

## Enchanted and Erudite

**Marina Warner. 2012. *Stranger Magic: Charmed States & the Arabian Nights*. London: Vintage, 540 pp. ISBN 978-0-099-43769-7**

Using nothing but superlatives to describe the works of Marina Warner has by now become an almost automatic response from reviewers and readers alike. The renowned novelist, critic, cultural historian, university professor and CBE has, in a sense, spoiled us with her intellectually and – given the numerous colour plates and illustrations – visually stimulating, yet accessible and highly readable books, covering a wide range of topics such as the Virgin Mary (*Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, 1976), fairy tales and nursery rhymes (*From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, 1994), representations of fear (*No Go the Bogeyman: Scaring, Lulling, and Making Mock*, 1998), etc.

*Stranger Magic* (2012), Warner's most recent publication, is an extensive study of *Alf Layla wa-Layla* or the *Arabian Nights* (also known as the *Arabian Nights' Entertainment*, *Tales of a Thousand and One Nights*, or simply the *Nights*), one of the most famous and perhaps most mysterious collections of tales. The supposed mystery of this (as Warner calls it) "polyvocal anthology of world myths, fables and fairy tales" (8) stems to a large extent from its diversity and – for lack of a better term – elusiveness. Not only is the time and place of origin of the *Nights* unknown, but both the tales and the collection seem to lack a stable, definitive shape, existing in a state of flux, in innumerable versions, translations and adaptations.

The main issue that prompted Warner to study the *Arabian Nights* was the fact that the collection was first presented to European audiences in "the most contradictory possible time" (20): the period of Enlightenment. French translations by Antoine Galland (1704–17; also the first printed versions of the collection) were immensely successful, giving rise to an 'oriental craze' – a fascination with everything Arabic, fabulous and magical. How and why, Warner wonders, did an age obsessed with reason, logic and rationality embrace a collection of decidedly irrational and wondrous tales? Escapism may seem like an obvious answer, but it does not satisfy the author, who studiously uncovers layer after layer of stories, influences and narrative traditions, spinning – much like Shahrazad (Warner adopts the modern transliteration) – her own complex, rich and intriguing tale.

The mention of Shahrazad here is no coincidence: in many ways, *Stranger Magic* takes on the attributes of the subject of its study. Not only is the narrative itself layered, intertwined and rich in detail, it also includes 'tales-within-tales': Warner's own retellings of fifteen (less known) tales from the *Nights*. If the *Arabian Nights* are characterized by diversity and plenitude, so is Warner's book: the erudite author uses the 'frame narrative' of a scholarly study of the *Nights* to include analyses, musings and discussions of a wide range of topics, from Dante to Darth Vader; from the talismanic value of money to the living quarters of Mikhail Bulgakov; from dervishes and talking toys to stage machinery and special effects on film. The discourse itself is enchanting and ever-changing, at times taking on an objective, scholarly note, at times relating childhood memories and personal

experiences in a more reflective and subjective fashion. The book is a proverbial cave of wonders, filled with stimulating and interesting arguments, well-researched data and even curiosities such as the fourteenth-century legal treatise discussing marriage between humans and jinn.

In addition to inspiring delight and wonder, the *Nights* have also, to an extent, fostered prejudice and promoted stereotypes about the so-called Orient. Namely, numerous readers and translators (most notoriously Edward Lane) believed the *Nights* were a mirror image of the Arab world (the aforementioned Lane added ethnographic annotations to his nineteenth-century translation). On the other hand, the tales in the collection embodied the West's romantic notion of 'Araby' as the exotic and magical site of exquisite pleasures. Such views have often been criticised, perhaps most severely (and certainly most famously) by Edward Said, whose postcolonial criticism constitutes one of the theoretical cornerstones of Warner's book.

*Stranger Magic* is divided into five parts, complemented by the previously mentioned retellings of select tales from the *Arabian Nights*, an introduction and conclusion, an extensive bibliography, a glossary, more than 50 pages of notes, 25 five colour plates and numerous illustrations in the text. The first part of the book uses the enigmatic figure of Solomon to discuss two (perhaps most readily recognizable) motifs from the *Arabian Nights*: the jinn (Solomon as the master of jinn) and the flying carpet (in some traditions Solomon's means of transportation). Part two, "Dark Arts; Strange Gods" discusses dark, 'exotic' magicians and the tendency to ascribe forbidden, supernatural powers to strangers and outsiders in general (in the *Arabian Nights*, Egyptians are most often cast in the role of the 'Other'). Part three is dedicated to the study of what Warner terms the "thing-world of the *Arabian Nights*" (195). The tales in the collection are, claims Warner, essentially about property, artefacts and material objects (lamps, rugs, bottles and flasks, talismans and amulets, automatons...), which are often infused with supernatural abilities and/or human properties.

The final two parts of the book are dedicated to the afterlife of the *Nights* – the responses of writers and other artists to the book and its various media appropriations. Part four, "Oriental Masquerades", includes chapters dedicated to Anthony Hamilton, William Beckford and Goethe. Part five, "Flights of Reason", mostly deals with screen versions of tales from the *Arabian Nights* (especially the two versions of "The Thief of Bagdad" and the shadow films of the almost forgotten film-maker and puppeteer Lotte Reiniger) and the representation of magic on film in general. The chapter "Why Aladdin?" inquires into the appeal of this particular tale (which, though often regarded as one of the 'most Arab' in the collection, was probably penned by Galland himself), pointing to "multiplicity and mobility" (361) as the key to its success. The final chapter takes a look at the oriental rug which covered the famous couch on which Freud's patients would lie during their sessions. The choice of the rug is perhaps not accidental (after all, as Warner reminds us, "[n]othing was accidental for Freud in the psychopathology of everyday life" (411)), as both the *Arabian Nights* and psychoanalysis rely on storytelling (though unlike the *Nights* in which Shahrazad's tales eventually transform and heal her husband, in psychoanalysis it is the teller and not the listener who needs to be healed).

In her introduction, Warner honours Robert Irwin and his *Arabian Nights: A Companion* (1994), claiming that without his work her own book would not have been possible. There is little doubt that future generations of scholars will pay tribute to *Stranger Magic*, mentioning with equal admiration and gratitude how inspiring and indispensable they have found it.

Nada Kujundžić

## Playing as a Serious Task

**Cherie Allan. 2012. *Playing with Picturebooks: Postmodernism and the Postmodernesque*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan. 201 pp. ISBN 978-0-230-22786-6**

Cherie Allan's *Playing with Picturebooks: Postmodernism and the Postmodernesque* is a book in the *Critical Approaches to Children's Literature* series which publishes selected contemporary scholarship and criticism on children's and young adult literature, film and media texts. The aim of the series is to provide quality books that will stimulate further research of children's literature.

In her book, Allan deals with the ways in which postmodernism has influenced picturebooks. She discusses the recent shifts in this exciting genre and explains the coining of the term 'postmodernesque', in analogy with Mikhail Bakhtin's term 'carnavalesque'. She claims that, "[J]ust as elements of the carnivalesque were carried over into literature, postmodernesque picturebooks have emerged from the postmodern tradition and yet exhibit a sufficient shift in direction to warrant a separate designation" (24).

This study focuses in an innovative and resourceful way on the theoretical foundations needed to understand trends in recent picturebook production and on the modifications of the genre in general. The study is of high significance in the field of children's literature research and will benefit not only academics in the field of children's literature, but also teachers and students, whether to introduce them to the topic or to give a fresh perspective and encourage further debate.

Allan uses a wide range of internationally known picturebooks to support her argumentation. She also references plenty of well-known experts in the field, and their works. Has postmodernism improved the development of picturebooks, or has it made way for the consumerist lifestyle? Is postmodernism still influencing modern picturebooks, or have they gone beyond postmodernism, converting to the postmodernesque? These are some of the questions Cherie Allan asks in this book.

In the introduction, the author looks back at the origins of postmodernism, which has always been a subject of debate. The difficulty in understanding the term is largely due to the media using it overly lightly. The author proceeds by outlining the features of postmodernism. Picturebooks are described as "cultural texts which reflect the tenor of their times" (2) and, "with their dual codes of written and visual texts, are ideally located to appeal to a postmodern audience" (4). Towards the end of the introduction, Allan questions the appropriacy of the term 'post-postmodernism' used by some scholars to refer to new