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Conference Report by Benjamin Miller

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GLASGOW INTERNATIONAL FANTASY CONVERSATIONS (MAY, 23-24, 2019)

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Glasgow International Fantasy Conversations. Mapping the Mythosphere. University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK 23 and 24 May 2019.

What is Fantasy? Fantasy is a collective, made up of a myriad of different stories by numerous authors. It is nebulous and ever expanding, made up of books, movies, games, works of art, poetry, and many other forms of expression. Even more than that, Fantasy has deep roots, stretching all the way back to myths, folktales, and legends. All of these different stories are interconnected with each other and these connections constitute the Mythosphere, which formed the central theme for this year's Glasgow International Fantasy Conversations: *Mapping the Mythosphere*. Panels were devoted to understanding and contextualising the complex and ever-changing network of Fantasy. The event spanned two days and included fourteen panels, three keynote speakers, and four different workshops, all of which were centred around the ideas of fantasy and the Mythosphere.

The event had three keynote speakers, each of which were invigorating as well as informative, and helped cement the theme and tone of the event. The first keynote speaker was Kristy Logan (United Kingdom), an author who specialises in rewriting fairy tales and folktales, who presented on "Twice Upon a Time: The Lure of Retelling." Logan discussed how other authors and herself have reframed folktales in order to make them more relevant to today's society. Specifically, she engaged with stories that put agency back into the hands of the female characters through the books she writes or performance art pieces that she creates. One of the stories she is particularly interested in is the English folktale, Mr. Fox. The story focuses on a young woman, Mary, who gets engaged to the wealthy Mr. Fox. Before their wedding, Mary realises that Mr. Fox is a murderer and gets her brothers to intervene. Logan turned this story into a performance piece in which she gives even more power to the female protagonist by turning Mr. Fox into a steppingstone in Mary's life.

Brian Attebery's (Idaho State University, USA) keynote explored the differences between the Horror and Fantasy genres and how the latter can help its readers to deal with fear in their own lives. The border between Fantasy and Horror is often highly contested due to them having quite similar elements. Both genres ask the reader to imagine the impossible and Fantasy often contains terrifying monsters and moments of horror. However, Attebery argued that Horror is Fantasy cut off before the conclusion. The former is only interested in creating one visceral emotion, while the latter goes through highs and lows to tell a story. This allows Fantasy to show what happens after the terror has passed; reminding the reader that fear is something we all must face, but that we can overcome.

The final keynote by Mel Gibson (Northumbria University, UK) was “‘For the Love of Mary Anning, A Pack of Dinosaurs?!’ The Mythosphere, STEM Subjects, Agentic Girlhood and Comics.” Gibson’s talk primarily focused on two comics, *Lumberjanes* (2014) and *Ms. Marvel* (2014). Both comics are primarily aimed at a younger female demographic, trying to provide girls with positive role models. *Lumberjanes* focuses on fostering a love for Maths and Science in young girls, where *Ms. Marvel* focuses on politics, especially women’s rights and immigration. However, instead of just pushing these arguments completely on their own, which would be dull for the intended audience, they are presented in fantastic narratives which are much more engaging for younger readers. Comics such as these use fantastic settings and whimsical styles to make social issues and political activism more accessible and exciting for their readers. Overall, Gibson argued that comics are a very intertextual medium in which many different genres and ideas can mix together, breaking down borders.

On the second morning of the event, participants were given the opportunity to attend one of four workshops in order to get more hands-on learning. I attended the workshop “When Your Characters Have Their Own Ideas: Approaches to Research in Fantasy” by the author K. L. Bone (Queen’s University Belfast, UK), who discussed how important research is to writing as readers will be more engaged when the story world is realistic. She shared her experience as a published writer and pointed out areas that she thought were important when doing research. What was really helpful about this workshop was that participants were also able to give their own experiences and thoughts on the subject. This allowed those in attendance to hear multiple perspectives on the subject, and learn more information than just the speaker could provide alone. Workshops like this are particularly helpful because they give aspiring writers the chance to talk to an author about how they got published and ask them questions about their writing process.

Over the course of the event, there were many different panels in which delegates shared their research and discussed the intricacies of Fantasy. The first panel that I attended was “(Un)Still Lives: The Art of the Mythosphere,” which explored the different ways that art interacts with and has affected the genre of Fantasy. The first speaker, Alexandra Gushurst-Moore (University of York, UK), talked about how the romanisation of the Medieval period during the Victorian era has shaped how the former is represented in Western Fantasy today. Victorian artists became obsessed with Medieval Britain, due to the fact that it was undeniably English, but this period was fictitious in the nature of its representation – a place where anything could happen, a time when dragons could have existed, and the world was a utopia of knightly honour and chivalry. All of these dreams of the medieval have persisted into the modern day and are the reason that it is an attractive setting for Western Fantasy. Lucinda Holdsworth’s (University of Glasgow, UK) presentation was on how the Glasgow Girls’ art style influenced Fantasy, but has been almost forgotten because they were looked down on by critics. She argued that one of the artists, Jessie King, inspired J. R. R. Tolkien’s illustrations of Middle Earth, due to the fact that the two share a lot of similarities, such as their landscapes and style of tiaras. Amy Barkhaus (University of Glasgow, UK) presented on the map of Fairyland by Bernard Sleight and how it represents the idea that all stories are connected. She tied this map to Tolkien’s analogy of Fantasy being a collective soup that is eternally being added to,

saying that the map of fairyland is ever expanding; indeed that if it were created today, the map would be much larger.

The second panel I attended was "Drawing Your Own Map: Fan Creation in the Mythosphere." The talks for this panel focused on why non-canon material is created and how they affect the primary texts. Christopher Lynch (University of Glasgow, UK) talked about how maps and guides of Discworld made by outside sources affect how people read Terry Pratchett's work. While writing his books, Pratchett did not want to make an official map of Discworld, intending instead for readers to not be constrained in how they picture it. However, this did not stop outside sources from making maps and guides in order to cash in on the popularity of the books. Now most people who read the books have at least one of these guides, which shape the way they approach the story. Parinita Shetty (University of Leeds, UK) discussed fanfiction's potential as a space where minorities, like the LGBT+ community, can express themselves and get their voices heard. Unlike more mainstream authors who are trying to get their books published, fanfiction writers have the freedom to engage with subjects that are deemed too controversial. Staying on the topic of fanfiction, Sarah Boyd (University of Stirling, UK) argued that this form is an important type of media because it helps to take ownership of our stories back from large corporations. When Disney company bought the rights to *Star Wars*, they were able to freely dictate what is canon and made much of the media around the series, other than the movies, outside of it. However, fanfiction is a field in which these corporations do not hold all of the power, and the fans can finally take control.

My third panel was "The Map is the Territory: The Real is the Fantastic," which focused on how Fantasy interacts with real world history and ideologies. Ben Littlejohns (University of Glasgow, UK) discussed how in media, pirates have become silly caricatures, devoid of any real humanity, and thus it is hard to fully explore the disturbing colonial past that led to them. In most stories the pirate treasure was first stolen from colonised indigenous people and countries thus Britain villainised the pirates so that they did not have to account for their own actions. David Allen (University of Wolverhampton, UK) and Agata Handley (University of Łódź, Poland) did a joint talk on theology in Fantasy. They engaged with J. R. R. Tolkien's idea that writing a secondary world is a reflection of God's creation and the Romantic idea of *locus amoenus* or the mythic garden. They argued that the obsession in the eighteenth and nineteenth century of reclaiming the lost garden of Eden lead to the rise of Fantasy. Finally, Mariana Rios Maldonado (University of Glasgow, UK) talked about how the comics series, *Hellblazer* (1990) engages with contemporary anxiety about nuclear trauma. The comic was based off of real events that took place in the UK in the 1980s, but have mainly been forgotten, comics like this ensure that these tragedies are not truly forgotten.

My fourth panel was "A Trail of Breadcrumbs: Fairy Tales in the Mythosphere." Akylina Printziou (University of Athens, Greece) talked about the works of Angela Carter and Kurahashi Yumiko, two female authors who rewrite fairy tales for a modern audience. Even though these two female authors come from different cultures, their stories are quite similar to each other, adding more mature content to fairy tales and making providing them with a feminist slant. Alba Morollón Díaz-Faes' (University of Oslo, Norway) presentation was on the way internet creators use Disney imagery

to make social commentary pieces. Disney movies have become a symbol of media safety, never dealing with what they perceive as controversial representation, so artists using Disney characters and motifs in order to make social commentaries on subjects deemed un-family friendly, such as homosexuality, makes this art more shocking and therefore thought provoking.

The final panel I attended was "Mythosphere-ology: Approaches to Fantasy." Mary Reding (Upper Iowa University, USA) discussed the idea of looking at the hero's journey as a three-dimensional sphere, as it is more complex than just a straight line. She proposed that the journey is actually a series of cycles that interlock with each other, because often the journey does not end but loops back to the start or starts a new cycle. Georgina Wilkinson (University of Glasgow, UK) theorised about how Fantasy fits into the multiverse theory. She argued that if the multiverse theory is correct then there must exist realities in which all of the Fantasy stories of our world are likewise true. The final talk was by Stephanie Millar (University of Strathclyde, UK), who discussed the YouTube group, Monster Factory, who play video games but make new narratives out of them which the original creators never intended. She argued that one of the more famous characters that they made, The Final Pam, was supposed to be based off of Christian imagery, but took a lot of influence from Greek myth, showing how creators can be influenced by works that came before them subconsciously.

Overall, it was a great opportunity to come to Glasgow International Fantasy Conversations. It was truly an extraordinary opportunity to be able to hear and compare ideas with other up and coming fantasy scholars creating a new understanding together, just like the Mythosphere.

BIONOTE

Benjamin Miller has a BA in Anthropology from Northern Arizona University, USA. He is currently working on an MLitt in Fantasy Literature at the University of Glasgow. Throughout his life, Benjamin has traveled the world, having visited Canada, Mexico, the United Kingdom, and a large portion of Europe. He has interests in German folklore and Greek mythology, and has researched them throughout his studies.