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“Describing the Ocean that is the Literature of the Fantastic”

Review: *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, ed. John Clute, John Grant, St Martin's Griffin, New York 1999, 1079 pp.

The bulky, more than 1000 pages long, *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, edited by John Clute and John Grant, whose 1st edition appeared in 1997, fills a very significant gap in fantasy criticism. Namely, it should be reasonably perceived as the first more scholarly attempt at providing a major and comprehensive work of reference, describing, in the editor's own words “the ocean that is the literature of the fantastic.”¹ Essentially, all other works of reference on the subject up to date — the most notable being, probably (listed here in chronological order), those written or edited by Marshall B. Tymn, Kenneth J. Zahorski and Robert H. Boyer (1979),² Baird Searles, Beth Meacham and Michael Franklin (1982),³ David Pringle (1999)⁴ or — in Poland — Andrzej Sapkowski (2001)⁵ — can hardly be described as academic. They are rather simple guides or popular compendiums, aimed primarily at fans or readers starting their adventure with fantasy literature. They also prove to be relatively limited — both in scope and volume, unavoidably over-selective, and methodologically rarely going beyond simple thematic classifications of the fantastic literature or popular, civilizational and “consensual” notions thereof.

This changes significantly with the publication of *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. John Clute and John Grant, previously known as the editors of the prominent *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*,⁶ invited to cooperation a broad range of contributors, including such distinguished critics, as, by way of example, Brian Attebery, David Pringle, Franz Rotensteiner or Gary K. Wolfe, to mention only a few (it is interesting to remark that *The Encyclopedia* features also a Polish contributor — Krzysztof Sokołowski). This resulted

¹ *Introduction to Encyclopedia...*, p. VII.

² M. Tymn, K.J. Zahorski and R.H. Boyer, *Fantasy Literature. A Core Collection and Reference Guide*, New York-London 1979.

³ B. Searles, B. Meacham, M. Franklin, *A Reader's Guide to Fantasy*, New York 1982.

⁴ *The Ultimate Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, ed. D. Pringle, New York 1998.

⁵ A. Sapkowski, *Rękopis znaleziony w smoczjej jaskini. Kompendium wiedzy o literaturze fantasy*, Warszawa 2001.

⁶ *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, ed. J. Clute, P. Nicholls, New York 1995. Grant was a technical editor of this work.

in a project very ambitious, both in scope and approach. *The Encyclopedia* won Hugo and World Fantasy awards as the best non-fictional work.

Unsurprisingly, *The Encyclopedia* centers on fantastic literature, but it also touches upon the film (mentioning movies as diverse as the Japanese “Godzilla” series and a rather niche Norwegian/Swedish Russian production *The Land of Faraway* directed by Vladimir Grammatikov) and other phenomena of popular culture, more or less directly connected with the main subject, such as role-playing games. Moreover, it provides entries on heterogeneous cultural motifs or mythological figures that surface in the works of contemporary fantasy (for example, “Achilles,” “Galahad,” “mermaids”) or on relevant terms from other fields of scholarly research such as anthropology or various cultural studies (“creative myths,” “icon,” “ritual,” “rite of passage”).

As far as “the fantastic” or “fantasy” literature is concerned, *The Encyclopedia*, which is very commendable, supplies information on a varied collection of literary works, both contemporary and historical, and by no means limited to the “mainstream” of the popular genre. What is especially remarkable — in contradistinction to most of the similar compendiums published in the USA or Great Britain — *The Encyclopedia* includes entries on writers from outside the English speaking world. This concerns not only authors that are classical (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Franz Kafka) or have been extensively translated into English and are relatively well popularized abroad (Gabriel García Márquez, Günter Grass) but, occasionally, also the ones that are less known or culturally “endemic” (Jan Potocki, Milan Kundera, Tommaso Landolfi). This, obviously, does not mean that *The Encyclopedia* cannot be accused of some, rather noticeable and controversial omissions — for example there is no individual entry on the world famous Japanese post-modern writer, Haruki Murakami. There are, also, short essays on several national literatures (including Polish, German, Japanese but also, for example, Lithuanian fantasy).

In addition to numerous “name” or “title” entries, the discussion of popular motifs or topoi surfacing in fantasy literature (and movies) can be also found (“immortality,” “invisibility,” “pirates,” “planetary romance,” “hidden monarch” etc.). *The Encyclopedia* does not refrain from more serious methodological or literary-theoretical discussions, concerning several theoretical (and often confusive) terms, genres or sub-genres of fantasy, or various critical and scholarly standpoints on fantasy literature. Short descriptions of most notable critics writing on the subject (for example Eric Rabkin and Tzvetan Todorov)⁷ are also given as well as facts referring to literary life in general (literary groups such as “Inklings,” literary awards, important publishers etc.).

Two main weaknesses of *The Encyclopedia* have been probably to a large extent unavoidable. Firstly, even such a bulky reference work has to be selective, and, obviously, some of the editors’ choices are subject to criticism (for example the lack of separate entries for the already mentioned Haruki Murakami or the distinguished Japanese anime director Hayao Miyazaki). Secondly, several of the definitions, generic descriptions and critical standpoints also raise controversies. Contemporary fantasy criticism, academic

⁷ It is perhaps regrettable that while Todorov and Rabkin are given separate entries, the research of Polish theorist Andrzej Zgorzelski who presented a theoretical framework at least comparable to that of Todorov’s (it was published in English in *SF Studies*) is not mentioned at all. See, for example, A. Zgorzelski, *Born of the Fantastic*, Gdańsk 2004.

or non-academic, is a sphere of multi-faceted confusion,⁸ and any comprehensive encyclopedia has to, at least partly, reflect that state of affairs. However, it might be argued that Clute and Grant have been a little imprecise and, perhaps, somewhat vague, while sketching out the subject matter of compendium in its introduction. Some of the opinions seem too arbitrary as well. For example, the authors suggest that such diverse writers as Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann, Edgar Allan Poe, Abraham Merritt, Lewis Carroll, Robert Ervin Howard, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, Clive Staples Lewis, Fletcher Pratt or Fritz Leiber constitute a certain centre of the contemporary fantasy tradition, whereas several other authors (Sheridan Le Fanu, or Howard Phillips Lovecraft) are somehow marginal to this “centre.” Obviously, the issue is much more complex. In the description of “genre fantasy” (contributed by Grant himself), in turn, *The Encyclopedia* associates repetitiveness and lack of artistic merit with the whole secondary world fantasy formula. These are just two of the several examples where *The Encyclopedia* might be accused of certain simplifications and overgeneralizations and its tone does not appear sufficiently objective.

The reservations made above should be, however, viewed in the proper context — it is, perhaps, unrealistic to require an utterly satisfying scholarly coherence and methodological competence of any encyclopedia. All in all, *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, as already noted, still remains a very much unique volume, and its position as the most authoritative and comprehensive work of reference in the field of very broadly and interdisciplinary-wise defined fantasy studies seems to be unrivalled. Thus, it should be highly recommended for both readers and researchers of fantasy literature and popular culture in general.

⁸ See, for example, M. Oziewicz, *One Earth, One People. The Mythopeic Fantasy Series of Ursula K. Le Guin, Lloyd Alexander, Madeleine L'Engle and Orson Scott Card*, Jefferson, North Carolina-London 2008, pp. 13–38; comp. G. Trębicki, ‘Kulturowe taksonomie literatury niemietycznej’, *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich* 107, 2011, pp. 269–279.

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Verdict: guilty!

Review: *Terry Pratchett: Guilty of Literature*, ed. Andrew M. Butler, Edward James, Farah Mendlesohn, 2nd edition, Old Earth Books, Baltimore 2004, 343 pp.

Terry Pratchett’s impressive oeuvre — 40 *Discworld* books and over a dozen other novels — and his immense popularity with both adult and not-so-adult readers are oddly counterbalanced by a virtual dearth of critical publications discussing the literary quality of his work. As a writer who has sold over 70 million books in 37 languages and has been knighted for services to literature, Terry Pratchett does deserve some attention on the part of researchers and critics.