

Reflections on an Australian Fantasy: constructing the impossible

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Abstract: The following article explores the importance of fantasy as an important literary form. I specifically focus on the social function of fantasy genre texts produced in the Australian context to address the following key questions. First, is there such a thing as Australian fantasy? And second, what are the ethical considerations and issues around the use of Aboriginal and European mythic systems to provide non-indigenous writers with their material for creating fantasy worlds?

Key words: Australian fantasy, difference, ethics, Eurocentric, genre, imagination

As an educator in the New South Wales secondary school system, I find the experience of teaching fantasy to be frequently problematic. In fact, catering to the extraordinary diversity of students I teach *and* trying to decide just what is it that characterises Australian fantasy, given that Australian culture is so diverse, is a challenge to any educator. There is also a third issue to be considered namely, in order to bring fantasy texts to my teaching practice, I also have to consider what is fantasy and what is it for? After all, when you assemble a body of texts into something as porous and osmotic as a genre, you have the opportunity to consider whether there is significance to the total works loosely bundled together by their emphatic focus on the imaginary.

The students I teach are aged from 12 to 18 years and bring to the school context a diversity of cultural and literary repertoires, talents and gifts. Class, colour, sexuality and gender all shape student's engagement with formal education. In some cases students are isolated from their peers and the wider culture. They may live in remote places, located far from the metropole; and may not have access to effective Internet connections. This means they are disenfranchised from engaging with wider world issues but also, they have not heard of interactive fantasy games like *Assassins Creed* or *Final Fantasy*. Of the students I teach, a quarter are Aboriginal Australians who bring indigenous perspectives and experience to

their schooling. As well, there are many students whose identities are shaped by their multicultural backgrounds. Some of these young people have broad and self-reflexive reading and viewing patterns; they know what they like and why, are capable if not always willing, to challenge themselves by reading outside their comfort zone and can articulate and share the value of texts in shaping their identities and indeed, they create their own imaginative Works and worlds. For other students, the idea of quietly engaging in the meditation of reading and writing seems alien and pointless.

In this diverse educational context the question, is there such a thing as Australian Fantasy, is both interesting and problematic because in one sense we are posing the question: is there a fantasy genre in Australia that reflects the complexity of cultures and power structures that make up Australian society? Also, if there is, what does it offer to readers in Australia, as well as beyond our borders?

The notion of a genre as defined by nation or geography has been raised before and, as N. Okarafor suggests when he asks, “Can you define African Science Fiction?” any definition that is imposed upon individuals is problematic: self-identification is really the only acceptable route” (2012: 180).

In my own context, as a teenager, growing up in a small town in regional Australia, the sense of isolation and disconnection from the landscape was powerful and existential. So too was the sense of a wider world. I recall that fantasy provided a promise of imaginative connection to nature and super-nature. It was a relief to discover divergences from the mundane world around me. Fantasy intimated other ways of being and relating and gave me a sense there were rich alternatives to the straightjacket of ordinary life. One could see *difference* as both worthwhile and charming. I could create myself, look to the daring, courageous and brave characters in fantasy novels and, as Socrates allegedly said, *be who you want to seem*. A further appeal in fantasy for readers such as myself is to be found in the moral lessons that the texts contain. The novels I read, however, were American rather than Australian publications: Ursula Le Guin’s, *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Marion Zimmer Bradley, whose *Darkover* novels blurred the generic borderland with science fiction, and Andre Norton’s *Witchworld* series are some that come to mind. All of these inspired me to see the world I lived in as intricate and imbricated with meanings that I might one day experience more fully. In a sense one of the central ideas in fantasy is the sense of promise it evokes. A further underpinning value of the genre is the representation of the natural world as important and to be nurtured.

My own attitude to the landscape around me, and the sense of personal dislocation I felt, was representative of a persistent colonial narrative in the national imaginary that has seen Australia as a site of exile and punishment since the arrival of Europeans on the continent; home was elsewhere, home was England. David Malouf has referred to Australian settler society as having an existential belonging with the landscape; our belonging is a not-belonging. By way of an example, Malouf quotes poet Judith Wright: “except for the wattle ... there is very little mention of Australian trees, flowers or birds in Australian verse in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.” Malouf considers that “this is because there was as

yet no place for them in the world of verse. Currawong and Banksia carried no charge of emotion like 'nightingale' or 'rose'" (1998). It is no surprise then that Australian fantasy authors, like their readers, have looked to Europe to inspire and shape their stories. In particular they have drawn their iconography from Celtic mythologies to create rich fantasy worlds. Fairy kingdoms, witches, feudal hierarchies, the power of iron, magic realms, oak, and silver birch trees; lore and discipline: all of them singularly non indigenous to Australia, are a part of that ongoing colonial legacy. Authors such as Richard Flanagan and Celia Dart-Thornton have based their original imaginative worlds in a mythos that is easily recognisable as European. Indeed, one marker of an Australian fantasy genre, is to be found in its implicit links to the colonial mind as if it were a psychic connection to 'home' and ameliorating the sense of exile felt by those first white settlers and internalised in national discourses.

So, although the growing sense of a distinctive Australian national identity needing to be debated — and problematized — by the complex cultural composition of our population — has characterised the final decades of the 20th century, the fantasy genre has remained largely a conservative enterprise; imperialistic and hegemonic. Fantasy worlds are usually a mix of feudal and hetero-normative social structures and themes often simplistically representing good and evil as aligning with traditional concepts of unreflective family loyalty. The tendency to reproduce linear quest narrative structures is a further marker of the work generally produced and as I invite my own students to challenge Eurocentric assumptions about the world, it seems to me that academic critique of Australian fantasy is well overdue. A survey of fantasy titles, especially those aimed at young adults — and most fantasy is — seems to validate these generalisations about the genre. That fresh and innovative writing is possible and commercially viable is not a debate. British author Patrick Ness's works, in particular *A Monster Calls* and his *Chaos Walking Trilogy* reinscribe fantasy genre writing. Ness walks away from simplistic models of heteronormativity and whiteness and tackles real world issues to ask powerful questions about the social function of fantasy. As Ursula Le Guin says, "Right now I think we need writers who can see the difference between the production of a market commodity and the practice of an art" (2014).

Recently, Australian author Garth Nix has attempted to do more than follow the conservative pattern of much Australian fantasy. In his Old Kingdom series, Nix has interpolated real world situations. On the border between two countries are asylum seekers. Displaced and seeking refuge these people are manipulated by politicians and used as pawns in a dangerous international land grab. The two countries are Ancelstierre, a non-magical state whose name echoes of the Angles and Saxons; and the Old Kingdom, where the disturbance of other, magical boundaries — those between life and death — are the focus of the main plot. Although Nix's inclusion of asylum seekers is at best a secondary plot, it does bring a significant contemporary debate to the attention of his teenage audience and provides an opportunity for meaningful reflection on displaced peoples around the globe as well as Australia's much criticised border control policies.

There is an ethical enterprise in Nix's work here that is, according to Le Guin, the real function of fantasy. Le Guin characterises fantasy as a vital imaginative space for offering alternative ways of being to provide alternatives to the disquieting sense of inevitability and powerlessness many people and I think, young people in particular, feel about the future. She says:

I think hard times are coming when we will be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives and who can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies, to other ways of being, and even imagine some real grounds of hope. We will need writers who can remember freedom, the realists of a larger reality. (2014)

At a time when students often express their disenchantment with politics and business, Le Guin demonstrates her ongoing engagement with the enabling possibilities of the genre. In self-reflexive works such as *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* and *Always Coming Home*, (itself a hybrid between several genres including fantasy), she disturbs passive readers' acceptance of the ideology of texts — challenging them; “is this too good to be true, this ideal society...” In line with post-modern sensibilities that the reader is capable and should be encouraged to think and challenge what they are told, Le Guin asks us; “what stand will we take?” Her texts are ecological, feminist, decolonising, philosophical, and above all, ethical: they remind us of the best that fantasy can offer — it is life-affirming, ethical and an immensely plastic medium for thoughtful investigation of, as Le Guin says, *other ways of being*.

This is not to say there are no examples of such thoughtful work by Australian authors. We have already mentioned Garth Nix' *Old Kingdom* series. However it would be impossible to consider Australian fantasy without referencing the work of Patricia Wrightson, a writer who has attempted to honour the continent and its indigenous traditions however complex the issues around this enterprise have been. In a sense this regional Australian fantasy author from Lismore in the north of NSW, not far from where I live and teach, has been singularly significant in her attempt to write uniquely Australian fantasy: “Patricia Wrightson's books, *The Nargun and the Stars* (1973) and the *Wirrun* trilogy (1977-81) won numerous awards when first published...” (Butler 226). Indeed the trilogy “present[s] a fluctuant boundary between the magical and the ordinary, incorporating Aboriginal lore into the story of a young person's quest, with animated nature and indigenous creatures as helpers and adversaries” (Nikolajeva 58).

However Wrightson's incorporation of Indigenous subjects and mythos in her work was seen as problematic; “...her use of Aboriginal myth has since been criticised by those who see in it an appropriation of indigenous culture, and recent Australian writers such as Garth Nix have found themselves warned off from using Aboriginal material” (Butler 226).

At the forefront of the criticism are legitimate concerns around an ongoing experience by Aboriginal Australians of being ventriloquised by a paternalistic white culture. Stolen generations, systematic and ongoing neo-colonial controls of Aboriginal families, towns,

language, landscape and education are all part of the ongoing event of colonisation. And as such, settler society's hijacking and reinscribing Aboriginal cultural stories without negotiation or understanding has a context: it is another act of stealing. Indigenous Aboriginal author, Yaritji Green writes of "the complex negotiations with the elders over the 'ownership' of culture in a context in which stories belong to specific groups, and of the uneasiness over publishing even the results of these negotiations." Green has said that she is "still working on the differences between Indigenous copyright (which, for her peoples, follows land boundaries) and general Australian copyright (which follows date of publication and doesn't give stories copyright, only the words of the telling)" (qtd in Okarafor 180).

In 1994, over two decades after her *Wirrun* trilogy, Wrightson returned to Aboriginal Australian subjects to negotiate the terrain between cultures in an inspired novel for young adults. Titled *Shadows in Time*, the book creates a hybrid space for narrative when two children, an Aboriginal boy and a colonial servant girl, both runaways from their cultures, journey together in the dreaming. As centuries pass, they are witnesses to the change that takes place on the east coast of the Australian continent. It is a remarkable book that represents a narrative solution to mirror the author's quest for an authentic outsider status. "The novel is ... a coda to her major work, reasserting the mutability of cultures and her right as an artist to let her imagination flow where it will" (Macleod in Finch: 2010). Wrightson's approach, to generate characters, children, as witnesses to time, is a useful text to offer students. Not only does it contextualise the movement of chronological, western time within the frame of the ontological space of the dreaming, it also acknowledges a spiritual displacement central to both Aboriginal and settler communities since 1788.

Brian Attebery observes of Wrightson's body of work that she

cannot restore the original context for mythic stories, but she can create new contexts – as living cultures themselves do constantly... [Wrightson's] job, as a writer, is to work out in fictional form her own relationship with Australia's troubled history and haunted landscape. Her strategy has been to bring *Wirrun* and other characters to share the task, going where she cannot go. These fictional collaborators remind readers that we need to invite other collaborators, fictional and real, to help us extend the quest for understanding beyond the boundaries of the text itself. (Attebery in Finch: 2010)

In the Australian high school context, the encounter with Wrightson's work provides a useful teaching opportunity for deep discussions with my students about their own relationships to place and culture: Australian fantasy provides the space for this conversation but Wrightson's text is also useful in considering the ethical questions around ownership of stories in the case of this person who is arguably Australia's most famous fantasy writer. This may act to dispel "the idea that she might have been just another one in a long line of exploiters of indigenous people' while at the same time forcing us to consider the complex and uncomfortable connections between storytelling and the legacy of colonialism" (Macleod in Finch: 2010).

It is also interesting to consider Wrightson's pioneering role as a female author of fantasy in Australia when such commercial successes by women have remained largely inspired by a Europe-inspired fantasy landscape.

One of the most unexpected developments of the last decade has been the domination of the popular fantasy genre by Australian women (and some men). The first of these was Sarah Douglas, whose first novel, *Battleaxe* (US: *The Wayfarer Redemption*) was published in 1995, and who has to date completed five fantasy trilogies. Others include Celia Dart -Thornton, whose novels make extensive use of English folklore; Ian Irvine, whose Three Worlds Cycle is on the borderlands of science fiction; and Glenda Larke, whose well-imagined fantasy world is inspired by Indonesia [and Malaysia] where she worked and lived for some years. (James 76)

Larke's work is reminiscent of iconic novels of encounter where the template of non-western cultures is used to evoke the fantastic. Her series, *The Mirage Makers* and *The Forsaken Lands* resonate with the classic accounts of Balinese culture, Vicki Baum's *Love and Death in Bali* (1937) and more recently, Nigel Barley's *Island of Dreams* (2009). Both of these novels represent the animistic cultural complexity of the island; it is a world inhabited by spirits and all human activities are shaped by the interrelationship with the spirit and natural worlds. Larke's landscapes draw on aspects of this south east Asian iconography. Her novels reference mangroves and tropical seas; architecture that opens onto gardens; Bahasa vocabulary for names (honorifics such as *Rani*, *Raja*, and names, such as the word *kris*, a dagger, *pisang*, banana) and cultural practices all work to create a distinctly non-European form of fantasy.

The controversy of appropriating another's culture however, still carries with it questions around exoticising and orientalisng that are no less ethically challenging than non-Aboriginal authors using Aboriginal mythology to write their own fantasy stories.

If there is a distinctive Australian fantasy genre: that is, one that is charged with the same diversity that characterises my students, one would imagine it would do more than look to Europe. I would like to think it would not simply borrow from Aboriginal Australia or our neighbours in other parts of the world. At present however, I only know of one Australian writer whose imaginative writing creates hybrid worlds that defy location. In Margo Lanagan's short story collection, *Black Juice* (2004) we encounter dangerous children in spaces that may be some version of present day Prague or Dalian; there is a story about cultural practice and musical instruments — we could, but may not be, in a drought-riven village in Africa; or perhaps we are not far from the coast in Papua New Guinea. The angels in her work and those who meet with them are neither biblical nor Babylonian. Fairies and feudal hierarchies do exist in Lanagan's oeuvre, but they take their place in an authorial space for writing that seems both experimental and intuitive: a space where elephants, with long, tonal names that may or may not be Thai or Laotian or Sri Lankan, narrate liberation narratives.

In Lanagan's case, the imaginary is a space for the practice of art to provide, re-iterating Le Guin, "other ways of being, and even imagine some grounds for hope ... realists of a larger reality" (2014). When I was a teenager in country Australia, I read fantasy as a place of possibility. If a distinctive Australian fantasy genre is emergent in contemporary Australia, Lanagan's *Black Juice* may be what it looks like. In it she offers a creative and evolving mirror inspired by the diverse worlds that reflect the multiplicity of traditions and perspectives in the Australian population.

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