explain how fantastic literature functions. The goal of this chapter is to generate an understanding of the intertextual dimension of fantasy literature: how different

Downloaded from http://scholarlypublishingcollective.org/psup/utopian-studies/article-pdf/35/1/260/2102442/utopianstudies_35_1_260.pdf by elisabeth.reichel@uni-osnabrueck.de on 10 June 2024

texts inform and influence each other. Attebery is inspired by mitochondria, parts of a cell that were originally independent beings but that, millions of years ago, where incorporated into the cell, resulting in a symbiotic relationship beneficial to both organelles. Attebery maintains that intertextuality functions in the same manner: older texts are incorporated into newer texts without losing their integrity, and resulting in connections that mutually enrich the different texts. Conventional literary culture has tended to emphasize intertextual networks between texts written by white men, instead of tracing a genealogy that is more inclusive of marginalized groups. Attebery, then, sets out to highlight the matrilinear lineage of science fiction to resist the overwhelmingly male landscape that has traditionally been regarded as its canon.

The sixth chapter, "Young Adult Dystopias and Yin Adult Utopias," will be of interest to scholars of utopian and dystopian literature. Attebery identifies utopian writing with fantasy because "the world-building impulse—the effort to produce coherent, convincing counterfactual worlds as something more than mere backdrops—is the same in all branches of the larger family of fantastic literature" (95), and he proposes that "utopia is the branch of fantastic literature with the greatest power—or at least the most overt ambition—to change collective behavior" (95). Attebery believes that both utopia and dystopia have potential for producing compelling stories and inspiring political action. However, contemporary writers have mostly leaned toward dystopia, particularly in literature written for adolescents, which does not have a strong utopian tradition. He considers reversing the utopian and dystopian modes: just as anti-utopia is another name for dystopia, or an attempt at utopia gone wrong, anti-dystopia could refer to a utopia gone right. Attebery connects this with Ursula K. Le Guin's conception of "yin" and "yang" utopias.[2] Le Guin argues that the majority of utopian writing is "yang," based on totalizing ideas. She proposes instead a "yin" utopia, a more nurturing and modest way of thinking about the concept. She concludes, "if utopia is a place that does not exist, then surely (as Lao Tzu would say) the way to get there is by the way that is not a way. And in the same vein, the nature of the utopia I am trying to describe is such that if it is to come, it must exist already."[3] Following Le Guin's conceptualization, Attebery suggests that we recognize small-scale utopias, particularly in those moments of utopia that already exist in day-to-day life: "A limited, or yin, utopia doesn't have to last forever or cover the whole earth. It needn't address every form of social ill or injustice. It just has to be enough different from Things as They Are that we are forced to pause

Downloaded from http://scholarlypublishingcollective.org/psup/utopian-studies/article-pdf/35/1/260/2102442/utopianstudies_35_1_260.pdf by elisabeth.reichel@uni-osnabrueck.de on 10 June 2024

and reflect on why they are that way" (108). In concluding, Attebery argues for strengthening the utopian tradition in literature. He asserts that "we especially need to offer such stories to our young people, who have the passion and the plasticity to make change happen" (110). He sees potential in finding small moments of utopia in the popular genre of young adult (YA) dystopia, and in a reading that emphasizes hope instead of despair and, consequently, may provoke a transformation in its young readers.

In chapter 7, "Gender and Fantasy: Employing Fairy Tales," Attebery discusses the thought process behind an earlier article on fairy tales and notions of masculinity. Mixing autobiographical account with scholarly inquiry, he identifies three traditional fairy tale figures with traits that run counter to hegemonic masculinity: the Little Man, the Monster Bridegroom, and the Erotic Swan. This discussion paves the way for the following chapter, "The Politics of Fantasy," which asks the unsurprising question of whether fantasy can be political. Attebery believes that, inevitably, fantasy will have a political component: "Because fantasy cannot exist outside of society, the politics of the primary world will inevitably be reflected in the secondary worlds of fantasy. In turn, the narrative structures of fantasy, which offer a chance to rewrite common wisdom and unconsidered habit, tug at the world outside the fiction" (130). While he denies the frequently made connection between fantasy and reactionary politics, he defines fantasy as a genre that "always looks back to an imagined past" (139), in contrast to, for instance, science fiction, which looks into the future. He believes that "one of the most exciting trends in recent fantasy has been the opening up of other pasts, especially by writers whose experiences are grounded in other identities than Oxford White male privilege" (139). These writers are reclaiming a past from which they were previously excluded, making use of the mythical, metaphorical, and structural tools of fantasy to resist this silencing.

Chapter 9, "*Timor mortis conturbat me*: Fantasy and Fear," explores the connections between fantasy and horror. More specifically, Attebery examines how the great fear of the unknown, particularly the fear of death and the fear of the Other, are present in fantasy. According to him, fantasy and horror are structurally different: While the latter focuses on the emotional response to dreadful events, fantasy must propose a sort of resolution. He is hopeful about the power of fantasy to confront fear: "*Timor mortis* will not conturb us if we can learn to use it. Instead, it can teach us to keep going to the end of the story, to connect with the other, and to transform dread into compassion" (163).

Downloaded from http://scholarlypublishingcollective.org/psup/utopian-studies/article-pdf/35/1/260/2102442/utopianstudies_35_1_260.pdf by elisabeth.reichel@uni-osnabrueck.de on 10 June 2024

Downloaded from http://scholarlypublishingcollective.org/psup/utopian-studies/article-pdf/35/1/260/2102442/utopianstudies_35_1_260.pdf by elisabeth.reichel@uni-osnabrueck.de on 10 June 2024

The last chapter, "How Fantasy Means and What It Does: Some Propositions," functions as an index of the many ideas developed in the core text. Each chapter is summarized in a few bullet points that follow the order in which the ideas were presented. Attebery does not offer further reflections in the manner of a conventional conclusion, but this last chapter proves useful as a guide. The reader may refer to it in order to see how Attebery organizes his arguments, what his main ideas are, and where they can find them in the text.

Fantasy: How It Works sets out to engage with a complex and expansive topic: What are the functions of fantasy and how precisely does it perform them? As his main interest is to depict the process rather than the results of scholarly inquiry, Attebery offers few definitive answers. As he states, "the nature of fantasy literature keeps changing" (1), and scholars must adapt their responses to this ever-changing literary landscape. Instead of a totalizing analysis, Attebery thus tackles the genre of fantasy literature from multiple angles, generating different interpretations that apply to different types of fantasy at different moments in time. The main value of this book resides in its potential to spark discussions, to inspire readers to examine the foundations of fantasy, and to reconsider the place of the genre in literary scholarship.

Although at first glance *Fantasy: How It Works* appears to be of interest mainly to fantasy scholars, many of its arguments rely on comparisons of fantasy with other literary genres, specifically literary realism, science fiction, and horror. Scholars working on these genres will find in Attebery's book compelling discussions of how the strategies for making meaning differ among them. Utopian scholars, whether they believe the utopian tradition is connected to fantasy or not, may be particularly interested in the conversation brought forward in chapter 6 around the political possibilities of utopia. In general, *Fantasy: How It Works* can prove a stimulating read for all interested in how fantasy constructs imaginary worlds and how these worlds comment on our experienced reality.

Notes

This work has been supported by the FPU program from the Spanish Ministry of Universities (FPU20/06066).

1. Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1984).

2. Ursula K. Le Guin, "A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be," *The Yale Review* (1983), reprinted in *Ursula K. Le Guin: Always Coming Home; Author's Expanded Edition*, ed. Brian Attebery (New York: Library of America, 2019), 703–24.
3. Le Guin, "A Non-Euclidean View," 7–17.

Sarah Falcus and Maricel Oró-Piqueras, eds. *Age and Ageing in Contemporary Speculative and Science Fiction*.

London: Bloomsbury, 2023. 248 pp., hardcover, $115.00. ISBN 9781350230668.

Reviewed by Mariana Batista da Cruz, Universidade Nova de Lisboa

https://doi.org/10.5325/utopianstudies.35.1.0266

The pervasiveness of questions of temporality, futurity, and immortality in science and speculative fiction opens new perspectives on aging and generationality. However, despite the potential of these genres to illuminate alternative ways of thinking about the human being in time, there has been a clear tendency within the field of aging studies to favor the analysis of realist narratives. To be sure, *Age and Ageing in Contemporary Speculative and Science Fiction* does not venture into completely uncharted territory. Teresa Mangum's study of "rejuvenation narratives," Andreu Domingo's conceptualization of "demodystopias," and Sarah Falcus's analysis of generational anachronism in dystopian novels have attempted to fill related gaps in aging studies.[1] Yet Sarah Falcus and Maricel Oró-Piqueras's edited collection of essays is the first extensive study of speculative and science fiction (SF) as cultural productions that encode prevalent concerns about age and aging societies.

Focusing on texts from Europe, North America, and South Asia, with particular emphasis on the anglophone world, the scope of the collection is limited but its contributions are rich in the range of themes that they address. This broad variety, touching on questions of genre, immortality, biopower, demographic change, temporalities, and transhumanism, renders the book relevant not only to those working within the field of aging studies, in

Downloaded from http://scholarlypublishingcollective.org/psup/utopian-studies/article-pdf/35/1/260/2102442/utopianstudies_35_1_260.pdf by elisabeth.reichel@uni-osnabrueck.de on 10 June 2024