

SCATTERED FLOCK

ISSUE 1 - FALL 2025



SCATTERED FLOCK

A Speculative Fiction Literary Journal



Scattered Flock Journal: Issue 1

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Issue 1 - September 2025

SCATTERED FLOCK

1 *Foreword* | Annemarie Whitehurst

FICTION

3 *All Wizardry Left Her Since the Day of Her Wedding* | Katarina Dulude

7 *Wishes Made from Wax* | Krista Martino-Hecht

11 *Polyurethane Skin* | Amy Kousourou

ART

14 *Frolic & Magical Friend* | Levi DeMatteo

OPINION

16 *Between Elfland and Poughkeepsie:
The Moonstone Covenant and Fantasy Style* | Isaac Sage

21 *Worldbuilding Off the Rails:
Fantasy, TTRPGs, and Improvised Comedy* | Brady Hutchings

23 *Yōkai, Ghosts, Aliens, and Urban Legends:
Dandadan's Science Fantasy World* | Eugenio Minvielle

ACADEMIC

- 26
- Becoming Ungovernable:
Carnival and Riot in The City and The City | Hannah Mimiec
- 30
- Where Enchantment Lies:
Faery, Estrangement, and the Limits of Worldbuilding in
J.R.R. Tolkien’s Smith of Wootton Major | Catherine Hall
- 35
- “Keep your eyes on it and feel for your hatchet”:
Imperialist Messaging in C.S. Lewis’ The Lion, The Witch, and The
Wardrobe | Katarina Dulude

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FOREWORD:

By Annemarie Whitehurst
Editor in Chief

Welcome to the very first issue of *Scattered Flock Journal*. It is my great pleasure to open these pages for you, our readers, as we begin this journey into speculative fiction with all its wonder, strangeness, and possibility.

Scattered Flock was born of a shared belief: that speculative fiction—explored in this literary journal through short stories, academic essays, passion pieces, and art—does more than simply entertain, but stretches our imagination, probes our values, and illuminates worlds both familiar and fantastical. We set out to champion new creative and critical voices, inviting both dreamers and thinkers into conversation. Our mission is to be a platform for writers, academics, and artists to showcase their expertise and abilities without the barriers of paywalls and subscriptions.

In this inaugural issue, we’re proud to present a rich variety of work from writers who have a shared academic expertise in fantasy literature. We have three creative short stories, ranging from traditional fairy tale to shocking science fiction, three critical academic essays that grapple with empire, dystopia, and enchantment, and three opinion pieces that celebrate personal interests, such as the writing techniques of fantasy and expressions of speculative fiction beyond traditional forms of literature. In this issue you’ll also see several incredible works of art that bring to life the impressive and intriguing aspects of the fantastic. These contributions come from minds driven by curiosity, craft, and the deep joy of this weird and wondrous genre.

Thank you to the contributors for trusting us with your work. Thank you to our peer reviewers, proofreaders, designers, editors, and volunteers, all of whom are subject-matter experts as alumni from the University of Glasgow’s MLitt in Fantasy Literature. Your knowledge, passion, and generosity have shaped this journal from the ground up. We also want to give a heartfelt thanks to the University of Glasgow’s Alumni Association, who helped us spread the word about this project. And to you, our readers, for opening this issue. Your engagement makes this endeavor worthwhile.

As *Scattered Flock* grows, I hope these pages become a place you return to—to get provoked, comforted, unsettled, inspired. I hope you engage, respond, share, and challenge. Because this journal is not a monologue; it is, and must be, a flock in motion, scattered across the globe, imagination, and ideas, yet coming together in the shared delight of speculative fiction.

Here’s to Issue 1 and to many issues to come. May these stories and essays kindle new ideas, awaken new dreams, and push us all to see beyond what we think possible.

With gratitude and excitement,
Annemarie

FICTION

All Wizardry Left Her Since the Day of Her Wedding

By Katarina Dulude

Fantasy - Modern Fairytale - Feminist

The Queen gazed out her tower gloomily. Her golden husband was gone for a fortnight—some battle to attend to. He was constantly waging war, there was always some battle to attend to. The children were with the nursemaid. It was a Stark-wall custom, after all. And so, the Queen found herself with little to do but sit on her velvet cushioned chaise lounge and let the time go past her. It was not appropriate for her to go out of the castle on her own. She was queen, after all. Nor did she have many bosom companions; though the people of Stark-wall had welcomed their new king with open arms, they were skeptical of her and the rumors of her sorcery.

Indeed, there was little to do, and somehow that exhausted the Queen more than when she'd been fighting for her freedom years ago. Then, there had been something to energize her, to motivate her. The magic within her kept her strong. And though the Lady had been cruel, they had been tied together in a way. The Queen, then the Lady's thrall, had detested her fiercely. Yet, she could not deny that it had given her a thrill every time they thwarted one another. The Lady's sorcery against her own, the Queen had felt she was something to be reckoned with then.



PORTAL

PHOTOGRAPH BY KATARINA DULUDE

When he arrived, he brought with him a shift in the balance, though the Queen did not realize it at first. He was far from the first man lost and wandering idly through the Wood; the Lady collected men like playthings until she invariably tired of them. When the Queen met him in the forest, he had been ignorant of where he was and the situation he found himself in. Gawping, but terribly handsome, there had been little reason for the Queen to believe he would be any different. He wasn't bright, even then, the Queen knew, but he was earnest in a way that endeared him to her.

He was the one. With his help, she had thwarted the Lady and won freedom for them both. With all that happened, she couldn't help but love him, need him, adore him after that. She would have followed him anywhere.

That was long ago. How different he was now from the wide-eyed, clueless man she'd met in the Wood. And yet, he hadn't gained any wisdom for all that.

The Queen held power for a moment. For a fleeting, ephemeral glimpse of a moment she was a goddess. Her servitude over, her enemy defeated, she seized the Lady's place. For one moment, she had everything she wished for. Freedom, control, love. All of it had been hers.

It was hardly any time at all, however, before he began to doubt her. She had been nothing but true and just and still he doubted. She was young, then, and her fear of losing him was stronger than her grip on all that she had worked for. And so she went with him and let it all slip from her fingers. And for what—love?

Once, she worked in every way she could to break free from her cage. In some ways, it had been an attractive cage—the Lady could be as kind as she was cruel. Indeed, though the Queen had loathed her so, there were the times they passed together, heavy breaths under silk sheets, where the Queen could admit only to herself that perhaps as much as she had wished to break free then, there was a reason, a detestable tie, hatred and yearning tangled in one, that had kept her there. Would she have broken free at all without her husband's influence? Would she have truly wanted to?

This, too, was a cage. Equally gilded and splendid, but a cage all the same. She lived each day corseted and cossetted, yet no magic kept her ensnared, save that of men and the rules they invent. She could not simply walk away, could she? Without her gift, she would need to rely solely on her mind.

The hardest part was simply acquiring the garments. Everything she owned was ostentatious, garishly brocaded and fine as the stuff of fairy stories. And yet, the clothes and all the other fine things that made up her enclosure were not without their uses. When a maid entered to draw her

bath, she made a simple offer. If the maid would exchange her spare dress, she would be entitled to three strands of pearls and an emerald ring from the Queen, with the promise of the maid's silence. The maid nodded eagerly.

And so, in a brown dress of homespun, the Queen became the Maid once more. In the night, she walked out of the castle through the servants' exit. She walked calmly, with purpose.

The Wood was much changed. Her husband's war with the Bears had decimated their population considerably. If there was ever a time that they required a bit of faith, it was now.

The Maid was older now, and for a moment, she doubted herself. Much time had passed. Would they recognize her or was that role relegated to only that brief moment of triumph? What's more, would the magic return? Was she a fool to hope it might?

All wizardry left her since the day of her wedding.



About Katarina Dulude

Katarina Dulude (she/they) is an American writer and photographer based in Glasgow. They graduated with an MLitt in Fantasy Literature from the University of Glasgow in 2023. She has three academic publications and her play, “The Wolf Sickness,” was recently workshopped by Tired Horses Theatre. Her research interests include neo-Victorian fantasy, the Gothic, queer and feminist studies, and children's literature.

Wishes Made from Wax

By Krista Martino-Hecht

Fantasy - Modern Fairytale

The Wishing Wax candle shop was a place where hard wax became granted wishes, if only on one's annual origin-day. The village witch who owned the shop, Baba Année, made the magic candles from scratch all on her own, as she had no one to help her.

Baba Année stretched her creaky bones as she prepared her materials. She tried to forget about her aching loneliness as she turned on the stove. She lifted a large silver urn by its golden handles and placed it over the heat to simmer. Baba Année poured the blue wax in first and waited a moment before lowering a new wick into it. Soon, she had pulled out a fresh wishing candle. She meant to carve it up, likely in the shape of a star, but first, she would need a new color.

She once had a second urn for this exact purpose, but someone had stolen it. Baba Année made do anyway, refilling her present urn with purple wax, when the shop doors burst open. There, a young girl stood, wearing a fancy petticoat, diamond-encrusted gloves, and shiny new boots. She was the chief's daughter and the richest girl in the whole village.

"Baba Année, listen to me *now!*" the girl snapped. "I am twelve today, and I deserve a wish."

"As you want, Sara," Baba Année said, without looking up from her work.

"I wish my pockets were full, to make me richer."

Baba Année snapped her fingers. "So it shall be."

There was no origin-day candle to light, and the girl did not bother to wait for it. She stuck her hands into her pockets greedily, where they already bulged with new wealth. But when she pulled them out, she saw they were only bunches of coal.

"Use the coal to keep warm, and perhaps you may learn of the varying ways of richness." The girl rushed out in a flurry of anger; Baba Année simply dipped her candle into the purple wax, unfazed.

Her door opened again, and there stood the village pretty boy. His hips cocked, he gazed at himself in a hand-held mirror before bothering to address the witch. "Baba Année, as you already know, I am seventeen today, and I deserve a wish."

"As you want, Sasha," Baba Année said and pulled the candle out to dry.

"I wish to stay a young buck forever, so I can chase cute girls whenever I want."



Baba Année snapped her fingers. “So it shall be.”

In a flash, the young man turned into a gleaming buck: a proud, male deer with antlers as high as the ceiling. He pranced around and snorted with confusion.

“Perhaps now you may know what it is like to be chased and coveted,” Baba Année said, and waved a hand. A push of magic forced the buck out of her shop and allowed Baba Année to work again in peace. Her candle was not yet finished.

Baba Année added a final color: pink, for good things to come. Gently, the old witch carved the multi-colored candle with practiced hands. She cut tiny slivers from the thick candle to fold down into leaves, flowers, and handles.

The witch quickly thought of her own wish before pinching the wick between two fingers. A flame ignited on its tip, and she watched it dance about.

Baba Année’s door opened, and then shut again carefully. A skinny boy had crept into the shop’s shadows, looking cold and hungry. His clothes were torn up, his face red-raw, and his eyes saddened. It was Sam, the village orphan. He had never visited her before.

“Please, Baba Année, I do not wish to interrupt,” he said.

“Nonsense, my child. Is it your origin-day?”

“Yes, Baba Année. Today, I am ten. May I have a wish?”

“As you want. You must blow out the candle’s flame for it to work properly.”

The boy shuffled into the light and held a shiny object. It was Baba Année’s stolen urn.

“First, I must apologize,” Sam said. “I stole this urn to protect my little sister from the cold. I had nothing else, and this was sitting alone, drying outside...”

“I accept your apology,” Baba Année said softly. “But I must ask, how can your sister possibly fit in my urn?”

“Like this,” the boy said, digging into the urn and producing a tiny mouse. She stood on her back legs and sniffed the air. Her whiskers twitched.

“Oh my!” Baba Année laughed. “She is cursed, then.”

The boy shook his head. “No, Baba Année, she is simply my only friend. We have grown close, so I consider her my family. As you know, I have no one else.” The boy hung his head. “My wish is for this little mouse to be safe and happy, and for you to give her a more comfortable place to live.”

Baba Année noticed again how little the boy had for himself. “Is that truly your wish?”

“Yes.”

“Then so it shall be.”

The boy leaned forward and blew on the candlewick. The flame went out and thrust them into darkness. Baba Année snapped her fingers, and ten beautiful candles flickered on all around them, lighting the other rooms. There was now a fresh bed fit for a young boy, and a tiny mouse’s bed beside it.

“Is that...for me?” the boy asked.

“If you want it. With me, your mouse-sister will be warm and well-fed, and in return, you could assist me in my candle-making.”

“Oh, thank you, Baba Année!” Sam said. He picked up his mouse-sister and danced with her in his hands. “A real home for us both!”

Baba Année prepared fresh soup for the boy in her returned urn and felt glad. The boy was pure of heart, and he had agreed to share her home. That had always been the witch’s only wish.



About Krista Martino-Hecht

Krista Martino-Hecht is an author of whimsical fantasy stories and a 2018 graduate of the Glasgow Fantasy Masters’ program. She currently lives in Queens, New York, with her husband and works at Regis High School as an assistant librarian. Before that, she worked at Books of Wonder, a children’s specialty bookstore. When she’s not writing, or reading, she’s fondly remembering her time in Scotland.



Art by EM

POLYURETHANE SKIN

By Amy Kousourou

Sci-Fi – Body Horror – Posthumanism

CONTENT WARNING: Contains elements of gore and self-harm.

You feel the shifting. Something beneath your flesh that hums and ticks. You pinch your skin, and it snaps back just like it should, but you know.

Something is in there.

Something is wrong.

Your fingers are talons when you scrape at fragile epidermis; skin surrenders to claw and red leaks like tears down your arm.

It looks real, but you know that's no guarantee. Biology became technology years ago. Steel twisted to sinew and blood was pulled apart and reborn in a synthetic rainbow that can fool even the most critical eye.

What is a body if not electricity through wires: tubes and data, the proper cycles of hardware in a delicate system.

A rip. A snap. Your nails fail you. Clogged and catching on plump fat, the hidden shine of muscle sheath taunts you. From your periphery, a shape catches your eye. Light flashing on metal. Something longer, sharper.

You stumble from the red tile beneath you and grip the knife in your fist. Blood loss considers you, and your wild eyes waver in the mirror. Side to side, you are a pendulum swinging between here and there, but the blade in your hand will cut that rope once and for all.

You slide down the cabinets and thump onto the cold floor. There is a voice in your mind—sanity, maybe—that cries for forbearance. It stares into the blood prints tainting that shining metal and tells you to wait, that some questions need no answer. But your arm is already a mystery half opened.

There is no going back.

The blade plunges through the ripped wound, and you fillet to find the telltale signs of artificial life. Blood squirts, and the taste fills your mouth. If there is a scream, then you don’t hear it. If there is pain, you don’t acknowledge it. There is only the flop of your hollow arm on your bare thigh and the discarded meat at your feet.

The bone gleams in the light, but if it is organic, it is in no rush to tell you. It glistens in the bright bathroom light, but the colour isn’t enough to judge. Is it human, grown and repaired and replaced by dying cells in a dying body that struggles against the inevitable, or artificial, eternal and endless and cold and pieced together by those dying creatures who now hate what they created?

The butchered limb that hangs from your elbow mocks your efforts. Mutilated, you have no answers, only the chill of the tile, the crimson lake you’ve created, and the rusty stench of blood in the room. The knife clatters and sprays on the glass shower cabinet, artistry amongst your decimation.

Your head is in your hand, fingers gripping the strands and pulling. The hum is a shriek. The scream is yours now. Hot, boiling rage seethes through your stomach and past your lips. Can a puppet truly see its strings, or is it doomed to stare forever ahead and never see the hands that control it? Even if you have been lied to since your birth—and were you even born, or simply produced?—can you snip the threads that hang you? Is that possible for one like you, or are you doomed to twist and writhe upon ligatures so tangled that you have no space to fight?

There is something left. An answer you could find, if only you were brave—or desperate—enough. An answer carved in synthabone, numbers and lines so alien on human bone. Your shaking fingers find that knife again, and you stagger like a newborn to your feet. You were already nude, and maybe you always knew that this was the only answer.

The tip of the blade points at your collarbone, waiting.

(Are you ready?)

You push and slide.

(You always were.)

It hurts. The pain flares like needles, like fire, like a knife slicing open your skin. You reach your belly, and it’s far enough. The blade *clink-clanks* into the sink, and your blood, like a living necklace, drips after it.

Your fingers push into the space you have created and peel the flesh back, a true blood orange. Your ribs, armour against the world, are exposed. Red veils what you seek, and you grab the towel beside you to rub it away, pain so loud in your head that it has become nothing, and glare through your wavering sight.

A barcode—black lines against pink—stares at you. Relief, or something like it, floods your fake body. You fall, and the cold tile greets you.

The ceiling sways above you. There can’t be much left of the liquid you were filled with. You wonder where you were made, when you were created, whose memories you have.

You think that, maybe, you would have liked to find out.

But as you lie on the floor, mutilated and draining, you find solace in only one thing: In death, you are free.



About Amy Kousourou

In between gaming and petting her animals (dogs, cats, birds, snakes, spiders, and Adam), Amy Kousourou completed an MLitt in Creative Writing in 2025. This year, she was the sole organiser of a fandom zine *Enchantment* and spent much of her time glaring at spreadsheets. Amy writes ecohorror, fanfiction, and has persistent brainworm for depressed andriods.

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FROLIC

By Levi DeMatteo

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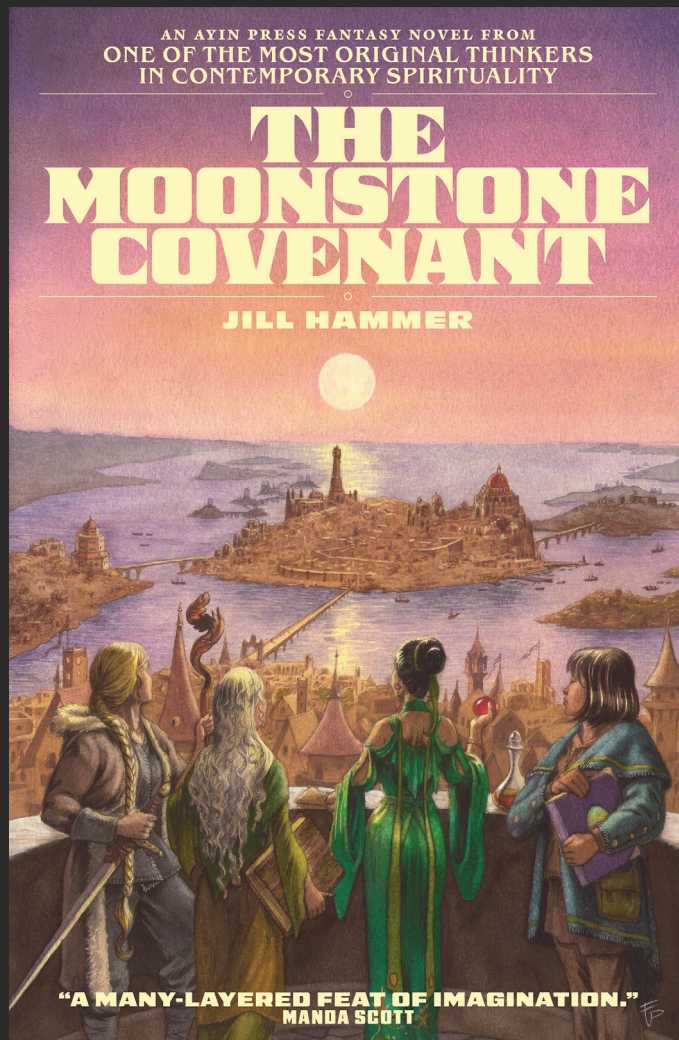
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MAGICAL FRIEND

By Levi DeMatteo

OPINION

Book Summary



The Moonstone Covenant

by Jill Hammer follows Istehar Sha'an, a refugee forest-dweller who can speak with trees and books. She leads her displaced Sha'an people to the floating island-city of Moonstone, a multicultural archipelago centered on a great Library. As Sha'an refugees, they face suspicion and persecution, especially under the ambitious Prince Vilya. Istehar is married to three wives—a warrior librarian, a former concubine, and an apothecary haunted by her parents' murder—and their complex polyamorous household becomes the emotional core of the narrative. After Istehar purchases a strange book titled *A Poisoner's Guide to Moonstone*, the quartet unravels a conspiracy around the city's founding, exposing political corruption, religious persecution, and a deep secret that could reshape Moonstone's future.

Between Elfland and Poughkeepsie: The Moonstone Covenant and Fantasy Style

By Isaac Sage

High Fantasy – Mystery – Queer Fantasy

In her seminal essay, “From Elfland to Poughkeepsie,” Ursula K. Le Guin takes an existing fantasy passage and changes four words to those of real-world places and terms. In doing so, she transforms the scene to one indistinguishable from any modern political novel. She writes: “Something has gone wrong. The book from which I quote is not fantasy, for all its equipment of heroes and wizards. If it was fantasy, I couldn’t have pulled that dirty trick on it by changing four words.” Fantasy, writes Le Guin, draws upon “the wellspring of myth.” It should not feel stylistically interchangeable with work set in the here and now. There *should* be a romanticism to it, a sense of weighty otherness, of the ancient and the alien. As Le Guin puts it: “...the point of Elfland is that you are not at home there. It’s not Poughkeepsie.”

Jill Hammer’s debut fantasy novel, *The Moonstone Covenant*, walks an unstable line between Elfland and Poughkeepsie. Set in the glittering archipelago-metropolis of Moonstone, the novel centers on four women—all of whom are married to each other—and their attempts to solve an ancient murder with hidden consequences for their current day. *Moonstone*’s greatest draw is undoubtedly its setting. The eponymous city is multicultural and multilayered, filled with opulence and poverty alike, believable as any real metropolis. It is a joy to explore, as are its denizens: warrior-librarians, dynasties of high-class concubines and, most interestingly, a diaspora of forest-dwelling refugees, chased by warlords from their homeland upriver. These people called Sha’an, worshippers of books and trees, are having difficulty assimilating into Moonstone; their insularity is distrusted by its citizens and despised by its would-be despots.

Istehar, the most unique of *Moonstone*’s protagonists, is a Sha’an priestess. It’s hard not to see a parallel with Hammer herself, who is an accomplished rabbi and spiritualist. In *Moonstone*’s standout sequence, a vengeful tree spirit from the Sha’an homeland has taken refuge in a princess, cursing her with a supernatural pregnancy. Hammer describes Istehar’s exorcism of the spirit with sharp detail: “*Come, honored one, I whisper. Come the way a child comes...* My uterus cramps, and I feel a discharge from my vulva I know must be blood...I have a strange desire to sink into the carpet-weave and sit in the water among the ibises.” Meanwhile, the princess sees “her stomach and breasts deflating like empty waterskins,” as the pregnancy is drawn from her belly into the priestess’s.

Here we’ve entered Elfland indeed, a scene informed by both Hammer’s vibrant imagination and her cultural tradition, evoking as it does the Jewish possession story of the Dybbuk. Yet the powerful, mythic specificity of such a scene—and of *Moonstones*’s setting—are frequently and frustratingly undercut by stylistic problems.

For one, there is the tense: first-person present. Many writers have wielded it effectively, but Philip Pullman is correct when he describes its “limited range of expressiveness,” which “presse[s]” the reader “up against the immediate.” Such a style *can* be wielded to visceral effect, but it is not the right fit for a fantasy about a sprawling, ancient city—a fantasy which directly evokes the Babylonian Captivity. “A wider temporal perspective,” as Pullman puts it, feels sorely needed: a break from the novel’s busy plot, and a wide-view, grander lens on Hammer’s fascinating world.



Jacques Joseph Tissot, “The Flight of the Prisoners” (c. 1896–1902). Depicts Judeans being led into Babylonian exile after the fall of Jerusalem.

There is also no denying that, following the success of *The Hunger Games*, first-person present tense often smacks of Young Adult, especially within speculative fiction. This is not necessarily a problem, save that Hammer doesn’t seem to *want* to write a YA novel. Yet, other YA hallmarks make their way into *Moonstone*, too. Most unforgivable are its flashbacks, which center on the protagonists’ years at a school for the city’s elite. These scenes damage the pacing and feel derivative of fantasy’s post-*Harry Potter* obsession with school. Worse, the novel’s villain, an authoritarian prince who uses the Sha’an as his scapegoat, is seen gaining hatred for Istehar at school. While it’s acknowledged that he distrusted the Sha’an before this, the general impression given is that his anti-Sha’an populism is fueled above all else by teenage beef, an idea at once ludicrous and juvenile. Add to this some unwelcome, Whedonesque quipping—“Nothing on earth could make me trust you...you don’t even return your Library books on time”—and we wind up with a novel in conflict with itself: a highly original world crafted by an expert spiritualist, conveyed via a generically modern, market-friendly style, all too susceptible to Le Guin’s dirty trick.

The Moonstone Covenant is Hammer’s first fantasy, and it *is* one to be proud of. She has crafted a distinct and convincing world, with an ending ripe for a sequel. Yet it is hard not to feel like this world, this story, was diminished slightly by its telling. Too often we discuss fantasy in a manner almost statistical: How deep is the worldbuilding? How complex is the magic system? How “spicy” is the romance? But none of these criteria will get us any closer to Le Guin’s wellspring of myth. For that, we need *style*: prose and imagery, specific and strange. More scenes like Istehar’s exorcism, and fewer schoolyard flashbacks. We need Elfland, not Poughkeepsie. I hope that, should she pen a *Moonstone* sequel, Hammer chooses to take us there. She has already proved herself more than capable.



Extract from cover art by Federico Parolo and Cem Eskinaziv

About Isaac Sage

Isaac Sage is a writer, researcher, and arts worker currently living in Glasgow, Scotland. Born in Los Angeles, he studied English, Creative Writing and History at Kenyon College, before flying halfway across the world for a master’s degree in Fantasy Literature at the University of Glasgow. His work on fantasy studies has previously been selected for the World Science Fiction Convention’s academic programme.

Worldbuilding Off the Rails: Fantasy, TTRPGs, And Improvised Comedy:

By Brady Hutchings

Improv Comedy – D&D – Fantasy

Terry Pratchett once claimed that the influence of *The Lord of the Rings* relates to fantasy as Mt. Fuji does to Japanese prints: “Sometimes it’s big and up close. Sometimes it’s a shape on the horizon. Sometimes it’s not there at all, which means that the artist either has made a deliberate decision against the mountain, which is interesting in itself, or is in fact standing on Mt. Fuji.” One cannot imagine where fantasy would be today without the roots established by Tolkien. Building on this metaphor, I would argue that improv is to fantasy as cherry blossoms are to Japanese prints: clearly a big part of it. (I’m not as elegant as Pratchett.)

Carl Sagan once said, “If you want to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe.” When two improv performers walk out on stage, they create a universe together. Usually they’ll get suggestions from the audience, and then they might start scenes with a simple *hello*. Or they might launch off as an insane character. Whatever happens, the improvisers agree on the accepted reality and try to add more details to the universe. Someone slips into a pirate voice? Now they’re on a ship. One pirate says they just don’t love the other as much as they used to? Great, it’s about divorcing pirates. Improv scenes like these can quickly become unhinged. However, the humor that comes from improv scenes isn’t in the crazy scenarios, it’s in the truthful human reactions. I want the pirate to look at their long-term partner/shipmate and give a tearful, “...Yar?” This holds true for worldbuilding in fantasy. I can easily invest in a story, suspending my disbelief about magic, dragons, or whatever else, if the characters themselves feel like real people and react to the world truthfully.

The famous motto of the improv school Upright Citizens Brigade is: “If this is true, what else is true?” For example, the next scene in our show could feature pirate couples therapy or how the *Black Pearl’s* HR department deals with the fallout of pirate divorce (I’m so sorry for sticking with divorced pirates). It offers a way to explore one of the infinite possibilities of this universe. This question arises every time we read a fantasy novel to better understand what a world would be like where we could ride dragons or speak to talking animals.



Art by Levi DeMatteo @Starfish_Hospital
Made for Dungeons & Cabins

All this illustrates how fantasy is a big part of improv, but improv has also heavily impacted modern fantasy. I’ve got three words for you: *Dungeons & Dragons*. While I had always been a fan of fantasy literature, I didn’t try *D&D* until my first improv group introduced me to it—and let me tell you, the skills are transferrable. A player reacts organically to whatever their Game Master throws at them and acts out dialogue on the fly, as any improviser might do. *D&D* has exploded in popularity through mainstream TV and videogames such as *Stranger Things* and *Baldur’s Gate 3*. This has led to a new medium for fantasy stories: actual play. Series such as *Critical Role* and *Dimension 20* use voice actors and comedic improvisers to tell narrative campaigns with high production values, and they have been incredibly successful at it, even selling out Madison Square Garden just last year.

Now I’m pretty bad at math, but if $A=B=C$, then I would like to complete the connection and plainly state that improv plays a large role in fantasy through *D&D*. This is clear to see through the “Chicken or the Egg” dilemma we face with recurring quests, characters, and tropes that get distilled back and forth between fantasy novels and tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs).

What I love about improv, *D&D*, and fantasy novels is that they celebrate worlds that thrive on the smaller details. They have such great overlap that they help each other grow. So here’s some writing advice: When your next big fantasy epic starts to feel too bogged down in maps of names you can’t pronounce, try a little less planning and a bit more spontaneity. Take a lesson from improv and ask yourself: *What else may be true?* If your novel has dragon riders, then let’s see how the town’s air traffic control deals with no-fly zones. If your world has talking animals, make sure your characters give informed opinions on the suffrage movement for city rats. The hero’s journey not working out for you? What would a truthful life look like for someone else living in this world? Try your hand at improv comedy, which can teach you to think on your feet and get out of your comfort zone.

About Brady Hutchings

Brady Hutchings (he/him) found the meaning to life in a fortune cookie: live, laugh, love. He graduated with an MLitt in Fantasy Literature at the University of Glasgow in 2023. As a member of a house team for the Glasgow Improv Theatre (GIT), he frequently teaches and performs improvised comedy. Brady plays tabletop board games, writes fantasy stories that make you laugh and/or cry, and believes it’s always five o’clock somewhere.



YŌKAI, GHOSTS, ALIENS, AND URBAN LEGENDS: DANDADAN’S SCIENCE FANTASY WORLD

BY EUGENIO MINVIELLE

SCIENCE FANTASY – SUPERNATURAL – MANGA/ANIME

In 1997, *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* described “Science Fantasy” to be “a bastard genre blending elements of sf and fantasy” and “sometimes with elements of horror” (Clute and Nicholls 1061). It’s easy to see why it gets a bad reputation: too often does Science Fantasy appear in crossover episodes where a sci-fi or fantasy trope drops into the “wrong” universe with no regard for lore or consequences. Not that I minded when this happened in *The Magic School Bus*, *Power Rangers*, *Dexter’s Laboratory*, or *Adventure Time*—but these days I find myself craving something more profound: stories with a deep and inspiring lore and a coherent logic. With such a wealth of mediocre Science Fantasy examples to pull from, I believe the genre’s potential was generally overlooked. That is to say, there was a niche audience who championed the early years of the developing genre through iconic books, comics, shows, and movies like *John Carter of Mars*, *Flash Gordon*, *Xena: Warrior Princess*, and *He-Man*, yet these science fantasy stories are often trivialized, enjoyed for the kitsch and unserious entertainment they provide in contrast to those epic stories placed in distinctly sci-fi and fantasy worlds (e.g. *Star Trek* and *Lord of the Rings*).

Now, twenty eight years later, it's clear to see Science Fantasy has grown into a handsome bastard much like Jon Snow (who, as we know, became very toned and sexy when he started taking his destiny into his own hands). At one end of the genre you have the juicy high fantasy and hard sci-fi blends like *Dune* and *Star Wars*, and at the other end the low fantasy and soft sci-fi side which takes place in a world like our own—*Stranger Things*, *The XFiles*, *Gravity Falls*, and...*Dandadan*.

The *Dandadan* series, written and illustrated by Yukinobu Tatsu, originally came out in 2021 as a manga (with fourteen volumes currently translated to English) and has since been adapted into an anime. This series fuses fantasy's *yōkai* and ghost lore with science fiction's flying saucers, reptilian aliens, and UFO cults. What makes *Dandadan* unique is how creatively it collapses the boundary between spiritual and extraterrestrial: aliens summon UFOs using occult-like rituals; the Loch Ness Monster resembles a young juvenile laser-firing Godzilla; a kappa named Mr. Mantis Shrimp sings nostalgic songs while throwing ultrasonic punches to receive his salaryman wage from the extorting Serpo Aliens. The intricate detail in these bizarre creatures not only enriches their aesthetic but also expands the lore, keeping me absorbed long after the first look.



Panel from Yukinobu Tatsu's *Dandadan*, Vol. 2

The story begins with Momo, a feisty teenage girl who believes in ghosts, but not aliens, and Okarun, a timid boy who believes the opposite. In a bid to prove each other wrong, they visit supernatural and alien hotspots, only to discover that ghosts and aliens exist, and maybe they were the same thing all along. Momo and Okarun's opposing worldviews—her ghost-believing mysticism and his alien-obsessed conspiracy theories—seem to be a perfect mirror of the debate between science fiction and fantasy purists. The sweet and seamless mixture of the genres and the unique cast of villains brings forth an energetic and unpredictable narrative.

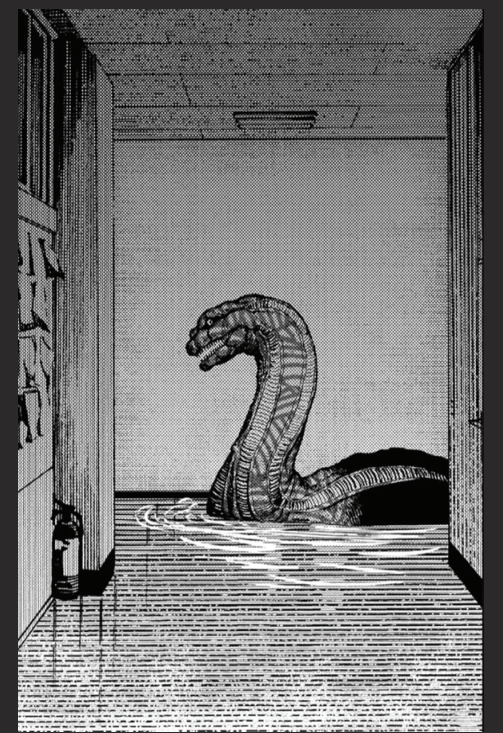
Beneath all these fantastic elements is a surprisingly tender story about friendship and growing up. Momo and Okarun, who are both awkward and combative, gradually learn to trust each other. Both characters are misfits, and through battling cursed grandmothers, psychic aliens, and Mongolian death worms, they also battle self-doubt and loneliness. Their romance arc is wonderfully interwoven into the central narrative in a way that keeps it engaging and quick paced.

Now there is one aspect that makes me hesitant to recommend this series to just anyone: it has been appropriately rated M (for mature content). The series contains the following graphic content: sexual assault, body horror/gore, violence, and crude sexual innuendo. It sometimes includes disturbing content that's meant to unnerve the reader. Speculative fiction is a good way to broach uncomfortable topics, and *Dandadan* does this in a respectful way that calls attention to issues of injustice. In order to properly highlight these topics, the show temporarily pauses its usual upbeat comedy to let the audience sit with a discomforting moment. These scenes often reveal a cultural insight, character history, or immediate threat of sexual and/or physical violence. While this subject matter is alarming in itself, it is even further heightened by the fact that the subjects of these assaults are most often children and teenagers. The inclusion of this content adds to the growing body of series that erode old assumptions that graphic texts are light, fun, fantastical works meant for children.

In conclusion, *Dandadan* stands as a shining example of how science fiction and fantasy can not only coexist but thrive when merged in a unique and imaginative way. By blending the supernatural with the extraterrestrial, the series challenges traditional genre boundaries and creates an engaging world full of quirky characters, rich lore, and emotional depth. It successfully weaves together elements of horror, romance, and science fantasy while addressing complex themes with sensitivity and nuance. The dynamic relationship between Momo and Okarun, alongside the outrageous and often bizarre encounters they face, keeps viewers on their toes and invested in the story. Ultimately, *Dandadan* is more than just a chaotic mash-up of genres—it's a testament to the power of creativity that can still be applied to common tropes to make them refreshingly captivating.

ABOUT EUGENIO MINVIELLE

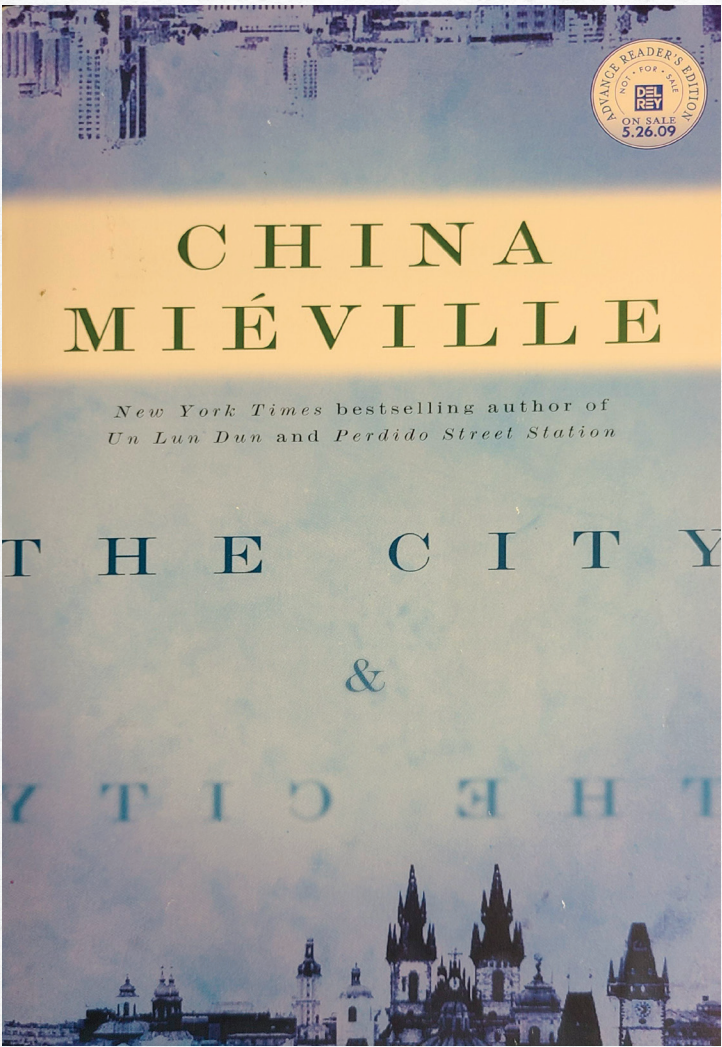
Eugenio likes to make things from scratch—whether it's clay cups or beer batches—and he approached *Scattered Flock* the same way, inventing the name and shaping the magazine's design from the first page to the last. His favorite fantastical creatures are alebrijes; bright, surreal, and wonderfully unique. Manga is another obsession, one he pursued all the way into his Fantasy studies, and he'll happily talk your ear off about Isekai, monster folklore, or even sappy romances.



Panel from Yukinobu Tatsu's *Dandadan*, Vol. 3

ACADEMIC

Book Summary



The City and The City

(2009) by China Miéville fuses crime noir with Weird fiction to interrogate the artificiality of borders. Inspector Tyador Borlú’s murder inquiry moves across Beszel and Ul Qoma, twin cities occupying the same terrain but separated by rigid laws and the learned practice of “unseeing.” The ever-present threat of Breach ensures that the populations remain estranged, their coexistence defined by absence and taboo contact. Yet the novel’s climax—the unificationist riot—momentarily disrupts this fragile order. As citizens breach en masse, the two cities blur into an exuberant carnival of disorder, gesturing toward a possible alternative civic life. Although quickly contained, this episode dramatizes the tension between imposed separation and the human desire for contact, highlighting the Weird’s destabilizing capacity to reimagine the

Become Ungovernable: Carnival and Riot in *The City and The City* By Hannah Mimiec

This article explores the unificationist riot in China Miéville’s *The City & The City* as a moment of carnivalesque rupture, temporarily collapsing the imposed division between twin cities Beszel and Ul Qoma. Drawing upon Mikhail Bakhtin and Elias Canetti, it reads the riot as not merely political distraction, but as a moment of ecstatic transgression that unravels the legal and perceptual regimes sustaining the cities’ separation. Through the lens of the Weird, the riot becomes a portal to a third city—one outside the laws of Breach—where shared language, contact, and disorder are possible. This article argues that although the riot is ultimately unsuccessful, the temporary transformation gestures toward a radical potential to consider alternative forms of social order, identity, and law.

‘Of course they worked together; that we knew. But that those little bands of eager utopians could do this? Could untether this breakdown, could make this happen?’ - *The City and The City*

China Miéville’s 2009 novel *The City & The City* merges Weird and detective fiction to tell the story of Inspector Tyador Borlú, who is tasked with investigating the murder of Mahalia Geary across Beszel and Ul Qoma. The division between these physically merged (termed ‘crosshatching’ in the novel) but legally distinct cities is upheld through the practice of citizens of one city ‘unseeing’ the other to avoid committing the crime of ‘breach’. Unseeing means to intentionally not notice the presence of the city that one is not legally situated in. For example, a person who is standing in a Beszel crosshatched street must move around the those standing in its Ul Qoman counterpart, without paying them any real attention. To notice the people in Ul Qoma would constitute ‘breach’ and invoke the appearance of Breach, the body tasked

with intervening and containing incidents of breach¹, the extent of whose powers are not truly understood by either city’s police organisations.

As the story comes to its climax, the unificationists take to the streets and, for a brief moment, collapse the division between the twin cities, which up until this point has been strictly maintained under threat of intervention from Breach. In this article, I propose a reading of the unificationist riot that emphasises the joyous nature of civil unrest and breaking through the legal barriers that keep individuals separated. To do this I will draw upon the work of Elias Canetti and Mark Fisher to illustrate how the novel engages with the fear of the unknown that has become a staple of Weird fiction. I will then argue, using Mikhail Bakhtin’s work on carnival,

1. Miéville differentiates breach the crime and Breach the organisation by capitalising the latter.

that the riot itself can be read as a subversion of the usual trajectory of this fear. Even though it is actually a distraction to allow politician Mikhel Buric to escape the police investigating his role in the murder, the explosion of breaching that occurs in the course of the riot briefly transforms the landscape of the two cities, opening up alternative spaces of association.

Elias Canetti's work in *Crowds and Power* provides a useful vocabulary for understanding the kind of effect that crowds, like those in the riot, can produce. 'Unseeing' means that everyday life in Beszel-UI Qoma is in many ways characterised by the 'repugnance to being touched' that Canetti describes as a feature of everyday life. This fear of contact with the other has its roots in the fear of the unknown, which informs 'all the distances which men create round themselves' in order to maintain a feeling of control and security about ourselves and our lives (Canetti 15). This fear of the unknown, or perhaps the unknowable, is capitalised on by Weird horror in its focus on our morbid 'fascination for the outside, for that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience' (Fisher 8). Fisher's understanding of the Weird as an intrusive mode that violates the comfort of distance from the other and the unseen is particularly useful in building a picture of how the riot fits into Miéville's Weird writing.

Despite the police's horror at the wanton breaches occurring during the riot, there is an undeniable atmosphere of excitement amidst the chaos. Miéville captures the ecstatic charge of border transgression in this scene:

'It must be an intoxication to step through the borders and greet their foreign comrades across what they made suddenly one street, to make their own country even if just for seconds at night in front of a scrawled slogan and a broken window. They must know by now that the populaces were not coming with them, but they did not disappear back to their respective cities. How could they go back now? Honour, despair, or bravery kept them coming.' (Miéville 335)

Canetti describes how in a crowd, 'the more fiercely people press together, the more certain they feel that they do not fear each other' (Canetti 16). During the riot, the divisions between the cities threaten to collapse, and so do the divisions between the two populations. Since the border between Beszel and UI Qoma is constructed almost entirely by the movement of bodies across the prescribed city lines, if the bodies of the population themselves become confused, then there is potentially no way for this division to hold up. All the individual moments of breaching that occur during the riot create portals into another city, one not recognised by the law of breach and therefore open to the possibilities of other social and legal orders. This is exemplified by the unificationist graffiti that, while awkward, is legible to both populations, suggesting the possibility of a shared language and culture that would render the continued separation of the cities untenable.

The chaos and exuberance of the riot is resonant of Bakhtin's conception of the carnival. During the carnival, 'the laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life are suspended,' including hierarchies (Bakhtin 122). In the carnival, 'all distance between people is suspended, and a special carnival category goes into effect: free and familiar contact among people' (122). The resonances for *The City & The City* are obvious here, where the citizens of Beszel and UI Qoma are kept distant from each other through the law of Breach, and only the upheaval of the riot allows them a window into the other city.

For Bakhtin, the 'carnival sense of the world possesses a mighty life-creating and transforming power, an indestructible vitality' (107). This evokes the 'transformative' nature of the Weird referenced by Anne and Jeff Vandermeer (Vandermeer and Vandermeer xv), where the power of the rioters, unificationist or otherwise, temporarily creates a real third city (in contrast to the conspiracy theory city of Orciny). This possibility is exhilarating, as Tyador observes how:

'Some figures I saw run did so with more giddiness than terror. Not unifs, too small and too aimless: teenagers throwing stones, in their most transgressive act ever, little hurled breaches breaking glass in the city they did not live or stand in.' (Miéville 332)

The words 'giddy' and 'temptation' are perhaps the best ways to describe the riot, and the possibilities or 'little anarchies' that it opens up. The opportunity to look and reach into the other city is irresistible to the teenagers in the street, evoking Tyador's earlier recollections of

playing 'breach,' where as a child, he and his friends would stare across into the other city for as long as they dared. These breaches make the other cities more *real* to each other; there is no longer the mere possibility that someone else is standing next to you in another city while standing in an area of crosshatching, and instead a confirmation that you have never been alone in that space. In the classic Weird tale this would be a source of horror through contact with the unknown (as Fisher describes), however in *The City and the City* this contact becomes a point of joy and recognition between people breaking through the legal barriers that have previously kept them separated and opening up new carnivalesque spaces of solidarity in their wake.

Of course, the unificationists are not accustomed to moving in the two cities, which makes them obvious to the avatars of Breach who are practised at moving in both cities and thus able to take them out with ease. The riot does come to an end, and Breach re-establishes the boundaries between the cities. What is left, however, is the undeniable *possibility* of the parallel crowds coming together once more and establishing for themselves new, joyful, carnivalesque cities that reject the strict separations and fears of their predecessors. It is in this sense that *The City and The City* provides an alternative response to the fear of the unknown and the Weird, one that asks us not to flinch away from the unknown and the other but to draw close to it and step outside of the everyday into new spaces of freedom and association.

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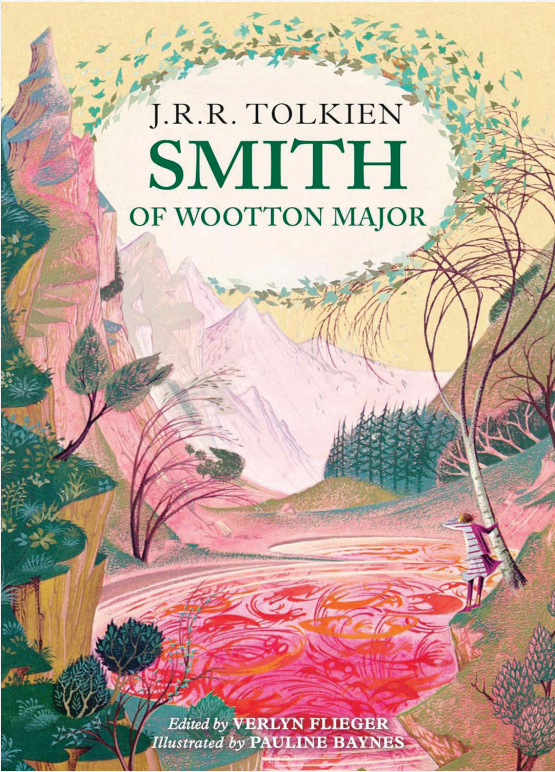
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About Hannah Mimiec

Hannah Mimiec is a part-time lecturer in law and part-time PhD student at the University of Dundee, currently researching narratives of policing in Weird fiction. They hold an LLB and an MLitt from the University of Glasgow, where they were part of the 2022/23 Fantasy MLitt cohort. When not thinking about tentacles, they are usually thinking about knitting.



Book Summary



Smith of Wootton Major (1967) is a late fairy tale by J.R.R. Tolkien. It tells of a small village where, every twenty-four years, a great Feast of Good Children is held. During one such feast, a fay-star—secretly baked into a cake by the humble apprentice Alf—is swallowed by a boy named Smith. When the star sets itself on his forehead, it grants him access to the realm of Faery. As Smith grows, he becomes a skilled blacksmith whose journeys into Faery leave him with glimpses of strange landscapes, enchanted beings, and even an encounter with the Faery Queen. Eventually, he must return the star, relinquishing its gift. The tale closes in quiet humility, emphasizing grace, stewardship, and the fleeting nature of wonder.

Where Enchantment Lies: Faery, Estrangement, and the Limits of Worldbuilding in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Smith of Wootton Major*

By Catherine Hall

This paper explores how J.R.R. Tolkien's *Smith of Wootton Major* achieves enchantment, not through detailed worldbuilding, but through narrative estrangement and emotional resonance. Through close analysis of the text and engagement with scholars such as Verlyn Flieger and Farah Mendlesohn, this paper argues that, unlike the richly mapped world of Middle-earth, *Smith* evokes wonder by remaining spatially vague and resistant to explanation. In doing so, *Smith* challenges conventional assumptions about the genre's reliance on intricate worldbuilding and reveals a different, more elusive mode of speculative captivation within Tolkien's broader literary legacy.

Fantasy evokes for many images of expansive secondary worlds with rich histories inhabited by imaginary beings who speak invented languages and possess unique cultural traditions. Much of this can be attributed to J.R.R. Tolkien, who established the foundations of the modern fantasy genre with his Middle-earth legendarium. Some readers may thus be surprised when they stumble upon the last story Tolkien wrote in his lifetime, the 1967 fairy tale *Smith of Wootton Major* (SWM). This story about a young boy who receives a fay-star, which grants him access to the land of Faery, is unlike Tolkien's more popular works, being relatively brief and seemingly simplistic. Still, it has engendered numerous interpretations, with scholars disagreeing on whether the story should be read as allegorical or autobiographical (Chance, Shippey, Kocher). Most persuasive, however, is Verlyn

Flieger's suggestion that *Smith* is the "practical application" of Tolkien's seminal essay "On Fairy-Stories," offering readers "a glimpse into Faery" (Flieger 65, Flieger and Shippey 187). Yet the story offers little information about that land. In fact, Smith's adventures make up less than a third of the story, and Faery is only sparsely described, remaining spatially indeterminate. The refusal to guide readers through Faery reveals that *Smith* represents a different mode of subcreation—one that creates enchantment through estrangement and emotional resonance, the affective force of Smith's wonder and longing, rather than the "impression of depth" characteristic of his Middle-earth legendarium (Shippey, *Road* 228-229). In doing so, the story can challenge current assumptions about fantasy's reliance on detailed worldbuilding and expand our understanding of Tolkien's legacy.

Faery appears accessible to Smith through the woods—a place that often acts as a gateway to the otherworld (Flieger, *A Question of Time* 250)—but how exactly Smith enters this land remains unclear. Smith is shown the way by the fay-star, but readers are left behind. Indeed, though Smith is physically within Faery and experiences the land with his own eyes, the narrative describes the landscape only fleetingly, maintaining a distance between readers and Faery: “he walked... in the woods and meads of fair valleys, and by the bright waters in which at night strange stars shone and at dawn the gleaming peaks of far mountains were mirrored” (*SWM* 20). Additionally, the story begins by describing “a village, not very long ago for those with long memories, nor very far away for those with long legs” (*SWM* 3). Tolkien suggests that Wootton Major—and perhaps the entire story world, including Faery—is near in time and space. However, this is only so for “those with long memories” and “long legs,” which implies the opposite: that this land is far away, in a distant time. Thus, while a story’s first sentence typically situates readers in time and space, Tolkien intentionally disorients them.

In addition to depicting a world that resists being pinned down, Tolkien denies readers any form of guide to help them make sense of

this strange land. Farah Mendlesohn maintains that in portal-quest fantasies—in which characters leave a familiar home and journey into a new land—readers expect a guide (13). Although Mendlesohn’s framework does not map strictly onto the story, Smith’s entry into the unfamiliar land of Faery leaves readers in need of direction. Flieger sees Smith as the readers’ guide, but if that is so, he is a very poor one (68). Indeed, he once comes across the King’s Tree, but it is said that “he never saw that Tree again, though he often sought for it” (*SWM* 24). Smith is similarly disoriented when the Faery Queen summons him: “he had little memory of the ways that he had been taken, for often he had been blindfolded by mist or by shadow” (*SWM* 31). The personification of the mist and shadows suggests that the land itself can decide when to reveal or obscure some of its secrets. As a result, Smith is unable to return to the places he once visited, making him an unsuitable guide. Another common “guide” noticeably absent from *Smith* is a map. Maps, which hold an important place in Tolkien’s oeuvre, define the limits and vastness of a Secondary World and function as “a companion on the reader’s journey through an alien landscape” (Ekman 14-15). In *The Lord of the Rings*, the map that precedes the main text allows readers to follow the characters’ journeys and understand

how far they have travelled. In contrast, in the accompanying essay to *Smith*, Tolkien writes that “Faery is a vast world in its own right, that does not depend for its existence upon Men, and which is not primarily nor indeed principally concerned with Men” (*SWM* 129). The absence of guides in *Smith* thus makes sense: Faery does not need to explain itself to outsiders.

Without any sort of guide, readers have no proper sense of what Faery really looks like and how to orient themselves in it. Instead, they are left to experience the land through the emotional impressions it leaves on Smith. Indeed, though Smith forgets many details of his travels, some of them “remained in his mind as wonders and mysteries that he often recalled” (*SWM* 22). Significantly, in this passage, the wonders are not described to readers; the emphasis is on Smith’s enchantment itself. The emotional impact of Faery is connected to the sense of “arresting strangeness,” which Tolkien maintains is a crucial element of fantasy (*Fairy-Stories* 60). This “arresting strangeness” is most vividly expressed through the King’s Tree, described as bearing “leaves and flowers and fruits uncounted” and whose “light was like the sun at noon”; it is not a tree found in Smith’s world, nor one readers would encounter in the Primary World (*SWM* 24). Among the fleeting

glimpses of Faery throughout the story, the King’s Tree stands out as one of the most detailed sights in the land, which speaks to how deeply it captivates Smith. His response to the King’s Tree exemplifies how the narrative creates enchantment by emphasizing otherness and inviting readers to share in Smith’s wonder. As Tolkien writes, Faery “contains many things...the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it...and *ourselves...when we are enchanted*” (emphasis added, *Fairy-Stories* 32). Rather than offering a world to be mapped, *Smith* invites readers to lose themselves in a strange and unknown land. The lack of explanations is thus not a storytelling flaw; it is precisely where enchantment originates.

Tolkien, and *The Lord of the Rings* in particular, are landmarks in the fantasy genre—as Brian Attebery identifies when placing that book at the core of his “fuzzy set”—but also a landmark of fantasy worldbuilding (12-14). Yet *Smith* shows that the magic of Tolkien’s works is not solely attributed to the vastness of Arda, the world of Middle-earth. In this tale, he presents Faery as a world that resists mapping and eludes explanation, reminding us that fantasy can enchant not only through detailed worldbuilding, but by simply embracing the strange and unfamiliar.

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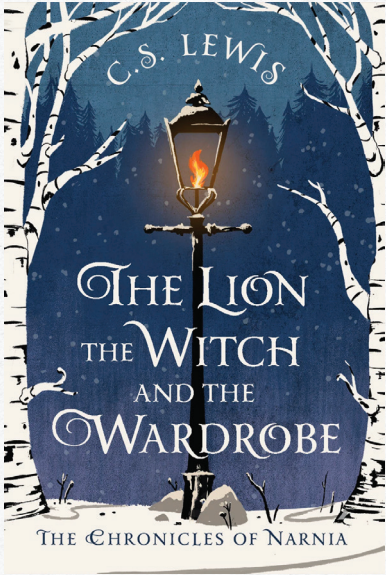
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About Catherine Hall

Catherine Hall (she/her) holds a BA in English Literature from McGill University and graduated from the Fantasy MLitt at the University of Glasgow in 2024, where she received the Wat Dryhope Award. Since 2020, she has been the executive editor for the Science Fiction and Fantasy review *ImaginAtlas*. Her research focuses on J.R.R. Tolkien, representations of Dwarves in fantasy, and fan culture.



Book Summary



C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1950) begins when four siblings—Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy—are sent from wartime London to the countryside. Lucy discovers a wardrobe that opens into Narnia, a land trapped in eternal winter by the White Witch. The children become entwined in a struggle between her tyranny and the return of Aslan, the great lion and true king. Betrayal, forgiveness, and sacrifice shape the story, as Edmund falls into the Witch's grasp but is redeemed through Aslan's self-offering and resurrection. With Aslan's victory, spring returns, and the children are crowned kings and queens of Narnia. Years later they stumble back through the wardrobe, children once more, carrying only the memory of their reign.

“Keep your eyes on it and feel for your hatchet”: Imperialist Messaging in C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* By Katarina Dulude

This paper argues for a reexamination of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* as a pro-imperialist text, an aspect that often gets overlooked but is deeply connected to the story's heavy presence of Christian themes. Through its hierarchical worldview, orientalist imagery, racialized othering, and the Pevensie children's role as imperial agents, the novel reinforces colonization ideologies. Drawing on scholars such as Clare Bradford, Rachel Towns, and Kath Firm, the analysis explores how Lewis's portrayal of “good” Britishness and “evil” foreignness reflects imperialist philosophies. By framing conquest and rule in Narnia as noble and redemptive, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* echoes and perpetuates the colonial mindset of its cultural moment.

Though in his letters C.S. Lewis denied that he wrote *The Chronicles of Narnia* as a Christian allegory, instead likening them to a “let us suppose” story, answering the imagined question: “What might Christ become like, if there really were a world like Narnia and he chose to be incarnate and die and rise again in that world as he actually has done in ours?” (Lewis and Hooper 475), allegorical or not, the texts were

heavily influenced by Christianity. Western imperialism and Christianity have long been intertwined, from the original colonization of the Americas being given support by two papal bulls to the centuries-old missionary presence in Africa and Asia that persists to the present day. Thus, the themes of imperialism in Lewis's novel are not far behind those of Christianity. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* functions

as a pro-imperialist text through its emphasis on hierarchies, textual orientalism and nationalism, othering of non-English human-resembling characters, and through the roles played by the Pevensie children—white saviors and scouts for an empire—within the narrative.

Clare Bradford asserts, “To read children’s books of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is to read texts produced within a pattern of imperial culture” (196). Though the British Empire’s territory dominance began to recede from its peak in 1947 (only 3 years before C.S. Lewis published *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, though also years after he is believed to have begun writing the novel), the British Empire still persisted through Lewis’ lifetime (and still arguably persists today due to their ongoing control of overseas territories and political influence over foreign countries). Thus, Lewis spent his entire life submerged in an imperial culture as described by Bradford, and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* demonstrates this. Firstly, Kath Firm observes that Lewis’s writing has a “devotion to hierarchies,” citing Aslan as not only a Christ figure but also a lion, and therefore, the king of beasts in a world where most “good” characters are also animals (26). This is also evidenced by the aristocratic social structure of Narnia, which is governed by monarchs. In this way, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* mimics the hierarchical ideology characteristic of the empire it was created in. Imperial attitudes also manifest via nationalism

and orientalism throughout *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Rachel Towns notes that Lewis uses food to signify goodness versus evil, writing: “The ‘good’ main characters... are always associated with eating ‘good’ traditional British fare,” which is evidenced by Mr. Tumnus and Lucy sharing a meal of eggs on toast with sardines and tea, and Mr. and Mrs. Beaver providing the Pevensies with fish, potatoes, and tea (16). Meanwhile, Towns continues, “antagonists make ‘foreign’ or ‘other’ food choices, correspondingly constructing their characters as ‘other,’” the most infamous example being the Turkish Delight with which the White Witch ensnares Edmund (16). This exotic sweet is enchanted by the White Witch, and Edmund’s decision to eat it leads Edmund to betraying his siblings. This orientalism also extends beyond food. The White Witch, according to Mr. Beaver, is nonhuman because she is of Jinn descent, as well as Giant (Lewis 81). A Jinn is a creature that appears in both pre-Islamic Arabian mythology and the Qur’an. Considered parallels to humans, they are not inherently good or evil. Instead, Jinn and humans both “have the characteristics to think and to reflect” and can be held “accountable for their actions in the same way as humans as they have the freedom to choose between right and wrong and between good and bad” (Rasool 107). However, Lewis disregards this moral ambiguity and their similarity to humans. Mr. Beaver provides the White Witch’s genealogical ancestry to

the Pevensies as proof of her wickedness, and Mrs. Beaver agrees, “That’s why she’s bad all the way through” (Lewis 81). The idea that one’s genes determine their moral character is a typical component of the eugenics movement, which was prevalent in the British Empire during its height. Eugenics attempted to justify imperialism by claiming that empires flourished because their ruling race was “superior,” although the success of an empire in colonizing foreign peoples universally leads to the threat of the imperial race succumbing to “racial degeneration” (Campbell 21). To prevent imperial degradation and collapse, the British Empire encouraged within its British population “marriage and reproduction between those people considered to have desirable qualities” and “preventing those with unwanted hereditary failings from being allowed to pass them on to future generations” (14). Within the context of the White Witch, who the text informs us is racially inferior by Narnian standards, we understand that as “racial degeneration would lead to a loss of [the British Empire’s] imperial status and dominance” (19). Having a ruler without “a drop of real human blood” has likewise led to Narnia’s degradation from the glorious land it once was in accordance with this imperialist mentality (Lewis 81).

Following this exchange about the White Witch, Mr. Beaver tells the children that though she may appear it, the White Witch is not human and warns the Pevensies against trusting anyone

humanoid in Narnia. Mrs. Beaver contests that she has known a few good dwarves, and Mr. Beaver replies that he has too, “but precious few and they were the ones least like men” (Lewis 81). He adds, “Take my advice, when you meet anything that’s going to be human and isn’t yet, or used to be human once and isn’t now, or ought to be human and isn’t, you keep your eyes on it and feel for your hatchet” (81-82). This attitude aligns with colonial ideology in two ways: firstly, by implying that white British children in a foreign land nonetheless have an inherent right to determine who is and who is not human. Secondly, it suggests that the Pevensies should be ready to attack or defend themselves from anyone they perceive to be not truly human and a threat. That the majority of Aslan’s allies, though anthropomorphized, are animals, meanwhile the White Witch’s allies consist largely of dwarves and monstrous creatures with humanoid form such as hags and ogres, reinforces this notion. Even within Aslan’s allies, the only prominent “good” nonhuman humanoid creature (without any animal features like Tumnus) is a giant called Rumblebuffin, who is considered ugly and “not very clever,” and speaks with improper grammar (Lewis 174). By presenting the idea that people who look human may not be, and therefore are probable enemies, or at the least inferior, Lewis promotes an ideology that attempts to justify and validate colonization.

The Pevensies’ unphased reactions to Narnia and everything they encounter there also aligns

with imperial thought. Though Lucy wonders why there is a forest inside the wardrobe, she appears unperturbed by encountering a fantastical being—Mr. Tumnus the faun. She greets him, “Good evening” and exchanges niceties with him after he, much confused by her presence in Narnia, determines she is indeed a human (Lewis 11-12). When the children are told that they are destined to save Narnia, they likewise exhibit little surprise or doubt; this is a perfectly reasonable conclusion, despite the fact it is an entirely foreign land for them. In this way, the Pevensies’ assumptions and ideologies resemble that which is perpetuated by British scout propaganda. Child scouts originated as a method of instructing young boys, and shortly after girls as well, in scouting skills (based on the creator, Robert Badel-Powell’s, own military manual on scouting), and also, crucially, to instill in them loyalty to the British Empire. Baden-Powell wrote in his handbook for young boys, “Every boy should prepare himself...by learning how to shoot and drill, to take his share in defence of the Empire, if it should ever be attacked” (7). This element resembles Father Christmas giving the Pevensies weapons. He tells them, “These are tools, not toys... Bear them well” (Lewis 108). Both in Narnia and in the British Empire, children are taught not to play, but rather, to be prepared to fight against a wicked, foreign “other” that might threaten the empire. In this way, the Pevensies appear to already be instilled with imperial values as evident by their natural acceptance as saviors

of a foreign land and training with weapons for the defense of their territory. Furthermore, their crowning at the end of the book mirrors the system of the British monarchy and further instills the idea that the imperial race is destined to rule over the foreign.

The Pevensies enter Narnia, a land they are not from, and are welcomed by its “good” natives because they are prophesied to save it. That those not originally from a land, particularly Westerners, should go into said land and “save” it is an inherently imperialist notion, and the idea that colonization was a noble task, positive for indigenous people, was very popular in Imperial Britain. Rudyard Kipling, for instance, memorialized this sentiment in his poem “The White Man’s Burden.” In this poem, Kipling urges British citizens to “Take up the White Man’s burden” to colonize and thereby, in their view, civilize British-occupied territories, framing this as serving those that they occupied. The Pevensies going on to rule Narnia demonstrates this savior-like sentiment. Their reign lasts decades and brings about a golden age of peace and prosperity. Lewis also writes, “much of [the Pevensies’] time was spent in seeking out the remnants of the White Witch’s army and destroying them” and that “in the end all that foul brood was stamped out” (183). This element harkens back to the othering of humanoid nonhumans and suggests that killing them is a service. Between this and the unequivocally positive portrayal of the

Pevensies’ reign, colonial ideology is reinforced.

In conclusion, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* functions as a pro-imperialist text through its orientalism and dehumanization of those deemed “other,” nationalistic messaging, and the role the Pevensies play by saving and ruling Narnia. Particularly given the popularity of the novel, past and present, these colonial elements warrant just as much attention as the religious aspects of the novel, and though Lewis states through technical terms that the *Chronicles* may not function as an allegory for Christianity, the pro-imperialist messaging within *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* may indeed leave room for a case to be made in further research that the text *is* an unintended imperialist allegory. Likewise, that Lewis was from Ireland, a country long colonized by England, yet spent the majority of his adult life in England, might lend additional insight into reading his work further through the lens of imperialism.

About Katarina Dulude

Katarina Dulude (she/they) is an American writer and photographer based in Glasgow. They graduated with an MLitt in Fantasy Literature from the University of Glasgow in 2023. She has three academic publications and her play, “The Wolf Sickness,” was recently workshopped by Tired Horses Theatre. Her research interests include neo-Victorian fantasy, the Gothic, queer and feminist studies, and children’s literature.

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