

Kim Selling, *Why are Critics Afraid of Dragons? Understanding Genre Fantasy*, Verlag Dr. Müller, Saarbrücken, Germany, 2008; pp.200; RRP \$US105.00 paperback; ISBN: 9783836497855

Kim Selling's Medieval Studies PhD thesis, published as *Why are Critics Afraid of Dragons?*, undertakes the ambitious task of examining 'the critical, historical and social contexts of the modern western genre of fantasy fiction, drawing attention to the Romantic inheritance of fantasy and its relation to broader social contexts' (p.ii). Whilst similar tasks have been undertaken by scholars before, such as Brian Attebery, Tzvetan Todorov and Rosemary Jackson, they have all, according to Selling, failed to provide a paradigm within which texts classified as 'genre fantasy' can be studied on their own merit, without pejorative judgments being passed on them.

Selling is aware of the daunting nature of her task, and claims that it is her position outside of traditional English and Literary studies that gives her the freedom and perspective to challenge the established methodology of genre fantasy analysis and to challenge not only the definition of genre fantasy, but the conceptualisation of genre itself. Her background in History and Cultural Studies leads her to adoption of Pierre Bourdieu's model of 'the field of cultural production' in her re-envisioning of the concept of genre (p.9-10). This is Selling's central theoretical and methodological innovation, which she claims takes genre studies from a value-imparting concept of 'fuzzy fields' and 'formula fiction', and transforms it into 'a field of cultural production ... encompassing an indeterminate continuum of texts, signifying codes and discourses, created, apprehended and processed by a culturally and historically situated community, that is subject to constant (internal and external) change and flux, that yet manifests historical development and provides a recognizable pattern of regulation and variety' (p.44).

In applying this new concept of genre to her generic subject matter, Selling tackles fantasy fiction's academic unpopularity head on. In Chapters One and Two she goes on the attack, claiming that it is modernism's hegemony that is behind the marginalisation of fantasy. Fantasy has become Other, as it takes on the feminised, popular culture, 'Nature' role in the dualism of (superior) Reason vs (inferior) Nature that is central to modernism's conception of the world. This categorisation, Selling claims, is about power - power that the elitist establishment has, and doesn't want to relinquish to the 'vulgar masses' (p.19,46). Selling's argument in these and in the following chapter is meticulous, methodical, and compelling. Her grasp of the mess that is the current state of genre fantasy criticism is nuanced, her analysis of its causes revelatory, and her courage in undertaking her task admirable.

The book is presented in six chapters, divided into two distinct halves. In first three chapters Selling engages with the theoretical, methodological and critical literature on genre fantasy, and develops her new paradigm. In the second three chapters Selling applies this new framework to genre fantasy in the contexts of Romantic Medievalism, alternative spirituality, and environmentalism. It is rewarding to see such a potentially radical new theory and methodology work in practice. Selling's choice of these topics is unsurprising and hardly unique, but they allow her to both work to her strengths (her PhD is after all in Medieval Studies), and to allow for comparison with existing theories and methodologies as applied to similar topics. This will, to those willing to accept the possibility of a better way, be proof of her paradigm's utility, whilst to those not already convinced, may provide material with which to make an informed judgment.

Selling's text is dense and detailed, almost to the point of impenetrability. Her marshalling of her sources is impressive, but can be confusing, as one attempts to keep track of which theory, concept or argument belongs to which scholar. This is, possibly, a consequence of this book's genesis as a thesis, and at times one wishes Selling would be brave enough to own her theoretical synthesis, or even to simply reduce frequent references to an original source.

Her conclusion is also disappointing. It appears at the end of her sixth chapter under a 'Conclusion' subheading (all six chapters are dividing into sub-chapters with individual sub-

headings), rather than as a separate chapter. The density and importance of Selling's work cries out for a comprehensive summary that draws together of all the threads that have been presented to us in the preceding 160 pages. Instead, these three pages feel tacked on at the end. There is a slight sense of afterthought about her concluding comments. Given the potential for this book to initiate a radical change in the way genre fantasy is conceived of and studied, one wishes for a more considered evaluation of where her thesis has lead her to, and where other scholars could go from there.

One final criticism of this book relates to its publication. Given what Selling has achieved, it is a shame that the publisher has decided to price this book so expensively, with leading retailers such as Amazon charging over \$US100 or £45 list price per copy. If you or your library can bring yourself to pay that sort of money for a 200-page book, the reader will then have to contend with tiny 8- or 9-point font, which renders the reading experience for most people challenging or even impossible. Both facts will no doubt contribute to this insightful and important book being less widely consumed than it deserves to be. This is a great shame, because Selling has written a work of significant value to those interested in studying fantasy fiction *because* it is popular, rather than in spite of that fact. This book is a breath of fresh air in the stifled halls of academic engagement with this topic. The risk of this book not generating the 'ongoing and open-ended dialogue concerning the nature, meaning and value of myth and fantasy' (ii) that Selling intends is real and disappointing. One is left to hope that the tenacity of fantasy scholars and those entering the field is put to good use in seeking out this volume, engaging with it and using it to generate debate in the way that it deserves.

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