

## *Introduction*

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This issue of *Coolabah* presents some articles on fantasy and the fantastic. Historically, as critics such as Todorov, Rosemary Jackson, Kathryn Hume, W.P. Irwin and Colin Manlove have pointed out, tales of fantasy date back to Æsop's fables and Homer. In Britain, Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* was an early key text with its legends of King Arthur and the Round Table. Ghosts, witches, and magic are integral elements in the plot of several plays by Shakespeare — beings of the unreal world. The imaginary voyage and exploits in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) belong to the world of the fantastic, and yet it is a text with acknowledged political overtones, fantasy often being a guise for political and social critique, as we find later in George MacDonald's writing. Modern day fantasy plays on these traditional themes, but also provides a more contemporary take on issues, especially when it comes to the media. The diversity of the genre is vast.

The seventeenth and eighteenth century debate on the literature of the imagination and the contrast between the mimetic and realistic novel, then in its early beginnings, can be linked to Coleridge's discussion of 'fancy' and the 'imagination' in *Biographia Literaria* (1817). It was believed that the powers of the imagination led to a production of secondary worlds often based on ancient supernatural ballads and tales. Joseph Addison, for example, in "The Fairy Way of Writing" (1712) comments on Dryden's use of the term and suggests such stories "entertain his reader's imagination with the characters and actions of persons as have many of them no existence but what he bestows on them," and since they bring back memories of childhood they "favor those secret terrors and apprehensions to which the mind of man is naturally subject" (cited in Sandner 22). At the end of the nineteenth century fantasy literature is especially associated with the Aesthetic movement, and the growth of children's literature. A different world was opened up for the reader in texts such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies*, J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, and in the stories and works of the Scottish writer George MacDonald. Writing about fantasy worlds they mark an escape from the humdrum and tedium of everyday life to other worlds populated by other people and spirits, as well as animals who can talk.

The turn of the twentieth century marked the publication of several critical works on this topic such as Brian Atterbery's *Strategies of Fantasy* (1992), David Sandner's

*Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader* (2004), *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* (2012) and Tabish Khair and Johannes Høglund's *Transnational and Postcolonial Vampires* (2012). Are we to make a distinction between fantasy, the fantastic and the Gothic? Some of the articles in this issue would suggest that is the case, though if we agree with Sandner that "the fundamental characteristic of the fantastic is "displacement" forcing the reader "to experience a lack, a disruption, inviting (if not provoking) an interpretation" (2004: 9), then vampires are also fantasy.

The articles in this issue illustrate many facets of the ambivalence of what we mean by fantasy and the fantastic both in Australia and in a European context. Matthias Stephan provides us with a comprehensive critique of different approaches to and understanding of Fantasy and the fantastic. John Ryan discusses aspects of teaching texts of fantasy in Australia and the problems that ensue with a multicultural group. He also queries whether there is such a thing as Australian fantasy. Articles by Maarten Renes and Helle Bildsøe in some ways provide one answer as they analyse Mudrooroo's use of vampires to exemplify the fantastic, based in part on Indigenous myth and taking us to another world. Taking a fairly recent text, *Legends of Australian Fantasy*, Anne Holden Rønning queries how Australian these texts are, since as John Ryan points out, they are largely based on a European heritage.

Critical theories such as magic realism and the carnivalesque are useful tools for interpreting fantasy and the fantastic. The article by Osama Jarrar on George Macdonald's fairytale, *The Light Princess*, illustrates how using the carnivalesque to critique Victorian social norms and mores adds a new dimension to the interpretation of a fantasy text. Today films, TV series and texts are full of zombies, Gothic figures and extraterrestrial worlds. Janie Conway Herron shows the manner in which Magic Realism subverts the extraordinary in her article on the Australian TV series *The Glitch* (shown late 2015) as it confronts issues of colonial history through dead bodies resurrecting. Alex del Olmo Ramon writes on Spanish zombie films at the time of Franco and the subversive political role they played. Bill Phillips also draws on zombie films in his discussion of Max Brook's *Zombie Wars*, an ecocriticism of contemporary environmental issues.

What role does and should fantasy play in contemporary life? Maybe these articles will give us some indication.