

IMAGINING THE CELTIC PAST IN MODERN FANTASY

Edited by Dimitra Fimi and Alistair J.P. Sims

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Imagining the Celtic Past in Modern Fantasy, edited by Dimitra Fimi and Alistair J.P. Sims and published by Bloomsbury in 2023 is part of the *Perspectives on Fantasy* series. This title reflects the conciliatory approach that this collection has regarding Fantasy Studies. As Attenbery, Fimi and Sangster state in the Series Editors' Preface, there is not a unique definition or set of rules, but infinite ways to understand it, since this genre evokes "different meanings at different times for different people" (2023: x). As Fimi explains in the Introduction, defining what or who is "Celtic" is complex, since researchers choose distinctions depending on their fields and context, and in popular culture the delimitation becomes a hodgepodge (2023: 1-2). Concerning this book, the diversity is well reflected, since different fantasy writers had re-imagined their own "Celts" (Iron age, medieval, cultural crossovers with similar languages, etc.). Ten researchers analyze representations of a variety of fantasy narratives that take elements from the Celtic tradition and culture, and their works explain the reasons beyond those choices and the deep lore that is created along the worldbuilding and the plot. The book is divided in four parts, designed to encapsulate the different subgenres of the essays. The first part, "Celticity as Fantastic Intrusion", includes three chapters. The first of them is "Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know: The Celtic Fairy Realm in Susanna Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*", written by Dr. K. A. Laity, and it analyzes the complex relationship between Englishness and Celticity, regarding the sense of "otherness", in terms of geography, language and tradition, as the key to Clarke's story. It must be considered that this novel is historical fantasy, taking place around the Napoleonic wars and focusing on the fall of the

use of magic. With this essay, Dr. Laity explains how defining “Celticity” and choosing the aspects to include in the text is an ideological act itself, with Clarke offering some restoration of magic and, at the same time, warnings about it. All of this can be related to the Celtic past and the complex cultural and political visions around it, a theme that will be shared by most of the texts cited in this book. The second chapter verses on “The Evolution of Alan Garner’s Celticity in *Boneland*”. In this work, Gwendolen Grant explains that Garner’s narratives and vision of the myths has not only inspired his world-building, but has also contributed to the fields of History, Archaeology and Anthropology, due to the author’s interest in the subjects. The interrelation between tradition and fantasy was clear for Garner, who declared that, even if he lacked the chance to learn the language, hearing Welsh felt like remembering, like “hearing the knights, who lay in the cave with their king under the hill behind our house” (Garner 1997: 196). Grant also revises how, as the author was writing the *Widerstone* trilogy, the Jungian ideas he was implementing in the narrative evolved, making it necessary for the reader to undertake personal research in order to understand the references. The first section of the book closes with Kris Swank’s work “Woman as Goddess in the Irish Fantasies of Jodi McIsaac”. This scholar analyzes how McIsaac subverts the medieval vision of the Tuatha Dé Danann and the interconnection between Celtic deities and saints. For example, the figure of Brigit / Brigid is a subject of allegories and symbolism related to fire, crosses and death (which, for Swank, is what a trip to Fairyland could mean). This essay explores how Irish legend can set the basis for feminine-empowerment and revolution but also humane qualities and values such as love and self-sacrifice, through the McIsaac powerful yet compassionate heroines whose morality can be adapted to reflect the Christian virtues and standards.

The second part, “Celtic Fantasy Worlds and Heroes” is divided into three chapters. In “The Heroic Biographies of Cú Chulainn and Connavar in the *Rigante* Series”, Alistair J. P. Sims develops a study of the depiction of the heroes of the saga, inspired by the Cú Chulainn and different Roman and Gallus warriors and rulers, such as Vercingetorix. Following methods such as the Heroic Biography Pattern, Sims analyzes their deeds and ethos in David Andrew Gemell’s stories. The same narrative universe is revised in “Classical Ethnography and the World(s) of the *Rigante*”, by Anthony Smart, who portrays another point of view: the classical Greek and Roman basis for Gemell’s imagery when it comes to barbarians and how *Rigante*’s world could be considered a Romanized perspective of Celtic history. In contrast to the kind of warriors and the heroes studied in the previous essay, Smart explains how the depictions of the Germanic barbarians from the Roman perspective present them as a menace to their identity and culture, representing their otherness as dangerous and corrupt. The sixth chapter of the book is a literal change of universe: “Celts in Spaaaaaa!” by Cheryl Morgan. This researcher explores how sci-fi and

mythological fantasy intertwine in Patricia Kennealy's *Keltiad* book series, where the mythical Celtic past and Arthurian legend narratives are combined, creating a utopian magical and technologically advanced society. Morgan explains the complexity of this depiction, since the Keltic race is not only inspired by the Tuatha Dé Dannan, but also contains references to the Atlanteans, relating them to the Great Pyramids of Egypt and the Peruvian Machu Picchu and Nazca Lines. This essay explores how the myth of Atlantis is extrapolated to the Irish past, building a combination of speculative fiction and mythology.

The book's third part, "Celtic Fantasy Beyond the Anglophone" contains two essays. The first of them is titled "From *Vertigen* to *Frontier*: The Fate of the Sidhes in Léa Silhol's Fiction". There, Viviane Bergue offers a perspective of how magical beings like fairies have been traditionally linked to Celtic culture, underlying the sense of otherness that relies on those visions. As Bergue explains, the author not only got inspiration from Celtic and Greek mythology, but her lore crossed paths with Christianity, including angelic legends, since Silhol's portrays the faeries as former fallen angels who did not join Lucifer's army. As many other essays contained in this book, the connection between religion and previous Irish myths is common and serves to reinforce the imagery of fantasy literature. Narratives like this one fall into the category of "mythopoesis", as the transformation of pre-existent myths inspire the reader to examine their own spirituality and morals (Mythopoetic Society). The other chapter from this section is "'Chaidh e nas doimhne agus nas doimhne ann an seann theacsaichean': Gaelic history and legend in *An Sgoil Dhubh* by Iain F. MacLeòid", written by Duncan Sneddon. The researcher analyzes the way in which fantasy often revolves around certain clichés such as mythical swords. This work explains how the different folklores and myths influence and complete MacLeòid's narration, finding models and references to Irish Medieval stories and Norse literature. As Sneddon explains, basing these narratives about Gaelic culture on legends and traces of Norse settlements on the islands and implementing them in a fictional present builds an alternative Gaelic history with a very deep and interesting lore. It must also be said that, as the scholar remarks, MacLeòid's worldbuilding is also connected to well-established tropes from fantasy literature, such as J.R.R. Tolkien and Terry Pratchett's stories, which include elves, dwarves, among other popular creatures, confirming their strong presence as part of the popular culture's version of Celtic myths.

Finally, the fourth part, "Fantastic Perceptions of Celticity" includes the last two chapters of the book. In "The Celtic Tarot in Speculative Fiction", Juliette Wood explains how tarot magic has been associated with the Celts (despite the fact that their texts did not explicitly mention anything about that matter) in order to build a narrative that links folklore and magic through esoteric practices. In this work, Wood

makes a recapitulation of several fantasy novels and poems where tarot imagery is essential and explains how the authors relate the cards and motives not only to Irish legends, but also to Arthurian stories and even the Templars, since the grail quest could be related to the modern Tarot seeker (2008: 110). Lastly, in “Celtic Appropriation in Twenty-First-Century Fantasy Fan Perceptions”, Angela R. Cox examines how readers and audiences in general perceive the inclusion of Celtic mythology in fictional narratives. This essay analyzes how certain patterns and tropes (druids, fairies, etc.) are so intricately linked to fantasy genres that the association between Celticity and fantasy is inevitable. Through ethnographic research based on collective online discussion from two online fantasy-fan communities, Cox explains that, even if the genre contributes to the popularization of mythology, the apparently homogeneous mixture between Irish and Welsh traditions and Arthurian legendary could end up diminishing the meaning of the folklore itself in popular culture.

In conclusion, this book offers different perspectives about Celticity in fantasy texts, presenting a wide variety of study cases. Although the authors review very different texts and narratives, there are certain common subjects, such as the early Christian imagery infused by Celticity, the Arthurian legend as complement to many of the myth-based stories, and the importance of Norse settlements regarding culture and tradition within the previous idiosyncrasy of the Islands. Through the different studies with a very practical approach and a fair quantity of examples analyzed, the reader (whether scholar or not) can understand how Irish mythology and folklore have been linked to new fantasy stories, the role they play in worldbuilding, and the evolution of these Celtic-inspired narratives through time.

242

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