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Embracing Ecology and Fantasy: A Review of The Wonders of Creation

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Abstract

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Posting about the book *The Wonders of Creation* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/embracing-ecology-and-fantasy-a-review-of-the-wonders-of-creation/>

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Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

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Embracing Ecology and Fantasy: A Review of *The Wonders of Creation*

Carl Fictorie

January 16, 2023

Title: *Wonders of Creation: Learning Stewardship from Narnia and Middle-Earth*

Author: Kristen Page

Publisher: IVP Academic

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Pages: 144 (Paperback)

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In this short and easy read, Kristen Page lays out a vision that neatly connects the fantasy worlds of Lewis and Tolkien to the environmental plight of our contemporary world. She shows how these authors articulate a well-developed environmental ethic in their respective fantasy worlds and makes the case that through reading these stories one can begin to develop a love of the real creation that we inhabit and which itself suffers from several similar problems as the worlds of Narnia and Middle-Earth. Page's argument is that we need to reorient our thinking about nature using the tool of storytelling, then use that to lament how we have treated the natural world, so that we might kindle a sense of wonder that will motivate us to action to preserve and restore nature.

The book consists of three lectures given by Page under the auspices of the Hansen Lectureship series of the Wade Center at Wheaton university. Page, Professor of Biology with expertise in wildlife disease and environmentally related public health issues, gave the lectures during the 2020-21 academic year. For each lecture there is also a respondent who has written a short essay commenting on Page's themes in that section.

Stepping out of the wardrobe

In the first lecture, "Stepping out of the Wardrobe", Page makes the case that the worlds of Lewis' Narnia and Tolkien's Middle Earth can be effective means to instill a love for nature in the reader. With good stories, the reader develops a connection with the characters and places in the world of the story. "Stories speak of truths,"¹ she says, so this connection to the landscape of the story can awaken an awareness of the beauty of the fictional world, a beauty that prompts an interest in caring for the real landscape the reader inhabits. Both Lewis and

Tolkien spent much time in and studying nature, and this knowledge is reflected in the breadth and depth of the worlds they created.² Additionally, as the characters in the stories travel through their worlds, the landscape prod their transformation as characters. Page argues that a similar transformation can occur in the reader. This transformation instills a loving concern for the natural landscape then can cultivate humility and contentment with respect to using the creation for our needs.

Christina Bieber Lake responds to the first lecture with an important point: that the case Page is making is really the same as the case in support of educating in the liberal arts. Through story our imagination is stirred, and we learn to see the world differently than before. "That is work best done by the storyteller and poet."³ Through that, we can "*imagine a different kind of relationship*" between ourselves and nature." The key word is "imagine." Imagination in the fictional world reveals truths about the real world.

A Lament for Creation

Page opens her second lecture with the question: "What does it mean to love your neighbor in the twenty-first century?"⁴ Referencing the scouring of the Shire in the last book of *The Lord of the Rings*, she notes that our ecosystems are at risk, and thus caring for creation is one means of loving our neighbor. Page discusses forever chemicals, brownfields, zoonotic diseases, climate change, all in the context of an extended critique of overconsumption. In each case, she finds a connection between the ecosystem distress and a story from Lewis or Tolkien: the scouring of the Shire, Frodo and Sam standing at the gates of Mordor and seeing the wasteland, Narnia's perpetual winter, and Ransom considering restraint as he tastes from an otherworldly fruit and is spiritually moved by the experience in Lewis' *Perelandra*.

In the last part of this lecture Page discusses lament specifically. Through lament, we recognize injustice, acknowledge suffering, challenge our comfort, overcome apathy, and through all of these, we prepare for action. She is particularly critical of us in the developed West, whose actions create much of the environmental degradation while our relative prosperity insulates us from the suffering it causes for the poor throughout the world. For many of us, we are too much like Uncle Andrew in *The Magician's Nephew*, whose point of view is so colored by his greed towards the resources in Narnia and fear of the animals whose language he cannot understand.⁵ Even here the story is capable of shaking us awake from our blindness to the problems around us and thus encourages us to begin the needed alterations to our behaviors.

The second lecture is the penultimate chapter in this trilogy, according to Noah Toly, the second respondent. He affirms that the reader *needs* to travel through the darkness, for without it, the reader cannot be changed.⁶ Experiencing the suffering of environmental degradation is a vital part of the transformative power of story.

Ask the Animals to Teach You

In the third lecture, Page quotes Job 12:7-9; “But ask the animals, and they will teach you...Which of all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this?”⁷ Page uses this quote to introduce the notion that God wants us to understand creation. Indeed, we need such knowledge if we are to be the caretakers God calls us to be in the opening chapters of Genesis.

Turning to *The Magician’s Nephew*, she notes how Aslan’s song can inspire a similar joy and awe in the reader, fostering the virtue of wonder, a notion drawing on the work of Stephen Bouma-Prediger. An attitude of wonder also helps to transform the reader because it encourages openness and receptivity towards meanings that are beyond oneself.⁸ Page reminds us that we oftentimes spend too much time indoors and encourages us to go outside, citing research on the various health and psychological benefits of doing so.⁹ She particularly promotes following the practice of “slow” reading of nature, to stop and pay attention to the place and take in even the smallest details.

In this context it is helpful to note that Page has also included a small collection of nature photography from her personal portfolio. The photos provide a glimpse of her wonder at the creation.

In addition to wonder, Page advocates for the virtue of humility, especially as we consider how small we are in comparison to the scale of ecosystems.¹⁰ Through humility we can reconsider how we extract resources from creation and consider how that extraction harms ecosystems beyond their capacity to recover. The character of Tom Bombadil in *The Lord of the Rings* is an important example of both wonder and humility. While Tom Bombadil is a being with powers comparable to Gandalf, his simple life and joy in the forest around his home shows how one might live in harmony with nature.

Emily Hunter McGowin provides the last response. She suggests that the reader considers the spiritual discipline of *visio divina*, or divine seeing, the “art of praying with images or other media.” This is not a veneration of nature, but rather using nature, whether real or fictional, to focus our prayer through the use of imagery towards wonder and praise of the Creator, the one through whom all things were created (John 1:3) and the one who is making all things new (Rev. 21:5).

This is a wonderful little book that I can commend to the readership of *In All Things*. It will either prompt you to read, or re-read, one or both of these classic fantasy tales in light of her ecological point of view or inspire you to consider how you might change your ways to address the ecological concerns discussed in the book. Or perhaps it will do both.

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