

Douglas A. Anderson, ed., *Tales Before Narnia: The Roots of Modern Fantasy and Science Fiction*. New York: Del Rey, 2008. ISBN 978-0345498908, sc, 352pp., \$15.00.

Reviewed by Jason Fisher, in *Mythprint: The Monthly Bulletin of the Mythopoeic Society*, Volume TO BE PROVIDED.



Following up his previous collection, *Tales Before Tolkien* (2005), Douglas Anderson now presents eighteen tales (and two poems) that inspired C.S. Lewis or that share common themes with his works. In spite of its title, Anderson is quick to note that “it is not restricted solely to precursors of Lewis’s seven volumes of *The Chronicles of Narnia*; rather, it encompasses the much wider breadth of his fictional output” (ix). To that end, the stories cover almost the whole range of the fantastic, from the traditional fairy tale to the pseudo-medieval fantasy to the gothic horror story, and ending on an almost realistic note with William Lindsay Gresham’s touching story, “The Dream Dust Factory” – strongly redolent of Stephen King’s novella, *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption* (1982). In spite of the *subtitle* of the collection, there is almost no science fiction to speak of here. But the closest thing we get is a remarkable story: “The Man Who Lived Backwards” by Charles F. Hall. This very clever tale presents time travel, hackneyed though the subject has since become, in a completely novel way, and it feels like the imaginative progenitor of both Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow* (1991) and Christopher Priest’s *The Prestige* (1995).

As I have already hinted by quoting from it, the book commences with a short Introduction. This sets the stage and provides only such background material as is absolutely necessary for appreciating the book’s mission and the parade of stories to follow. As readers work their way through the volume, Anderson provides spare but valuable introductions to each piece. The clarity and brevity of Anderson’s editorial comments are most laudable, allowing as they do the words of each author to assume center stage in succession. For those acquainted with *Tales Before Tolkien*, Anderson follows the same approach here. He concludes the collection with further notes on each author as well as recommendations for further reading – including authors not represented in the collection (e.g., Algernon Blackwood, John Buchan, Lewis Carroll, and Lord Dunsany, to name just a few).

In a short review, it would be impossible to say something about each of the stories in this wonderful and engrossing collection, so I will have to confine my remarks to only some of the best (including the two already mentioned above). In the subcategory of traditional

märchen, or fairy tales, Hans Christian Andersen's "The Snow Queen: A Tale in Seven Stories," "The Magic Mirror" (an excerpt from George MacDonald's 1858 novel, *Phantastes*), Charles Dickens's "The Story of the Goblins Who Stole a Sexton," and Owen Barfield's beautifully ambiguous "The Child and the Giant" are particularly excellent. The Dickens story has the added bonus of being *funny*.

In the domain of the horrific, Sir Walter Scott's "The Tapestry Chamber; or, The Lady in the Sacque" and Charles Williams's "Et in Sempiternum Pereant" (the only short story he ever published) are quite striking, each in its own way. Both are masterpieces of the gothic horror genre, easily standing up to Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" or Saki's (H.H. Munro's) "The Open Window."

More conventional (i.e., medieval) fantasy is represented here by William Morris's "A King's Lesson" and Robert Louis Stevenson's "The Waif Woman: A Cue — From a Saga." Both stories convey moral lessons of duty and honor. The longest story in the collection, Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's novella, *Undine*, abuts this genre as well, but stands in a class by itself, recommended heartily by MacDonald, then Lewis, then Anderson, and now by me. For those who come to agree, be sure to look for Amy Sturgis's new edition of Fouqué's *The Magic Ring* (2006; originally published almost two centuries earlier).

The two poems are Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's moving "Tegnér's Drapa," provided as a proem to the collection, and Tolkien's early work "The Dragon's Visit" (a work contemporary with *The Hobbit*). While it is nice to see the latter reprinted, I'm not sure the poem could have been of any notable influence on Lewis, and I wonder whether something else would have been more appropriate to the goals of the collection. Perhaps a selection from *The Notion Club Papers*.

Two further pieces, an excerpt ("Letter III") from Valdemar Thisted's curious novel *Letters From Hell* and John Macgowan's "Fastosus and Avaro," seem to point to Lewis's *Screwtape Letters*. But the resemblance is really only superficial. Lewis read Thisted's novel; however, that novel is nothing like *Screwtape*. But as for Macgowan, which does resemble *Screwtape* in several tantalizing ways, there is no evidence Lewis read it (in fact, there is direct testimony to the contrary).

Two selections, E. Nesbit's "The Aunt and Amabel" and Roger Lancelyn Green's "The Wood That Time Forgot: The Enchanted Wood" (the second chapter of a still unpublished novel), deserve special mention. Each bears in its own way a striking resemblance to aspects of Lewis's Narnia. In the case of Nesbit's charming tale, an enchanted wardrobe is the means of ingress into a fantasy world. In Green's novel,

children explore an enchanted wood very much like Lewis's Wood Between the Worlds. For all admirers of Lewis (the intended audience of this marvelous collection in any event), these two stories will be especially welcome.