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## The Defence of Fantasy

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Review: Brian Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1992, 153 pp.

**Słowa kluczowe:** fantasy, theory of literature, science fiction, American and British Literature, literary criticism

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Brian Attebery, a professor of English at Idaho State University and editor-in-chief of *The Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, is undoubtedly — among such writers as Gary K. Wolfe or Darko Suvin — one of the most prominent figures in American fantasy criticism. *Strategies of Fantasy*, published in 1992 appears, in turn, to be one of his three key studies (the other two being the classical *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature: From Irving to Le Guin*<sup>1</sup> and the recent *Stories about Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth*<sup>2</sup>). It has also probably proved the most influential one as some of the theoretical proposals introduced there have been gladly accepted by many other researchers. At the same time, it also belongs to these seminal studies that are little known in Poland and it definitely has not received in our country the critical reception it certainly deserves.

Despite what the title of the book (or the author himself) may initially suggest, it is more of a collection of essays, linked by the common subject matter (that is fantasy literature) than a single-purpose, structurally-consistent and theoretically-focused monograph in the vein of William Robert Irwin<sup>3</sup>, Tzvetan Todorov<sup>4</sup>, Kathryn Hume<sup>5</sup>, Rosemary Jackson<sup>6</sup> or Farah Mendelsohn<sup>7</sup>. I, by no means, perceive it as the study's weakness and I do not imply that the book does not have

<sup>1</sup> B. Attebery, *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature: From Irving to Le Guin*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1980.

<sup>2</sup> B. Attebery, *Stories about Stories: Fantasy and the Remaking of Myth*, Oxford University Press, New York 2014.

<sup>3</sup> W.R. Irwin, *The Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy*, Urbana, IL, University of Illinois Press 1976.

<sup>4</sup> T. Todorov, *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press 1973.

<sup>5</sup> K. Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis. Responses to Reality in Western Literature*, New York and London, Methuen 1984.

<sup>6</sup> R. Jackson, *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion*, London and New York, Routledge 1991.

<sup>7</sup> F. Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Middletown, Connecticut, Wesleyan University Press 2008.

a clear overall cognitive frame. This frame is introduced quite explicitly by Attebery on the second page of his introduction and may be described as the effort to relate fantasy literature to most recent, mainly postmodern theory and reinterpret it in a more profound and sophisticated way that it seemed plausible previously (especially to the academic opponents of the genre, traditionally regarding it unfit for any serious critical attention). The theoretical texts that Attebery refers to are primarily “Gerard Genette’s analysis of time, Seymour Chatman’s redefinition of character, Bakhtin’s belatedly influential theory of the dialogical nature of the novel, Hirsch and Abel’s identification of primarily feminine patterns of narrative development, structural and post-structural modes of analysis”<sup>8</sup>. As Attebery argues “many of these theories interact quite excitingly with fantasy texts”<sup>9</sup>.

Another impulse behind Attebery’s study seems to be the urge to engage in polemics with the already mentioned opponents of fantasy and prove that — at its best — it can be literature as cognitive and sophisticated as any realistic literature (and in certain respects, perhaps, even more so), and that the neglect and scorn it has received results to a large extent from ignorance and the inadequacy of tools and criteria applied by the academy.

This kind of criticism — sympathetic to the subject of study and engaging in ideological and cultural debate, but at the same time balanced and intellectually refined is quite distanced from more traditional structuralist and formalist positions, emphasizing separateness of the study of literature and literary criticism (as taken, for example, by the author of this review himself), but obviously fits well with contemporary interdisciplinary debate.

The study is divided into eight chapters. Chapter One — Fantasy as Mode, Genre and Formula has probably exerted the greatest impact on the current theoretical and genological discourse. Attebery seems to be one of the few American or English scholars who do not take the term “fantasy literature” for granted, acknowledging its ambiguity, and tries to analyze the confusion shrouding it. As a result, he proposes to distinguish between fantasy as a “mode” (the broadest category, implying a certain creative response to reality), “genre” (a category intermediate between mode and formula, slightly artificial as the author admits himself) and, finally, “formula” (which he perceives as basically commercial product and equals to “secondary world fantasy” repetitive and imitative works). Subsequently, Attebery proposes a very original way of defining the genre of fantasy as a “fuzzy set” — that is, category “defined not by boundaries but by a center”<sup>10</sup>. In other words, he suggests selecting an archetypal fantasy text or texts and describing the whole genre in relation to them. As he suggests, “one way to characterize the genre of fantasy is the set of texts that in some way or other resemble *The Lord of the Rings*”, further specifying that “the works we recognize as fantasy tend to resemble *The Lord of*

<sup>8</sup> B. Attebery, *Strategies...*, p. VIII.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> B. Attebery, *Strategies...*, p. 12.

the *Rings* in three [...] fundamental ways [...] one of these has to do with content, another with structure, and the third with reader response”<sup>11</sup>. Attebery’s theoretical proposals have influenced many other authors, especially Marek Oziwicz<sup>12</sup> and Mendlehsohn<sup>13</sup>. Obviously, Attebery’s ideas are as controversial as any others in the perilous terminological field, but they are definitely worth a thorough reflection on the part of any scholar interested in the very concept of “fantasy genre”<sup>14</sup>.

The whole rest of the book — chapters from 2 to 8 — seems to be much less controversial and, at the same time, extremely insightful. *Chapter Two — Is Fantasy Literature? Tolkien and the Theorists* analyzes the shortcomings of modern criticism that led it to dismissing Tolkien’s work (and fantasy in general). They seem to stem from an incomplete and, in some respects inadequate notions of what literary art exactly is or should be<sup>15</sup>. *Chapter Three — Fantasy and Postmodernism* reflects on certain parallels and differences between fantastic and postmodern ways of expression and also analyzes seminal fantasy works, classical and new, in the light of postmodern theory. The subject of narrative strategies, specific to fantasy, is continued in *Chapter Four — Fantasy and Narrative Conventions: Story* and *Chapter Five. Fantasy and Narrative Conventions: Character*. The conclusion to the first appears especially worth quoting. The author asserts here that by placing questions of memory and fate, cause and effect, invention and experience at the level of story, rather than leaving them at the discretion of a narrator as realistic fiction tends to do, fantasy suggests that they are central to the process of storytelling, and not mere stylistic choices. They operate at the level of narrative code, rather than discourse. A realistic work is merely one that disguises the doubts built into its fictionality. By displaying

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> M. Oziwicz, *One Earth, One People. The Mythopoeic Fantasy Series of Ursula K. Le Guin, Lloyd Alexander, Madelaine L’Engle and Orson Scott Card*, McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers, Jefferson, North Carolina and London 2008.

<sup>13</sup> F. Mendlesohn, op. cit. Elaborating on Attebery’s concept Mendlesohn proposes four different “fuzzy sets” to define the four major categories of fantasy literature as she perceives them. See G. Trębicki, *Narratologiczna taksonomia fantasy: propozycje teoretycznoliterackie Farah Mendlehsohn*, “Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich”, t. LVII, zeszyt 1 (113) 2014, pp. 107–117.

<sup>14</sup> As a genologist, I am personally quite fond of Attebery’s concept of fantasy as a mode but I remain sceptical of his definitions of fantasy a genre and a formula, as they do not, on the whole, create a coherent genological system. Also, the idea of “fuzzy set”, although may be useful at times for strictly practical reasons of grouping texts, seems to be completely adiachronical and thus cannot reflect the evolution of a possible genre. It is also, in my opinion, too arbitrary and dependent on a particular “selector’s” subjective choices.

<sup>15</sup> The ideas presented in this chapter were later interestingly relied on and continued by Oziwicz in his study (Oziwicz, op. cit). See G. Trębicki, *Fantasy Literature and the Twentieth Century Mythological Revival. Marek Oziwicz’s “One World, One People”, “Extrapolation”, v. 54, no. 1 (Spring 2013), pp. 122–125.*

rather than suppressing the arbitrariness of narrative choices, fantasy can breathe new life into its own conventions<sup>16</sup>.

*Chapter Six — Women's Coming of Age in Fantasy* offers an interesting gender-focused analysis of some fantasy works. *Chapter Seven* discusses the sub-genre of science fantasy, which, according to Attebery, in the hands of a skillful writer, is capable of enhancing both fantastic modes. Finally, *Chapter Eight — Recapturing the Modern World for the Imagination* discusses fantasy works set in mimetic reality and cognitive implications of this literary operation.

Throughout the whole study Attebery proves a talented close reader, supporting his ideas with insightful discussions of a wide range of fantasy texts and often shedding new light on particular plots and characters that have apparently received more than enough attention by other writers. If not for any other reason, the book is definitely worth reading for these interpretations alone.

Due to a wide range of issues undertaken and its cognitive merit Attebery's study is an obligatory reading for all scholars interested in contemporary fantasy literature, regardless of their methodological attitudes or specific interests. As it is written in a friendly and engaging manner, it might be also appreciated by more ambitious fantasy fans who, thanks to it, might better understand their favorite books.

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<sup>16</sup> B. Attebery, *Strategies...*, p. 68.

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## **Once Upon a Time...**

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**Słowa kluczowe:** mit, baśń, feministyczna krytyka literacka, współczesna literatura kobieca

**Keywords:** myth, fairy tale, feminist literary criticism, contemporary women's fiction

Susan Sellers is a British author, translator, editor and novelist<sup>1</sup>. She is Professor of English and Related Literature at the University of St. Andrews and co-editor of the Cambridge University Press edition of Virginia Woolf's works. Her work entitled *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (2001) is a study concentrating on the way how women write and rewrite myth. The author

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<sup>1</sup> <https://susansellers.wordpress.com/> (access: 31.07.2016).