

Bernd-Christian Otto and Dirk Johannsen, eds. *Fictional Practice: Magic, Narration, and the Power of Imagination*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2021. 372 pp. ISBN 978-90-04-46599-2 (hardback), 978-90-04-46600-5 (e-book).

Fictional Practice: Magic, Narration, and the Power of Imagination is the thirtieth volume of the ongoing Aries book series, Texts and Studies in Western Esotericism. The volume has been compiled to study the relationship between fiction and magic from multi-faceted perspectives. Therefore, the authors in the collection sought to find the initial position and reasons for this interrelation, in what ways the sides instruct each other, and how to situate the boundaries separating them if possible. The volume consists of fourteen chapters accompanied by introductory remarks from the editors. Thematically, depending on the source of inspiration for the writing, most chapters deal with fiction-inspired magical practices. While only one chapter wholly accounts for the opposite tendency, a few more chapters exhibit unique studies based on the reciprocal nature of the magic-fiction interrelation.

Chronologically, the collection covers the period from antiquity up to the present and provides significant arguments for the conceptualization of fiction-magic interconnectedness under a novel phenomenon called “fictional practice.” The term is suggested by the editors of the volume to denote the amalgamated essence of fiction and magical practice since the nineteenth century, as prior to this period, they constituted a pool of inspiration for each another. However, it is slightly difficult to observe fictional practices in the early modern cases as the practitioners are pioneers of the field and reflect both insider and outsider views. Additionally, some originate from oral folkloric traditions, the credibility of which is yet to be determined. Nevertheless, a red thread can be seen woven through most chapters in their acknowledgement of the dominance of fictions over the magical practices that fuel the emergence of fictional practice.

The first two chapters of the volume in particular seem to transcend the above-mentioned conceptualisation since the border between magic and fiction is blurred to the degree that the dominance of either is difficult to identify. Kyle Fraser’s Chapter One, “Magic as Pollution: Fictional Blasphemies and Ritual Realities in the Roman Period (1st century BCE–4th century CE),” introduces the ambiguous approach to magic in the late Roman period. Imaginative representations of magic and rituals were composed in a monastic environment by Hellenised priests who were the “sacred” practitioners of magic, at the same time evaluated as a threat to the Roman order for being impure, fraudulent, and polluting according to authors like Pliny, Strabo, Livy, Cicero, Diodorus Siculus, etc. (22). In Chapter Two, Claire Fanger explores the magical practices in “The Medieval Anti-Faust.” She mainly focuses on those practitioners who use black magic and are present in the Faustian legends, yet not punished like Faust. The first-hand experience of John Morigny, fourteenth-century member of the Order of Saint Benedict, is reflected in his book *Liber florum celestis doctrine* or *Flowers of Heavenly Teaching*, where he reveals his “insider” perspective as a ritual expert influenced by medieval tales about *nigromantia*, a Latin term for demonic magic (43).

Unique perspectives on fiction-inspired magical practices in the Nordic terrains are presented in Chapters Three, Four and Five. Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir’s “Enchantment and Anger in Medieval Icelandic Literature and Later Folklore,” explores Icelandic folkloric magical patterns found in the Legendary Sagas (*fornaldarsögur*) ranging from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries to the nineteenth century. Owen Davies’ “Narratives of the Witch, the Magician, and the Devil in Early Modern Grimoires” explores the emergence of early modern grimoire traditions. Historically, cheap trial pamphlets loaded with fictional witness testimonies were the main devices of negatively shaping public opinion about magicians. However, the fictional writings of the period gave rise to the “genre of Devil’s pact grimoires” called *Höllenzwang*, which focused on the Faustian motifs conveying stories about secret knowledge revelations. Such novels significantly

changed the understanding of actual magicians by serving as textbooks for summoning devils and forming a firm magical manuscript culture in Germany, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Portugal, France, etc. (98). Ane Ohrvik’s “When Ritual Texts Become Legendary: Practice and Fiction in Nordic Folklore” explores two types of written manuscripts that appeared in Norway during the early modern period. The first class, called the Black Books, consists of real historical manuals for practicing magic and conveying knowledge of practical arts and medicine. The second class is the oral legends dedicated to the mythical magus Cyprian. Regardless of the former’s factuality and latter’s fictionality, both texts are loaded with reiterating patterns and motifs of ritual practices.

Chapters Six and Seven deal with the interaction of fictional discourses of magic with the teachings of both the Theosophical Society and its offspring, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. In “Magic and Literary Imagination in H.P. Blavatsky’s Theosophy,” Marco Frenschkowski questions this interaction by looking at how literary motifs migrated to the construction of Theosophical conventions and H. P. Blavatsky’s understanding of magic. Though she did not acknowledge practical magic in the early teachings of the Theosophical Society, magic had become one of the fields Blavatsky took inspiration from after experiencing the affirmation of her Theosophical concerns in Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s fictional magic writings. Dirk Johannsen’s “The Emergence of Fictional Practice in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn,” presents a similar trend in the HOotGD and William Butler Yeats’s fiction. Golden Dawn’s concept of magic differed from its ancestors in the way that its language was designed according to literary trends as its members were mainly literary figures, making the Order an esoteric literary circle (178). It was Yeats who surpassed the line between fictional and magical by creating the Celtic Mystical Order, within which his poems are posited as poetic talismans to unfold “spiritual force” (190).

The only chapter dealing with fictional writing that itself emerged from a magical practice is Chapter Eight, Hugh B. Urban’s “My Life in a Love Cult:

Tantra, Orientalism, and Sex Magic in Early Twentieth-Century Fiction.” Moving the case studies into the twentieth century, Urban conveys a significant example of how the close relationship between magic and fiction is dependent on the related cultural practices of the given period. Urban undermines a comparative study of sexual Tantric magic in the USA and England by comparing the novels of three female writers who have experienced such rituals in person and presented them in their fictions. The British novels Flora Annie Steel’s *The Law of the Threshold* (1924) and Elizabeth Sharpe’s *The Secrets of the Kaula Circle* (1936) are vivid and influential accounts of Tantric magical practices negatively portrayed as the fulfillment of all diabolic sexual desires. Contrary to them, in Alma Hirsig’s *My Life in a Love Cult: A Warning to All young Girls* (1928), Tantric rituals are a medium revealing the essence of body and sexuality for spiritual liberation. Along with her sister’s actual relationship with Crowley as his sexual companion in their rituals, Alma presents her own real encounter with Pierre Bernard, a “loving guru,” who also played an important role in the early reconceptualisation of Tantra in the USA through his “sex cult” (216). Hirsig’s semi-autobiographical presentation of Tantra acknowledges sexual magic rites as women’s rights to the fulfillment of sexual pleasure, desire, and needs.

Chapter Nine, Ethan Doyle White’s “Drawing Down the Moon: From Classical Greece to Modern Wicca,” and Chapter Ten, Christian Giudice’s “Drinking from Hecate’s Fountain: Kenneth Grant’s Typhonian Trilogies and the Fusion Between Literature and Practiced Magic,” focus on fictional practices inspired by Aleister Crowley. White traces the origins of the ritual of drawing down the moon and its adoption by Gerald Gardner (1884–1964) and his Wiccan community. This magical practice is first detected as a joke in Aristophanes’s *The Clouds*. Though Gardner and his Wiccan community do not acknowledge the roots of their ritual, Gardner’s acquaintance with a similar lunar ritual in Aleister Crowley’s *Moonchild* (1929) leaves no doubt as to the same origin of inspiration. Giudice focuses on Kenneth Grant, Aleister Crowley’s secretary, and

his unique style of fictional practice. As Crowley's only follower who went on to provide new contributions to the studies of "magick," Grant practiced magical rituals to communicate with outer space and utilized fictional "crypto-historic and ufological" literature for this purpose. In particular, Grant took Crowley's skrying tradition further and claimed that Crowley opened a magical portal embodied by the portrait of a non-human entity serving as a medium for both human and alien spirits, which can be accessed through ufological literature.

Katerina Zorya's Chapter Eleven, "If One Knows Where to Look, Fiction is Magick: Reading Fictional Texts as Manuals of Magic in Post-Soviet Ukraine, Russia and Belarus," argues that in the Soviet era, some magical works were intentionally labeled as fiction to avoid censorship and practitioners would read such "instructive fictions" as if they were written to teach concealed esoteric ideas (262). Of such types, Richard Bach's and Carlos Castaneda's works were the most influential in post-Soviet publishing, as Bach's works were more general and abstract in terms of revealing the details, while Castaneda's novels transmitted detailed techniques for easy adoption by the readers, both rich with practical knowledge and tools. Zorya claims that, in this way, the label of fiction on such writings was a comprehensible and safe way of spreading practitioners' magical ideas without being censored.

Chapter Twelve explores the fictional heritage of Howard Philips Lovecraft. Justin Woodman's "Cthulhu Gnosis: Monstrosity, Selfhood, and Secular Re-Enchantment in Lovecraftian Occultural Practice," explores how Lovecraft's fictional heritage gave way to contemporary magical practices based on his "Cthulhu Mythos"—a fictional mythological universe inhabited by monstrous and hyper-spatial entities after the extinction of the humankind (290). Woodman conducts anthropological fieldwork among Lovecraft-inspired chaos magic practitioners in the United Kingdom called The Haunters of the Dark, and reveals how Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos has been adopted to connect with the mythos' beings from his tales, which is the center of the HotD's magical practice.

Finally, Carole M. Cusack's Chapter Thirteen, "A Magickal School in the Twenty-First Century: The Grey School of Wizardry and Its Prehistory" maps one more modern magical practice informed by popular fiction. The Grey School of Wizardry was founded by Tim Zell-Ravenheart, taking after the aesthetics of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series and the fictional school of Hogwarts. The Grey School became the institution through which Zell-Ravenheart and his wife Diana Moore started their quest to recreate the magical, mythical, and legendary conventions they read in Rowling's books, such as breeding unicorn goats and searching for mermaids in the Pacific Ocean.

One striking theme in several chapters is the evaluation of the acts of reading and writing as magical practice. The members of the Lovecraftian Order treated the reading of Lovecraft's works as a magical performance, especially enacted before sleeping so that vivid dreams could be seen (Woodman). For Kenneth Grant, a writer has supernatural powers in putting fancies into words, like a magician looking through reality into higher dimensions informed by extraterrestrial entities (Giudice). Entire books were written by some post-Soviet authors like Vladimir Dolokhov, Vadim Gurganov, Andrei Kainarov, and Rita Vetrova for whom writing constituted a magical practice during which "lines fall on paper like fiery tracer bullet bursts from the heart, and they call up an even greater ecstasy" (276, quoted in Zorya).

In the concluding chapter, Bernd-Christian Otto, as one of the editors of the volume, summarizes all the case studies based on his own arguments. First, Otto adopts three perspectives in the discussion of the case studies depending on the dominance of the informing side in the magic-fiction relationship. Since it is a significantly nuanced categorisation, many studies are repetitive for the sake of his arguments and are included into more than one category simultaneously. Otto also traces the historical evolution of this correlation and rightly holds the cruciality of the rise of the fiction genre in Western cultural history as an account for the increasing number of magical practices.

For Otto, fictionalization provided practitioners with self-protection through pseudepigraphy, self-legitimization, and self-traditionalization to raise the worth of their practices.

Fictional Practice: Magic, Narration, and the Power of Imagination is a commendably well-composed collection of case studies for the scholars of magic, ritual practices, fictional narratology, and other disciplines whose academic interests lie in the scholarly study of magic. However, except for a few authors who clarify their purpose in using the term “West” or “Western,” the problematic nature of the term is not addressed when speaking about “Western esotericism.” That said, Jewish and Islamic discourses are also absent from the treatment of magic-fiction relations. Nevertheless, in a broader sense, the collection is rich with cultural-historical data that aids the observance of the emergence and conditions enabling this development, and helps map the power and usage of magical knowledge in fictional and factual discourses. It may serve as a powerful pioneer in conceptualising magic-fiction interrelation on an interdisciplinary level from the prism of religious, literary, and anthropological studies.

Khanim Garayeva
garayevak@gmail.com