



Worldcon 75 Academic Track
Session 16: "Medieval" Religion in Speculative Fiction

Saturday 17:00-18:30
Room 209

Chair: **Meg MacDonald**

Abstract 1:

Julie A. Hofmann (Shenandoah University, USA):

Through a Past Darkly: Modern Views of 'Medieval' Religion in Science Fiction and Fantasy

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From Arrakis to Westeros, readers of science fiction and fantasy regularly enter worlds whose religions appear to be drawn from Earth's Medieval (and mostly European) past. Rituals in forgotten languages, robed and cloistered clergy, power-hungry preachers who gladly sacrifice their morality if it means they can use their office and institutions to wield power over the throne – these are all common images that survive despite other attempts to build unfamiliar worlds. In this paper I will examine a range of representations of religion in 'medieval'-like settings, in order to explore how a largely Protestant, Post-Enlightenment worldview (and in the case of the U.S., also an Exceptionalist one) has informed the medievalism of Anglophone science fiction and fantasy.

Julie A. Hofmann is Professor of History at Shenandoah University in Virginia, U.S.A. She has been reading science fiction and fantasy for about forty-five years, and suspects that it may have helped turn her into a medieval historian. Her historical research focuses on gender, property, kinship, and law in Carolingian Europe. She has contributed a chapter to a collaborative translation of a ninth century commentary on the *Rule of St. Benedict*, written by Hildemar of Corbie, much of which she completed while a Visiting Research Fellow at King's College London in 2014. That same year, she presented a paper on medievalism in Terry Pratchett's Discworld at Loncon3. She has also presented on medievalism at the International Medieval Congress at Kalamazoo, and at the first Middle Ages in the Modern World (MAMO) conference at the University of St Andrews. Dr. Hofmann teaches a very broad range of courses in her department (pretty much all of the non-U.S. history), as well as a freshman seminar course called "Race, Gender, and the Other in Disney's Animated Films." She also sometimes blogs and tweets as Another Damned Medievalist. Originally from California, she has lived in several parts of the U.S., Germany, and the U.K., but currently resides in Winchester, VA.

Abstract 2:

K.A. Laity (College of St Rose, USA):

Lollard Magician: Jonathan Strange & the Reform of English Magic

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"Do not let friars enter your wine cellars for fear they will bless every barrel and change the wine into blood." John Wycliffe

The tumultuous fourteenth century in England had many notable figures but few with the same zeal for reform as John Wycliffe. The Oxford scholar saw a country estranged from its true faith by a layer of corrupt clergy more concerned with their comforts and position than with helping their parishioners, and called them ‘the pests of society, enemies of religion, and patrons and promoters of every crime’ (Murray). In a time of a schism at the very top of Western Christianity, he cast into doubt the very office of the pope, pleasing neither Pope Urban VI in Rome nor Anti-Pope Clement VII in Avignon with his assertion that there was in the bible no authority for a pope at all. Further he thought the only solution to the manifold problems in the world was to put the faith directly into the hands of the people by crafting a version of the bible in English.

More than a century before Martin Luther and his 95 theses, Wycliffe protested vehemently against the attempts to lock away the truth of his faith behind bolted doors, cloistered walls and obscurities of language.

I will draw parallels to the career of Jonathan Strange, who likewise thought that magic was, in the words of Wycliffe, “for the government of the people, by the people and for the people.” He fought against the self-appointed head of English magic, Mr Norrell, finding nothing in the teachings of the Raven King to suggest that only one man should be head of the practice and that those who fattened their purses in the ‘business’ of magic like Lascelles and Drawlight were no better than the corrupt pardoners and friars of Wycliffe’s day.

K. A. Laity is the award-winning author of *How to Be Dull*, *White Rabbit*, *Dream Book*, *A Cut-Throat Business*, *Lush Situation*, *Owl Stretching*, *Unquiet Dreams*, *À la Mort Subite*, *The Claddagh Icon*, *Chastity Flame*, and *Pelzmantel*, as well as editor of *Respectable Horror*, *Weird Noir*, *Noir Carnival* and *Drag Noir*. She also writes historical fiction as Kit Marlowe and crime as Graham Wynd. Her bibliography is chock full of short stories, humor, plays and essays, both scholarly and popular. As a 2011-2012 Fulbright Fellow in Galway, Ireland she worked in digital humanities at NUIG. Dr. Laity teaches medieval literature, film, gender studies, digital humanities and popular culture at the College of Saint Rose, where she is also the director of the Digital Humanities Initiative. She divides her time between Hudson, New York and Dundee, Scotland.

Abstract 3:

Gillian Polack (Australian National University):
Understanding the Other through Medievalism
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How a given writer presents a ‘medieval’ world can give us many insights into how critical aspects of culture are perceived and depicted. In particular, the understanding of minority religions depicted in speculative fiction based on the Middle Ages says a lot about the cultural baggage Australians carry and how their understanding of Australian history serves to help create the world they use in their fiction. While Medievalism is important to many writers of fantasy, some key aspects of the historical Middle Ages do not always translate neatly into modern tellings based on historical interpretations. It is in the changes that are made to standard accounts of the Middle Ages (or any other historical period) that we see most clearly the effects of that cultural baggage.

This paper will examine a small group of Australian speculative fictions writing loosely based in the Middle Ages. It will use their Medievalism as a route to understanding

how Australia's secular culture creates its preferred Middle Ages, focussing on how these writers work religious elements into their fiction and what approaches they use. More specifically, this paper will focus on how Medieval Jewish othering is depicted in these texts, and, through the examination of the Judeo-Christian world, how differences in religious observation and belief in Western Europe in the Middle Ages are translated into speculative fiction.

The depiction of religion is useful to establish the cultural assumptions that Australian writers work with, due to Australia's strong claims of being a secular society. Given that there have been Jews in Australia since the early European settlement (there were Jewish convicts on the First Fleet), the depiction or lack thereof of Jews in the fantastical Middle Ages of Australian writers is critical to understanding how Australian writers handle the creation of outsiders in fiction.

Dr **Gillian Polack** is an Australian writer, editor, historian and critic. Her main research interests are cultural development and transmission in both the Middle Ages and through contemporary literature. Her most recent novel is "The Wizardry of Jewish Women". Her anthology "Baggage" was shortlisted for a Ditmar in 2010. One of her stories won a Victorian Ministry of the Arts award and three more have been listed as recommended reading in the international lists of world's best fantasy and science fiction short stories. Her non-fiction includes work on historiography, the Middle Ages, Arthurian studies and literature. She is currently based at the Australian National University.