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Letters of Comment

Erin Lale

Charles de Lint

Joe R. Christopher

Thomas M. Egan

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Editorial

Hello again! Welcome to *The Mythic Circle 17*. We think this is a particularly strong story issue, with a provocative mix of surrealism, folktale, and traditional myth. Douglas Rossmann returns with another marvelous Norse saga, and a new author, Macgregor Card, offers impressive verbal pyrotechnics patterned after Escher. We are also pleased to welcome Paul Edwin Zimmer back to our pages with his poem "The Person from Porlock."

While we are not featuring a "Mythopoeic Youth" section in this issue, it should be noted that both Macgregor Card and Daniel Jenner are young writers; they were both seventeen when they submitted the pieces which appear here. Impressive, hmn? So write and give them your comments!

Speaking of which, we need more Letters of Comment! The magazine was originally conceived as a writers' workshop in print, and we believe that is still a valuable function. To fulfill that function, though, we require your letters. When you read the magazine, jot down comments and send them in. We want to know what you think, and, of course, our authors need to know what you think.

We are writing this toward the end of April, but, as these things go, the magazine probably won't be in the mail until the end of July. So—our best wishes for a wonderful summer to all of you!

Letters of Comment

Dear Editors,

#16 was a delight as usual. A few nits I've picked: in "The Last Paragraph," I would have liked to see some good come to the Story Man through his giving. Perhaps he could have determined to do more work with children because he enjoyed sharing the stories. The switch of focus from him to the girl at the end was jarring. I thoroughly enjoyed "Sorceress of the Slums," but it bothered me that Brother Holt and Lynd would discuss escape plans in front of the guard. If it was too soft to hear, and I was a guard, I'd wonder why they were whispering. By the way, is the rivalry of The Holy Lady and Her Son/Lutherum meant to suggest Catholicism and Protestantism? There was a time in British history when the cult of Mary was suppressed as idolatry.

"Memory's Lover, with Two Catalogues," rang true. It seems we live in a less romantic age. (But perhaps the Classical world would not have seemed so high-minded had we lived in it.) I bemoan our society's fixation on diagnosing every one of us with some kind of mental illness (o.k., enough ranting.)

I found the stories "St. Tiffany and the Dragon," "The Last Caravan," and "The White Geese," all to be deeply satisfying in that the endings fit the stories' buildups.

On a final note, congratulations to Sarah Beach for a

marvelous cover illustration.

An announcement: I'm starting a magazine, *Berserker*, and I'd like to invite the writers and readers of *The Mythic Circle* to send poetry, camera-ready art suitable for xerography, and short stories of 500 words or less on the subjects of berserkers, werewolves and other shape-shifters. Longer stories will have less chance of fitting into the small magazine. Stories from the werewolf's point of view will be preferred. Send submissions to: Erin Lale, 331 West Thomson, Sonoma, Ca. 95476.

Erin Lale
Sonoma, California

Good luck with the new magazine! 500 words, though? That's really short. --CISL

Dear Editors,

Happy new year and thanks for issue #16—it came at just the right moment when I had some free time during the holidays to give the stories and verse their proper due.

There were two stand-outs in this issue: Christina Blasi's "Desert Dreams" was a lovely prose poem. I'm not exactly sure what happened at the end, or perhaps why, but I was seduced by the imagery and intensity crammed into its few short paragraphs. My favorite of the issue, however, was D. Lynn Smith's "The White Geese." A perfect use of mythic matter as it resonates against the contemporary world, illuminating both its own internal concerns as well as the aspects of the real world that Smith chose to focus on. Quite frankly, and no disrespect intended to *Mythic Circle*, I don't understand why this didn't sell to a paying market with a larger readership. The story certainly deserves to be more widely read.

Hmn. Poor Gwenyth Hood. This dialogue on her poem seems to have gone on for forever by this point, ranging far beyond its original intent. I'd refrain from continuing the discussion except that Tina Cooper asked me a question in her response to my letter. Yes, Tina, I am saying that a writer should reflect this world and its ramifications in his or her work – which I'll define as any creative endeavor, not merely writing. To do otherwise limits the work. I think this is particularly important when it comes to secondary world fantasy. The writing has to reflect the real world—its concerns, its flaws and its beauties as the writer perceives them— or it becomes simply escapism. I doubt Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* would have been nearly as successful had it not been infused with its author's love of his own country and his fear of what would become of it as progress came relentlessly sweeping over it.

So I'm not asking writers to limit their works, but to consider what they are putting down on paper. Yes, in real life our heroes and saints have flaws and shadows - and they should be the same in fiction. Wouldn't you rather read about someone you could believe exists—at least for the time you buy into the "suspension of disbelief"— someone with faults as well as their better qualities, or do you want

one more cardboard, black-and-white stereotype? Heroes come about because they rise above their flaws and fears—that's who I want to read about. Not a "hero" whose only claim to the attribute is the author's designation. It seems to me that arbitrarily calling this character the hero, that the villain, this one the leader, that the sidekick, is what's limiting. I want the writer to show me *why* they are who they are - even in, maybe especially in, a secondary world fantasy.

I think, Tina, that you've made the wrong assumption when you say that showing the hero's flaws makes for dark stories. It's certainly possible. But so is the opposite. It can be a very positive and empowering experience to see heroes deal with their flaws and fears, rather than have them blithely go on through the story without a shade of grey. The latter kind of character is exactly the reason that I dislike so much of the secondary world fantasy being published today. It's not idealistic, it's escapist, and while it may be diverting for an hour or so, it leaves—if I may use a food analogy—no nutrition once the meal is done.

Fantasy—any fiction, when it comes down to it—can be funny, feature light-hearted adventures, etc., but at the same time have an underlying sense of mythic resonance, can leave the reader thinking, and/or appreciating something he or she might not have considered before. That's the job of fiction as I see it. Tell a story, yes. Entertain, certainly. But have something more going on underneath what's more readily apparent. I don't mean the writer should lecture, or throw in analogies of whatever the current social/political flavor of the month might happen to be. Just that there be something meaningful for readers to take away when they're done. Something for them to chew on later, something that might illuminate what was previously in the darkness, something that might leave the world a better place than it was before the experience.

Perhaps all of the above is simply my being too starry-eyed and idealistic. To accomplish any of the above certainly isn't easy and one can't always be guaranteed of success. But isn't it worse not to try at all.

You don't say it in your response, Tina, but in similar discussions I've had with other folks what comes up next usually is: "But I read (fill in genre of your choice) to get *away* from all the problems of the real world." To which I say, the best fiction doesn't allow us to hide away from the world's travails, but rather helps us acquire the tools we need to deal with those problems.

Realistic fantasy doesn't mean the antagonists always wine, that the heroes turn out to be anti-heroes or outright villains, that the world's shown to be a bad place and it just gets worse. But it does have to contain some truth. We do have to connect with it on more than one level. And I've gone on about this for far too long, taking up space that could be much better used by printing new stories and poems, so I'll stop right here, adding only:

May you all prosper in the new year.

Charles de Lint
Ottawa, Canada

Hmnnn---why do I feel that I just wandered in between a knight charging with leveled lance and his bete noir? I don't recall advocating cardboard, black-and-white stereotypes. In fact, I agree with just about everything Charles has said above. I think flaws make a hero --in fact, any character-- much more interesting, and, now that I consider it, entire schools of literary tradition can be classified by reference to how the protagonist handles his or her own flaws. Traditional tragedy often shows us how a hero's defects of character can defeat him; and much of the best fantasy shows us a hero straining against his own limitations to reach the delicate point where Tolkien's 'eucatastrophe' of grace can occur.

I also, however, think there's nothing wrong with 'escapism' per se. Since we are adverting to the master, wasn't it Tolkien (quoted by Lewis) who said that 'escapism' might be nothing more than the reasonable wish of a prisoner to escape his jail? Personally, I define escapism as material which can seduce the aching heart and weary mind into a place where they may be re-inspired. And I read you, Charles, as saying that this is desirable, so perhaps there is no real difference of opinion.

Though I agree with Charles that we should devote our space to new stories and poems and your comments on them, I think there is value in this kind of dialogue. Long ago, Gwenyth Hood wrote us a letter in which she talked about the relationship between a writer and her audience. She said she believed "that writing literature is a much more cooperative venture than is usually recognized; that the community struggles together over what needs to be said and how it should be said, and that the most successful works speak for the whole community which has evoked them as well as for the individuals who produced them." So I think she would agree that a dialogue such as this also has its place.--TC

*Well, Gwenyth has not told us she minds the prolonged discussion triggered by her poem. I've found it interesting to follow. Re *The White Geese* no offense taken at all. We think that quite a few of the stories and poems we print are of professional quality, or very near, but the fact is, if there is a space crunch (and there is always a space crunch in any magazine--even ours) many editors of the big magazines will take a poor story written by a Big Name over an excellent story written by an unknown. Big Names sell more copies. And because we profess to be a workshop in print, we also print stories with great promise, hoping that after receiving comments, the author will be able to polish a draft--and sell the piece. This is another reason why we really appreciate your excellent responses. Thanks again. --CISL*

Dear Editors,

Received *Mythic Circle* #15 today... I glanced through the letter column. Yes, I remember Thomas Egan -- so I'm waging a cultural war, am I? Well, I'm afraid I'm too inconsistent a warrior for anyone to follow. (Evidence: "A Realist Comments on *The Lord of the Rings*" in *Niekas* a while back. But maybe that was supposed to be funny.) Actually, I wouldn't call what I'm doing "war" at all. I'm just trying to make some sense and create some (intellectual

and/or artistic) order in my small area. (Aren't we all?) Of course, I keep changing my mind about my attitude about what constitutes human order - not in absolute ways, but in practical ways. And, then, lots of things amuse me, so I can't say I take it all with High Seriousness...

But what I meant to comment about was Ron Blizzard's "I can only hope that something I've said helps and that no one will be tempted to slit their wrists (or mine)..." It reminds me of a long time ago when I was taking an aptitude test. We were given sets of five pictures and told to pick out the three similar things in each. One sequence that I got had a set-up card table, a bird, a dog, a chair, and an egg. I picked the bird, the dog, and the egg because, while I didn't know if that egg was fertile, at least those three things were potentially alive. The correct answer, of course, was the table, the dog, and the chair, because they each had four legs. After thinking it over, I decided that, while my answer was equally valid, I would not be reaching the majority of people if I tried to compete in fields which depended on seeing the obvious. Our criticism of each other's writings are not quite at the same level of obvious vs. outre, but, while we as writers may not think the comments on our work are completely valid, nevertheless the comments allow us to see the work from someone else's perspective. I know that I've received useful criticism in the question-and-answer sessions after I've read essays - but only in a minority of cases. What we need to do is evaluate the criticism, neither accepting it nor rejecting it wholesale.

Joe R. Christopher
Stephenville, Texas

Well said about accepting or rejecting criticism. Hoping to improve my prose, this last year I joined an on-line writing group. Recently I ran a book through the group, noting how sometimes the criticisms all caught on one problem. I almost always heeded those, whether I'd thought the problem valid or not--if everyone came to the same conclusion, readers were likely to as well. Then there'd be the scattered comments, wherein one person would go on at length about something he or she had noticed, yet no one else even remarked it in passing. Sometimes I felt a ZING! "Yes! That really is a problem!" and other times I'd pinch the bridge of my nose and say, "What?" The author is always in the driver's seat, and is thus free to disregard all criticism... but since I believe art is not on the page but is created between author and reader, I have a responsibility to make my vision as clear as possible.

If we have space, let me point out something else I've noticed in reading and in writing. There seem to be three kinds of writers ("Oh no, not another three kinds idiot!" you're thinking. Bear with me, just for the length of this theorizing): Those who see a movie in their brains, and write it down as best they can, usually quickly so they can get on to the next good part, and those who hear the story read to them in exquisitely chosen words. The first group seem to be the ones who produce exciting plots that really move along--but many of them tell the story with clumsy sentences when looked at on an individual level, with occasional fat-deposits of cliché or repeated words or plain

bad grammar. The second group writes with great precision on the word-by-word level, sometimes coming up with individual sentences that give the frisson of good poetry...but their plots are murky and even confusing. And, of course, the third group is the one comprised of writers who excel at both. Well, I am very much of the first group. I am really struggling to learn to write better prose on the word-by-word level, which is why as I sell more books, I am seeking more technical criticism--preferably from Second Group people. Learning to look at what I've written is very much at this point like exercising muscles I hadn't known existed (which is also true as I advance along in karate. Ooch. Ouch!) Anyone have thoughts on this? --CISL

Dear Editors--

Greetings from my corner of Middle-Earth!...

Issue #15 was good overall in its contents. I liked the retelling of Norse myth especially. The two dwarves or "Black Elves" (Richard Wagner's retelling of the Nibelungenlied spoke of Black Elves for dwarves) were fine figures for storytelling. The conflict with the giant eagle was believable and suited the tempo of the plot. It gave a nice "feel" for an ancient legend. I wish someone would retell in modern style the tragic heroism of Baldr, the only Norse god a decent person can admire. Alfred the Great (according to his biographer, Asser, the Welsh bishop, c. 890s) sang the tale of Baldr (his betrayal and death had Christian overtones in the Middle Ages) to his Viking and Danish captors. As a Saxon prince he knew the pagan myths although an orthodox Christian and proto-Crusader.

The poems were decently done but their themes too often echo modern notions of life. Mine stress imagery and the hint of coming tragedy. So I feel...

Thomas M. Egan
Woodside, N.Y.