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## Mythopoesis

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## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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### Abstract

Discusses the hard-to-define quality of mythopoeic fantasy.

### Additional Keywords

Fantasy—Sources; Fantasy—Techniques; Myth in literature; Sarah Beach; Patrick Wynne

# Mythopoesis

## A Column by Sarah Beach

### Myth

The word "myth" is a slippery thing, for the minute one tries to pin it down with a rational description, it either dries up or slides out of reach. That eminent compendium of definition, the Oxford English Dictionary gives the following entry for "myth":

A purely fictitious narrative usually involving supernatural persons, actions, or events, and embodying some popular idea concerning natural or historical phenomena.

Properly distinguished from allegory and from legend (which implies a nucleus fact) but often used vaguely to include any narrative having fictitious elements.

One's rational response to this definition is to agree, even while one's heart is dissatisfied. For those who follow a particular faith, it is even less successful, for "myth" of a sort is usually at the core of their faith: a supernatural person embodying and concerned with natural and historical phenomena. Our minds are trained to accept the idea that myths are "made up stories", but at some point our hearts quibble. Those whose religious beliefs are shaped by Judeo-Christian teachings are willing to accept the tales of the Greek myths as "made up," the "fictitious" becomes an unacceptable description; some feeling insists that there is truth in the myth, truth of some sort or another. This then is where the problems of defining and describing myth arise: myth is not aimed at the rational response, rather it is directed toward the non-rational (or emotional) and intuitive response to the world.

Northrop Frye in Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton University Press: 1973) gives this explanation:

If superior in kind both to other men and to the environment of other men, the hero is a divine being, and the story about him will be a myth in the common sense of a story about a god. (AC. p. 33)

The point is that myth is about something other than "mere" humanity. If mythic characters represent a human quality, they do it in a distilled and highly potent way, untainted by other qualities. The god Pan, for instance, in his ambivalent mischievous way, embodies that highly charged excitement which in its negative manifestation is called panic. A "mere human" could not convey this representation, embody this quality: either the human character would simply be an example of someone caught in the emotion or they would stretch to become something more than human.

When a Sub-creator sets out to include a mythic dimension to his Secondary World, these qualities of myth are things he needs to keep in his mind. Formal religion with its rituals is not a sufficient substitute for the mythic background, because ritual properly celebrates the remembrance of a mythic event or person. Without a sense of the myth behind the

ritual, the reader will find the formal religions presented in the Secondary World rather flat. Further, if myth is present in the Secondary World, there must be at least some of the peoples of that world who believe in the myth.

If the Sub-creator pays insufficient attention to a myth he has placed in the story and has a character who believes in the myth, he can easily end up cheating the character. If the author does not know what the characters believe, he can by inattention make the characters look like fools.

Myth is the heart's explanation of why things are as they are in the world -- the heart's explanation and not the mind's. Myth has little to do with scientific fact. Science and rationality will answer the question "What is the sun and why does it rise and set?" with facts about stars and rotations, and probably end up by pointing out that the sun itself is not moving around us -- it doesn't really "rise and set". Unless an Author creates his peoples in such a way that they begin by knowing these scientific facts, their myths will not speak of the sun factually (as we know it). Indeed, a race of peoples who did know these facts would not speak of the sun "rising" or "setting". However, if an Author considers handling myth in a traditional fashion, he needs to discover what sort of an outlook his peoples have about their sun (or suns). For those of us who live in temperate zones, the sun is friendly. To wake in the dark of night in order to watch the coming of sun is a heart-filling experience: the horizon turns grey and then a thread of gold appears, and gradually this gleaming, blinding presence rises up to begin its march across the sky. But supposing one lived in an extremely arid zone: the sun would be no friend there, rather a thief who steals away the night's coolness.

Myths reflect, among other things, the way a culture responds to its environment, what the sun and moon mean to the people, and how important and powerful the winds and weather are to them.

The forces of nature, supernatural and elemental emotional forces, these are the types of things which draw on the garments of personality in myth. Myth is not about inanimate objects, but about a living, active universe. Northrop Frye describes the mythopoeic impulse this way:

Nature is now inside the mind of an infinite man who builds his cities out of the Milky Way. This is not reality, but it is the conceivable or imaginative limit of desire, which is infinite, eternal, and hence apocalyptic of the whole of nature as the content of an infinite and eternal living body which, if not human, is closer to being human than to being inanimate. (AC. p. 119)

Apocalypse! Revelation! Myths are the lightning embodiment of the heart's perceptions. Beware, for any moment now you will realize that the thunder rumbling

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people one would like to be able to see. All in all, and I do mean all, Stephan P. Clarke's companion is a treasury and a triumph!

Nancy-Lou Patterson

## Ratigan Redux

The Great Mouse Detective. A Walt Disney animated film, based on the "Basil of Baker Street" books by Eve Titus. Barrie Ingham as Basil, Vincent Price as Ratigan, Alan Young as Mr. Flaversham, Val Bettin as Dr. Dawson, Basil Rathbone as Sherlock Holmes. Music by Henry Mancini.

You will recall that when Digory and Polly journeyed to Narnia, "Mr. Sherlock Holmes was still living in Baker Street." At the same address was also living a very clever Mouse, the great detective's counterpart in the Mouse world. For it seems that under the floors and behind every wainscotting of Victorian London, every human, from the great Queen Victoria down to the lowest cutthroat, had a microscopic rodent doppelganger. C.S. Lewis would have been delighted to know this, fond as he was of "dressed animals", especially anthropomorphic mice.

The Lewisian touch, however, is the fate of Ratigan in the climactic scene. The suave, urbane, sophisticated villain, who had been so wrathful at being reminded that he is a rat, is clearly revealed as nothing but a rat. His fine expensive clothes are ripped off his back by Big Ben's machinery, revealing the grey rat fur underneath. Together with his clothes, his fine airs are also shed, and he becomes nothing but a vile, snarling, vicious beast. The chilling, horrifying scene reminds me of the fates of Eustace, Ginger, the N.I.C.E. people, and Rabadash -- Lewisian characters who lost their humanity, or their anthropomorphism, as the natural consequence of their evil ways.

There is also a Tolkienian element -- in the character of Fidget the Bat, who is obviously a reincarnation of the Creeper in the Black Caldron film. That character was clearly patterned after Gollum (see review in Mythlore 46).

Though less impressive visually, The Great Mouse Detective is overall a much better movie than The Black Caldron. The visual effects are never allowed to become the center of attention, but they remain, as they should, subservient to the plot, and even more to the characters -- and marvelous characters they are, too.

Several changes have been made from Ms. Titus' books. To mention just one, Basil and Dr. Dawson (Dr. Watson's Mouse counterpart) here meet for the first time in 1897, a long time after their encounter according to the books. But such alterations by now are an unavoidable Disney tradition, and most of the changes seem to be improvements in this case.

Benjamin Urrutia



## Mythopoeic Celtic Stationery by Patrick Wynne

This stationery is available for \$5 plus \$1 in handling. It features four designs, all found in Mythlore number 35: The Celtic circles portray themes from J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Charles Williams. Each circle is at the top right of the page and is 3 5/8" in diameter, with a lined border around the page. The fourth design is of the four corners found on the front of this sheet, but much larger in size. The set includes 4 sheets of each design, making 16 printed sheets, 12 blank sheets, plus 16 envelopes. The paper is of neutral but beautifully antique-appearing parchment. Each set makes fine personal stationery both for men and women, and are excellent for a special mythopoeic gift. Send your order to: Orders Department, 1008 N. Monterey St., Alhambra, CA 91801.

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YOLEN: Read fantasy -- and as many different kinds as possible. Don't get stuck in just one -- high or low, humorous, tall tale, neolithic or future fantasy, time travel and all the rest. And to all writers I say, write everyday. Writing is a muscle that needs daily exercise or else it becomes flabby.

(This interview was conducted by mail)

"Dragonfield", "The Lady and the Merman", "The White Seal Maid", and "Angelica" are published in Dragonfield and Other Stories, Ace Fantasy Books: New York, 1985.

Cards of Grief, Ace Fantasy Books: New York, 1984.

"The Dragon's Boy", "The Sword and the Stone", and "Evian Steel" are published in Merlin's Booke. Ace Fantasy Books: New York, 1986.

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about in those cloud-banked skies in the sound of Thor's hammer: the sparks from the anvil will be flying and soon his feet will come crashing through the trees with wind and rain on his heels.