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Tales Newly Told

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Tales Newly Told

A Column on Current Fantasy by Alexei Kondratiev

The figure of the magician has had a long-standing and powerful appeal for writers of mythopoeic fantasy. Like the inventor of imaginary worlds, the magician is a subcreator, applying his will to the material of the primary Creation in order to produce new forms, new experiences that could not have come to light otherwise. Like the mythopoeist, the magician's main tool is imagination, the ability to project thought-forms in such a way that they influence outer reality, or the lives of others. And, also like the writer of visions, the magician has frequently, throughout history, fallen afoul of religious authorities who felt threatened by his power to extend the bounds of the world, who saw in his exercise of godlike creativity a mockery of the prerogatives of God Himself.

Judith Tarr has, in her previous work, already given us poignant depictions of magic at odds with the laws of the Church. The "Hound and the Falcon" trilogy portrayed Christian elven-folk who were compelled by their very nature to express themselves through magic, and yet were condemned by churchmen too narrow-minded to allow their moral views to be modified by new knowledge. In her new novel *Ars Magica* (Bantam, 1989) Tarr has placed this conflict between the magical impulse and respect for received authority within the person of the supreme leader of mediaeval Christendom, the Pope himself — in this case, Sylvester II, or Gerbert of Aurillac, who held the See of Rome in the year 1000. Legend has made of him a sorcerer, the pupil of an Arab mage, and the possessor of an oracular bronze head inhabited by a familiar demon. Tarr artfully splices this legendary material with the spottily known (through the *Historia Francorum* and other sources) facts of Gerbert's life. We follow Gerbert from an early awareness of magic (as well as a great thirst for knowledge) in his native Gaul to his studies under the mage Ibrahim in Spain (where he gains the Brazen Head but pays a terrible and traumatic price for it), his unsuccessful struggle to be made bishop of Rheims (in which he discovers, yet again, the price to be paid for magic wrongly used), his warm relationship with the Holy Roman Emperor Otto III, his enthronement in Rome and, finally, a bittersweet, half-ironic intimation of his death.

Some writers of historical fiction place great stress on recreating the flavor of their setting, weaving a rich tapestry of the imagined sights and sounds of the period, which then conditions the reader's perception of the story's protagonists. Tarr does not really belong to this school: although she peppers her narrative with telling descriptive details, and is capable of strong imagery as any other fantasist, the story takes place mainly within her characters' heads. What matters is the moral dilemmas they face, and the choices they make. One is almost led to

believe that the Mediaeval setting is there only to make the presence of certain specific moral problems more likely. It is, for the most part, a pleasantly colored but vague backdrop for the actions of the boldly drawn characters.

Gerbert (who, by his admission, is no saint) lusts with ambition for the see of Rheims, develops a personal hatred for his rival, and winds up giving magical expression to these baser emotions. The magic itself, of course, is morally neutral; only its user's intentions can make it evil.

Although Tarr's characterizations are vivid and real, this book is not as satisfying as the "Hound and the Falcon" trilogy. Perhaps her almost exclusive use of historical figures here has constricted the scope of her imagination, and prevented her from making any of them quite as appealing and involving as the wholly imaginary elves in the previous work. Also, in a book bearing such a title, one would have liked to see more depictions of actual magic in operation, to convey more strongly the deep attraction it has for Gerbert. There is indeed one scene describing a magical working, complete with quotes from a grimoire, but it is hardly enough to evoke the experience of a lifelong practitioner of the Art.

Although the clash between Church doctrine and magical talent gives one an ideal context in which to explore the moral conflicts involved in magical (and any other subcreative) work, such conflicts are, of course, not at all exclusively related to the influence of Christianity. In *The Sarsen Witch* (Ace, 1989), Eileen Kernaghan gives us a vivid portrayal of the personal problems confronting a magic user in the long-ago Bronze Age — a setting she had used with memorable effect in her earlier novel *Journey to Aprilioth*. The plot's central focus is the building of Stonehenge, an event rife with enigmas for the prehistoric. If that sanctuary was indeed the culmination of the themes and patterns central to the megalith builder's culture, why was it erected so long after the great age of megalith building was over? Kernaghan gives us an ingenious and believable solution to the riddle, but the true strength of the story lies in its portrayal of Naeri, a girl of the Neolithic hill-folk (in whom the blood of the Atlantean "witchfolk" lives on) who have been conquered by the warlike "horse-lords." Naeri is gifted with the earth-magic, which allows her to sense the currents of energy outward through herself, with potentially devastating results. Torn between her love for the smith Gwi, her loveless but surprisingly accommodating marriage with the brutal horse-lord Ricca, and the schemes of her cousin the minstrel Dau (who hates the horse-lords even as he occupies a position of influence among them), she is constantly forced to deal with the responsibilities inherent in

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Janice K. Coulter **Milwaukee, WI**

In his forward to *The C.S. Lewis Hoax*, Joe R. Christopher urges that Kathryn Lindskoog's arguments be repeated until Walter Hooper responds to them. He asks, "What else can honest scholars do?"

They can do what honest scholars have always done. Dig for the facts. It is the only way to discover the truth.

Hooper cannot be compelled to respond and his silence cannot reasonably be construed as an admission of wrongdoing regardless of how often Lindskoog's theories are repeated. The veracity of any statement he may choose to make would probably be questioned by those now impugning his integrity.

Honest scholars who mistrust Hooper won't simply parrot arguments, engage in personal attacks, or publish unsubstantiated suspicions. They will investigate and report the facts.

Paul Nolan Hyde **Simi Valley, CA**

In response to the query about the function and dubious value of the "Reverse Spelling Dictionaries," may I say in all seriousness that I am not the inventor of such a thing. Such dictionaries exist for many languages including English. The purpose is to group all words in a body of material with the same or similar suffixes in one place. For example, if you wished to find all of the words in the language that ended with the suffix "-able", the reverse dictionary would have them all listed under "elba-". In English this is not a particularly informative exercise, but in inflected languages such as Old English, German, or Finnish, this sort of printed arrangement can be quite useful. My purpose in creating "Reverse Dictionaries" for the Middle-earth languages was to provide a way whereby the conjugations and inflections of nouns, verbs, and other parts of speech might be easily analyzed. Needless to say, it was not done to invoke consternation or mental anguish in the hearts and minds of the readership; I have more effective methods for doing that.

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her magical talent. She is also divided between her native earth-magic, which is invasive, hard to control, and sometimes frighteningly impersonal, and her attraction to smithcraft — also a kind of magic, but a conscious, controlled, "light" one.

The setting of *The Sarsen Witch* is essentially the same as that of Henry Treece's *The Golden Warriors*, and Kernaghan's meticulous depiction of seasonal rituals recalls Diana Paxson's tales of proto-historic Britain (as her evocation of exiled Atlanteans may owe something to Tolkien's idea of Númenor), but nevertheless this vision of the Bronze Age seems fresh and individual. Kernaghan definitely belongs to the first school of historical fantasists mentioned above: in a quiet, unassuming but powerfully effective style, she paints a realistic and colorful picture of the chalk downs of southern England as they must have

appeared in their pristine splendor, changing slowly through the seasons. We are made constantly aware of the characters' experience of the natural world around them, and of its relation to the magical influences in their lives.

(One very minor but amusing anachronism: at one point Naeri and her companions are shown hunting pheasant. But pheasants were only introduced to Britain during the Roman era!)

The Bronze Age of Europe hold a great fascination for the modern imagination, because, although we have so little concrete knowledge of the period, so much of the myth and magic in our own culture seems to have its dim, half-perceived origin there. Eileen Kernaghan's mythopoeic glance at that era is most enriching. One hopes that she will journey there again, to uncover new aspects of it for us.

Perpetual Winter (Continued from page 36)

adherence to which ensures that the protagonist will remain on the right path. Nor does this world offer a hope of deliverance from a higher sphere. Lewis' characters inhabit a multi-level universe, in which the natural world has connections to a higher realm. Aslan's country, the real world of which the known worlds of mortality and mutability are only shadows, can be visited and eventually inhabited by the heroes. McKillip's is a self-contained universe, where the young hero and heroine, attempting to escape the devastation of the thawing ice, are cast "back to the bewildering shores of the world" — a world that is "only another tiny island, ringed with a great dragon of stars and night" (McKillip, 165).

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