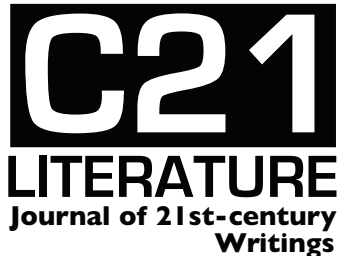




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ARTICLE

How 'the Old Stories Persist': Folklore in Literature after Postmodernism

Sara Helen Binney

School of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing, GB

s.binney@uea.ac.uk

As twenty-first-century fiction constructs its identity, it must negotiate the inheritance of postmodernism. This article examines a particular strand of postmodernism's legacy: that of the fairy tale reworkings which were so popular and so influential with writers considered post-modern. I will examine two related shifts apparent in twenty-first-century fiction: from the fairy tale to folklore, and from magic or the marvellous to the Todorovian fantastic. Rather than working with the fairy tales popularised by the Grimms and Disney, recent fictions are engaging with a broader range of folkloric narrative forms: I define the works which do this as folklore-inflected fictions. This change is formally linked to the shift into the fantastic, which I will explore through two recent novels: John Burnside's *A Summer of Drowning* (2011) and Eowyn Ivey's *The Snow Child* (2012). These novels create the fantastic differently, but both use a constellation of folklore, landscape, dreams, and hallucinations to maintain the Todorovian hesitation. Their use of the fantastic is part of the broader move towards a renegotiation of realism which has been emerging in recent fiction and criticism; this article shows how folklore-inflected fictions fit in to this larger trend.

Keywords: folklore; fairy tale; fantastic; narrative; post-modernism; fiction; novel

Postmodernism in its various iterations – its 'fragments, hybridity, relativism, play, parody, pastiche, [its] ironic, sophisticated stance' (Hassan 2015: 16) – has been dying, if not dead, for decades. Josh Toth claims that '[t]he deathwatch began [...] as early as the mid-1980s' (Toth 2010: 2), and Linda Hutcheon famously sounded the final death-knell in 2002. Since then, attempts have been made to name the literature of the twenty-first century in terms of its postmodernist heritage: terms from 'post-post-modernism' (Nicoline Timmer 2010) to 'late postmodernism' (Jeremy Green 2005)

describe contemporary literature as working with, rather than against, postmodernism's legacy. At the same time, there are those who claim that 'things really have changed in the twenty-first century' (Adiseshiah and Hildyard 2013: 2). For them, the continued focus on contemporary fiction's postmodernist heritage 'unhelpfully obscures influences, challenges, and precursors that are at least as important for current literary practices' (Vermeulen 2015: 14).¹ Different strands of fiction today are either rejecting the inheritance left to it by postmodernism, or accepting it and seeking to develop aspects of postmodernism further.

At least one strand of literature is doing both. The fairy tale is being reassessed by contemporary novelists who, while largely rejecting postmodernist strategies, have accepted the postmodernist heritage of the fairy tale form. As Cristina Bacchilega, Stephen Benson, and others have shown, postmodernist writers rewrote fairy tales prolifically, to the point that these writers became 'the fairy tale generation' (Benson 2008: 2). From Robert Coover's *Prickongs and Descants* (1969), through Angela Carter's iconic *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) and Margaret Atwood's *Bluebeard's Egg* (1983), to Sara Maitland's 'Wicked Stepmother's Lament' (1996), 'fairy tales in the second half of the twentieth century [...] enjoyed an explosive popularity' (Bacchilega 1997: 2). Work by these writers, as well as by Salman Rushdie, A S Byatt, and others, is postmodernist in its desire simultaneously to inhabit and to critique old forms. Carter famously claimed that 'I am all for putting new wine into old bottles, especially if it makes the old bottles explode' (Carter 1997: 37), and in her own works she brought out the violence and sexuality she saw as latent in the 'old bottles' of fairy tales. For a new generation of critics and scholars today, however, such new and exciting revisions have become accepted and expected. This is partly through the simple process of time passing: Nicoline Timmer sees that 'as a cluster of ideas and assumptions, postmodern thinking and writing functions as a "background" or cultural setting' to contemporary writers' work (2010: 13); even for those who are attempting to reject some of postmodernism's claims or aesthetics, 'postmodernism

¹ Vermeulen is writing here of the influence of 'a modernist impulse' (Vermeulen 2015: 14) on contemporary fiction, and the need for current criticism to rebalance itself away from the influence of postmodernism; this is something Adiseshiah and Hildyard, too, see as an influence.

always remains present as a premise and a background against which [contemporary] novels position their attempts to move beyond it' (Huber 2014: 216). The same is true for fairy tale retellings: even '[c]hildren in the early decades of the twenty-first century may very well be exposed to *Shrek* films, DreamWorks' parodies of Disney, before viewing what baby boomers would consider fairy-tale "classics"' (Bacchilega 2013: 12). Because of this, twenty-first-century retellers of fairy tales are writing from a particular position between past inheritance and present concerns: not only do they use fairy-tale and folkloric narrative in ways which show that they have learned the lessons of postmodernism and are therefore, in the most literal sense, post-postmodernists – the descendants of the fairy-tale generation – but the texts they produce are also firmly of the twenty-first-century, and exhibit the aesthetics and preoccupations which critics are beginning to delineate as particular to now, specifically a renegotiation of realism and the fantastic.

Fantastic Settings

Representative of this renegotiation are Alaskan writer Eowyn Ivey's first novel, *The Snow Child* (2012), and *A Summer of Drowning* (2011), by the Scottish poet and novelist John Burnside. *A Summer of Drowning* retells the Scandinavian legend of the huldra, a creature in the shape of a woman who seduces men into drowning; *A Snow Child* is based on the Russian folktale 'Snegurochka', mediated through Arthur Ransome's English translation 'The Little Daughter of the Snow'. Both novelists move away from the use of magic common to many postmodern fairy-tale revisions and instead use their folkloric intertexts to create a form of the Todorovian fantastic. In fantastic texts, 'two distinct levels of reality are represented. One is our everyday world, ruled by laws of reason and convention, and the other is the supernatural, or that which is inexplicable according to our logic' (Chanady 1983: 5). While 'our logic' may, depending on the individual or culture encompassed by 'our', include elements of the supernatural, in *A Summer of Drowning*, *The Snow Child*, and other recent novels there is a clear division set up between rationalism on the one side and magic on the other. This can be seen most clearly through the worlds in which the two novelists set their narratives, which are described in terms chosen to create a sense of rationalist realism. Both novels are based firmly in a precise location in the far

north – the Norwegian island of Kvaløya in *A Summer of Drowning*, and the frontier territory of 1920s Alaska in *The Snow Child*.² When Burnside's narrator describes a journey across her island, she says:

We went out to the end of the earth today. It isn't far, just a short drive to the far side of Kvaløya, then over the bridge and the causeway, out to the furthest point on Hillesøy, where we always find *kråkebolle*, half-smashed on the rocks, powder green and white, or touched with pale blush pink. (Burnside 2012: 240–1, original emphasis)

This visual, colourful description of local wildlife is touristic: the italicised Norwegian word for sea urchin, *kråkebolle*, and the directions given in the preceding lines imply a reader who knows neither the language nor how to move through the landscape. While this is in fact how one would travel from Kvaløya to Hillesøy, it is the description's realism, not its reality, which is important. The initial whimsy of calling the place 'the end of the earth' is punctured by the mundane directions. The visual details are also in keeping with realist description, and are something Ivey makes use of in *The Snow Child*, too, although Ivey's sense of realism is not in the same touristic vein. Mabel documents the local plant life in quasi-scientific terms in the letters she sends back to her family, describing 'wild roses, simple with five pink petals and prickly stems; geraniums, their thin petals lavender with deeper purple veins' (Ivey 2012: 366) and many more. These letters, as well as the drawings Mabel includes, are considered to be 'the frontier equivalent of an Italian master studying human anatomy' (Ivey 2012: 259); she is creating a true depiction of something no-one from her culture has ever seen before. By tapping in to the old-fashioned language of early sci-

² Northern wildernesses, particularly in Scotland and Scandinavia, are common settings for contemporary rewritings of folkloric narratives. As well as *A Summer of Drowning*, Cecilia Ekbäck makes use of Scandinavia: *Wolf Winter* (2015) revolves around Blackåsen Mountain, in Swedish Lapland, said to have housed spirits for generations. The Scottish mainland has housed the devil (in Burnside's *The Devil's Footprints* (2008)) and witches (in Susan Fletcher's *Corrag* (2010)), but its islands and the seas around them are where the folklore is most prolific. Amy Sackville makes use of the selkies in the seas around Orkney in her novel of that name; Susan Fletcher's fishman in *The Silver Dark Sea*, (2012) and Jess Richards' folklore-inspired characters in *Snake Ropes* (2012), all inhabit imagined islands and their seas.

ence, with its empirical claims, Ivey underlines the realism of her setting. With their touristic and frontier-scientific descriptions, both novels keep their settings realist; at the same time, they make the places strange.

This is primarily a function of the narrative perspective: in *A Summer of Drowning*, even though the narrator Liv has lived on Kvaløya all her life, and considers it one of 'the real places, the home places' (Burnside 2012: 22), Burnside is able to emphasise the sense that '[e]verything is strange here' (2012: 57) by directing his narrator's story at foreigners, at people unfamiliar with her home. She describes summer as: '[t]rue summer, not just white nights, the months of snow, then thaw, then snow again, finally over' (Burnside 2012: 17). Rather than simply referring to the season, she clarifies what summer means to her, to someone from there, and sets this against the idea she knows foreigners have of Northern Europe, the white nights. She is constantly aware of the outside impression of the landscape she inhabits, noting that the tourists were 'surprised by how warm it could get, up here in the frozen north. They would come with sweaters and thermal socks expecting a cold, austere land – and they were disappointed' (Burnside 2012: 105). There is a sense of explanation here, of Liv trying to correct an impression, but it is an impression the text has first set up, so it can be challenged. While Liv may scorn the tourists' reading of her landscape, it is a perspective which persists in the text, allowing Kvaløya to be constructed as strange, even by a local narrator.

In *The Snow Child*, Ivey achieves the same effect by inserting foreign focalising characters into her landscape. Jack and Mabel arrive from Pennsylvania having been 'warned' that 'the Territory of Alaska was for lost men and unsavory women, that there would be no place for [them] in the wilderness' (Ivey 2012: 35). The town they find in Alaska is remote, too: '[b]ack home, Alpine wouldn't have been called a town at all. It was nothing more than a few dusty, false-fronted buildings perched between the train tracks and the Wolverine River' (Ivey 2012: 16). The comparison with 'back home' is one of many, creating distance between the characters and their landscape. The remoteness of the place is also clear: Alpine is the couple's nearest settlement, a two-hour ride on horseback from their homestead, which is totally isolated. For Mabel it is 'raw, austere' (Ivey 2012: 35), like the tourists' view of Kvaløya; for Jack, it is

'lean and wild and indifferent to a man's struggle' (Ivey 2012: 63). This wildness, comparable to Burnside's 'northern wilderness' (2012: 34), provokes awe and terror in Jack and Mabel, as they are trying to live off the land; for Liv and her mother, though, the remoteness is a blessing. Liv describes how her mother moved from Oslo to this island because it was 'far away from everything she knew', and was full of 'what, at the time, must have looked like remote, empty places' (Burnside 2012: 21). While Liv maintains the distance between local and not – her mother, 'at the time' (Burnside 2012: 21), was an incomer – she also emphasises her landscape's sparseness.

Despite each writer's realism, then, their creation of remote, strange, wild settings distances both the focalising characters and the implied reader from the place. This creates a gap in knowledge, a space for a form of the marvellous which is not explicitly magical; this gap becomes a Todorovian fantastic hesitation once the possibility of magic is introduced. In Todorov's formulation, the fantastic was set between the adjacent genres, as he called them, of rationalism and magic. These he called the marvellous, where magic is an accepted part of the text's created world, and the uncanny, where the text's world runs on the principles of rationalism, and where any apparently supernatural event could be explained as the result of a dream, hallucination, or trick.³ Todorov saw the fantastic as a borderline dividing these 'neighbouring genres', represented by the following diagram:

uncanny|fantastic-uncanny|fantastic-marvellous|marvellous (1975: 44)

Here, the fantastic is represented only by the line between the fantastic-uncanny and the fantastic-marvellous; it is a liminal state created by a lasting uncertainty as to the nature of the events in the text:

The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighbouring genre, the

³ I am using Richard Howard's English translation here. While his terms have become commonly used by other scholars, they are not without their problems. What he translates as the 'uncanny' does not equate precisely to Freud's usage of the term; the original is 'étrange', which translates more directly as strange or unusual. Similarly, his translation of 'merveilleux' as 'the marvellous' loses the French term's connection to wonder, a link particularly resonant when discussing how Todorov's delineations relate to folk and fairy tales.

uncanny or the marvellous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event. (Todorov 1975: 25)

Both *The Snow Child* and *A Summer of Drowning* create and sustain this fantastic hesitation, as I will show, but it is the 'laws of nature' in these novels which create the possibility of supernatural events: both Alaska and Kvaløya are closely associated with the unreal through folklore and through the possibility of 'seeing things' in either hallucinations or dreams, which are themselves created by the extreme fluctuations in daylight in the far north. As Liv explains in *A Summer of Drowning*: '[t] here are people who cannot take living this far north, because of the long winter darkness, and there are others who cannot bear the endless, mind-stopping white nights of insomnia and wild imaginings' (Burnside 2012: 17). The darkness and the light each bring dreams and the possibility of hallucinations, in both of these novels. While it is the long days of the novel's titular summer of drowning which breed an uncertainty about what is real and what is a dream or 'wild imagining' in Burnside's novel, in *The Snow Child* the same effect is created by the long nights. Esther warns Jack and Mabel that:

The winters are long, and sometimes it starts to get to you. Around here, they call it cabin fever. [...] [Y]our mind starts playing tricks on you. [...] You start seeing things you're afraid of...or things you've always wished for. (Ivey 2012: 80)

While each writer creates uncertainty about what can be considered real in their strange, remote, northern wilderness, the links which join hallucination and dream, folklore and the natural world, differ in each novel.

The Snow Child

In *The Snow Child* the fantastic is created largely through Ivey's two main focalising characters' opposing beliefs about the eponymous snow child, Faina. For Mabel, the novel's main folkloric intertext provides the key to this child. Mabel is the one who knows the story 'Sneguorchka', in which the child is not only made of snow, but can only stay with her adoptive parents while there is snow on the ground. In the novel

Faina does indeed come and go with the seasons, and even her name is linked to the landscape: it means 'the color on the snow when the sun turns' (Ivey 2012: 256). Her name is liminal, balanced on the change of light at dusk; it is also, like Faina herself, closely associated with the snow. Her eyes are 'rimmed in frost' (Ivey 2012: 161) and she is 'cool to the touch' (Ivey 2012: 223); indoors, where it is warm, she 'seem[s] to wilt in her chair' (Ivey 2012: 223) until Mabel cools her with snow brought in from outside. Snow never seems to melt on her skin: Mabel watches as '[a] single snowflake lit upon her bare skin. [...] There in the child's hand. A single snowflake, luminous and translucent. A sharp-edged miracle' (Ivey 2012: 160–1). The possibility that the girl simply regulates heat differently is challenged by the 'miracle' of the single snowflake, which should not be able to remain frozen in a human hand. The folklore gives context to this 'miracle', and encourages a marvellous reading of Faina, but it never fully cancels out the uncanny reading, in which Faina is just a normal child.

The other main focalising character, Jack, is not as interested in folklore, nor as ready to believe in it as Mabel:

[Jack] had always scoffed at the superstitious and mystical. Alone in the depths of the wilderness, however, in the fading winter light, he had discovered in himself an animal-like fear [...] Disturbing thoughts whirled through his brain, stories [...] about forest hags and men who turned into bears. (Ivey 2012: 95)

Jack reaches for folklore in response to the landscape, but the wilderness comes first and the folklore follows. He sets himself up as a rational person, then experiences the place, its wild strangeness and its darkness, and reaches for folklore to explain it. Jack's relationship with Faina works in the same way: to him she is 'a wild creature', who 'knew this land by heart' (Ivey 2012: 67), and she is therefore associated with Jack's fear of the landscape: '[i]t wasn't the girl that frightened him as much as the strange world of snow and rock and hushed trees that she navigated with ease' (Ivey 2012: 95). By associating the child with the potentially marvellous setting, Jack sees her as fantastic as well:

There was something otherworldly in her manners and appearance, her frosty lashes and cool blue stare, the way she materialized out of the forest. In ways she was clearly just a little girl, with her small frame and rare, stifled giggles, but in others she seemed composed and wise, as if she moved through the world with knowledge beyond anything Jack had encountered. (Ivey 2012: 105)

Her doubleness is what makes her fantastic: she is at once a real girl and a strange, snow-bound creature. However, it is her familiarity with the real landscape, her local knowledge, which lends her her magic, not, in Jack's narrative, her association with the magic of folklore. Even when Jack refuses to read Faina as folkloric, she remains fantastic: 'Jack wasn't one to believe in fairy-tale maidens made of snow. Yet Faina was extraordinary. Vast mountain ranges and unending wilderness, sky and ice. You couldn't hold her too close or know her mind' (Ivey 2012: 242). Faina is a cipher for the landscape itself, and Jack and Mabel's quest to tame the child runs along similar lines to their desperate need to understand the landscape enough to make a living from it; both the child and the place are described as partly unknowable by Mabel and Jack, creating a gap which Ivey's realism cannot fill, and creates the possibility of a magical or marvellous explanation.

At the same time, the possibility of a rational explanation for the events in the novel is retained, and folklore is occasionally used in the service of this alternative. Chasing Faina through the woods, Jack wonders:

What did he expect to find? A fairy-tale beast that holds young girls captive in a mountain cave? A cackling witch? Or nothing at all, no child, no tracks, no door, only insanity bared in the untouched snow? (Ivey 2012: 97)

Here the character envisages two distinct possibilities: folkloric magic (although not from Ransome's tale), and madness. Mabel, too, worries about the 'dark winter's madness' (Ivey 2012: 138). Rather than lending magic to the landscape, this possibility that the characters are hallucinating lends weight to the realism of the text. It implies that the fantastic hesitation – the possibility of a magical child made of

snow – can be explained away in rational terms: Jack and Mabel's longing for a child has driven them to see things which are not there, and they have merely imagined Faina in the dark wilderness of Alaska. This link to the natural world is again crucial. It is in darkness that they dream, Jack of 'children [who] ran soft-footed through the trees' (Ivey 2012: 51) and Mabel of '[s]nowflakes and naked babies' (Ivey 2012: 89); the dreams themselves are seen as products of the landscape, because they 'fell and melted like snowflakes' (Ivey 2012: 51). It is in the darkness of the long, northern winter that the possibility of madness is strongest: when '[d]arkness settled around the cabin [...] Mabel glanced out the window occasionally with the thought that she might see the child, but there was only her own reflection' (Ivey 2012: 81). Like in the window, Faina's presence in the text could be simply a reflection of Mabel's longing for a child.

Ivey sets up a duality between a snowy landscape imbued with magic, and a realist world in which hallucinations are left unchecked in the wilderness. It is not this duality itself which creates the fantastic, as a kind of average between Todorov's categories of the marvellous and the uncanny. Instead it is the movement between them, across the borderline of the fantastic, which prevents the hesitation from being resolved. Berlina calls this a 'constant oscillation or coexistence of two fictional worlds' (2015: 246); it is the oscillation which is key to the two worlds' coexistence. Ivey creates this movement through the use of more than one focalising character, and the shifts of belief they each undergo over the course of the novel. Jack is at first unsure of Faina's reality: he initially sees her through unreliable eyes when he is 'groggy with sleep' (Ivey 2012: 49). He then tracks her through the woods to discover the truth, and thinks that she moves 'like a fairy' (Ivey 2012: 95), so quickly that 'she had become a phantom, a silent blur' (Ivey 2012: 96). Her knowledge of the landscape, the fact that there could be a non-magical explanation for her fast, deft movement through it, is quashed beneath these marvellous descriptions. From Jack's perspective, though, the switch from belief in something 'otherworldly' and potentially magical to full disbelief comes when he finds Faina's real father, dead from drink in the snow. He later refers to this scene as the fact which prevents him from believing in Faina's magic, but even within this supposedly realist scene there

are elements of the marvellous. As Jack watches Faina throw snow over her father's grave, he notices that '[i]t was more snow than a child could possibly hold in her arms' (Ivey 2012: 115); the folkloric association between Faina and the snow remains. While Jack moves from belief to disbelief without fully removing the possibility of the fantastic, Mabel moves in the other direction. She thinks the girl Jack has seen in the woods 'must have wandered away from somebody's cabin' (Ivey 2012: 56), and worries about a real girl out in the snow. However:

She had sought reasonable explanations. She asked Esther about children who lived nearby. She urged Jack to inquire in town. But she had also taken note of those first boot prints in the snow – they began at the vanished snow child and ran from there into the woods. No tracks came into the yard. (Ivey 2012: 90)

Mabel comes to accept the folkloric, magical interpretation of Faina's existence, using the footprints as a kind of evidence for her belief. These shifts continue through the novel, with each chapter focalising a different character; because of these constant shifts, not only within each character's perspective but between the two, the reader is left with no stable source from which to glean whether Faina is real or not. The fantastic hesitation is created here through an oscillation between the marvellous possibility that these characters are living in a folkloric landscape where magic really does exist, and the realist possibility that the potential magic in the landscape and in Faina is simply the result of madness, or darkness-created dreams.

A Summer of Drowning

In Burnside's novel the fantastic is created differently. Rather than moving between different ways of seeing the world which are discrete and separate, thereby creating uncertainty in the reader, *A Summer of Drowning* contains these different perspectives within a single narrative point of view which is itself uncertain. Despite this difference in construction, Burnside's novel contains many of the same associations as Ivey's. Dreams and hallucinations are again associated with the natural world, and are used to erode the possibility of the supernatural. As Liv's mother describes to a

visitor: '[t]he winters are long [...] And the summers are sleepless. Everybody goes a little crazy from time to time' (Burnside 2012: 96). Even the narrator is afflicted by a kind of madness, but it is not the madness of 'seeing things', as one section of the novel is titled. Hers is clinical, a temporary insanity which is the result of witnessing what she believes to be a supernatural event, not its cause. This is linked directly to the novel's main folkloric intertext, the huldra legend – where a creature in the shape of a woman seduces men into drowning – but after Liv sees the creature which may or may not be this huldra, she records her symptoms almost medically: 'I ran a high fever that night, and [Mother] couldn't get me to eat. I was shivering, and I couldn't talk for a long time, but I did drink' (Burnside 2012: 318). This episode is referred to as an 'illness' (Burnside 2012: 318), a 'madness' (Burnside 2012: 319), and also as a 'breakdown' or a *'crisis'* (Burnside 2012: 320), all terms for mental illness. This can be read as a rational explanation of the strange creature Liv saw in the woods: it did not exist, because Liv was crazy, perhaps because of the white nights of the far northern summer. But there is another interpretation, which Burnside gestures towards. In this reading, there really is 'a gap – a dark, clean tear – in the fabric of the world' (Burnside 2012: 321): reality is not what we think it is, and it does contain magic, but being forced to recognise this is such a profound shock that Liv's brain cannot take it, and temporarily shuts down.

Even in its use of madness, then, *A Summer of Drowning* maintains a fantastic hesitation between the rational and the magical. The real risk, for Liv, is not *being* mad but *seeming* mad: she worries that 'if I tried to talk about what I *did* see, the people in the town would think I was crazy, just like Kyrre Opdahl' (Burnside 2012: 6, original emphasis). Kyrre is her neighbour and the island's storyteller, who tells Liv and the reader the story of the huldra in the first place. Already the constellation of nature, folklore, hallucination, and dream is clear: unlike *The Snow Child*, *A Summer of Drowning* does not separate them out. In Ivey's novel the fantastic is created through a triangulation of realism, hallucination, and dream, opposed to the natural world and the folktale; here, in *A Summer of Drowning*, the fantastic is created within each one of these facets.

The clearest example of this comes at the disappearance of Martin Crosbie. Liv thinks that his presumed drowning might have been 'a trick my mind had played on me' (Burnside 2012: 270) – a kind of madness – or 'a leftover from one of Kyrre's old tales' (Burnside 2012: 270) – a folkloric form of magic. She also, along with her mother, thinks that perhaps it was caused by the dreamlike quality of the midnight sun: 'In the morning, I would wake and, like Alice, I would see that it was all nothing more than a curious dream' (Burnside 2012: 270). She was, perhaps, 'confused by the light and the unreality of it all' (Burnside 2012: 271). The time of year destabilises Liv's sense of reality; despite this, we are told categorically that '[i]t wasn't a dream' (Burnside 2012: 270), that this event really happened. Liv's final summary of this episode rejects the possibilities of madness and dreams, linking the disappearance instead to folklore and nature: it was 'a story that was neither a murder, nor a suicide, but a natural event, like a rainstorm, or a bird migration' (Burnside 2012: 271). Like these natural occurrences, legends such as that of the huldra are here linked inextricably to the landscape: not only are they stories which are local to Norway and particularly its coastlines, they are also consistently linked to the idea of the natural world, to the physical geography of the place. We are told that '[t]he old stories persist in the wood of the boathouses and the ferry docks' (Burnside 2012: 22); the place itself is impregnated with folklore. Liv, too, feels that it is 'the stories, that, more than anything else, bind me so closely to this place' (Burnside 2012: 69). Kyrre, the storyteller, is 'part and parcel of the island' (Burnside 2012: 28), 'part of nature' (Burnside 2012: 92), and he seems to Liv to be not just an old man, but 'old like the carved rocks in Mother's garden, old like the weather, or the tides' (Burnside 2012: 92). While the folkloric stories and their teller add their air of unreality to the place-specific uncertainty provoked by the white nights, Burnside is not creating a magical world to set against a realist one here. Instead, he describes a conception of nature which refutes that separation: nature is itself fantastic, containing both the magical and the rational, and refusing to choose between them.

In *A Summer of Drowning*, then, the folklore is tied to the land, and it is the folklore which creates a fantastic hesitation in the landscape. Describing a stretch

of coastline she has named the 'end of the earth', Liv tells us that she chose this name because she was 'thinking partly of a real place and partly of the true remoteness in some old fairy story' (Burnside 2012: 241). This landscape is fantastic in the Todorovian sense – on the borderline between the magical and the real – but here the fantastic includes the folkloric. For Ivey, though, the fantastic exists before the folklore; the Alaskan wilderness has a kind of magic of its own, which comes from the wilderness of the place rather than a specific tale or legend: '[i]t was the river's source – a glacier cradled between white mountains. From so many miles away, the craggy peaks seemed to waver in the sunlight like a mirage, close and distant, real and unreal' (Ivey 2012: 326). This 'waver' is not folkloric, but it is fantastic; it is, in fact, the same word Lynette Hunter has used to describe how the real and the marvellous relate to each other in fantastic narrative (1989: 128). Ivey's novel oscillates between the real and the unreal, constantly crossing the fantastic borderline Todorov described, while Burnside's novel statically inhabits the hesitation: its world is real and unreal at the same time.

Implications

The difference in the two novels' uses of the fantastic is in part a function of their differing folkloric intertexts. While legends like that of the *huldra* tend to pertain to a particular, real place in which magical things sometimes happen, folk and fairy tales like 'Snegurochka' are often set in generalised locations like a village or a forest, which are imbued with magic.⁴ Max Lüthi described folk tales as being set in a world in which 'the numinous' – the supernatural – 'excites neither fear nor curios-

⁴ My elision of the historical distinctions between the folk tale and the fairy tale here is deliberate. While the folk tale has often been considered an oral precursor or source for the literary fairy tale, this distinction has recently undergone some helpful critical revision; see Sadhana Naithani and Donald Haase. Cristina Bacchilega summarizes the problem as follows: '[t]he genre of the "fairy tale" is still generally understood to as European and North American; [...] most of the rest of the world has or had "folktales" that can become "fairy tales," but are not yet' (Bacchilega 2013: 21). The universalised fairy tale is, in this formulation, a progression beyond the oral folk tale, which is specific to a cultural group; the distinction contains a cultural hierarchy which is too often unspoken or unquestioned. While there are useful and important differences in the literary treatments of narratives described as 'fairy tales' and those thought of as 'folk tales', I group the two together in order to draw clearer formal distinctions between this broad group of narratives and other folkloric forms such as the legend.

ity' (1986: 7); for Jason Marc Harris this form 'tends towards fantasy' and is therefore a 'sustained presentation of [a] secondary world' (2008: 22). By contrast, in a legend, 'side by side with the world of the everyday reality there exists an "other" world whose spirit is clearly distinct' (Lüthi 1986: 4); this form 'is closer to the fantastic, since the everyday world clashes with the numinous one' (Harris 2008: 2). In reworking specific forms of folklore into novels, writers have different relationships with the supernatural to negotiate: it makes sense, then, that Burnside's novel consistently inhabits the fantastic borderline, as a result of the legend from which he takes his plot, while Ivey's folktale intertext leads to a less constant use of the fantastic.

It also makes sense that in twenty-first century fiction there are parallel moves, both from fairy and folk tales into forms like the legend, and at the same time from reworkings which are marvellous or fully magical towards those which are fantastic. The 'fairy tale generation' was just that: with some notable exceptions they took their intertexts from the European folk and fairy tales popularised by Perrault and the Grimms – what Bacchilega calls the 'the canonized Perrault-Grimms-Disney triad' (2013: 27). Now, many writers are working not only with these but with other related but distinct folkloric forms. As well as *A Summer of Drowning*, Amy Sackville's *Orkney* (2013) and Margo Lanagan's *The Brides of Rollrock Island* (2012) both rewrite legends about selkies; Susan Fletcher's fishman in *The Silver Dark Sea* (2012) is also a creature of legend. Folk and fairy tales have not disappeared as key intertexts either, as *The Snow Child* shows, but many writers are using them as one of several intertexts rather than as their only or main one: in his novel *The Crane Wife* (2013), Patrick Ness fuses the two forms together, mixing Japanese folktale Tsuru no Ongaeshi with a volcanic legend to create a new tale which he both tells, in a faux-traditional style, and retells, in the novel's main London-based plot. Helen Oyeyemi, Kirsty Logan, and Jess Richards also draw upon and mingle a host of folkloric narratives of various forms as well as folkloric motifs in order to create new stories which glance at rather than retell older tales. All of these writers pick and choose motifs, characters, and tales, mixing them not only with each other but with conventions from the European novel and its various genres. While an interest in reworking folkloric narrative remains strong, what these contemporary novelists are writing can better be

described as 'folklore-inflected' fiction. This fiction is interested in the narratives, motifs, and concerns of folkloric stories, but may not be wedded to retelling a single tale or tale-type in the same way as much postmodernist fairy-tale fiction has been.

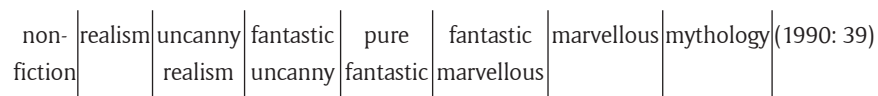
By changing the kind of folkloric narratives with which they engage, writers of recent folklore-inflected fiction are shifting away from Todorov's marvellous and into the 'pure' fantastic. The many marvels in Angela Carter's work, for example, are presented as simply part of the world of the text, and 'supernatural events provoke no particular reaction either in the characters or the implicit reader' (Todorov 1975: 54). In contrast, as we have seen in *The Snow Child* and *The Summer of Drowning*, the folkloric magic is problematised, and the text can be seen to remain hesitant about its status. These are particularly clear examples, but the tendency is apparent in other recent novels as well. Sackville's *Orkney* and Cecilia Ekbäck's *Wolf Winter* (2014) both maintain the undecideability of the fantastic hesitation until the denouement, when *Wolf Winter*, based on a folk tale, moves into the marvellous and *Orkney*, based on a mixture of legends, retreats to the uncanny; even novels more securely situated at each end of the spectrum, like Susan Fletcher's fully demythologizing *Silver Dark Sea* and Lisa Tuttle's marvellous-fantasy novel *The Mysteries* (2005), rely on the fantastic hesitation for narrative tension.

This movement is not a local trend within folklore-inflected fiction. Rather, it is part of a current return to realism or neo-realism, what Eaglestone has called 'a whole cultural turn towards the idea of reality' (2013: 18). Robert Rebein calls this 'dirty realism'. For him:

contemporary realist writers have absorbed postmodernism's most lasting contributions and gone on to forge a new realism that is more or less traditional in its handling of character, reportorial in its depiction of milieu and time, but is at the same time self-conscious about language and the limits of mimesis. (Rebein 2001: 20)

Josh Toth sees emerging alongside this neo-realism something quite different: 'rather than just new "realisms", then, what we see [...] are narrative forms that renew the realist faith in mimesis while simultaneously deferring and frustrating that faith via the irony and stylistics of a now past, or passed, postmodernism' (2010: 132–3). What the novels discussed above do is raise both possibilities: that contemporary literature is fully aware of the limits of mimetic realism, and at the same time that there is faith to be had in representative language. The result of this duality is the use of the fantastic.

This is perhaps no surprise: as Adiseshiah and Hildyard point out, the 'complication and problematisation of realism is most obviously apparent in the presence of the unseen that haunts many of the novels' of the twenty-first century (2013: 2). I have shown how the 'unseen', or, rather, the seen but not fully understood, has been created in twenty-first-century fiction. Neil Cornwell's expansion of Todorov's diagram of the fantastic helps to flesh out this relationship:



This expanded spectrum is a sliding scale across which tale tellers and retellers can move. The shift in contemporary folklore-inflected fiction away from the marvellous and into the fantastic is, along Cornwell's scale, is a turn towards, but not fully into, realism. As we have seen, novels with differing folkloric intertexts move more or less far along this spectrum, and so can be better described by the 'fantastic-marvellous' or the 'fantastic-uncanny', but the broad trend is into the fantastic. As contemporary fiction turns towards realism, it brings folklore-inflected fiction with it, out of the marvellous and into the more contested ground of the fantastic. To put this another way, contemporary fiction's realist turn is in tension with the magical aspects of postmodernism's legacy; the intersection between them creates the fantastic as a particularly contemporary literary mode, well suited to addressing the concerns of the twenty-first century.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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