

CURIOUSER AND CURIOUSER: WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE RETURN FROM WONDERLAND?

Review by Alison Baker

McGuire, Seanan. *Every Heart a Doorway*. Tor, 2016. Novella

Nancy Whitman arrives at Eleanor West's Home for Wayward Children dressed in black but pulling a pink-wheeled suitcase patterned with white cartoon daisies. Little does she know that the suitcase has been packed with a rainbow of clothes, a memorial of her time before she was a servant of the Lord of the Dead. While Eleanor West's Home appears to be a therapeutic centre for children with delusions about travelling to other worlds, it is in fact a supportive community for young people who have been forced to leave a fantastical land. Eleanor herself, and the school's psychologist, Lundy, both have returned from fantastical lands themselves. Nancy's parents cannot come to terms with the changes in their daughter; they interpret her behaviour, dark clothing, and white and black hair as an unfortunate depressive/Goth phase that she will recover from with support and therapy available at Eleanor West's.

Nancy starts to learn more about Eleanor West's and her fellow students: in particular, her roommate, Sumi, who found the way to Confection, a nonsense candy-land; Kade, who went to a warlike fairy-world; and Jack and Jill, twins who went to a land ruled by a vampire lord. Jack was the apprentice of a scientist and Jill was the adopted daughter of the lord. On her first night there, Nancy is awoken by screams. On leaving her bedroom, Nancy discovers Sumi dead, with her hands cut off. Initially, as the new girl, Nancy comes under suspicion, but soon the spotlight is on the macabre Jack, who has previously dissected a pet guinea pig (McGuire 77).

As the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that there is a murderer at work in the school, who is taking body parts of the victims that are symbolic of the relationships they have with their worlds as grisly trophies, namely their eyes, brain, and their beauty. Nancy, Jack and a boy, Christopher, who went to a country of animated skeletons, join forces with Sumi's friend Kade, to catch the killer.

McGuire makes full use of the novella form within this work, and it is perhaps no surprise therefore that she won both the Nebula (2016) and Hugo (2017) awards. She utilises spare but lyrical, rhythmic prose: "The body lay in the front yard, covered in a thin sheen of dew, face turned up to the uncaring sky" (McGuire 100). Describing a skeleton Christopher animates; "Her scapulae were delicate wings; her skull was a psalm to the elegant dancer waiting beneath the flesh [...] There was a pearlescent sheen to her, like opal" (McGuire 139). These balanced sentences add richness to a linear, sparse plot.

Nancy is largely the point of view character; we learn more about her visit to the Halls of the Dead than we do about the other characters' other worlds. Her viewpoint is shaped by her time in her country; she values quiet, requires little food, and can keep herself entirely still when needed. She is asexual, but not

aromantic. Gender identity and sexuality are discussed naturally as a part of a character and how they see the mimetic world of Eleanor West's home, but also how they lived in their world. It is clear that not everyone in the Halls of the Dead was asexual, but Nancy fitted in there because of the stillness and quiet. She explains: "I can appreciate how beautiful someone is, and I can be attracted to them romantically, but that's as far as it goes with me" (McGuire 43). Sumi's openness and lack of judgement about Nancy's sexuality is delightful; she simply wishes to know whether her sexual expression will be uncomfortable for Nancy.

Gender is also openly discussed in the novella. Kade is expelled from his world when the Goblin King of Prism, his Fairyland, realises that he is "a little boy who just *looked* like a little girl" (McGuire 39). Jack and Jill's experiences on the Moors affected their gender presentation: Jack, who had been considered the feminine daughter by their parents, now dresses in jeans, a button-down shirt, and a bow-tie, with her hair tied back. Jill, her sister, considered the smart one by their parents (McGuire 78) wears pale coloured, lace dresses because her vampire Master liked the way blood showed up on them (McGuire 66). Jack and Jill's parents' desire to both decide on their gender expressions, their binary expectations of them to be either pretty or clever, and to name them after a nursery rhyme are all damaging to the twins, and also made Jill more susceptible to the vampire Master.

Seanan McGuire's novella may be seen as a typical representation of a portal fantasy. Farah Mendlesohn (*Rhetorics of Fantasy* 2008) describes a portal fantasy as a narrative in which "a character leaves her familiar surroundings and passes through a portal into an unknown place" (Mendlesohn 1). Mendlesohn goes on to reference John Clute's definition of portals, that they "litter the world of the fantastic" (ibid) and are discovered by characters from youth to childhood. Alice's rabbit hole and looking glass are portals, as is the door in Coraline's bedroom, the moving bricks in the wall behind the Leaky Cauldron leading to Diagon Alley, and the wardrobe leading to Narnia.

There is humour in the intertextual nature of the novella, too; when Eleanor is offering a way to her nonsense land as a way of keeping some students safe, Christopher asks why her door is still there while others have vanished. Lundy explains that temporary portals are more common than stable ones, and he asks about Narnia. Another student replies: "That's because Narnia was a Christian allegory pretending to be a fantasy series, you asshole" (McGuire 99), demonstrating a metafictional self-awareness of the Fantasy genre, and the tropes that may pervade it. Nancy states that she never wondered what it was like for Alice to return from Wonderland. She used to assume that she would just "shrug and get over it" (McGuire 51), but discovers that she no longer feels at home back in the mimetic world, away from the Halls of the Dead. Further intertextuality is demonstrated in references to the Goblin Market (McGuire 54) and the myth of Persephone (McGuire 51). This intertextuality serves to enrich the reader's understanding of portal fantasies; to reflect upon the child protagonist's experiences and alienation from their home.

John Clute's 2006 book *The Darkening Garden: A Short Lexicon of Horror* reprinted in 2014 as part of *Stay* provides a useful consideration of Horror as a genre, which Clute argues is a mode, or genre, of the Fantastic (Clute 331). The title of the 2006 book comes from Cyril Connolly's 1949 discussion of what he considered the darkening tone of secret garden narratives: that portals no longer led to paradise, but to a waste land (Clute 271). *Every Heart a Doorway* describes both paradises and wastelands, and although it does

contain some descriptions of the aftermaths of violence, but I would suggest that this is not “affect horror” (Clute 275); the bodies are described through the eyes of Nancy, Jack, and Christopher, who do not fear the dead. Instead, as in the description of the skeleton above, they are described with love, admiration, and respect. For that reason, *Every Heart a Doorway* could be considered a “dark fantasy” (Clute 290) rather than affect horror. This distinction is significant, since the novella’s tone is elegiac rather than terror-laden, due to the beauty of the descriptions of corpses and corporeal matter. The reader is left with regret for the loss of the dead characters rather than revulsion or horror at the means of their deaths.

The category of ‘dark fantasy’ rather than ‘affect horror’ may also be relevant to the readership. At the time of writing, there are two sequels: *Down among the Sticks and Bones* (2017), telling the story of Jack and Jill’s time on the Moors living with Dr Bleak the mad scientist and the Dark Lord, and *Beneath the Sugar Sky* (2018). They have been described as Young Adult, and since the protagonists in all three books are teenagers, this is reasonable. However, these are sophisticated, complex narratives with big ideas about the Fantasy genre, particularly portal fantasies, gender expression, and sexuality, although it is notable that there is no depiction of sex, despite discussions about sexual expression. Their length and the age of their protagonists should not prevent those with reductive ideas about Young Adult novels from reading them. I am looking forward to exploring more of Seanan McGuire’s work.

WORKS CITED

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Mendlesohn, Farah. *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. Wesleyan University Press, 2008.

BIONOTE

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