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Magic, Monsters, and Make-Believe Heroes: How Myth and Religion Shape Fantasy Culture

Saira Chhibber

Queen's University, Ontario, Canada, saira.chhibber@queensu.ca

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Magic, Monsters, and Make-Believe Heroes: How Myth and Religion Shape Fantasy Culture

Abstract

This is a book review of Douglas Cowan, *Magic, Monsters, and Make-Believe Heroes: How Myth and Religion Shape Fantasy Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2019).

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Author Notes

Saira Chhibber is a PhD candidate in the Cultural Studies program Queen's University. Her research examines Hindi language popular culture in relation to gender, nationalism and diaspora. She has taught courses in popular culture, film and television studies in the Department of Film and Media at Queen's University.

Cowan, Douglas E., *Magic, Monsters, and Make-Believe Heroes: How Myth and Religion Shape Fantasy Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2019).

Douglas E. Cowan's book *Magic, Monsters, and Make-Believe Heroes* (2019) examines the intersections of fantasy and religious narratives across a range of popular culture texts. A professor of Religious Studies, Cowan has written a series of books on religion and popular culture: *Sacred Terror: Religion and Horror on the Silver Screen* (2008), *Sacred Space: The Quest for Transcendence in Science Fiction Film and Television* (2010) and *America's Dark Theologian: The Religious Imagination of Stephen King* (2018). *Magic, Monsters, and Make-Believe Heroes* continues this series, although he is quick to identify that this text has less to do with religion than its three precursors. This book looks at the ways that fantasy culture reflects the intrinsic human need to find meaning through stories and how we use stories to construct our identities in relation to the world around us. Cowan examines a large collection of popular media including folklore, film, television, comics, and role-playing games (RPG). With the facility of someone who has a great deal of familiarity with the subjects he writes about, Cowan weaves seemingly disparate threads together to make a case for the relevance of fantasy narratives in popular culture. Cowan relates both personal anecdotes and scholarly material with easily accessible language. For scholars of religion and film this is perhaps an unconventional text given its emphasis on different media rather than a focus on film alone. However, the many examples Cowan provides do offer a useful conduit for understanding fantasy culture in relation to religion.

The book is comprised of nine chapters that take up: Dragons (chapter 1), fairy tale princesses (chapter 2), representations of witchcraft and magic (chapter 3), eternal children and eternal lives (chapter 4), warrior heroes in Eastern and Western contexts (chapters 5 and 6), warrior-heroines (chapter 7), live action role play or LARPing (chapter 8) and a conclusion that

focuses on the 1970s science fiction film *Zardoz* as an exemplar of the commonalities between religious tales and fantasy narratives (chapter 9). This book brings into conversation an almost dizzying amount of media texts (there are over 200 films and television shows referenced) and a brief glimpse at his mediography showcases the wide spectrum of works that are included. Cowan offers a vast survey of a number of critical approaches to the study of these texts and given how much material Cowan engages with, it is at times difficult to ascertain the specific theoretical frameworks the book employs. Each chapter draws from an assortment of scholars from different disciplines (Roland Barthes, Lubomir Dolezal, Emile Durkheim, Jack Zipes, to name just a few). A focus on narratological concerns presents the most consistent thread throughout the work, emphasizing the structure, themes, and functions of stories, especially within the fantasy genre.

Cowan begins his first chapter (“Here Be Dragons”) by addressing the difficult task of setting some parameters for understanding ‘fantasy’ as a genre. Drawing upon genres such as horror or sci-fi that have fairly well-established conventions, Cowan argues that fantasy is more difficult to pin down. Turning to Farah Mendlesohn’s work *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Cowan takes up her four-point framework for categorizing fantasy as portal quests, immersive, intrusive, or liminal in nature (15). Cowan’s nod to Mendlesohn seems fitting, given their shared taxonomic and narratological approach to analyzing a wide array of texts. Cowan sets out to use these materials in order to present his case for the commonalities between fantasy and religious narratives.

The book’s fourth chapter, “Between *Puer Aeternus* and *Vitam Aeternam*,” is a fascinating study of eternal children and eternal life that is organized around various iterations of Barrie’s *Peter Pan* and Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*. Cowan’s contention is that contemporary versions of Peter Pan and Alice have been refashioned as heroes’ journeys as per Joseph Campbell (86). In addition to discussing the different ways that these characters and their stories have appeared in

films, for example looking at representations of Pan from Disney's *Peter Pan* (1953) to Spielberg's *Hook* (1991), Cowan also introduces interesting new parallels between Peter Pan, Alice, and figures from contemporary films that would not readily come to mind in this regard. For instance, Cowan finds commonality between Pan and the young vampires in Joel Schumacher's film *The Lost Boys* (1987). After a brief description of the film, and a close examination of the first meeting between a teenager and the leader of the local teenage vampire gang, Cowan says "...aspects of this sequence reinvent the central elements of the classic Pan story: eating and flying.... In the same way the Darling children learn to fly and come to understand the make-believe nature of Pan's island, these actions represent Michael's initiation into the vampiric domain that underpins Schumacher's horrific rendering of Neverland" (77). This is a striking comparison, but it works, and connecting these seemingly disparate media texts is reflective of Cowan's knowledge of popular culture.

The book's eighth chapter "The Stuff of Legends" surveys participative immersive fantasy culture through the conduit of fantasy role play and how these are reflected in media like popular film. Cowan begins the chapter with a description of the film *The Knights of Badassdom* (2013) and its representation of LARPing (live action role playing) before moving to a brief comment on the importance of the table top role-playing game Dungeons and Dragons in Netflix's *Stranger Things* (2016-). In this chapter Cowan adds depth to the discussion of participative fantasy culture by drawing upon the work of journalist Lizzie Stark in researching LARPing in North America. Stark's work demonstrates that, far from being a fringe affair, LARP and other immersive fantasy culture are not the singular domain of children and the socially marginalized: participants in fact represent broad swathes of society (166). Adding to the discussion on immersive fantasy culture is Cowan's description of gaming in relation to streaming media, using the examples of actor Wil

Wheaton's science fiction RPG *Titansgrave: The Ashes of Valkana*, and the Austin TX store Outlaw Moon's Dungeons and Dragons campaign *A War in Scarlet*. These examples lay the groundwork for an interesting discussion with regard to the impacts that platforms like Twitch and even YouTube may have on fantasy culture and related fandom.

Chapter nine, entitled '...Happily Ever After?' draws the most heavily on film. Cowan's focus here is primarily on director John Boorman's 1974 cult film *Zardoz*. In this final chapter, Cowan uses film to demonstrate that stories are rarely about endings and that narrative resolutions are less important than the act of storytelling itself. The choice of media text here may seem odd given the film is somewhat obscure, but *Zardoz* is a fitting example of Cowan's point that the importance of stories is found less in tidy conclusions, and more in narrative's ability to shape belief, identity, and culture. In keeping with his method throughout this book, this chapter draws comparisons between a wide collection of sources, from the film to the Bible to Emile Durkheim. Cowan focuses almost explicitly on the film's plot and scholars of religion and film may find that this chapter lacks depth in terms of greater film analysis. Cowan uses *Zardoz* to point out similarities between religious and fantasy narratives, and he argues that both emerge from a shared impetus offering a paradigm for how we locate ourselves in society.

This book is an enjoyable read and a positive addition to the study of popular culture in relation to fantasy culture. However, there are a few difficulties that some may find with its structure and content. Foremost is that in providing a vast amount of material there is a lack of depth in terms of analyzing these works, especially with regard to religion. That is not to say that discussions in relation to fantasy culture and religion do not occur in the book, but there could be deeper engagement with religion throughout. For example, the book's third chapter, "Imagining Magic," contains a sub-section titled 'Magic and Religion: A Brief but Necessary Side-Quest' that

takes the reader from sociology to Roman Catholic theology. This chapter also contains a section entitled ‘Resisting Magic: “Let Me Say Something About Harry Potter”’ that features an overview of some of the conservative Christian backlash against J.K. Rowling’s books. The book also includes a section that briefly addresses Buddhism in relation to representations of martial arts in chapter five, “The Mythic Hero: East.” Offering examples of creation myths relative to martial arts from various parts of Asia, from the South Indian *Kalaripayattu* (a divine gift of Vishnu) to the Japanese martial arts (gifted by mountain goblins called *Tengu*). Turning to the creation myths of Shaolin Kung Fu, Cowan recounts the popular tale of the Indian Buddhist monk Bodhidharma who travelled to China c. the 6th century. In the version of this tale that Cowan shares, the monk (also known as Da Mo), taught the Chinese monks that he was visiting a series of exercises to improve their health that eventually developed into Kung Fu. While these references to religion offer interesting glimpses of the relationships between stories and culture, expanding upon religious themes throughout the various chapters of the book would have been a welcome addition. For instance, it would be interesting to hear about potential connections between religion, fantasy, and immersive participatory culture in the chapters that take up gaming.

In many of the book’s chapters, an intended focus on particular media texts comes close to being overwhelmed by digressions to other materials. For instance, the second chapter “Once Upon a Time,” with its focus on intrusive fantasy and fairy tales, takes up examples from television (*Grimm* and *Once Upon a Time*), comics (Bill Willingham’s *Fables*), children’s/young adult fiction (Brandon Mull’s *Fablehaven* and Rick Riordan’s *Percy Jackson* series) for the first half of the chapter before finally settling on films in the second half. In the midst of these examples, Cowan frames Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* in contrast to Jonathan Z. Smith’s essay “In Comparison a Magic Dwells” before taking up Smith’s framework to look at

how princess stories in fairy tales are retold in film. The information that Cowan includes is valuable and informative, however in using so many sources the material feels rushed within the scope of a single chapter.

This is an ambitious project that brings together a number of different media texts with scholarship from many disciplines. Cowan clearly has a vast breadth of knowledge with regard to diverse popular cultures and this is easily discerned through the facility with which he moves from folktales to films to the contexts of contemporary RPGs. This book offers an intriguing intervention with regard to the question of why we find ourselves drawn to similar stories across cultures and creative disciplines. Differing themes across chapters are connected by the ideas of mythic journeys and mythic visions. Cowan's conversational tone makes concepts such as religion, myth, folklore, narratology, gaming studies and media approachable to undergraduates and fans of popular culture alike. *Magic, Monsters, and Make-Believe Heroes* would be a great textbook for undergraduates studying popular culture, media studies, or game studies.