

Reviews

Joseph Rex Young: *George R.R. Martin and the Fantasy Form*, New York: Routledge, 2019

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Joseph Rex Young's book titled *George R.R. Martin and the Fantasy Form* fills a tremendous gap that has been present in contemporary fantasy studies: while several books have been written about the study of Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* that focus on the different readings of the fantasy series, and the success of the mega-franchise that grew out of the narrative, Young's monograph attempts to find Martin's place in the modern fantasy genre. One of the most refreshing aspects of the book is that instead of treating Tolkien and his work as the exemplar of fantasy, Young highlights how while it is to some extent understandable (since Tolkien's popularity in the genre is beyond dispute), "Tolkien was a hugely idiosyncratic writer whose inspirations, motives and methodologies bear little resemblance to those of the authors of genre fantasy, much of which consists of narrative iterations of pre-existing intellectual properties" (4–5). While several comparisons have been made in fan circles between *The Lord of the Rings* and *A Song of Ice and Fire*, and how Martin has changed the rules of the fantasy genre, Young argues that instead of abandoning the rules of the fantasy formulae, Martin followed them very strictly. Thus, *George R.R. Martin and the Fantasy Form* is about the analysis of how Martin's epic saga relates to the genre of fantasy.

In Chapter 1 titled "The American Pratchett? – Muck and Modality", Young is discussing whether Martin's work should really be compared to Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Lev Grossmann, American novelist and journalist once called Martin "the American Tolkien" in a *Time* article that was written about the fourth volume of the epic fantasy saga, titled *A Feast for Crows*. According to Grossmann, Martin's prose is different from the Tolkienian narrative since his characters are more complex, and they are also introduced as "slugging it out in the muck, for money and power and lust and love" (Grossman 2005). However, Young argues that there are two problems with this statement: first of all, it overemphasizes the innovation and the importance of Martin's complex characters, and his references to muck are not only

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realistic, but they serve as an important tool to alter the readers' understanding of the characters. Young references Northrop Frye's theory of modes: he argues that while Martin utilizes the ironic mode to highlight the not so noble features of the characters, Tolkien turns towards the high-mimetic narrative, which results in the readers looking up to the characters.

The author further elaborates on the issue of the question of good and evil in fantasy, and argues that there have been several fantasists (E.R. Eddison, David Lindsay, Mervyn Peake, or J.K. Rowling) who raised questions about morality – instead of coming up with something new, Martin just follows this tradition. Furthermore, Tolkien's characters are also morally sophisticated, since it is suggested several times throughout the trilogy that the Ring brings out the worst of the ringbearers. Grossmann also suggests that Martin is more realistic, since his world and his characters do not follow the aesthetics of the antique glamour of the Middle Ages that is present in several sword and sorcery texts, but they are rather shown in a primitive barbarity, covered in dirt and blood. Frye argues that Martin uses this technique in order to critique the medieval world, and strengthen the readers' feelings about the unjust and backward nature of this world. At the end of the chapter, Young comes to the conclusion that because of the aforementioned reasons, Martin should not be called the "American Tolkien," but rather the "American Pratchett," since by using the ironic mode, he shows a very different reality from that of Tolkien – however, there are several parallels between *A Song of Ice and Fire* and the writings of Terry Pratchett, including irony, toilet humour, alazons, and the mocking of literary convention.

Chapter 2 ("Enough about Whores? – Sex and Characterisation") focuses on the depiction of human sexuality in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, since the series became famous for the vast number of references to sex. By applying Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological model of reading, Young argues that sex and sexual violence serves an important role in these novels, since these scenes offer several hints about the true personality of the characters: "[p]ut simply, he uses sex as a way of encouraging readers to consider the way his characters interact with his world" (41). Tywin Lannister, for example, spends his last night with a prostitute, and also orders the gang-rape of his son's first wife, because he did not want to be related to a low-born girl. However, their sexuality can also paint a more positive picture about a character: in the case of the Starks, for example, one of the early scenes of *A Game of Thrones* describes the sexual intercourse of Catelyn Stark and her husband, Ned, and how she wanted Ned's seed to quicken in her, which shows how she considers

someone that she loves. As Young suggests, “Martin’s game of beds runs parallel to the game of thrones, providing an alternative, implied moral spectrum with which the author can discreetly keep readers orientated in his indictment of bloodthirsty aristocratic presumption” (45). However, sex can also serve a third way: the world of *A Song of Ice and Fire* is a world of patriarchy, several female characters use their sexuality to rebel against the expectations they face from their community. After Ygritte sees Jon Snow as someone desirable, she starts acting on her desires, while Gilly also persuades Samwell Tarly to sleep with her.

The next chapter, “‘Look with Your Eyes’ – Immersion and ‘Thinning’” offers a genre-specific examination of the series and describes Martin’s world as a place where magic and morality is constantly diminishing, and thus, Young connects *A Song of Ice and Fire* to modern fantasy. He uses John Clute’s term *thinning*, which is “the passing away of a higher and more intense reality” (Clute and Grant 1999, 942). In the world of Westeros, the Targaryens are modally romantic, since just like the dragons, they are also dissipating as the ruling dynasty. Young also argues that the best way that the readers can feel this thinning is through immersion, which allows the readers to see everything through the eyes of the focalizer. However, Martin uses other Mendlesohnian strategies (portal-quest, immersion, intrusion, liminal) as well in order to evoke this thinning, including the Starks’ portal-quest when they leave Winterfell: still, it is mostly immersion that reveals that meaning is inherently missing from this world.

Chapter 4 (“‘Dead Men Come Hunting’ – Intrusion and Recovery”) examines two other Mendlesohnian subplots that play an important role in the series: Bran’s portal-quest journey and Jon Snow’s intrusion. It has already been established that something is missing from Martin’s world, and these two storylines show that there may be some truth out there that is incredibly hard to grasp. While Bran is acting upon the truth that he receives from his instructors (Osha, Jojen, Coldhands, and Leaf), Jon can only suspect the truth, as he famously “knows nothing” – precisely because his chapters follow the logic of intrusion, where he is aware that something is wrong, but simply cannot grasp the problem.

The following chapter, “‘Remember That You Were Brothers’ – Superstition and Cohesion” puts Martin’s series in the center of Todorovian analysis: the author argues that while many fantasy theorists tend to push Todorov’s ideas to the side, *A Song of Ice and Fire* is a clear example for hesitation, as superstition and accusation frequently appear in the text. Aeron Greyjoy, Qyburn, Cersei Lannister or Melisandre of Asshai all turn towards unambiguous magic, which results in the “dissolution

of median disequilibria in action” (199). Young argues that this, in turn, is again connected to Tolkienian Recovery, since these actions prove why winter is coming: the source of the looming threat is the evil that humans brought upon each other.

Chapter 6, “‘But Here You Are’ – Magic and Healing,” “analyses Martin’s work in relation to David Sandner’s analysis of fantasy literature in terms of the resolution of ‘the anxiety of the sublime moment’” (7). Sandner defined four reactions towards the literary supernatural, which all appear in *A Song of Ice and Fire*: Samwell Tarly tries to *possess* it, Stannis Baratheon is working on *domesticating* it, while Davos Seaworth suffers *fragmentation*, since although he tried to avoid magic, his identity is slowly merging with it. Lastly, Daenerys goes through *dispossession*, since she merges with her dragons and is reborn in order to become a true Targaryen.

In the conclusion, before summarizing the main ideas of his book, Young argues that although it is true that the television adaptation of the series had an impact on the popularity of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, and is an important event in television history, its influence should not be overestimated. He highlights how, when it comes to the discussion of the show, it is usually implied that “normal” people become fantasy “nerds”; furthermore, many people criticize the series because it is fantasy. According to Young, one should not think about how Martin “tricked” people to read fantasy, but rather “how Martin’s use of fantasy sells his experiments in depicting human emotion, ambition and morality” (196).

Joseph Rex Young’s monograph on the fantasy form is an incredibly rich and intriguing read about Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire*. While I do not think that those who have read the series have to be persuaded that the series has literary value in it, for those who would like to disagree with this statement, Young’s book can serve as a great counterargument. Besides the fans of *Game of Thrones*, this book might be a fascinating read for those who would like to dive deeper into Martin’s literary world, or those who are interested in understanding why *A Song of Ice and Fire* is deemed to be such an excellent fantasy series by so many people in the world.

References

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