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Searching for the fantastic: an Australian case

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Abstract: Fantasy is the ability of the imagination to visualize and textualize non-existent worlds as real. It is an escape to an imaginary present or past, but often expresses direct criticism of the real world or moral issues. The relation between fantasy literature and myth, the fairytale, and legends is highly complex. Is fantasy and the fantastic just the strange and unknown, and what is its purpose? Is it only imaginary worlds that can be defined as such and what is the role of the reader/listener in interpreting these texts as fantasy? This article will discuss what we mean by fantasy literature in relation to a recent collection of novellas, *Legends of Australian Fantasy*, their use of myth and its literary expression.

Key words: fantasy, Australia, myth, the fantastic.

Writers of the fantasy and the fantastic deal with other worlds, about people and places that do not exist and frequently have a subtext expressing critique of contemporary issues and attitudes. Adult fantasies such as George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) and Richard Adams' *Watership Down* (1972) are examples of this. Fantasy has always been closely linked to fairytales, myth and legend, and the creation of utopian and dystopian worlds. Fantasy texts are thus not a contemporary phenomenon but have been written for over 200 years with differing foci, as Sandner writes:

Fantastic literature emerges as a site for critical debate in the eighteenth century, partly as a result of an increasing disbelief in but continued fascination with the supernatural, partly as a negative by-product of arguments for the realistic novel and, perhaps most importantly, as a vital component of the emergent discourse of the sublime. (2004: 6)

Since the eighteenth century fantasy texts have developed to cover a vast range of aspects of life. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* fantasy is “any kind of fictional work that is not primarily devoted to realistic representation of the

known world.” This, of course, covers several genres but one fundamental feature of fantasy texts is an imagined world where magic plays an important role. Magic has its own code and redefines things in the world it writes of, disrupting time, resulting in a realistic framework with unrealistic events and people. *The Bedford Glossary*, quoting Yeats’s *A Vision* as an example, defines fantasy as the power to create out of nothing and therefore closely linked to myth — it is a mythopoeic force as a framework for a literary work (1997: 231). A text of fantasy has certain characteristic features: another world, and impossible, mysterious, supernatural primary events are central, as well as a willingness to reject the external world of realism and believe in the portrayal of the other world and its happenings. Stereotypical characters rather than individuals, and intertextuality, questions of style, tropes, language and theme are all significant elements in fantasy writing. The ending is often contrived thus dragging us in on a round of implausible events.

More than any other genre fantasy literature and films open up for various interpretations. The role of the reader is central in determining theme and social codes in fantasy texts — the known which is made unknown, recognizable yet strange — since fantasy plays on the imagination of the reader and his/her ability to visualize the setting, and thus feel involved in what is happening. In James and Mendlesohn it is suggested that there are “four distinct modes of fantasy ... the portal quest, (enters the world), the immersive (is part of the fantasy world), the intrusion (the fantastic breaks into the primary world) and the liminal (magic might or might not happen)” (2012: 2). A recipe for a fantasy story would go something like this: Take a mediaeval world, a problem or prophecy, one ordinary, naïve hero/ine, and a very evil villain with a blind spot. Add mythological creatures and nonhumans, and a wise old advisor to resolve the situation (see Attebery 1992: 10).

As Attebery points out, “Fantasy depends on mimesis for its effectiveness” (1992: 4). Our infant sense of wonder is engendered by fantasy. We never really lose this, as any parent reading to children notices — the sense that in fantasy characters can do anything. Man is by nature curious, and fairytales satisfy the role of curiosity in people of all ages, as well as the imagination of childhood, leading to what Coleridge called “the willing suspension of disbelief that constitutes poetic faith.” In “The Fantastic Imagination” (1890) George MacDonald wrote that his tales are not for children “but for the childlike, whether of five, or fifty, or seventy-five” (cited in Sandner 2004: 67), a view also held by Walter Scott in “On the Supernatural in Fictitious Composition” where he warns against overuse of the fantastic: “The marvellous, more than any other attribute of fictitious narrative, loses its effect by being brought too much into view. The imagination of the reader is to be excited if possible, without being gratified” (cited in Sandner 2004: 53). One can ask whether this is what happens in some of the stories in *Legends*, for example Garth Nix’s *To Hold The Bridge: An Old Kingdom Story* which is about proving one’s worth as a soldier — an initiation story. The system in the Old Kingdom is hierarchical, and in this world of Charter Magic the protagonist is finally successful. By doing so he is accepted and guaranteed a life without problems. In several of the novellas in this collection the magic/fantastic element is either too repetitive or too well-known to inspire the reader’s imagination. Reading these novellas I frequently felt that I had read the same story before — much of it presented nothing new or inventive. Although we can say that an essential feature of fantasy is its repetition of the known, to awake interest it needs, as Sandner and Le Guin have

pointed out, to have a different approach. The similarity of several of the novellas in this collection means the anthology as a whole lacks vibrancy.

We can ask whether the fantasy character appeals to our sense of our own other — a being we would like to be or not. Gaining a ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ may be problematic for the modern reader with his/her scepticism, since fantasy requires readers to accept as fact what is not in fact real, but also to play on their own actual and fictive experiences. The visualization of fantasy in the social media in today’s world bridges a gap to the real, so the viewer is deprived of the ability to imagine freely what the scene and setting and characters look like. This might explain the editors’ standpoint in *Legends of Australian Fantasy* — many of the novellas play into the hands of those brought up on Star Wars and other media rather than tales of old. In the introduction to his novella *The Spark (A Romance in Four Acts): A Tale of the Change* Sean Williams states his inspiration from Star Wars, clashes between magical worlds, and the misuse of power. The tale shows some semblance to the wicked Queen or stepmother of fairy stories, and the effects of jealousy, but the ‘tricks’ are very modern such as balls of fire and things and people that explode, so it reads as a combination of Star Wars effects and settings, combined with traditional fantasy tales from earlier periods, portraying imaginary people and worlds with human frailties and feelings.

The structure of the fantasy story has been the subject of much criticism. George Macdonald compared it to a sonata, with differing parts, each with their own characteristics, the problem, the path to solving it, and the final solution. Others, including Tolkien, have underscored the structure of fantasy as essentially that of the fairy story, and for Tolkien also the rhetoric of the same. Tolkien saw the fantastic as a function of language, so the use of rhetoric becomes central, including the use of coincidence, repetition, foreshadowing, and variation between everyday speech and archaic forms. Eric Rabkin comments on an archetypal language that follows certain rules. “One of the key distinguishing marks of the fantastic is that the perspectives enforced by the ground rules of the narrative world must be diametrically contradicted” (as when flowers talk) (Sandner 2004: 168-170). This to me is very evident in the texts in *Legends*, where the characters are given forms of speech inappropriate to the register of the rest of the text. Both the above critics, as others, do not make a clear distinction between fantasy and the fantastic apart from indicating that the fantastic has its basis in language rather than content, an issue for discussion I have chosen not to include in this article.

In her 1973 essay “From Elfland to Poughkeepsie” Ursula Le Guin insisted on the importance of style. She suggests that at one level fantasy is a game and therefore has affinity with dreams (cf. Freud), but at another level “[i]t is not antirational but pararational, not realistic, but surrealistic, a heightening of reality ... a different approach to reality” (cited in Sandner 2004: 145). Attebery seems to agree with Le Guin when he writes that “[a]s a way of filling in the empty fictional space, narrators refer the reader to the European fairy tale and romance tradition” [but] “borrowing a milieu from old stories is likely to result in settings that seem flimsy and flat, like cardboard stage sets” as many writers lack an extensive knowledge of the mediaeval and ancient world. (132-133). Le Guin, too, is critical of the amount of imitation in fantasy writing, and authors’ lack of linguistic skill, an essential prerequisite for making the reader believe that what they are reading is impossible, yet credible. As she points out “A fantasy is a journey. It is a journey into the subconscious mind, just as psychoanalysis is. Like

psychoanalysis, it can be dangerous, and *it will change you*” (153). But this change will only take place if we believe somehow in the story told. The difference between the folktale and the ambiguous tale of fantasy lies in the fact that in the folktale everything fits together in the end whereas in the ambiguous tale “we are left with two or more mutually contradictory patterns, like puzzle pieces that can fit together to make a triangle, a circle, a star, but with a gap somewhere in each design” (Sandner 2004: 24). Both myths and legends are based on group interaction, a collective unconscious, even a collective memory — but modern fantasy does not do this, it is more an escape to another world, often without closure. As Manlove has suggested, “modern fantasy tends to be far more self-conscious, ratiocinative, cultural, and descriptive than, say, the traditional fairy tale” (cited in Schlobin 1982: 26).

One of the issues when discussing fantasy is how far we should differentiate between that, Gothic writing, and science fiction texts. There is a general consensus among many critics that “fantasy is about the construction of the impossible, whereas science fiction may be about the unlikely” (James and Mendlesohn 2012: 1). Some of the novellas in this anthology have a strong science fiction element, the theme being more unlikely than impossible. This may be one of the problems raised by this anthology given its title of *Legends* since in other countries science fiction and fantasy are considered separate genres. It appears that in Australia, fantasy and science fiction are grouped together as regards encyclopaedia inclusions, and in the many awards and meetings for writers of these genres.¹

I am aware that many critics would distinguish clearly between the Gothic and fantasy, but in many texts the two overlap. Gothic writing appeared in the late eighteenth century/early nineteenth century as seen in the works of Ann Radcliffe such as *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), and Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), the same period that saw the first publication of Grimm’s fairy tales in 1812. The Gothic mode provided the language and setting, and discursive structures to represent the unrepresentable as Turcotte says (2005: 3). In my opinion Gothic writing plays on the reader’s sense of the abnormal and uncanny, also in Freudian terms as in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*; in other words it is read in relation to a possible realistic situation, whereas fantasy has free limits to indulge in imaginary worlds of people, and, in some literature, talking animals.

In the *Australian Literature Review* Rowena Cory Daniells writes on some of the reasons for the current popularity of the fantasy genre. She defines all such stories as “the exploration of the human condition” whether in ancient times, children’s literature, or contemporary fantasy. Further she posits it as an escape from modern life issues and “an antidote to cynicism” (online). Whilst I would agree with her, there is another aspect often overlooked by literary critics, especially in relation to contemporary society. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century we need to see contemporary fantasy literature against the background of Star Wars films, Ben 10, computer and digital games on which a whole generation has been brought up. The imaginary world is not just in the mind, but has been visualised by film directors and in TV programmes as well as in short videos in the social media to illustrate and advertise books, music etc. In a world where man has walked on the moon, built a space station to which astronauts can travel and live, the whole concept of escape to another unknown world is not as strange as for previous generations, as is well illustrated in the filmatization of *Lord of the Rings*, *Watership Down* and *The Hobbit*, (filmatisations which put a different slant

on the original texts), as well as *Avatar* and other similar films and TV series. This is one way of trying to understand the globalization of our world and disintegration of national identities, for as Jane Yolen has suggested in “Fabling to the Near Night” (2000) “Fantasy tales are as much *of* their time as *beyond* it“ (cited in Sandner 2004: 328).

The fantastic in Australia

In the literature being written in the late nineteenth century by Australian authors fantasy does not play any significant part, if at all. We see a prevalence of works of social realism focusing on the search for an Australian identity, and social issues of the time including women’s rights and heredity. Writers such as Catherine Helen Spence, Miles Franklin, the Henry Lawson stories and the creation of the concept of mateship dominate the literary scene. The colonial situation played a significant role at two levels. First, unlike other British colonies, there was no obvious mythology or folklore that could parallel or counteract that which the colonists brought with them. Secondly, authors tended to concentrate on explaining what the country was like and living conditions for the people there. At that time Australia was still seeking to find itself and its identity as a nation, with little or no room for imagined worlds of fantasy. Though the landscape might have been seen as having strong elements of the fantastic, daily life trying to survive in a harsh and strange environment did not make it a source for writing about imaginary worlds. Maybe fantasy is a luxury for an established literary audience or authorship.

It is primarily around the turn of the nineteenth/twentieth century that we find Australian texts that can be termed fantasy, though labelling them thus is highly controversial. In 1896 K. Langloh Parker published *Australian Legendary Tales* of “the legends of the Narran tribe, known among themselves as Noongahburrachs” (1998: x) with a very negative introduction by Andrew Lang. Parker saw this as a way of presenting Aboriginal tales for non-Aboriginal children and preserving these tales from a ‘dying race,’ though Lang’s introduction sees them as “a savage edition of the *Metamorphoses*, ...[which were] a very late and very artificial version of traditional tales as savage in origin as those of the Noongaburrah” (xv). Another text of the period that deals with the fantasy is G. Firth’s *The Last Lemurian* (1898) about reincarnation, lost races and cities in North Western Australia. The collection of Aboriginal tales by David Unaipon in the 1920s *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines* and the manner in which they were republished in the 1930s, the lack of recognition given to his work until late in the twentieth century, as well as political correctness, have also played a role in why Australian writers have been reluctant to use Indigenous legends in fantasy literature. Australian texts of fantasy written for children have, however, existed throughout the twentieth century, such as Patrick Wrightson’s *The Nargun and the Star* (1972) and the trilogy *The Ice is Coming* (1977) which draws on Aboriginal mythology.

In 2010 Jack Dann and Jonathan Strahan published *Legends of Australian Fantasy*, an anthology of novellas by the most prize-winning and applauded contemporary writers of fantasy in Australia and who also have a good following abroad. Several of the authors have also written fantasy series, and some of the texts are related directly or indirectly to those. These stories cover a wide range, from the more traditional quest romance to a

dark world of evil in an unresolved unhappy ending. They portray worlds that are not of today, but although bearing strong resemblances to the world of mediaeval literature they are quasi-mediaeval, especially those by Garth Nix, Ian Irvine and Kim Wilkins. Those by Isobelle Carmody, Jennifer Fallon and Trudi Canavan deal with magic and magical persons, others with conflicts between religions, as that by D.M. Cornish, and more than one has a strong Irish folklore background. The relation of these novellas to Australia is ambiguous, and raises a question of whether fantasy can be national, or is it always universal, especially in setting. Most of the authors in *Legends of Australian Fantasy* have also written for children, though these novellas are admittedly written more for adults given themes such as seduction, and the selling of body parts.

In their introduction Dann and Strahan state that epic fantasy literature in Australia first became a phenomenon in the 1980s. They distinguish between epic fantasy stories and ‘ordinary’ fantasy stories for children: “It took until 1995 for Australia to produce its first bona fide bestselling fantasy writer. That year Sara Douglas’s *Battle Axes* came out.” She was the first Australian author to be signed to the HarperCollins Fantasy list (x). The editors of this collection raise a problematic issue by using such a narrow definition of fantasy, linking it to epic works such as *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*. They suggest that Donald Wolheim’s unauthorized publication of the paperback edition of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* in 1964 in America marked a watershed in adult reader’s response to what they term “secondary-world fantasy” — a view British readers of fantasy literature would contest. Further they maintain that Tolkien “became the first-ever fantasy bestseller” (ix) — again a debatable view, given that authors such as H.G. Wells and C.S. Lewis had already published tales of fantasy, and the fact that Tolkien was first published in the mid-1950s. Since C.S. Lewis and Tolkien were good friends it is not surprising that they published fantasy tales around the same time.

Though it might be tempting to discuss these novellas in relation to the series the authors are known for, especially since many, such as Jennifer Fallon and Garth Nix, have written several series, I have chosen in this article to discuss them as independent pieces of fantasy prose not linked to the other books and not interpreted as part of a larger scheme. Looking at how these novellas and the authors’ own afterwords fit into the genre ‘fantasy’ will elucidate at least some aspects of fantasy written by Australians.

Folklore and myth as setting in Australian fantasy stories

As mentioned earlier there is a certain tradition in modern fantasy, following Tolkien, to set the story in a quasi-mediaeval setting. This was Tolkien’s scholarly world, the world of Beowulf, and he had mastery of this in a way others do not. In this anthology Irish folklore is one of the settings both Juliet Marillier and Cecilia Dart-Thornton draw on. In an interview Juliet Marillier admits that her “novels are a blend of folkloric fantasy, history, romance and family saga”, and says she sees her books as appealing “not only to fantasy readers, but to readers of historical romance who like Celtic settings and a touch of folklore magic” (online). When asked whether she creates the worlds herself Marillier replied:

I have used traditional stories a few times, though rewritten in my own words, but more often I have made up new stories in the mode of folklore. It’s not difficult for me to find appropriate stories or to write new ones, because I love folklore, mythology and fairytales and read them all the time. I’ve been doing

that since I was a very small girl! I do a lot of research for all my novels ... [but] I don't claim any great historical authenticity for the Sevenwaters books. (online interview)

Here she touches on a seminal issue in fantasy, and a closer look at a couple of the novellas will throw some light on how folklore and myth are used. Juliet Marillier's *'TwiXt Firelight and Water: A Tale of Sevenwaters* is a good illustration of the use of folklore, but also of the quasi world it evokes. In the afterword Marillier says it answers some of the questions she is frequently asked about the *Sevenwaters* series that covers three generations; what happened to Padriac and "What exactly is Faicha?" Told by a first person narrator, though two different people, this is a two-part story, the first on the subject of intermarriage between worlds and the treatment of children by their sorceress mother (the wicked stepmother trope); the second provides the fairytale element and the solution to the story when Aisha saves Conri/Faicha, the raven, by marrying him.

Central throughout this story is a link between humans and people of the other world. The story opens at a meeting of druids with a discussion and description of the various groups who live on the island — humans being the last ones to come — and raises the question of whether leprechauns and other Irish folklore creatures also count as inhabitants. One of the main themes is, thus, a classic of folklore: what happens when humans and people of the underworld and our world marry, to which the reply is "The bravest heroes and the darkest villains are oft products of such unsanctioned pairings" (*Legends* 83). Conri and his brother Ciarán have a human father and a mother who has magical powers, and alternate between living in "the Otherworld" and the human world (83). Since they are half-human they will never grow old, and have magical powers of persuasion as Conri says,

like many folk of mixed heritage, I had the ability to turn the minds of human folk one way or another — charm, one might call it, though not a charm in the sense of a spell, more a gift for choosing the right tone, the right words, the right look of the eyes to persuade a person to a certain way of thinking. (89)

The two brothers represent different aspects of the half-human, Conri's music is magic, and Ciarán can work magic by singing to lure "a fox out of the bracken to lie down by him" (86). So far the story is typical of one kind of fantasy, which is set in a known world. It then moves to fairytale mode with a traditional tragic love element when Conri falls in love with a human, Lóch, and Conri's wicked sorceress mother turns him into a raven with a man's mind, a state he will remain in for fifteen years, but only as long as no one calls him by name, in which case he will remain a raven until a woman agrees to marry him despite the fact he is a raven. There are several versions of this theme in folklore, the prince/lover turned into a bird or animal and only redeemed by love.

Conri is finally saved by Aisha (Padriac's daughter) who is her father's daughter in the metaphorical meaning of the word, and travels from Galicia to Sevenwaters, which is not far north of Dublin, to find her family. The journey through the dark forest where she meets Ciarán the raven, Faicha néé Conri, and where the eldritch people have made their homes is traditional in fairytales. Ciarán tells the story of Faicha which "begins between firelight and water" (119), the issue being whether Aisha will release him from the spell by agreeing to marry him as a raven. In the afterword Marillier says the title of

the story comes from a folksong “The Tinkerman’s Daughter” (*Legends*130). This song was written by Mickey MacConnell about Redheaded Ann, a tinker’s daughter who is sold to a farmer who first sees her “twixt firelight and water.”

This tale is traditional in theme and structure and has a happy ending. As a modern fantasy it links a real world of Old Ireland to a world of the imagination, a tone which is very prevalent in old Irish folklore — people who were half-human and half-elf. The at times highly poetic descriptions of nature which form the backdrop for the story heighten the feeling of being in another world, and stylistically an effective alternation between tenses (past and present) and the viewpoints of Conri and Aisha add fluidity. If we use James and Mendlesohn’s categories of fantasy then this novella is a combination of the immersive, that is part of a fantasy world, but also the intrusive in that fantasy becomes a part of the primary world.

Another writer in this collection who has a similar approach in her use of folklore is Cecilia Dart-Thornton, the author of the Bitterbynde series. The author says she wrote this story to answer some of the emails she received about what happened to some of her characters in the Bitterbynde stories. *The Enchanted: A Tale of Erith* supposedly taking place in the winter of 1038, has a Celtic setting and includes some Shetland folklore. In the afterword Dart-Thornton says “it was a joy to return to that fantastic yet familiar world” (545). She also says that the interpolated story of Katherine Fordyce is taken from *Country Folklore* Vol. III. Playing on the known, it is reminiscent of Celtic stories and legends where the underworld has trows (from Shetland and Orkney folklore, a miniature version of the Norwegian troll and more human)ⁱⁱ and wights,ⁱⁱⁱ shag winds, and leprechaun-like figures, such as Thrimby. The country estate “Kelmescott Hall is, of course, titled in honour of William Morris” (545).

In my opinion this story is not a fantasy in the critically assessed meaning of the term, but rather a classic tale, reminiscent of Jane Austen and the Victorian mode. Both the setting — where the text opens with Mazarine, a young orphaned girl with a fortune, looking out from large country house across a large parkland with a delightful and poetic description of the view and the room — and the characters, the absent and cruel father who partially disowns his son, and who is Mazarine’s guardian, are in classic mode. In addition we learn that Mazarine has been brought up with tales of eldritch creatures. The love story between Mazarine and Hawksmoor and the interventions of the guardian, which result in a challenge to a duel, are conventional and not part of any fantasy genre.

The fantasy element lies in comments on local superstitions here and in other parts of *Erith*, and the many references to strange beings of folklore: “malicious being[s] such as the Bocan or the dreadful waterhorses, or the emaciated drowners with weed-green hair, such as Peg Fowler or Jenny Greenteeth or the Fideal...” (454), and the fuathan (a malevolent Highland Gaelic mythological water spirit) who tries to kill the King, whom Hawksmoor saves. Creatures such as the fuathan are simply those superstitious creatures whom legend and folk belief have made up to account for incomprehensible and supernatural events. A central character and the pivot of the solution to all problems is Thrimby, a reclusive servant who loves to make up verses and jingles and who speaks in an old dialectical manner, for example: “We knowed it would come off by end o’ day” (447) in response to the fact that a wheel has come off the earl’s coach. Thrimby is reminiscent of the little people of Irish folklore who, like him, clean houses at night

and are hardly seen during the day, a creature which has its parallel in the “nisse” in Nordic mythology. “Mazarine was almost certain he was no mortal creature, but a wight of eldritch, a beneficent domestic brownie” (448). Another device used to add a fantasy element is the naming for feast days and months, for example New Year is the Midwinter Imbrol Festival.

Style is a fundamental criterion for that which makes a text fantasy, the creation of another world with other language and settings than those in everyday use. Le Guin comments on common faults of style in fantasy texts such as “archaicizing” (cited in Sandner 2004: 149) meaning the use of archaic words as a symbol of fantasy without the prior in-depth knowledge of how, for example, Elizabethan language was actually used. The use of forms such as ‘thee’ and ‘thou’ does not make the language archaic, rather fake artificial. This type of language is evident in Dart-Thornton’s novella where she enhances the setting by using deliberately old-fashioned forms of language, for example: “On mornings when he lay abed, inconvenienced by overindulgence” (465), and the earl is referred to as “My sire” (466). And typical of Thrimby are many statements such as this:

“‘Tis true enough that ye be not the jealous kind, young master, As blind, deaf and dumb as a mole wearing ear-muffs mayhap; as self effacin’ as a snowman jumping into a frying pan, maybe, but not the jealous kind. As sacrificial as a worm wot offers itself to a blackbird to save other worms ...’” (473)

Is this the language of fantasy?

Dart-Thornton’s novella works at two levels and as such is typical of one kind of fantasy literature, one might say the intrusive. Fantasy is not the dominant element in the story as the major theme is the love story, which follows a classic pattern of misunderstandings, complications and final resolution. The fantasy element is found in the interweaving of folklore beings with magical powers who demand their payment, and yet can be thwarted by their own, that is by Thrimby. It is not coincidental that Dart-Thornton says in an interview that she has an interest in folklore, oral and rural, and was influenced by Tolkien, but also the Scottish writer George MacDonald, E. Nesbit and the Irish musicians The Chieftains.^{iv} She wanted to create her own world like Tolkien’s Middle Earth. Dart-Thornton has embraced another culture to tell her story/ies “I have, and I’ve done that from outside that culture which gives it another perspective, I suppose. Why I chose that was because I was brought up in quite an anglophile household where ‘British was best’ and that has pervaded me. That has been my cultural influence from as far back as I remember” (*Legends* 14) Is then her novella really a legend of Australian fantasy as the title of the volume suggests?

Other Worlds and Magic

Critical theories such as magic realism and the carnivalesque are useful tools in the analysis and discussion of fantasy texts, since Magic and magical worlds have always been key tropes in fantasy writing. As Yolen writes: “magic realism fantasies explore the inexplicable linking beneath the surface” (MacRae 1998: 172-3). She too links

contemporary fantasy to role-playing games on social media, where one moves from a primary to a secondary world. In this anthology two of the stories have magic as their theme. *The Mad Apprentice: A Black Magician Story* by Trudi Canavan, a novella told from the sister's perspective, is about loyalty, the wrongful use of power, and Black magic. The Magician's Guild and the inability to understand reality are central.

Magic is a key concept in Jenifer Fallon's highly topical text, *The Magic Word*. The major theme is the end of worlds, not just one, but several, old and new, because the Creator has tired of them. All these worlds speak the same language because they have the same Creator. The old worlds are breaking down: "That's because ye are the old worlds. The Creator is done with ye. ... The old worlds will fade into nothingness as the Creator forgets all about ye" (426). As Dick Provin says "Don't you ever get the feeling you're just marking time? That nothing in your world is progressing the way it should?" (400) They are in a Limbo where the separate worlds are all mixed up, symbolised by the fact that Hythria's baby never seems to be born — she has been pregnant for nine years (402): "we're waiting for you to *deliver* my precious Hythrun heir before we travel again" (390) to which Hythria replies "I am damn sure I should have given birth ages ago" (405). However, these worlds are far from magical in the ordinary sense of the word as we never really get to know what they are like, just their existence.

Fantasy elements in this story are the fact that people, for example Provin, cannot be killed and always comes back to life in any world other than their own, The explosions which happen at every key moment in the characters' attempts to get through the veil (mist and fog) are symbolic of the confusion in our world and uncertainty as to what we want for it. These explosions throw Adrina into abysses where she wakes in various contexts and out of which legendary figures emerge, such as Brakandaran and the Demon-Child, who on one occasion comes back with a little man who says he is "ye worst nightmare!" (425). He is one of the Lairds of Leipreachán, and might be able to help them to find the Creator — a woman. The author also indicates that many of these adventures may only be a dream.

Known for her complex characters and her concern with other worlds, Fallon's use of a typical fairytale structure of the repetition of part of the opening of the original chapter is effective. However, the narrative device of the High Princess of Hythria sprinkling crumbs for a little brown bird, then turning to her husband, Damin, who is reading a scroll when a servant enters asking someone to talk to the prisoner, is too commonplace to excite any 'willing suspension of belief.' The second repeated pattern, falling into an abyss with, in each case, a different solution, has more elements of fantasy. The only solution to escaping from the world of Limbo is to go through the veil, and to know the magic word (389-426) which is "sequel" (443). However, they do not know what to do with this word so closure is ambiguous. This novella is a good example of the fragmented form of fantasy since it includes elements of transcendence and the uncanny (see Sandner 2004: 11).

This story with its reliance on repetition lacks the structural progression we normally expect in a fantasy. What then makes this novella a legend of fantasy — the existence of other worlds and the use of leprechauns and helicopter crashes from another world — a sort of combination of folklore and Star Wars ideas? The introduction of the two Americans, Cayal Lakesh (Dorothy) and Declan Hawkes (Rodent), also called Tide Lords, who, flying over the Pacific, have crash-landed their helicopter (seen as a

metallic beast) in these strange other worlds, could be symbolic of the West invading the rest, but also the wish all have to regain their own world. The text can be interpreted as a comment on contemporary globalization, and the idea that in many ways we live on and in different worlds (if we include space travel), but have a sense of belonging that is common. As such this text is social fantasy used to comment on current issues and the uncertainties associated with them. The author expresses her own uncertainty about the meaning of her texts when she says in the afterword in response to “the countless emails asking me what happens to the characters in my books after they end, ... : *when I know that, I’ll write the sequel*” (443) (emphasis in the original).

Another story that comments on the contemporary world is *The Dark Road: An Obernewtyn Story* by Isobelle Carmody. Part of the Obernewtyn series, it tells of how Hannah and her mother come from Antipoda to Uropa and the way paranormality affects their lives. Again strange unknown worlds and special powers are given to or held by individuals. As the author points out her writing is an exploration of every nook and cranny of the imagined world. Today people are continually searching for something that they never find, and we can ask whether the author in this novella is suggesting that by going back to our roots we can discover the future.

Horror and Gothic elements

The link between fantasy and the Gothic is seen again in modern epics which, when filmed, rely heavily on the element of horror in the Gothic world. It is interesting, for example, that a New Zealand landscape was felt most appropriate to represent Tolkien’s world. In this anthology *The Corser’s Hinge: A Lamplighter’s Tale* by D. M. Cornish has several Gothic horror elements. It is a traditional story of rescuing the damsel in distress, in this case the rescue of Viola Grey by Sprawle, Wells and the two sisters, who are portrayed as women warriors, fighting valiantly against the fictlers who were worshippers of the false god Sucoth, and who also engaged in human sacrifice. The story ends after a long and intricate path of traditional fairytale obstacles, dangers faced, and descriptions of rooms such as this:

On the right of the door stood a monumental image carven in swartstone, yet another seven-mouths monstrosity formed with unnerving clarity, its oddly crooked arm holding aloft a tiny, clearly struggling figure dangled over a hungrily waiting maw. (311)

But the ending has a clever twist. A distinctly Gothic element is added to the tale as the person asked to return Viola to her family is Bunting, a corser, (someone who deals with corpses or bodyparts,) who has standing orders for body parts, often obtained through robbing graves. He has at present an order for

1 of the female kind, a child of elder years, scarce beddened.

And here she is lying in his cart, asleep — the agonising choice and final decision are classic Gothic. Should he adhere to his ethical code (the Hinge) or not? This novella does not really portray a fantasy underworld, but has like Fallon’s *The Magic Word*

elements of the uncanny, as well as religious differences, issues of disability, and magical elements. Closure is, however, unsolved and ambiguous.

Conflicts of faith or religion are central in two other novellas in *Legends of Australian Fantasy*. *Tribute to Hell: A Tale of the Tainted Realm* by Ian Irvine, which deals with the conflict between religions and the punishment for sin. This text has many classic aspects of fantasy including mediaeval features such as the search for the Covenant, a casket, and false trails, and where the Abbess and the daughter of the Devil are central figures. The conflict between two faiths is also a theme in Kim Wilkins' *Crown of Rowan: A Tale of Thyrslund*, set in Anglo-Saxon England about the eighth century, as well as being yet another fantasy text where women play a central role, this time five sisters. Ash has visions, Bluebell is the woman warrior, and the story portrays the duties of a king's daughter. Wilkins says, "the backdrop is meant to be vast and epic; but the stories are meant to be intimate, human, and draw very close to the five sisters at their centre" (204).

But there is one novella that I find difficult to classify in any manner as fantasy. John Birmingham's *A Captain of the Gate* is, he says, an alternative WW2 tale. Can there be such a thing as a fantasy about a real event? Much of the text is so close to several factual details that this critic has difficulty in accepting its inclusion in an anthology of legends. It raises the issue of to what extent we can take modern history, or for that matter history in general, and turn it into fantasy. Critics are increasingly querying the veracity of historical accounts and where we draw the line between how much of what we read is history and how much of it is some form of fantasy, imagined by the author as real.

Conclusion

These are only some of the novellas in *Legends*, but all the texts have their elements of fantasy, some more so than others, but their lack of an Australian context and reliance on a heritage elsewhere may leave reader expectancy disappointed. The reason for calling them legends of Australian fantasy seems to be largely because they are linked to fantasy series such as *Sevenwaters*, *Obernewtyn*, *Black Magician* and *the Old Kingdom* by the same Australian authors. As the editors comment these authors are "Australia's own legends of fantasy" (2010: xi). Are they indicating that the authors are legendary? How much more interesting would these novellas have been for non-Australian readers had they added an element of the exotic and strange, of Pacific legends and myths as background, and some semblance of an Australian topography as setting.

Australian fantasy stories could have been taken to their culture, which is what European literature has done down through the ages. The setting has been recognizable as something known, such as the boarding school background for *Harry Potter*, yet transported to a fantasy world, or else things often feared, such as the forest on a dark night. Fantasy has played on this fear. We can ask why the Australians are still in the twenty-first century taking their cue from a British literary imaginative tradition instead of creating a fantasy of their own; and whether the use of the European heritage is the expression of a new kind of 'cultural cringe.' The answer may in part lie in the history

of the portrayal of Aborigines in earlier literature as monstrous, following Darwinian theories of the species, nineteenth century ideas of the savage and the black man, and Australia as 'down under' — the underworld.

Schlobin postulates "fantasy lures its followers into an examination of their own natures, the seminal truths of their existences, and an extension of the frontiers of their futures" (1982: xx)? If we accept this then we could interpret these novellas as commentaries on a state of colonialism, on contemporary global society, marking an escape to a world where good still triumphs over evil, but where the author's imagination can have unlimited scope.

In conclusion there is one relevant, but problematic question I should like to raise: to what extent can Indigenous texts be seen as fantasy? Maori writers such as Patricia Grace and Witi Ihimaera have, for example, incorporated myth and legend in several of their texts, often giving them a contemporary twist. The question is whether the incorporation of myth and legend makes a text one of fantasy. If we define fantasy as the power of the imagination to find ways of describing cultural phenomena and practice without stating it specifically and clearly, then Indigenous texts can also be classified in the fantasy genre. Oodgeroo's *Stories from the Old and New Dreamtime* raises some interesting questions about the use of myth. Here she relates some traditional tales that have a moral purpose, and then writes new stories in Aboriginal manner for the present 'Dreaming.' Mudrooroo's use of vampires in his trilogy *The Undying, Underground and The Promised Land* moves in the land of fantasy, but with strong Gothic elements. George/Dingo is an in-between figure, a hybrid, at times human, at times his Dreaming self, much as the wights and trows of European folklore. Following Fanon's critical approach Turcotte has suggested that the vampire is used as a tool for decolonization, so these texts would also have a political connotation.

Although I am aware that there is a question of political correctness, two hundred years after colonization the potential is there for Australian fantasy writers to use their national heritage, rather than relying on the European one, not just for entertaining reading, but also for making political statements as has also been one of the functions of fantasy writing in earlier times. Indigenous myths and legends, also in the European tradition, are not in themselves fantasy but ways of explaining phenomena in the world. It should therefore be possible to draw on some aspects of Indigenous myths and legends without denigrating their value to those for whom it is part of their tribal and/or religious belief. As for topography the vast continent of Australia surely can provide unlimited settings for fantasy. Adult fantasy demands an adult approach and it is time fantasy left the world of children and returned, as in the nineteenth century, to critique of political and social aims.

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ⁱ A quick survey of calls for papers, announcements for meetings on the web can verify this statement.

ⁱⁱ See *Folklore Myths and Legends of Britain*, London: Reader's Digest Association, 1977. 472.

ⁱⁱⁱ In its original usage the word *wight* described a living human being. More recently, the word has been used within the fantasy genre of literature to describe undead or wraith-like creatures: corpses with a part of their decayed soul still in residence, often draining life from their victims. (Wikipedia) In this story it is the wraith-like creature which is used.

^{iv} See www.darthorton.com Dart-Thornton speaking about her work and inspiration on youtube.com December 2009. (accessed 2015)