Chapter Ten

Contemplating Otherness: Imagining the Future in Speculative Fiction

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The exploration of otherness and difference has always been one of the defining characteristics of science fiction. Populating the imaginary space of the future with different possible paradigms of subjectivity and social organization affords a tantalizing opportunity to challenge and re-envision traditional power structures. Science fiction's exploration of how the impact of technology may reconfigure concepts of what is 'naturally' human, 'provides concrete, material externalisations for metaphors of alterity' (Roberts 2000, 168), particularly in the figures of the cyborg and the extraterrestrial. Such alien figures have the potential to effect a radical destabilization of conservative ways of knowing, performing, and regulating identity while suggesting alternative discourses of identity and power relations.

In such a turbulent arena of contested possibilities and power relations, the child may function as a liminal figure occupying the territory between the past and the future, nature and culture, continuity and change. Kay Sambell has argued that 'the child as an emblem of hope for the future, capable of transforming and transcending adult mores, and the image of the child as helpless victim are often held in acute tension in dystopian writing for young readers' (2004, 252). In young adult science fiction, the adolescent search for identity and potential for resistance to adult authority is embedded in adults' ambivalent attitudes towards young people's engagement with advanced knowledges and mastery over new technologies. In an increasingly relativistic and technological world, the potential of youth for attaining personal and political empowerment is counterparted by deep anxieties concerning the viability of conventional concepts of what it means to be human. The new challenge of

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biotechnological advances, such as cloning and genetic engineering, serves as a metaphor for the changing adolescent body; however, the subsequent collision between nature, nurture, and sophisticated technologies provides for an exploration of new ways in which identity, gender, the body, childhood, and human nature might be performed. As Dennis Wilson Wise has noted, science fiction has always been 'open to a decentered and fragmented self [. . . and] it also allows greater opportunity for the subject to navigate the various contexts that shape it' (2008, 290).

Science fiction as a genre has resisted easy classification or definition, although Darko Suvin's argument that science fiction's 'necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition' (1995, 37) has been very influential. For Suvin, a science fiction story revolves around a scientific or technological 'novum'—robots, time travel, terraforming—which is different from the contemporary real world. The existence of this novum makes the fictional world both unfamiliar and recognizable yet intrinsically logical. The structural component of the novum with all its attendant challenge to and destabilization of normalizing attitudes and systems renders science fiction a powerful literature of cognitive estrangement, based upon the premise 'what if'. This process of cognitive dissonance, the presence and negotiation of otherness, is intertwined with science fiction's potential to challenge its audience to consider alternative speculative societies and to think critically about the contemporary world, with the subsequent possibility of acting upon and changing that world.

Children's science fiction is problematized by the necessary level of complex cognitive demands on the audience and by the dystopian dimension of many imagined futures; for example, it is difficult to implement the full stimulating range of the novum or to involve a high degree of 'hard' science or 'thought experiments' in light of children's less sophisticated understanding and experience of technological discourses and mathematical knowledge. Applying John Clute and John Grant's theory (1997, 804, 942) that science fiction novels follow a continuum of cognitive dissonance, narrative resolution, and sociopolitical consequence, Farah Mendlesohn (2004) contends that there is a scarcity of fiction for children which would fully satisfy this narrative structure. Instead, she argues that use of quasi-scientific scenarios in science fiction for children and teenagers deals with the resolution of personal issues within the domestic arena of the family and in romantic relationships—rather than directing the young reader towards more macro-level transformation of both themselves and the globalized political sphere. She concludes that 'children's science fiction seems to be limiting itself in some cases through an insistence on didacticism, in other cases because of a perceived need to reassure children that the universe is stable, safe, and just' (2004, 286).

Science fiction writers for young people are challenged by the need to provide alternative possibilities and render them accessible and meaningful to a young and less experienced audience. While science fiction has always been

politically committed with the creation of new worlds informed by the concerns of contemporary society, recent Irish children's science fiction offers an intriguing rewriting of the fantastic past and traditional folklore. It evolves a flexible and compelling paradigm for sustaining this delicate balance through the juxtaposition of the fantastic and the futuristic, tradition and technology. This is achieved through a hybrid genre of science fantasy that merges fantasy narratives with science fiction.

For many science fiction readers, Suzanne Elizabeth Reid argues that the mix of science fiction and fantasy is 'uncomfortable, taking rationalists closer to the boundary between logic and imagination and threatening the comfort of readers who seek escape from literal reality. The most successful writers of science fantasy, however, have been able to stretch the parameters of both kinds of minds, a feat to be admired' (1998, 152). Irish writer Gerard Whelan's *Out of Nowhere* (1999) juxtaposes the appearance of characters from another dimension alongside fantasy elements from Irish folklore, while Michael Carroll's *Moonlight* (1993) depicts the resurrection of the mythical unicorn through the biotechnology of cloning. The secondary worlds of writers such as Kate Thompson and Oisín McGann explore the emancipatory yet destabilizing effects of secret experiments and government conspiracies in dystopian futures. Eoin Colfer's *Artemis Fowl* series (2001 onwards) also combines magical creatures from Ireland's fairy past with the advanced weaponry, globalized politics, and technological impulses of science fiction adventure; however, Conor Kostick offers a re-evaluation of traditional systems of defining and regulating subjectivity by intertwining feudalistic fantasy role-playing games with the exploration of digitized bodies and identities in *Epic* (2004), *Saga* (2006), and *Edda* (2010). The subsequent collision between inherited knowledge from the fantastic past, mythology, and new technologies provides a stimulating arena for exploring new ways in which gender, the body, and human nature might be imagined and performed.

Ambivalence about the competing systems of myth and science is embedded in recent Irish children's speculative fiction, such as the shape-changing Myunan tribe in McGann's *Archisan Tales* (2004–2005), Thompson's 'Shifter' characters, and Kostick's exploration of the adoption and performance of digital identities. Alice R Bell asserts that

> stories that argue for a mix of science and myth for more holistic understanding reflect less a dislike of technology, more a sense that it is not enough. They draw on images of the child as a boundary object between generations. These narratives may be ambivalent about both myth and science and comfortable with such insecure identities that refuse to settle on a single truth. (2009, 18)

The potential of shape-shifting for questioning the integrity of the self is inseparable from a sense of curiosity and anxiety about the nature of embodiment

and identity. Of course, ambivalence is always experienced in the transition from childhood to adulthood.

The new forms of embodiment that emerge through the experience of bodily metamorphosis, however, are often disruptive and even perceived as monstrous, as they threaten the stability of the self. Clare Bradford has noted the particular tensions and potential for disjunction that narratives of metamorphosis possess:

> They hover between two timescales (that of the 'real world' in which characters and events occur, and of the mysterious moment outside time when metamorphosis occurs), and between two models of spatiality—the realistic settings in which characters and events are located, and the mythic significances with which these settings are inscribed. (2001, 155)

This juxtaposition of atemporal and contemporary timeframes, as well as the deployment of both mythic and realistic modes of narrative, seems to be a common thread in recent Irish children's science fiction. Many critics have noted the simultaneous allure and the anxiety aroused by the presence of hybrid forces such as the werewolf and the vampire. These creatures straddle both mythic and historical dimensions, blurring the boundaries between animal and human, night and day, alive and dead. KA Nuzum summarizes, effectively, this complex ambivalence about such otherness: 'while we yearn for a resolution in the narrative that will reconstitute historic time and human normalcy, we simultaneously crave the experience of mythic and liminal with all of their accompanying liberties and dangers' (2004, 225).

This ambivalent yearning for the emancipatory yet unsettling power of the fantastic dominates Thompson's fiction. It is concerned with 'the meaning of the word "human" and with the rights and responsibilities that are attached to it' (Dunbar 2007, 136). In the *Switchers* (1994–1999) and the *Missing Link* (2000–2003) trilogies, Thompson deploys metamorphosis to raise questions about notions of the 'real', the 'natural' and the 'normal' (1994, 24). The 'wild blood' inherited by her Shifter protagonists from their fairy lineage forces them to choose between the different forms of existence they assume or the limitations of human experience. Her shape-shifting characters determine that people are 'looking for something. . . . There's nothing left to believe in and people wants [sic] something new' (1998, 91). Their hunger for social and psychological sustenance, however, is not relieved through inhabiting new or forward-looking viewpoints but, instead, by replicating existing familiar structures and concepts of humanity. Similarly, the genetically modified characters in the *Missing Link* series call their isolated farm Fourth World, in the hope that it promises a new transformative order. However, when they are confronted with the dilemma of how to align themselves in terms of commonality and difference, they ultimately decide on a comforting but complacent hegemonic platform of shared identity rather than exploring new possibilities.

Thompson's distinctive mixture of the realistic and the fantastic enables her to elegantly explore the impact of memory, heritage, cultural belonging, and hopes for the future. Her humanist ideology limits any real transformation or radical revisioning of the conservative power relations determining identity or society politics. In their quest for origins, her characters swing like pendulums within the regulated confines of reactionary paradigms of human/animal, natural/technological, nostalgic past/menacing future; however, they never question or propose alternatives to these binary conventions. While her 2006 novel, *The Fourth Horseman*, addresses the challenging topics of contemporary global terrorism and genetic experimentation, this ostensibly radical novel is undermined by a complacent and nostalgic sensibility. Thompson's juxtaposition of the biblical story of the Apocalypse with that of a virus designed to target certain races and marginal groups is ultimately unconvincing and politically passive. This is evident in the text's distrust of advancements in techno-science that are not rooted in the organic world: 'outside was Victorian Britain, red-brick, the remnants of a forgotten agriculture. Inside was cutting-edge genetic engineering' (2006, 60). Throughout this novel, Thompson also chooses not to address how concepts of national identity or contemporary issues of globalization may play a role in the power relations of the novel. Instead, she occludes any sense of local or cultural differences by presenting a standardized view of humanity's shared curse of curiosity. The novel concludes with the up-to-that-point dynamic protagonist musing that as long as no one is so stupid and arrogant as to succumb to the attraction of opening Pandora's Box of taboo scientific knowledge, 'the apocalypse will stay where it belongs. Somewhere in the future' (2006, 250).

This resistance to, and suspicion of, the alienating and destructive nature of technological knowledge, however, is counterparted by Thompson's deep affinity with the creative arts, especially storytelling and Irish traditional music, which provides an intertextual framework for her fiction. In her imagined Ireland, the power of music that spans and connects different times, species and places, was originally given by the fairy folk to humans. Yet even this metaphor for the potential of creative metamorphosis and self-expression is denied, as inherited songs may only be sung and played by each new generation and not reinterpreted, extended, or bettered by human artists.

In the *New Policeman* trilogy (2005–2009), the chronotopic device of the 'timeskin', a two-way permeable membrane both separating and linking the human sphere with Tír na nÓg, the mythical and timeless land of youth, allows her to play with concepts of alterity. However, the existence of this magical portal also conveniently allows her to maintain a conservative and politically passive status quo: while the worlds of magical and mortal experience coexist, this does not necessarily lead to an exchange of perspectives between the inhabitants of these worlds. Nevertheless, she is more committed in this series to charting the layering and sedimentation of history, culture, and individual identity. She depicts the collision of the timeless land of mythological heroism

with an increasingly self-destructive, technologically reliant, and alienating modern Irish world, rather than actually interrogating the ongoing nostalgic hunger for an Arcadian Celtic past.

The most recent novel in this series, *The White Horse Trick* (2009), presents a 'natural' end to a consumerist Ireland, which brought about its own doom through a lack of respect for both its past and the organic world. In Thompson's novel, the island of Ireland experiences the devastating effects of global warming and flooding at the end of the twenty-first century; however, only a few privileged refugees have access, through the timeskin, to immortality in Tír na nÓg. The energy and urgency of these few quickly dissolve into a quasi-sedated state; their potentially revolutionary energy is tranquilized by lazy contentment and a lack of mortal concerns. These refugees bring only a tiny fragment of human civilization with them. It is significant that out of this flotsam, only songs and musical instruments are considered worthy of salvage. Thompson touches on provocative issues: ecopolitics, the treatment of refugees, and the possibility of stopping a dystopian future. However, her view of history and the universe as cyclical, and her didactic and trans-historical concept of human nature, ultimately refutes any real suggestion of political transformation of Irish society or dynamic re-evaluations of traditional regimes of power. Instead the reader is left, in Jo Holmwood's words, with 'a romanticised sense of the inevitable' (2009, 43). The story of Adam and Eve, who, in the text, are descended from Irish refugees who escaped into Tír na nÓg, engenders the cycle in which humanity keeps making the same mistakes.

Eoin Colfer shares a similar concern with consumerist technologies that lead to environmental waste. His depiction of feisty fairies imbued with technological ingenuity offers, in his *Artemis Fowl* series, a far less ambivalent reimagining of traditional fantasy tropes, Irishness, and Celtic folklore than does Thompson's. The series, which Colfer describes as '*Die Hard* with fairies' (Maguire 2001), is woven with intertextual references to comic books, computer games, and *film noir*. His witty deployment of the fairies, alongside the technologically saturated criminal world inhabited by the Irish anti-hero Artemis Fowl, results in a 'modern, technological version of the fairy tale' (O'Reilly 2007). Colfer updates the leprechaun, a traditional figure in Irish folklore, to the dynamic 'LEPrecon': a Lower Elements Police Reconnaissance agent, who is laden with technical wonders, as well as possessing traditional magical powers. There is, also, lightness of touch in his deployment of characters from world mythology: he names his anti-hero Artemis after the Greek goddess of hunting, and the impetuous French teenager, Minerva, from the Roman goddess of wisdom.

Colfer's interweaving of literary and mythological sources has contributed towards the international success of this series; however, his effective standardization of the books' language, characters, and settings erodes any distinctive sense of Irishness. While Artemis is explicitly represented as a scion of an Irish criminal dynasty, inhabiting a modernized Norman castle, Celia Keenan states

that 'all sense of the national and local have been eradicated [from the series]. Speech rhythms are entirely mid-Atlantic. No Hiberno-English or Wexford usages are evident. Landscape has become virtual' (2007, 27). Furthermore, there is also an erasure of racism or intercultural tensions within the fairy world and the human world, and between both. Although Artemis's adventures are situated in such exotic locales as the Arctic, South America, and Africa, any potential for linguistic diversity or the recognition of ethnic, national, or local difference are elided by the fairies' ability to speak all human languages and the humans' speech, which is always in American English.

Throughout the series, Colfer focuses instead on celebrating the empowering and pleasurable aspects of drawing upon the fantastic and the technological. His protagonists are always pragmatic and comfortable users of whatever science or magic is at their disposal, without ever questioning the ethics or underlying power relations involved. Respect for the natural world is maintained, despite the actions of Colfer's comically extravagant villains: Opal Kobi experiments on animals to gain enzymes in order to maximize her own magic powers; gluttonous Extinctionists judge the animal world for 'crimes against humanity' (2008, 236) and exterminate inconvenient creatures by eating the last of their species. By the fifth book in the series, *Artemis Fowl and the Lost Colony* (2006), the successful reconciliation of magic and science is complete as various characters—human, demon, or fairy—accept that conservative understandings of physics should be expanded to recognize that magic is just another available form of energy.

In *Artemis Fowl and the Lost Colony* and *Artemis Fowl and the Time Paradox* (2008), Colfer offers the tantalizing possibility of challenging traditional notions of bodily and psychic identity. He blurs the boundary between the human and supernatural: when Artemis travels through time, he manages to appropriate energy that enables him to temporarily become a magical creature. This blurring of boundaries is extended even further when he and Holly—a fairy—tentatively hover on the edge of romance. The couple is permanently altered by an experience in which they merge physically and psychological while travelling through the time tunnel: in swapping eyes so they each possess one human and one fairy eye, they literally swap perspectives. However, this potential for personal transformation and for mutual insight into their respective Other is immediately downplayed. This experience is diffused for the sake of sustaining the fast-paced momentum of the plot and a reassuring, linear concept of selfhood, undisturbed by any real extended engagement or negotiation with otherness.

In the opening chapters of the first book, Artemis's desire to translate and master the knowledge held within the fairy book he acquires represents the most significant depiction in the series of an effort to understand another's viewpoint, but even this is underdeveloped. Instead, Colfer focuses on developing Artemis and Holly's relationship, which, though initially turbulent, soon becomes equitable. Ultimately, his presentation of the parallel human

and fairy worlds is more concerned with piquing the reader's curiosity, thereby compelling them to consume further books in the series, rather than interrogating how concepts of identity and alterity may be explored.

Unlike Thompson's and Colfer's notions of the otherness of the Celtic past, which are ultimately hegemonic and stable, McGann's dystopian stories problematize and deconstruct clear-cut approaches to the power relations between humans and technology and humans and the natural world. McGann's speculative fiction offers a greater degree of cognitive engagement than does Thompson's lyrical and passive stance and Colfer's preoccupation with the unreflective momentum of adventure. McGann confronts his readers with politically darker and more psychologically alienated secondary worlds in which there are no easy answers or sentimental resolutions.

While his early novel *The Harvest Tide Project* (2004) may appear narratively uncomplicated, its treatment of the Myunan tribe's ability to shape-shift suggests a sensitivity to both the productive and destructive aspects of technology, because the Myunans are dependent on their tools to enable them achieve the full range of their metamorphic abilities. In the sequel, *Under Fragile Stone* (2005), McGann balances the empowering ability of technology to aid transformation with an accompanying vulnerability: an exorcist priest spiritually purifies and sterilizes the wild spirit of the sacred land of the Myunans with scientific equipment that channels his god's power. The interweaving of the fantastic and the mechanical suggests a more sophisticated and inclusive way of thinking than does the upholding of binary systems of identity.

Similarly, in the 2004 novel *The Gods and Their Machines*, McGann does not flinch from engaging with issues of religious zealotry, terrorism, and how fundamentalists for their own ends may use technology. The novel's protagonists struggle to become more than unthinking pawns in the conflict. The memories of dead martyrs are channelled through a technological form of brainwashing into the minds of soon-to-be suicide bombers. These supernaturally possessed figures that have been scientifically manipulated are rumoured to possess the disturbing power of 'mortiphas'. This subverts comfortable assumptions of the boundary between life and death. McGann effectively exposes the self-gratifying illusions of a hegemonic society that maintains its sense of 'natural' control through the marginalization of Other voices, spaces, and experiences. This is evident when Riadni, from Bartokhrin, challenges Chamus, a citizen of nearby powerful Altima, which seeks to subordinate and colonize its neighbouring country: 'I've never heard of the Fringelands. What are they on the fringe of? . . . Bartokhrin's twice the size of Altima. . . . How can we be on *your* edge?' (2004, 109). As Farah Mendlesohn states, the novel is 'about the way in which we turn others into aliens in our minds' (2009, 168–169).

In the dystopian *Small-Minded Giants* (2006), McGann focuses on the physical dimensions of human existence and how the experience of occupying a particular time and space constitutes a sense of embodied identity, which can be both dynamic and static. After some unspecified natural disaster, the

last group of humans are reliant on the gargantuan Machine running the domed city in which they live. All human activities are organized to run in a clockwise motion to maintain the maximum production of energy for this Machine. While dissidents and saboteurs are deemed 'cancer' or 'rot' (2006, 192), and the city's leaders prize technology above the inhabitants, society itself slowly stagnates from a lack of creative thought and intellectual or political curiosity. When the Machine inevitably breaks down from neglect and the deterioration of the scientific knowledge and skills necessary for its upkeep, the citizens actively choose to restart it by retracing their routine paths around the city landscape as an assertive gesture of their engagement with this technology: 'Cos *yes*, we're cogs in a machine—but it's *our* machine. It won't work without us' (2006, 253).

McGann's earlier works do not explicitly invoke any reference to Irishness or the Irish experience. However, his recent steampunk novels, *Ancient Appetites* (2007) and its sequel *The Wisdom of Dead Men* (2009), posit an alternate history of Europe and Ireland and re-imagine Ireland not as colonized but as a competitive and privileged part of the Victorian imperial project. In this alternate nineteenth-century society, members of the fabulously rich Irish Wildensterns, like other ruling European families such as the Bismarcks and Medicis, are physiologically hardier and stronger than standard *Homo sapiens*, with the ability to accelerate their own healing through contact with the alchemical metal gold. Against a backdrop of the Darwinian doctrine of the survival of the fittest, and a racial hierarchy that traditionally represented the Irish race as inferior and more childlike than the British people (Curtis 1997), the novels chronicle the interplay between power and powerlessness, secrets of the past and futuristic knowledge. Their strict Rules of Ascension allow the members of the Wildenstern family to assassinate each other in order to gain pre-eminence. When medieval Wildensterns are excavated from their state of suspended animation within the liminal space of the Irish bog, the delicate balance of power is thrown into chaos, as these ruthless ancestors assert their right to primacy within the family and the larger political arena.

While McGann's Wildensterns and engimals—mysterious machines with animal-like qualities—attempt to assert their 'superior' identity in a Victorian setting, Conor Kostick creates a futuristic world, where identity formation is mediated through technology. Kostick's trilogy, *Epic*, *Saga*, and *Edda*, goes far in dismantling traditional concepts of embodiment and subjectivity in the polyphonic and transformative terrain of cyberspace. While Michael Scott's *Gemini Game* (1993) presents the allure of virtual existence, game play, and the potential for exploring diverse identities, it does not address these with any real sophistication or cognitive complexity. In contrast, Kostick's exploration of the digital figure of the avatar, and its postmodern challenge to conventions of the body, gender, and culture, emphasizes the ongoing *process* of construction and performance involved in identity formation, rather than presenting humanity as fixed and unitary, as Thompson and Colfer do.

Kostick's exploration of the transformative potential of technology necessitates a broader context than that of Irishness. His commitment is to an active engagement with diversity in the cautionary tale of the settler/colonizer society in *Epic*. This society is creatively and politically stagnant as a result of its overdependence on the feudalistic role-playing game that determines its economy and social hierarchy. The game had originally been intended as a temporary entertainment device to entertain a group of colonists on their long space journey to another colony; it was also designed to serve as a tool for conflict resolution, where humans would confront each other in a virtual arena as an alternative to physically fighting. However, over centuries the active and constructive nature of this game has been subverted into a conditioning regime for maintaining an unjust status quo. This diasporic group is torn between re-enacting the old cultural regime of its planet of origins and the challenge of creating a different and more egalitarian society in their new homeland.

Although the overarching computer game is embedded in a medieval hierarchical social structure, Kostick's protagonists have the opportunity to rework their cultural inheritance and transcend any hegemonic sense of national, ethnic, gender, or class subjectivities. Nadia Crandall has traced intriguing parallels between nineteenth-century Gothic fiction and children's cyberfiction, arguing that they both share a common 'transgressive chronotope' (2008, 40), wherein characters act out and often enjoy forbidden behaviours such as erotic, violent, and aggressive actions. Crandall notes that the use of ancient backdrops and Gothic settings such as castles, wastelands, and mazes is 'omnipresent not only in computer games but also in cyberfiction [. . . , as] they represent the complexities of the mind in thinly veiled metaphors' (2008, 42). This convergence of Gothic and speculative fiction tropes, with the attendant layering of time, and enhanced by Kostick's rewriting of the classical myth of *The Odyssey* in *Edda*, creates a richly intertextual frame for his series.

Kostick's exploration of what constitutes subjectivity raises many stimulating questions about how embodiment and technology may provide diverse platforms for the performance of identity. Virtual-reality technologies disrupt distinctions between inner and outer worlds and conservative notions of national and local influences, because digitized identities become detached from materially bound, historically specific spaces. Alienation and displacement are evident in the opening page of *Epic*, where the protagonist Erik's mother announces to her dismayed family that she is 'dead' (2004, 7). Although it quickly becomes apparent that it is her online persona that has been killed, this blurring of the real and the digital effectively sets the context for the destabilization of identity in the novel and its sequel, *Saga*. Erik's choice of a female avatar is in radical defiance of the usual utilitarian thinking involved in choosing a game persona; this sets in motion the challenging exploration of the ethics, politics, powers, and responsibilities of virtual experience in the series. This question, whether a human has the right to kill, is answered in

Saga with the creation of Defiance: the first interspecies guild, which establishes a successful platform for collaborative and mutually respectful dialogue between humanity and technology-based sentient life.

Although the novels of Thompson and Colfer appear to be similarly concerned with addressing issues of alterity through metamorphoses and futuristic encounters between both humans and the fantastic Other, and between the inherited past and the speculative future, both authors, ultimately, conform to conventional and didactic ideas of how national and human identity is constituted. Their novels briefly acknowledge liminal moments when their young protagonists are caught between emancipatory engagement with alterity and the pressure of responding to inherited regimes of knowledge and power. However, their imagined futures ultimately maintain normative systems for defining and regulating identity in traditional binary configurations.

This is in sharp contrast to the provocative scenarios of Kostick and McGann, which suggest how experiences of subjectivity and community may be reconstituted through the process of cognitive estrangement. While their narratives are infused with fantastic tropes, the novels of both writers share a political engagement with destabilizing hegemonic concepts of the natural and the alien. The multiple ways of knowing and being in their works allow for the imaginative re-evaluation and interrogation of inherited regimes of knowledge and the fantastic past. Kostick and McGann demonstrate a deep respect for their young readers and their ability to respond to complex and dense ideas. Their works consistently invite considerations that challenge didactic and hegemonic binaries. Both authors successfully and powerfully fulfil the elusive promise of authentic science fiction for young audiences: they offer enriching encounters with difference that afford a crucial space for critical reflection, speculation, and revision of self, society, and Other.

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