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## Letters of Comment

Gwenyth Hood

Brian Skinner

Charles de Lint

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## Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico; July 29 - August 1, 2022

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### Authors

Gwenyth Hood, Brian Skinner, Charles de Lint, Mary-Edith Bridges, Jane M. H. Bigelow, Erin Lale, and Joan Marie Verba

## EDITORIAL

Welcome, everyone, to issue number eighteen of *The Mythic Circle*. Lots of excellent poetry this time out—we're looking forward to seeing your responses.

Speaking of which, we want to thank you for your letters of comment with respect to the last issue. Many of you took the trouble to send in detailed, careful, sensitive critiques of the stories and of the magazine in general, and we are very appreciative. Our writers need to hear how you respond to their work. Further, many of your letters are thought-provoking in themselves; witness Charles de Lint's enlightening analysis of the writing process in his letter below. Please continue to let us hear from you!

We hope you had a heartwarming holiday season, and our best wishes go with you in this the new year.

Tina Cooper and C.I.S. Lowentroun

## LETTERS OF COMMENT

Dear Editors—

I'm sorry I missed writing a LOC for the last issue. I've finished #16. "Saint Tiffany and the Dragon" was my favorite. It was beautifully written and had a touching end. However, I did keep wondering why Tiffany didn't start out by asking for *advice*.

"The White Geese" by D. Lynn Smith is another fine story, touching and well written. I had some trouble with the timing, though, and the symbolism. I understood that the seven geese represented the seven children, and that the kindly old woman knew that it was necessary for the children to grow up and leave her, going where she could not follow. Also she would die some day, probably before them.

But seven years seems a brief time for all this to happen. If the children don't actually commit suicide (and they seem too full of hope for that) it's hard to understand why they couldn't write every now and then or come back for an occasional visit. There is a strong suggestion that the narrator is going to die at the end, but if going away with the geese represents going away with the children, then they all had to die before her. This seems a sad overthrow of all her efforts on their behalf.

"Tying up the World" had an amusing concept and some hilarious moments. But I was unable to believe, really, that this enormous boondoggle would only distract people from antisocial activities and not important ones.

Janet P. Reedman, author of "The Sorceress of the Slums," is a talented storyteller who, as I understand it, not only edits her own 'zine but has published semi-profession-

ally or professionally elsewhere. Her story has much to recommend it, but I assume she sent it to *Mythic Circle* because she wanted demanding and picayune criticism. So here goes. The use of the term "Lutherum" for the evil, male chauvinist god disrupted my belief in the subcreated world; it drew me back abruptly into the real world and its troubles and made me angry at the author for what seemed to be a cheap shot.

Also, my imagination would have been more captivated by the story if the struggle between good and evil within it had been more subtle. I don't mind if the protagonist is really good and the antagonist is really evil; in fact, I like stories that way. But it's different with clashes between whole societies. It is true, of course, that the worshippers of the Goddess and Her Son don't come off all that well. If the worshippers of Lutherum had been less uniformly wicked and treacherous and their policies less uniformly detrimental to the culture; if they'd had an idea or two that might have worked in the hands of a sincere person; if they'd had other strategies in addition to threats and torture to bring about conversions, the story would have impressed me more.

C.R. Schabel's "The Last Paragraph" was well written and held my interest. I liked the way the psychiatric hospital setting was justified; "All non-homeowners without valid Blue-Cross cards were automatically transferred to the County General Psychiatric regardless of their true mental state. In order to be eligible for care, however, a patient needed a psychiatric disorder. Consequently CCP's infirmary (its largest ward) was occupied with manic-depressives treated for acute appendicitis, schizophrenics choked with pneumonia, or even paranoids in advanced labor." I don't know whether this is based on real life or not, but it has a horrible aura of authenticity to it.

I don't know whether I could quite believe Mr. Samuelson's exaggerated courtliness. I'm also not sure how much we are to admire or sympathize with him. His violent fantasies about threatening editors, burning down bookstores, and shooting a "successful" author during a signing suggest a man with a weak imagination, since a person with normal intelligence could surely see that burning bookstores would solve nothing, editors can't publish what they don't think will sell, and even "successful" writers have problems of their own.

The girl in the coma, Mr. Samuelson's decision to read his stories to her, and the form they took in her imagination were wonderfully described. I didn't find it a satisfactory resolution to have Mr. Samuelson leave just when the girl was awake and calling for him. Now could I accept that he would still carry the stories around and yet fail to send them out for fear of another rejection. I understand that the story needs a resolution beyond mere wish fulfillment, but I don't think that was it. Perhaps he could have talked to the girl once or twice and encouraged her in her own writing. Perhaps he could have come back to the hospital and read to more patients in comas.

I enjoyed the humorous treatment of sorcery in "Double Take," but the ending seemed to tame and indefinite,

somehow.

Thank you, Mary Edith Bridges, for your kind words on *The Coming of the Demons*. I did write a sequel and have tried to publish it without success. I hope that I may succeed some day.

Regarding the ongoing controversy on my "Christopher Columbus" poem; I have no objection to your keeping it going as long as you find it interesting. One thing I must add, though; it is untrue, as a matter of fact, that I never thought of denouncing Columbus as the harbinger of a Western colonialism. It is also false that I was taught to regard him as a hero in school. On the contrary, I was taught to regard him as an impractical madman who ran after a dream that destroyed his life. The textbooks did not, indeed, teach me to hold Columbus personally responsible for *everything* the Europeans did in the Americas; indeed, I came away with the impression that Europeans now had the wherewithal to find their way to the Americas and were bound to do it soon. If Columbus had not done it when he did, it wouldn't have been too long before someone else did. So no, I wasn't taught to think that if Columbus had stayed at home, the indigenous American cultures would have remained forever unmolested.

In the poem, I thought I was trying to say that Columbus, in his persistence in seeking for his vision, represented a quality that human society needs and which I had to admire in spite of its (apparently) disastrous consequences. It was not an unusual or earthshaking insight, but I came to it by myself and not without pain. If Charles de Lint considers this insight disastrous and expression of it morally reprehensible, that is his right. I merely repeat: it is false, as a matter of fact, that it didn't occur to me to denounce Columbus as the first of many explorers who opened the Americas to short-sighted, greedy, wicked, arrogant destroyers of indigenous cultures. It was simply impossible to express that insight and the one I did express in the same relatively short lyric poem. Or if it was possible, I lacked the genius to do so.

Congratulations on another fine issue. I look forward to the next.

Gwenyth Hood  
Huntington, West Virginia

*Critiques like these really help our authors. Thanks, Gwenyth. I felt sorry for poor Mr. Samuelson, too. Maybe he could 'cross over'--vanish from the city streets to find himself embodied in one of the girl's renderings of his stories, perhaps as a happy and extremely successful minstrel. We'll look forward to hearing what you thought of issue #17.--TC*

Dear Editors--

My thanks to you for including my work in issue #17. It was an honor to be counted among the pages...

You've managed to present an eclectic mix of work in a way that also has a focus. Most magazines seem to

concentrate in one area or the other, but you've successfully given the reader both.

In the same way, you've presented work of substantial content while paying nearly equal attention to the details of aesthetics. I refer to the layout as well as the artwork. *The Mythic Circle* is worth reading and readable at the same time. The artwork was, of course, stunning-- throughout. My thanks to Tim Callahan for the wonderful illustration that accompanied my story. It was not far from the image that formed in my mind as I wrote "After the Long Night."

I can assure you that my contributor copy will be getting plenty of exposure among the editors and writers with whom I stay in touch....

You've produced a magazine you can be proud of, and I wish you continued success in all your endeavors, but especially the mythic ones.

Brian Skinner  
Chicago, Illinois

*Thanks, Brian. Every now and then CISL and I peer at each other across the mounds of MC work and ask, 'should we go on doing this?' Letters like these keep us going.--TC*

Dear Editors--

Thanks for the most recent issue of *The Mythic Circle*.

I was interested in C.I.S. Lowentrou's theory on the groups that writers can be divided into (visual, literate, and those that combine the two.) I hadn't quite thought of it along those lines before, but it certainly makes sense. And writers who fall into either of the first two groups should certainly be commended for trying to master the skills of the group they're not in. Unfortunately, it seems that it's usually the visual writers who make the effort, although any writers who doesn't try to push his or her abilities to the maximum each time out, is only coasting. In the end they'll hurt only themselves, when eventually their readership drops them and goes looking for the new flavour of the month.

I remember thinking, when I first got into writing fiction, that yes, inspiration certainly plays its part, but to maintain that inspiration over the course of a novel wasn't really practical. Or possible. I thought that craft would get one through and the longer one had worked, the more one "practiced" and produced a body of work, the easier it would get.

Doesn't work that way--at least not for me. I soon discovered that the larger a body of work I had, the more I have to push myself on each subsequent story or novel; that it actually gets harder each time out. It's not just a matter of continually honing one's skills and learning different ways to tell a story. There's also the problem of having covered certain plots, themes and the like in previous work and it's always time to move on.

But if it was easy, why would we be doing it?

I've gotten off track, somewhat. Let me close by saying



that this issue was the usual delightful medley of polished pieces and those that are still a little rough around the edges, but no less charming for that. I have to commend you yet again for providing this forum for the writers you publish, a place where they can see their work in print and get feedback on it that, happily with your letter-writers, seems offered in the spirit of helpfulness, rather than maliciousness.

Charles de Lint  
Ottawa, Canada

*And we appreciate your participation, Charles. Thanks for your continuing comments on our stories and your observations on the nature of writing. I have often thought that writing is something of a paradox --so often it begins in inspiration, free of conscious control-- yet it requires the most careful control to bring it to its final form.--TC*

Dear Editors--

A quick letter this round, to tell you how much I enjoyed the recent MYTHIC CIRCLE. I was particularly impressed with the overall placement of the stories. Each piece seemed stronger than the last, and ended on a very strong note. Those last two or three stories read better to me than the last few issues of SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY MAGAZINE. Amazing that I have not encountered the authors in the professional realm.

On a less fulsome note, there was the artwork. Well, one piece, really. I love the rest of the art--that cover was glorious! But I was really disappointed to see Douglas Rossman's story accompanied by a piece of work that is frankly amateurish. His prose is so strong, and his work so evocative, it was especially jarring to see it paired with something that --took away-- from the atmosphere, did not add to it. I did note that the artist has the same last name - did he let one of his family members illustrate the story? (In which case I withdraw my criticism, and offer my praise for his thoughtfulness on behalf of his daughter or niece or whatever.)

That sour note aside, I commend your continued efforts, and look forward to the next issue.

Mary-Edith Bridges  
Seattle, WA

Dear Editors--

I approach dragon stories almost as warily as people in them approach dragons: it's so difficult for a writer to find anything at all new on that subject. Gerard Daniel Houarner has managed to do so. Now I hope he'll go back and give the idea the deeper development it needs to come to life.

Having the dragon and the maiden, and later the two of them and her whole village, reach a cooperative arrangement, is a fascinating idea. I can even believe it would be

possible, particularly since Houarner has provided a history for the current ritual which is somewhat cooperative. I can't believe that the changes would happen that quickly or that easily! Most people resist change most of the time. Societies that are already in a somewhat precarious position, as this one seems to be, resist it particularly strongly; they don't need any additional risks. Would any village really all hang around as a dragon strolls into town? Wouldn't they be likelier to run screaming, or shove some young would-be hero out there to slay the dragon? These people are acting rationally. They're thinking first and acting later. Maybe I'm being a sour middle-aged cynic, but I'd like to see some reason for this unusual degree of intelligence.

I'd like to know more about Saille. Perhaps Saille is simply too emotionally exhausted to scream as the dragon demands, but Houarner gives the impression that she is deliberately restraining herself. Why? And where does she find the strength? This is quite a formidable maiden we have here.

The story would be more believable if there were a few false steps along the way to the happy ending. When Saille says, "Let's pretend we're married," the dragon might well be inspired to consider a light snack. Saille might have to do some fancy dodging before managing to talk him out of that. The exact mechanics of providing more dramatic tension have to be the author's choice, of course.

The hints of dragon ecology and life cycle are tantalizing. I hope Houarner will do some more with this story.

With thanks for another interesting issue.

Jane M. H. Bigelow  
Denver, Colorado

*Thank you for the detailed critique! I'm sure Mr. Houarner will appreciate it.--TC*

Dear Editors--

First, a short diatribe. Mr. Egan, in response to your assertion that Baldr is "the only Norse god a decent person can admire," perhaps you would like to do without the yearly rains (Thor), without wheat (Sif), without written communication (Odin), without law (Tyr), without the world itself (Freya). The Norse myths are *myths*, not tales of human heroes. The Aesir and Vanir are not characters akin to Captain Kirk, who just went around having adventures--they are the farces that govern the universe, and their stories are symbolic representations of those forces. Baldr is a type of Summer King whose death at the hands of his brother ushers in the barren winter. He is Persephone. He is John Barleycorn. He is--and probably you know this already, as you referred to him as Christlike--the Sacrificed God. Baldr, so the legend goes, will return at the time of Ragnarok. The parallels go on, but I'll end this before it becomes a thesis. P.S., yes, "Dark Elves" is a more correct translation of O.N. *svartalfar* than is "Dwarves," abso-

lutely right.

OK, on to comments on the contents of #17. I loved Paul Edwin Zimmer's "The Person from Porlock." It seems you've learned the person's lesson of brevity yourself--if I can judge not only by this one but by the poems I'm running in *Berserkergrangr* #3 as well (at the printer's as I write this.) (By the way, everyone, my current guidelines call for longer stories than originally reported in my letter in issue #17, as I've gone to full-format.) My mom, who is a Coleridge scholar, laughed out loud, and exclaimed "What a good poet! He's SOMETHIN'!"

"Let's Pretend We're Married"--an interesting twist on the dragon's bride story.

"Be Careful Around Mary Alice" was too predictable; a "be careful what you wish for, you may get it" story has to have something else in with it to give it some zip, or at least has to deal with the existential consequences of such an ability--namely that Mary Alice could possibly take away all the pain and death and lack in the world, but the thought never occurs to her or to anyone else in the story. How would someone deal emotionally with godlike power? And speaking of emotions, where are Mary Alice's after she kills her husband? Surely anger and boredom are not the only strong feelings of which she is capable! Is Mary Alice a religious person, and if so, how does this affect her relationship with her God(s/ess)? Or if not, how does she explain this magic to herself? A premise like this is an opportunity to explore Big Questions; many people--myself obviously included--read and write fantasy and science fiction not only for a good read but also because these are the only genres in modern literature in which the writer-to-reader covenant *includes* Big Questions. (It was, after all, actually H.G. Wells, not Eleanor Roosevelt, who wrote what became the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights. I'm sure no one could picture Danielle Steele doing that!) OK, I will get off my high horse (high fantasy horse?) now.

"The Gift"--there is a richness of subtext about this story that is very Tolkienish. The allusions to Norse mythology are right-on-target, and the meeting with the otter-spirit had the feel of true magic. Also it is a smashing-good tale! How many, I wonder, even of the great heroes of literature would walk alone and unarmed into a dragon's lair for the sake of a husband? I'd love to hear more about Yrsa in future stories.

"Jogging the Moonbelly"--huh? I realize I'm not supposed to understand the peculiar slang, but I don't understand the plot, either.

"A New Angle"--this one's pretty fun, but it leaves me wondering why the aliens or whoever it is are interested in people who are eating. How come, huh?

"Leading Roles"--I like it. I always enjoy a good AD&D-character-finds-out-what-he-is story, and this one is done well and with a spare elegance. Whole novels have been written to accomplish what takes this story two pages.

"The Ruby"--I really like this story. It's refreshing to see a story with a point to it, especially one where the

point's not overdone. I also like the illo for this.

"Saucepan Tales by Cellarlight"--I just couldn't read this one, I'm not sure why. I got two paragraphs in, my lip snarling further and further into an expression of total distaste, and put it down. I can't figure out what exactly caused that reaction; there was just something horrific about it that I couldn't stomach.

"In Alahiyyi"--is this a translation? Whether it is or not, it certainly captures the spirit of Tsalagi poetry. (Writing as someone who is of the aniyunwiya and speaks a little Tsalagi.)

"Wandering Voices"--this story evokes the reader's sympathy for the characters without ever getting trite, and handles the ghost-lover idea the same way. It is nearly as distilled as poetry, packing a lot of story into a small space, but is never confusing.

"Wiggly Dreams"--Mr. Wilson (*Ms. Garrison?--TC*) gives just the right twist to make the old appropriation-of-demons plot fresh again. I'm curious about why the "It" is called a Voydanyoi, though. Why is a Russian monster haunting an American or British house? How did it get there? And how on Earth did a creature of the folktales of a people that didn't know Christianity until the Middle Ages and certainly were never exposed to Witchcraft (in the sense of a British religion or of the perversion that Christian Devil-worshippers made out of it) ever hear of a pentagram? Perhaps it would be better just to call it "It."

"After the Long Night"--a good story. Naming the characters of the women Demi (= Demeter) and Sephie (= Persephone) seems just a little obvious, though. And I would have preferred that the explanation be left out; by the time we are told the characters' full names we've already figured it out.

"Towards the True Country"--I really liked this once it got going, but I got impatient with the beating-around-the-bush at first and so I scanned the story until I got to the part where the Lady dances with Winston and reprimands the protagonist.

"Gypsy Melody"--well, I've never much cared for free verse, and throwing in whole sentences in foreign languages has always seemed to me a conceit. There's some promise here, though, in that this isn't just full of worn-out themes, like so many things today, presented in worn-out ways. Instead it seems to play counterpoint to those well-recognized elements that comprise it. Or perhaps I'm reading too much into it.

Well, this concludes the LOC of Enormous Size.

Erin Lale  
Sonoma, California

*Hey, we love LOCS like this. Detailed, story-by-story analysis is just our cup of tea. Thanks for sending it, and feel free to send many more! Regarding "Saucepan Tales by Cellar-Light," the horrific element made me feel a little queasy, too; but the texture of the narrator's language was so dense, so*

*lyrical, so comic, that it lifted me from queasiness to admiration. The language crosses over to poetry and, for me, makes the piece. As to "Be Careful Around Mary Alice," while I agree that one of the most attractive things about fantasy is the authors' ability/willingness to tackle the big questions, I don't think every story can accommodate that. Mary Alice is essentially a rather trivial, crabbed character, who probably never considered a big question in her life and isn't about to start now; instead, she retreats in fear and huddles in her house. Maybe it isn't what we would want to see her do, but to me it seems true to the character and the tone of the story--TC*

Dear Editors--

I noted in *Mythic Circle* #17 that you wondered why more readers didn't write in with their analysis of stories. I can think of some reasons. First, for any publication, only a fraction of readers respond. This figure averages between three and ten per cent. Second, many readers are generally unanalytical about what they read. They can only say they enjoyed a story or didn't, but they are at a loss to explain why. Third, some hesitate to send in letters for fear of looking foolish in public, or of hurting the writer's feelings with a criticism (some people don't take the most constructive of comments well.)

As to why I, personally, haven't sent in a letter of comment for a year or so is that I haven't had any strong feelings about any story lately. They haven't been extraordinarily good or extraordinarily bad, and I find it difficult to comment on a lukewarm reaction. After I read your editorial, however, I tried to pay attention, and I find that, at least in issue #17, there were some common errors.

The main error I found was too much detail. In particular, too much "setting the scene" and not enough "establishing the story conflict." For instance, "After the Long Night," didn't really begin until the sixth paragraph, and "Towards the True Country" didn't really begin until the fourth. (Both stories were interesting once they got started, though.) Those opening paragraphs could have been summarized in a couple of sentences. In a short story, the writer must say something really interesting on the first manuscript page, or the reader gets bored. Similarly, a lot of what might be otherwise interesting stories dragged--again, because of too much unnecessary detail within them. "The Gift" (Hi, Doug!) was highly entertaining, but would have been more so with some editorial tightening. Douglas Rossman, professional oral storyteller, obviously has a good, well-developed style, however. Then there were simple "wonder tales" with not much more than the wonder to them. ("Be Careful Around Mary Alice" and "A New Angle" for example.) I find such stories a bit thin, I want

something more than the one fantastic phenomenon.

And that, I suppose, is why I haven't written lately.

By the way, you do feature some extraordinary cover art. The importance of a good cover cannot be overemphasized.

Joan Marie Verba  
Minnetonka, Minnesota

## THE MAGI

by David Sparenberg

When I shut my eyes  
I envision these old men of Africa.  
They have become moon's shadow. Moon  
has become a web  
in their sparse, ebony hair.

Edged  
with ribbon colors of earth ages  
ringlets of beard catch  
the flaming stars, the mists  
of emerald deltas, silhouettes  
of buttes and mountains.

Thinner  
than El Greco's magic  
they shine with the light  
of blackness, arching  
over carved sticks  
of tribal memories.

The elders know us.  
They look back with eyes  
that are pools of stories  
knowledge greater  
than articulation.

Their minds have captured  
the deep  
ecology of evolution;  
their bodies are distillations  
of human sojourns.

These are the magi! Phantasms  
offering their wisdom  
to the child within.