

## Bibliography

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## Additional Reviews

Peter Bramwell, *Pagan Themes in Modern Children's Fiction: The Green Man, Shamanism, Earth Mysteries* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 240 pp., \$80 (cloth).

Peter Bramwell's final sentence is perhaps the best way to begin this review: "A creatively critical dialogue between [modern Paganism and children's fiction] is what this book has observed and perhaps, I hope, extended" (190). *Pagan Themes in Modern Children's Fiction* succeeds in initiating a dialogue well worth extending beyond these pages, both for Pagan Studies and children's-literature scholars.

Working from the framework of critical linguistics which "regards language as a socially situated generator and vehicle of ideology and power relationships" (18), Bramwell's primary strength lies in his examination of the ideology of children's fiction with Pagan themes. In the first chapter, "Locating Paganism," Bramwell defines what is at stake: "how the language of children's literature with Pagan themes controls or liberates child characters and readers, often with regards to gender roles, and in some cases in the dynamics between human and divine beings" (18). Bramwell also offers Ronald Hutton's "four languages of Paganism" (18) as a conceptual terminology to which he will consistently return. This proves a useful way to organize and evaluate the children's fiction under discussion, as does Bramwell's explanation of and emphasis on Pagan chronotope, "a holistic outlook on time and space," (4) as represented in, for example, the Wheel of the Year.

Other strengths include a willingness to acknowledge and call into question underlying ideology and to address potentially "problematic and troubling" (20) aspects of both modern Paganism and the children's fiction he examines. He writes, for example, of "spiritual practices being stolen from indigenous cultures, decontextualised and watered down"

(20). Bramwell is also quick to note Paganism's "privileging of childhood spirituality" (29), and to recognize that "a clear similarity can be discerned between a Pagan view of childhood and the construction in children's literature of the child as primitive, connected with nature and the past" (29).

I am repeatedly impressed by Bramwell's ability to examine his subject in a nuanced and fair way. Quite early on, as a response to Pagan readings of C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, he writes, "as always, there is scope for the reader to negotiate with and interrogate authorial intent, stated or implied" (34). Bramwell is at his best when he gives close and nuanced readings of texts. As but one example, his reading of Tim Bowler's *Dragon's Rock* carefully unpacks how "Figurations of witches are all too obviously projections of adolescent male psyche" (162), concluding after his dissection of the witch figure's two stereotyped sides that "any attempt to generalise about human nature is undone by gendering and dualism" (162). Bramwell rightly privileges books with greater ambiguity and complexity such as Catherine Fisher's *Darkhenge* over clearly didactic texts like Paul Pendragon's *The Silverberry Tree*. While Fisher "integrates prehistoric monuments with shamanism and the Green Man in a psychologically and mythically complex and coherent narrative" (188), Pendragon merely "show[s] how environmentalist grandstanding can erase literary judgment" (180).

The book's three-part structure ("Herne the Hunter and the Green Man," "Shamanism and the Pull of the North," and "Prehistoric Monuments, Witchcraft, and Environmentalism") does help focus attention on what Bramwell sees as the three primary themes through which modern Paganism is represented in children's fiction. As Bramwell demonstrates quite well, Pan has been supplanted as "pre-eminent literary Pagan god" (38) by the Green Man who "is a blank slate on which current concerns can be inscribed, notably the desire to get in touch with the rhythm of nature and to act against ecological degradation" (38). Even so, the Green Man is not an altogether uncomplicated or admirable figure. As Bramwell looks at "the masculine, the feminine and balance," he is likewise aware of "the potential in the rise of the Green Man for him to become a monotheistic, patriarchal, interventive and controlling figure, very much against the pluralist, feminist and egalitarian spirit that has heretofore inhabited modern Paganism" (39). This sort of "yes, but also consider this" approach taken not only in the Green Man chapter but also throughout the book is another of Bramwell's strengths. He does indeed succeed at opening for discussion representations of Pagan themes and elements in a mostly nuanced and thoughtful manner.

With the exception of a brief examination of Anthony Browne's fabulous picture book *Willy the Wizard*, the children's literature covered

by Bramwell could best be described at novels aimed at more mature readers. While many books are examined, among the highlights are Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising*, Geraldine McCaughrean's *The Stones are Hatching*, Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, Susan Price's *The Ghost Drum* and her Ghost World trilogy as a whole (this discussion is especially strong for its connection of Shamanism in Price's fiction with scholarship on Shamanism), and Catherine Fisher's *Darkhenge*.

Peter Bramwell, with his background in children's literature and passion for his subject, has done his reading. The range of books examined in *Pagan Themes in Modern Children's Fiction* is impressive, and he is careful to give needed background on the texts for unfamiliar readers. The trade-off, however, is a style that feels scattered and incomplete, tending too readily to foreground summary and save critical engagement/analysis for last. This style leaves me with a sense of having been handed an incomplete connect-the-dots puzzle: I am expected to draw the connecting lines when what a reader needs is for Bramwell's hand to guide from one dot to the next in a way that keeps moving forward and ultimately completes a picture. As one example, Bramwell concludes about Helen Cresswell's *Stonestruck* that "A beautiful, powerful woman cannot possibly be a good mother seems to be the reactionary 'can't have it all' covert ideology lurking here" (71), then moves directly into "*The Green Lady and the King of Shadows* by Moyra Caldecott (1989) is set in sixth-century Glastonbury" and continues with summary background of Caldecott's book. My mind needs Bramwell to transition into Caldecott by making connections to the "beautiful, powerful woman... covert ideology" angle, but instead I am jarringly pulled out of that critical framework and back into summary. While I recognize this contention may be seen more as a critique of style than of content, it remains a valid concern insofar as it works against readers' ability to organize and synthesize Bramwell's ideas.

Even so, *Pagan Themes in Modern Children's Fiction* does succeed in opening up the "creatively critical dialogue" (190) Bramwell so desires and, further, makes strides to "widen the [Pagan children's literature] canon, possibly destabilise it, by going beyond the witch figure and the Wiccan path, and the comforts of recognition and induction, to other more contentious aspects of Paganism in which contemporary children's literature makes numerous and significant interventions" (35). Not a bad start at all.

Dawn Comer  
Defiance College