

Recall This Book 78
Fantasy
April, 2022
Anna Vaninskaya (JP, EF)

John Plotz:

Hello. From Brandeis University, welcome to Recall This Book where the crack anthropologist, Elizabeth Ferry and I... (oh, no, that sounds like you studied crack!) but the star anthropologist, Elizabeth Ferry and I, I'm John Plotz, assemble scholars and writers from different disciplines to make sense of contemporary issues, problems, and events. Today, we tackle the always contemporary question of fantasy, its appeal to children and adults, its power to make up other worlds and what that power has to do with our imaginative capacity to make our own world anew. So very tiny topic, but luckily to take it on, we have the giant brain of Edinburgh professor, Anna Vaninskaya. So welcome, Anna. It is great to have you.

Anna Vaninskaya:

Thanks for having me.

John Plotz:

So many things can be credited to Anna's giant brain, including in recent years, an amazing archive called Scotland-Russia: Cultural Encounter Since 1900, which, I'm sorry, we will not probably talk about today. though I think it's fascinating. But specifically we asked Anna here to walk around fantasy with us because she's the author, both of William Morris and the Idea of Community: Romance, History and Propaganda 1880 to 1914 that was published in 2010 and Fantasies of Time and Death: Dunsany, Eddison, Tolkien, which was published in 2020. So, Anna, one thing I really, really like about your work is the way it traces the lineage that includes famous names like our shared hero, socialist, William Morris, and of course, Tolkien, but is also mindful of lesser likes like Mervyn Peake, Lord Dunsany, Edith Nesbit, Stella Benson maybe, and hope release, Arthur Machen and a host of others. I hope that we could sort of extend that genealogy forward to heroes of our own childhood like, say, Susan Cooper and Edward Eager. But all of that

points, I think, to an RTB special, which means it is not so much an author interview as it is at three-way conversation about fantasy, which grows from your published work, but is not reliant on that exclusively. So having said that, Anna, can I maybe ask you just to kick us off by telling us about your most recent book, *Fantasies of Time and Death*, and we'll sort of go onward from there?

Anna Vaninskaya:

Sure. Well, I'll begin actually by giving a personal story. I was a Tolkien fan as a child and... Actually, I have to say I'm still one today.

John Plotz:

Good, good. Me too.

Anna Vaninskaya:

What attracted me to his work as a child was not the adventure, the fun, the excitement that so many people tend to find in it, but the feeling of melancholy loss and sometimes even despair and these feelings, I began as everyone does with *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* and then progressed on to the rest of his legendarium. One of the reasons why I was attracted to this aspect of his work was rooted in my own life journey as it were as somebody who immigrated at a young age. And I found when reading about Tolkien's elves that their longing for a lost home. Their sense of displacement and exile as something I could identify with.

Anna Vaninskaya:

So here's a wonderful example of a work of fantasy that has a direct bearing on real life experiences of so many human beings in our world today, but also of course throughout history. And connected with this overwhelming sense of melancholy and nostalgia was a meditation on the passage of time of course, the things that time takes us away from in our own lives and in history more generally, the things we lose as a culture as time passes. And of course, for Tolkien, the question of death as he himself said was absolutely central. I latched on to this even as a child before I began to consider it analytically as it were later in life.

John Plotz:

Can I jump in on that point about death is so fascinating especially as a child reader, because I completely understand what you're talking about with that feel of nostalgia and loss, and maybe this is where you were going, it brings up the issue of the immortality of elves. So I wondered your thoughts about nostalgia among the immortals.

Anna Vaninskaya:

So the elves nostalgia or nostalgia of the immortals, as you say, is rooted precisely in the fact that they have to keep living after they have lost that which they have loved. And this is something that you get in *The Lord of the Rings*, of course, but also across Tolkien's *Legendarium*. And it's precisely, ironically, because their lives are so long, endless as far as the duration of this physical world is concerned that the burdens they have to bear so much more profound and more poignant in the context of the imagined world than the burdens of mortal beings like human beings, because mortals, they have to fear death, which comes quickly to them, but they don't have to deal with the accumulating losses that the elves accrued over their lifetime, their endless lifetimes.

John Plotz:

I wanted to say that I love that we dived right into Tolkien, but I think it's fascinating to think about that particularity of Tolkien's struggle with like nostalgia as you put it, but also sort of the immortal perfect world versus the broken ruined world that we actually live in. I mean, you're making me think, I think in... You guys probably know I'm obsessed with Ursula Le Guin and the time scale in *Le Guin*, the dragons live on that other time scale. And then there's a kind of interface between the dragon and the human. And just to scale outward maximally, can I ask, Anna, have you thought about the analogy to very, very old epic forms that we might or might not call fantasy? Like *The Iliad* and the *Odyssey* where the gods are kind of coterminous with the humans. They somewhat envy the humans for being mortal, but they kind of struggle with the burden that they're immortal and therefore their actions are kind of light, whereas humans are mortal and their actions are heavy, I guess.

Anna Vaninskaya:

Yeah. If you look at various pagan pantheons, quote-unquote, it is interesting to you observe this kind of thing. Obviously, to say just one more thing about Tolkien.

John Plotz:

Sure.

Anna Vaninskaya:

In his instance, it's the Norse pantheon that's most relevant as an inspiration and so on. Although, it was by no means limited to that. And the idea of the doom of the gods that the gods ultimately will also be defeated in the end is something that you can see entering into his own subcreation. And to maybe bring this back to the subject of my book as well, Tolkien was by no means the only early fantasist. And I call him early, because of course, much of what he was writing, we think of *The Lord of the Rings* as a mid 20th century work.

Anna Vaninskaya:

But in actual fact, it's really more early 20th century. And at that time there were others like Lord Dunsany like E.R. Eddison who are the other two authors that I considered in my monograph who were exploring this idea of what the gods' relationship is to human existence, to existence in general. They were producing these thought experiments, what it must be like as an immortal being, who's not just immortal like an elf Le living in this physical world and bound by its constraints, but actually transcends the world, can create the world, can destroy the world and so on.

Anna Vaninskaya:

What it must be like for a being like that has, on the one hand immense powers, but on the other hand is also subject to constraints of a different kind on their nature and what the relationship is between these sort of divine beings and the creatures they create, whether those be mortal or immortal. So these kinds of questions were ones that various fantasy authors were engaging with in the early 20th century. Obviously, since then as well. So any author who creates a simulacrum of reality is sub-creating. But in the case of a fantasist, they've introduced aspects into that sub-created secondary world that are not present in the primary world where we actually live. And this is what makes things interesting in the fantasy is how you-

Elizabeth Ferry:

Like magic or animals that talk, or things like that.

Anna Vaninskaya:

Yeah. Any kind of supernatural element essentially. Now, just one note on that prefix sub in subcreation, the reason Tolkien thought of it as subcreation is of course because he was a Christian believer and he thought the ultimate creator is God. And therefore we human beings who are made in God's image also create like our creator. We're mini-gods, if you will, who make in the... Because we are made in the image of the maker. And ultimately, again, as a Catholic, he thought that our subcreations will be given life by God, will be turned into real creation into the part of reality at some point after humankind is redeemed.

Anna Vaninskaya:

So that's his particular kind of Christian take on it. It's not original to him. If you read the essays of George MacDonald, who was a Victorian fantasist writing sort of in the second half of the 19th century and his essays on the imagination, he pretty much says the same thing. And there are others as well. MacDonald was a congregational minister whose ideas were deeply rooted in his Christian belief as well. So there's this tradition within fantasy writing, which theorizes the purpose of the fantasy writer as a kind of almost instrument. Well, not an instrument. That sounds too kind of grand, but not as an instrument of God, but as somebody who effectively on the human scale does what God does.

Anna Vaninskaya:

Now, obviously, if you do not subscribe to particular system of faith, then this won't work for you as an explanation of what the fantasy writers do, but certain aspects of it can certainly be taken and can be made useful, whatever one's particular background is. And the idea that any writer creates a world when they... I think no one would argue with that. That's a fairly self-explanatory thing.

Elizabeth Ferry:

I was thinking that the very term world building and when people talk and they often talk about it in the context of worlds that don't follow the same rules as everyday worlds that already is implied, maybe not a divine creator, but some sort of process of creation that looks a lot like that. Right?

John Plotz:

Yeah. But it's completely fascinating to know. I had missed this and I guess it's in *On Fairy-Stories* that Tolkien believed that after human existence, that those worlds would actually somehow be realized. That's amazing.

Anna Vaninskaya:

That was the hope as he... It's in the epilogue to the essay, *On Fairy-Stories* that people don't tend to focus on, but that's pretty much what he says there. And I think most critics don't go there because it's a bit too far out for them

John Plotz:

I mean, it's interesting. We don't really need to talk about the kind of tension between Lewis and Tolkien, but that's interesting. I always assumed that one of the things that Tolkien didn't like about Lewis was his insistence on that kind of eschatological realization at the end of the Narnia books where you get the kind world beyond worlds that are realized after death.

Anna Vaninskaya:

They were both talking about these things in these very same years when Tolkien is composing the essay. So it's not surprising.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Can I ask a not very well-informed question about Lewis and Tolkien. My reading of Lewis was always, and I think I may have even learned the word allegory in the context of reading Lewis, and I know that's not totally technically accurate, but there is more of an allegorical feeling, I think when you read it that this is an allegory of sort of Christianity. Whereas I would never say that Tolkien is an allegory.

Anna Vaninskaya:

That's absolutely right, yeah.

John Plotz:

Yeah. And Tolkien says that himself explicitly, like in one of those prefaces later in *The Lord of the Rings*. He makes this great distinction between allegory and applicability basically.

Anna Vaninskaya:

Absolutely. Yeah. And he disliked, as is well-known Lewis' pension for allegory. That said Tolkien himself did write allegories. He has a couple of short stories, Leaf by Niggle and Smith of Wootton Major that arguably, but I think no one would seriously disagree that they are allegories. So he practiced in that form too, but it was not his favorite by any means. But this raises an interesting, bigger question about the degree to which fantasy in general is susceptible to... Well, not just allegorical interpretations, but to the impulse towards allegory.

Anna Vaninskaya:

Because if we go beyond somebody like CS Lewis, everyone knows about the Narnia is an allegory. How much allegory, quote-unquote, can be found in other types of fantasies. And if I may bring in one of the authors that wrote my book about E.R. Eddison, who is not well-known. He's very difficult to read. That may be one reason why very few people read him, but I think very rewarding once you get ahold of him. Also very ideologically problematic, and that's something maybe if we talk about Morris later on. We can talk about his ideology.

John Plotz:

I think that would be great to talk about actually. Yeah.

Anna Vaninskaya:

Yeah. But just to say that Eddison was very interested in this question of allegory as well. He hated it. He built a whole philosophical system on the basis of the significance of particularity and sort of the reducibility of things. So here was another fantasy writer who was repudiating allegory as a mode. Very, very consciously and explicitly.

John Plotz:

Maybe we could connect that to the ideological uptake question that you mentioned. I guess the way I was thinking about this, Anna, you should take the question any way you want, but I was thinking that there are tendencies even in what you've been saying, but if we think about how somebody like Tolkien works to subcreate, there's tendencies to imagine that as affirming a kind of possibility of a stable world order, which you could think of as conservative by nature. I mean, whether it's redemptively Christian or just sort of a kind of reinforcing the stable facticity of like a story frame that holds, and then there's another way in which, because subcreation or secondary

world-making is reimagining, it would be consistent with the claims that Ursula Le Guin makes that there's a manifesto for reimagining the world built into fantasy.

John Plotz:

There's one reading of fantasy that says people are escapist. Like Fredric Jameson says, "Fantasy is escapism." It's just idle wish fulfillment. And that would make it look more ideologically, either neutral or conservative. And then there's another vision that says, "Well, no, it's actually showing you a way out. Ergo, it's emancipatory, it's progressive, it's anarchist." However, you want to talk about it. Which angles make sense to you and why?

Anna Vaninskaya:

Well, all of them together because we haven't touched on the thorny issue of defining what fantasy actually is. And I don't suggest we go that way because that's a rabbit hole, but because so many different things have been called fantasy, I think it is actually impossible to generalize certain works that we call fantasy fit into the former kind of... And certain fit into the latter. I know for instance, a recent book by James Gifford on fantasy and the radical fantastic, modernism, anarchism and fantasy.

Anna Vaninskaya:

He has chapters devoted to Dunsany, Mirrlees and Morris, and as well as obviously later fantasists. But there have been readings of the same authors that have taken both tax as it were. So it's possible to read you in the same work from opposite points of view as on the one hand transformative, but if looked at from a different angle, which you could call conservative. Even Tolkien who nobody would argue, I think that he's particularly radical ideologically speaking, but if he actually look at his definition of escapism in *On Fairy-Stories* as something that makes us want to revolt against the abuses of the status quo. And he talks specifically about factories producing bombs in that essay.

Anna Vaninskaya:

He gives that as a concrete example. Obviously, he also talks about the internal combustion engine and sort of industry and all the rest of it, which is his better known conservative side, if you will. But he frames fantastic escapism as a statement against war in the essay, *On Fairy-Stories*. So as a kind of call to

reimagine the world in a radical way, that condemns the sort of the abuses of human society, the destruction of human life and so on.

Anna Vaninskaya:

You could easily read that as, quote-unquote, radical if you wished to do so. So I think it's all about how we define these terms, I think ultimately. But if we step back into a more narrow definition where we are literally looking at the political views of a given fantasy author, then things are relatively simple and we can take someone like William Morris, who was a Victorian writer fantasy, but also one of the founders of British socialism and in his later years, which is when most of his fantasy romances were written.

Anna Vaninskaya:

He was an active Marxist. So he infused his fantasy with ideas about, for instance, communitarian ways of living about the importance of solidarity, all of those kinds of things, kind of values. They're there to be seen, but the romances aren't allegory. So we don't have a kind of crude embodiment of his political ideas in those stories. They work on their own terms. They exist completely outside of any ideological framework should you wish to read them that way. But equally, if you wish to place them back in the political context of the time, they make sense in relation to Morris's own political beliefs.

John Plotz:

Which may explain why *News from Nowhere* and the *Dream of John Ball* say are more sort of widely excited works than those works.

Anna Vaninskaya:

Yes, exactly.

John Plotz:

They lend themselves to more direct.

Anna Vaninskaya:

Exactly. Because he's explicit there because *News from Nowhere* is a straightforward socialist utopia. The label is right there. I mean, aside from fantasy, one of my main research areas is the sort of the history of the British socialist movement. And in the 19th century, the socialists, and I'm referring

here not just to writers, but to sort of the political activists and so on, they used the past very, very actively in order to formulate their critique of the present.

Anna Vaninskaya:

So they were able to critique the capitalist status quo by invoking certain models, sometimes inventing the past in a way that suited their particular agenda in order to show that, "Look, things can be different because in the past they weren't like this. They can be different again. And the past might actually give us some examples of how to structure our societies that we could use to make the future a better one.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Absolutely. And that was sort of what I meant by the Morris analogy. I was just saying in terms of that's the other side of my argument about why transformation and preservation don't seem to align in a neat way according to a political spectrum because you put it beautifully. The past and the future is what you make of it, right?

Anna Vaninskaya:

Yes. Yeah.

John Plotz:

So we have a conversation with Gifford in the vault that we're going to publish one of these days about radicalism and Le Guin. But also we have an upcoming conversation with David Wengrow who wrote that book, *The Dawn Of Everything*. Do you know this book? He wrote it with Graeber-

Elizabeth Ferry:

He wrote it with David Graeber.

John Plotz:

... who passed away, David Graeber.

Anna Vaninskaya:

Oh yes, of course I do. Yeah. I was thinking of Graeber as the main author. Yeah, of course. Yeah.

John Plotz:

So Wengrow is the archeologists who worked with Graeber . And one of the things I love about that book is that it basically just shows the insane variety of economic and political dispensations under which so-called, quote, prehistoric human society has endured. There's not one terminology.

John Plotz:

Yeah. Yeah, exactly. Like a multi-foliate version of how you articulate basically power, knowledge, authority. All of these different variables that can be combined in many different ways. I totally take that fantasy can be regressively backwards looking, but I like the notion that it is... X, it looks outward. And by looking outward, it has the potential to just shake things up, which might be a reversion to some older imagined better order. But Anna, what you're saying, I completely agree with, which is the imaginary past can be a different future too.

Anna Vaninskaya:

For sure, yes.

John Plotz:

So we haven't really talked about the children's fantasy side or the children versus adult. I mean, we've been assuming a sort of continuous. And Anna, you started us off with that beautiful anecdote about your own feeling that sense of loss and nostalgia that it sounds like pervades even your adult account of Tolkien as well. But do we want to think a little bit about the notion of these as books for children versus what it means to be an adult. Is an adult reader a fantasy? Are you an outside reader always or sort of a secondary reader?

Anna Vaninskaya:

Yeah. Well, Tolkien's writing except for the obviously children-oriented Hobbit and several of his shorter stories, he's not a writer for children, although he's accessible to children. And I think that's what wrong-foot some people that when they come across a work that is not inaccessible, and obviously, they're all the market marketing considerations and sort of critical disparagement that greeted the publication of the book. And that has persisted in certain quarters since.

Anna Vaninskaya:

So even leaving all of that aside, I think we shouldn't class something as a quote-unquote, children's book in that negative sense, if it can be read by children, because it can also be read by adults just as well. And as Tolkien himself said in the essay, *On Fairy-Stories*, and I apologize for constantly coming back to that, adults will get more out of it. Children can read it and enjoy it, but adults will get so much more. And that is a hallmark of all children's fantasy that is actually intentionally targeted at children as well, that if it's well written, adults will be able to glean more from it than children could possibly do.

Anna Vaninskaya:

That's both for the good and for the bad, because if we take someone like Edith Nesbit who is a well known children's fantasy writer from the late 19th, early 20th century, and incidentally also, she was a socialist member of the Fabian society. So on the kind of radical end, if you will, politically. Those books are urban comic fantasies for the most part. They're very enjoyable reads. My own daughter really loves them. But then when I look at them as an adult reader with a contextual knowledge and so on, I actually find a lot of ideologically, politically, if you will, disturbing elements in them in relation to depictions of class, race even to a certain extent, gender and so on which a child would simply not pick up on because they lack the reference points of the background.

Elizabeth Ferry:

I have a question. I mean, something like E. Nesbit, it makes sense that it's written for children because it has children protagonists. Right?

Anna Vaninskaya:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Elizabeth Ferry:

And I didn't know, although I certainly, in many ways more accessible than *Hobbit*, I like it much better than *The Lord of the Rings* than the Fellowship-

John Plotz:

Oh, those are fighting words, dude.

Elizabeth Ferry:

I know. But as you can see, and I'm willing to fight if I need to, but what makes it obviously for children in your sense?

Anna Vaninskaya:

Right. Actually, I was thinking in terms of origins, because it began as a story for one of his own children and was famously... The publisher's reader for it was famously the publisher's son, 11-year-old, I think, son at the time. So in that sense, in terms of his gestation and publication, it was always framed that way. It was obviously published as a children's book. But you're right in that if you look at it simply as a text in its own right, actually that's true. I mean, what aspects of a class would make us classify it as a children's book? I'm not so sure in that instance. So that's actually a good question.

Elizabeth Ferry:

I mean it's definitely less dark than the rest of the... Than the ring cycle anyways.

John Plotz:

I don't know. I'm going to say I love the Hobbit. I always read it as a child. I read it to my children with great pleasure. I have read it as an adult with pleasure. But I think that there and back again, structure is pretty classic children's story. I mean, it has a quest with various people who loom in to view as obstacles or episodes for the unfolding experience of a single small, somewhat childlike figure, I think. I mean, he might be old, but he is ingenious.

Anna Vaninskaya:

Yeah, sure.

John Plotz:

And Lord of the Rings is different from that. Lord of the Rings, just it demands a complexity of world rendition. It's not just the unfolding of a line, it's looking laterally and seeing the whole map.

Anna Vaninskaya:

But this also raises the question of different target audiences and whether there's such a thing, for instance, as young adult fiction, because that's a marketing category, which has limited, usefulness, I think, as a critical category, but nevertheless-

John Plotz:

Except that A Wizard of Earthsea was commissioned to be a young adult book.

Anna Vaninskaya:

That's in fact exactly what I was going to bring up right now is A Wizard of Earthsea because in that instance, it's precisely the label... Sort of it's made to the label and the protagonist is... Well, the protagonists rather, because it's Sparrowhawk and so on. The boy protagonists, they're sort of on the cusp of manhood, so their adolescence. And the story is about their crossing over that line into adulthood. So their initiation, if you will. And there's a very interesting-

Elizabeth Ferry:

It's even like a school story at the beginning.

Anna Vaninskaya:

Yeah.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Right?

Anna Vaninskaya:

With Roke, absolutely. Yeah. So there are all those hallmarks. So that's an interesting... But then of course it goes beyond that. And obviously when Le Guin continued the series into Tehanu and onwards. Yeah. Of course at that point, I think it shed it's young adult associations almost completely. Especially, if you think about the Tehanu to such an extent about the life of the middle age that you sort of... I think those classifications begin creek and fall apart, basically, the more it develops. And that's a hallmark for me of... I mean, that's what good fiction should do. It shouldn't remain imprisoned by any kind of categories that might be imposed upon it.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Generic categories, you mean?

Anna Vaninskaya:

Yeah.

John Plotz:

Yeah. I mean, that really is a whole other angle, which we probably don't have a ton of time left to explore, but one of the things now that I think back to Tolkien's *On Fairy-Stories*, he's very definite that the genre is a textual one by nature, or the mode is textual by nature. And that's a funny claim. I mean, it's a very apropos claim at the era that he made it. But if you think about how fantasy has permeated our different media forms nowadays, and I don't know if you guys have seen the trailer for the new *Lord of the Rings*...

John Plotz:

But obviously the incredible success of the *Lord of the Ring* movies, but other versions as well. We could ask that question of whether fantasy looks fundamentally different in a textual form from a, I don't know, visual or... What's a word for all of those different media modes? Popular media, I guess. Film, TV, et cetera.

Anna Vaninskaya:

Yeah. I think now days one cannot talk about fantasy as an exclusively textual form, but those days are long gone. If you look at the conferences, book essay collections, everything, it's multimodal, and there are probably more people working on fantasy in those other modes, than they are working on textual fantasy nowadays. That's just a guess, but it's the impression I get. But I think they do differ. So the films, fantasy films would come the closest, I think, to textual fantasy because there is a single... Well, to a certain extent, the single author's guiding vision, determining the whole product, the whole sort of final output.

Anna Vaninskaya:

Although, obviously, unlike a book, there are lots of other people involved in the creation of cinematic fantasy. But usually there's still a director who stamps their vision on the world. But once you get into gaming, for instance, then even that goes by the wayside and there's so much agencies given to the player, for instance, in navigating their way around the world and choosing sort of learning about it, doing different things in it. And the worlds are constantly being expanded, if they're successful game worlds, for instance. They're potentially endless in the way that even something like the lifelong project of a Tolkien or some other authors who's done that kind of thing, they

cannot kind of possibly compete because there's still just one person at the end of the day. And at that one person is going to die.

Anna Vaninskaya:

But with the gaming universe, you could potentially have hundreds, thousands of people working on it for as long as they're making money on off of it essentially. It's just a complete step change, I think in how fantasy works once you get into that.

John Plotz:

Yeah, though, I will say your use earlier of the word, *legendarium*, which is the word that people use to describe the Tolkien corpus and it's potentially extensible edges, of course, brings back older concepts. Not just the Marvel Cinematic Universe or the Star Trek cinematic universe, but also the Arthurian *legendarium*, right?

Anna Vaninskaya:

Yes.

John Plotz:

There's a long tradition of available story space, which might be multiply-authored.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Absolutely.

Anna Vaninskaya:

That's absolutely true. And it's interesting in that regard that... Because we haven't talked at all about the kinds of fantasy that take place in these preexisting *legendarium*. So Arthurian fantasy of course, is a particular sub-genre, a very fruitful one. And it is simply the latest incarnation of something that goes back literally thousands of years. And we could view if any fantasy that uses existing pantheons, for instance, either Greek pantheon, whatever in a sense also is doing precisely that. So you're right. In that sense, textual fantasy has always already been there.

John Plotz:

And the One Thousand and One Nights is another legendarium, which borrows itself, borrows from Indian stories and Persian stories and changes its name and its shape.

Anna Vaninskaya:

Yes. That's true.

John Plotz:

Yeah. So this is probably a great moment to turn, Anna said, the final step for home here is a category we call recallable books. So where we ask another book that you would recommend to listeners here that might relate to this conversation? So maybe there's something you want to sort of pull off the shelf. Did you have a book in mind?

Anna Vaninskaya:

When you asked me to think that, I went through a number of contenders and actually I'll settle on something. It's a collection of short stories published, I think, or collected at any rate in 1977, I believe called the Kingdoms of Elfin by Sylvia Townsend Warner.

John Plotz:

Oh my God. I love that book. I love that book.

Anna Vaninskaya:

Right. She's a British writer who's better known as the author of Lolly Willowses with 1920's novel about a woman who becomes a witch essentially. But at the very end of her life, she wrote a series of stories, many of which were published in The New Yorker, I think, said in different, incredibly vividly realized, quote-unquote, elfin kingdoms, which are modeled on actual, mostly European, but also sort of Ottoman and near Eastern cultures with the usual kind of distinction between elves or fairies and mortals, but the way she takes on those, what we think of as familiar tropes is just so different from anything that anyone would expect.

Anna Vaninskaya:

I think it's kind of a unique creation. And it's disturbing. So it's not a cuddly, fuzzy read by any means. But it'll make you question your understanding of fantasy, I think. So I would recommend that.

John Plotz:

Oh, yeah. That's so great. Thank you so much. I totally agree. I mean, maybe James Hogg would be the closest comparison, but no, 170 years after. Some of those strange fairy tales, but it is-

Anna Vaninskaya:

Hogg is actually mentioned, I believe in one or a couple of those stories.

John Plotz:

I think in the final story maybe.

Anna Vaninskaya:

Yeah.

John Plotz:

Yeah, exactly. Cool. Elizabeth, you're going to pass this week, right? Or you-

Elizabeth Ferry:

Well, one did occur to me, which maybe I'll bring up which is the Lloyd Alexander, Taran series. I've forgotten the name of the series itself.

John Plotz:

Chronicles of Prydain, I think.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Chronicles of Prydain, yes.

Elizabeth Ferry:

That begins with the Book of Three. And I was thinking of it partly in relation to this idea of the legendarium, right, because it's drawing on Welsh. Sort of a Welsh world and also Welsh mythology. But that's one that... In some ways I think it's a lot. I'm not sure it's as good as the Earthsea cycle.

John Plotz:

It's definitely not.

I do love it though. I adore it.

Elizabeth Ferry:

I love this sort of way it has this kind of episodic character and there's one of them which is called Taran Wanderer, which is a kind of very different in tone from the others where the protagonist goes and he learns first to weave and then to throw pots and then to forge a sword. And it has this very kind of detailed sort of production aspect. It's almost a little bit like-

John Plotz:

Little House on the Prairie

Elizabeth Ferry:

Yeah. The Laura Ingalls Wilder where there's like these descriptions really... It's kind of technical descriptions.

John Plotz:

Yeah. How to smoke a pig.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Exactly. I love that change of pace that it sort of allows.

John Plotz:

Yeah. I just wrote a footnote about it, which I sort of compared the fact that Taran is the assistant pig keeper to the fact that Ged begins as a goat keeper. And I talked about this kind of magic and manure quality where it's like very earthy and very enchanted both. I think that's something super endearing about those books. Yeah. And that tradition of going back to the Welsh stuff, because he's not the only person to kind of reinvest The Mabinogion.

John Plotz:

So very quickly, I'll say I pick a book that often gets classified as science fiction, which is N.K. Jemisin's The Fifth Season. You'll see it in both. But I think she's clearly in conversation with Le Guin and I really like Jemisin both because she's got this wonderful view of a world where people can make or stop earthquakes with their minds. So that's sort of the magical power. But then she has a very sharp sense of how much what she's doing is not allegorical to our own world, but applicable in terms of the way that power works. It belongs to that tradition of kind of geopolitical fantasy, I guess, where you learn a lot about who's in power and what you can do.

Elizabeth Ferry:

Othering, right? Power and othering.

John Plotz:

Powering, othering, for sure. It turns out that basically people who can control earthquakes are the strongest people in the world, and that makes them the most object because they need to be controlled by those who have real power, need to control the sort of earthquake minds. So yeah, it's a very resonant book, and then a series, but especially the first book, I love.

John Plotz:

Okay. So I'm just going to add really quickly that for those of you who enjoyed these conversations, I think you'll want to tune in two weeks from now where we're going to rebroadcast a conversation that we had years ago now with Madeline Miller, the author of *Cerci*. I also think you might like episode 46 when we spoke with children's lit expert, Leah Price. Those are searchable like all our archives through our website or through the New Books Network. So Anna, this has been a huge pleasure. Thank you so much for taking the time.

John Plotz:

Recall This Book was founded by Elizabeth Ferry and me, John Plotz. It's sponsored by Brandeis and the Mandel Humanities Center. Sound editing is by Naomi Cohen. Website design and social media by Miranda Peery of the English department. We're eager to hear your comments, criticisms, and thoughts. If you liked what you hear, please subscribe, rate, and review us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your podcast. From all of us here at RTB, thanks for listening.