WITH BOTH FEET ON THE CLOUDS

FANTASY IN ISRAELI LITERATURE
ISRAEL: SOCIETY, CULTURE, AND HISTORY

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## Contents

**Acknowledgements**  
7

**Introduction**  
9

### I. DEFINITIONS AND DEBATE

Section 1.1 *Danielle Gurevitch*, What Is Fantasy?  
11

Section 1.2 *Elana Gomel*, What Is Reality?  
26

Section 1.3 *Gail Hareven*, What Is Unimaginable?  
39

### II. REALISTIC FANTASY AND FANTASTIC REALISM IN CONTEMPORARY ISRAELI LITERATURE

Section 2.1 *Danielle Gurevitch*, 'May He Come in Haste': Urban Fantasy in *Soothsayer* by Asaf Ashery  
56

Section 2.2 *Orley Marron*, Etgar Keret’s Fantastic Reality  
87

Section 2.3 *Ruby Newman*, Postmodern Jewish Superstition in David Grossman’s *To the End of the Land*  
103

### III. VISIONS OF HEAVEN AND HELL: THEATER, CINEMA AND CHILDREN’S LITERATURE

Section 3.1 *Eitan Bar-Yosef*, Dybbuk, Husband, Home: Shmuel Hasfari and the Fantastic Tradition in Israeli Theatre  
112

Section 3.2 *Shmulik Duvdevani*, Magical Realism in Israeli Cinema  
141

Section 3.3 *Noa Manheim*, The Grand Old Witch of Dreams  
163

### IV. DIASPORA DREAMS: CULTURAL ROOTS OF JEWISH/ISRAELI FANTASY

Section 4.1 *Elana Gomel*, The Man from the Yellow Star  
170

Section 4.2 *Ioram Melcer*, Why Doesn’t It Rain Fish Here?  
190

Section 4.3 *Sahara Blau*, Kosher Vampires: Jews, Vampires and Prejudice  
199
V. "MESSIAH DOES NOT CALL BACK": FANTASY IN JEWISH SOURCES AND ANCIENT JEWISH LITERATURE

Section 5.1. Anat Aderet, Travel Literature: Itinerary of an Armchair Traveler’s Journey to Eretz Israel in a Seventeenth Century Yiddish Story

Section 5.2. Ido Peretz, Ghost Stories in Medieval Hebrew Folktales: The Case of Sefer Hasidim and Sipurei Ha-Ari

Section 5.3. Bilhah Rubinstein, A Terrible Fable and Enchanting Fiction: The Story of Josheph De-La Reina and its Reflections in Two Novels of Yhoshua Bar Yosef

Section 5.4. Dov Schwartz, The Borders of Messianic Imagination in Jewish Thinking

Appendices

List of Israeli Adult Fantasy and Science Fiction Published from 1948 to 2011

Contributors

Index
“Science is in the hands of wizards,” said Lynn Thorndike back in 1923, and I would add, “And the future is in the heads of believers and fans of fantasy.” With Both Feet on the Clouds, which deals with the literary genre of fantasy from a unique perspective, would never have seen the light of day without the collaboration, partnership, and companionship of my two fellow editors, Professor Elana Gomel of Tel Aviv University and Rani Graff, chief editor of Graff Publishing House. Their tireless efforts, and most importantly their steadfast belief in the importance of the project, enabled the publication of this volume, which would have been impossible without Rani’s generous and passionate support and Elana’s conviction, wisdom, and composure. For me, Elana is a great source of inspiration, as well as knowledge, and her serene demeanor throughout work on the project made the whole process a real treat.

A special word of gratitude goes to my very dear friend Noa Manheim. Noa, one of the most influential people in contemporary Israeli literature, first planted the seed that grew into this lush essay tree, in both the Hebrew and English versions, by asking us at a social gathering: Why is original adult fantasy literature missing from the vast canon of modern-day Israeli literature? Thank you for starting me on a road that became a passionate journey of research into a fascinating subject in an effort to seek answers to your intriguing question.

My deep appreciation goes to the excellent, professional work of Sara Kitai, who translated and copyedited the majority of the essays, most of which were originally written in Hebrew.

I am grateful to all the wonderful authors for their contribution to this collection. We wished to provide a multidisciplinary framework that would examine the Israeli fantasy enigma from a variety of angles for writers, students of literature, and their professors. Thanks to the broad perspective we were able to present here, I am confident this book accomplishes that mission. Moreover, I firmly believe it helps to bridge the gap between critical theory and creative writing. So, from the three of us, Elana, Rani and myself, thank you to Gail Hareven, Orley Marron, Ruby Newman, Eitan Bar-Yosef, Shmulik Duvdevani, Noa Manheim,

Finally, I owe a deep debt of gratitude to the wonderful supportive team at Academic Studies Press: Dr. Yaakov Yadgar, the academic editor of the “Israel: Society, Culture, and History” series, who read the Hebrew edition of this book and encouraged me to produce an improved and updated edition for English readers, Kira Nemirovsky, the production editor, and Stephanie Monasky and Lauren Taylor, the sales and marketing coordinators. And last but certainly not least, to dear Sharona Vedol, the acquisitions editor, for her great support throughout the long, complex procedures, both academic and bureaucratic. Thank you for your devotion, patience, and tireless help.

I thank you all for making my fantasy come true.

Dr. Danielle Gurevitch,
Chief Editor
Why do Israelis dislike fantasy?

Put so bluntly, the question appears frivolous. But in fact, it goes to the deepest sources of the Israeli historical identity and literary tradition. Uniquely among developed nations, Israel’s origin is in a utopian novel: Theodor Herzl’s *Altneuland* (1902), which predicted the future Jewish state. Jewish writing in the Diaspora has always tended toward the fantastic, the mystical, and the magical. And yet, from its very inception Israeli literature has been stubbornly realistic. The best-known Israeli writers, such as Amos Oz, David Grossman, and A. B. Yehoshua, have perfected a mimetic style that strives to represent faithfully the complexities of everyday life. The literary emphasis has always been on the “true to life,” in an almost nineteenth-century sense of the word. Until very recently, any departure from this mimetic consensus was frowned upon by the critical establishment and readers alike. The situation has begun to change recently under the influence of global postmodernism, popular Hollywood movies, and shifts within Israeli culture and society itself. But it still remains the case that to speak critically of Israeli/Hebrew fantasy and science fiction is to invite polite incomprehension, if not outright hostility.

The present volume challenges this stance. Originally published in Hebrew in 2009 by Graf Press and the Heksherim Institute at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, it is the first serious, wide-ranging, and theoretically sophisticated exploration of fantasy in Israeli literature and culture. Its Hebrew edition has already earned widespread attention and popular interest unusual for a book of literary criticism. The present volume is a new edition of the 2009 book, reflecting new developments and responding to the lively critical dispute occasioned by the original volume during the last two years.

Although the vast majority of its contributors are academics, the present volume also includes essays by writers, poets, and cultural critics who jointly attempt to answer—or to contest—the question posed at the beginning: why do Israelis, living in a country whose very existence is predicated on the fulfillment of a utopian dream, distrust fantasy?
The broad range of issues raised in the book corresponds to the multiple implications of this question. Fantasy is not merely a literary genre whose importance in contemporary literature is beyond doubt: it also has a social role. It functions as a mirror, reflecting society’s hidden fears, tensions, and anxieties, but also as a beacon of its dreams. The essays in this volume probe the artistic aspect of Israeli fantasy, arguing that critical neglect has led to the overlooking of significant fantastic elements in Israeli literature, theater, and cinema. They trace the complex web of relations between Israeli and Jewish fantasy and the influences of biblical and Jewish sources upon the Western fantasy tradition. They define the literary conventions of fantasy and magic realism, and they address the wider cultural, social, and ideological significance of fantasy (and its rejection) within the fraught field of Israel’s search for self-definition.

Among the contributors to the volume are internationally established scholars and academics in the fields of cultural studies, literary studies, cinema, theatre, and religious studies Dr. Danielle Gurevitch, Professor Elana Gomel, Dr. Eitan Bar-Yosef, Dr. Shmuel Duvdevani, Dr. Orely Marron, Dr. Ruby Newman, Dr. Bilha Rubinstein, Dr. Anat Aderet, and Prof. Dov Schwartz, as well as well-known writers, poets, critics, and translators Gail Hareven, Ioram Melcer, Sahara Blau, Ido Peretz, and Noa Manheim. Each of them brings his or her unique perspective to bear upon the multiform and complex issues of the meaning, history, and cultural role of Israeli fantasy. The book is organized thematically. Proceeding from a generic definition, continuing through an overview of the many faces of fantasy in contemporary Israeli literature, cinema, and theater, it broadens up into a consideration of the dialogue between Israeli and Jewish cultures in the diaspora and culminates in a discussion of the roots of Israeli fantasy in the Jewish religious and mystical tradition.

It is our goal to advance both studies on Israel and studies on science fiction and fantasy. In this volume, we present essays with innovative subject matter and interdisciplinary approaches in order to further develop the rapidly growing academic field of fantasy and science fiction studies.
What is Fantasy?

Danielle Gurevitch

1.

Fantasy literature uses poetic means to examine the limits of the possible. Although characterized by vision and rich imagination, it is not detached from reality: fantasy must begin with individuals and the world around them. In ancient times, mythic consciousness helped people to understand their pasts, the circumstances of their lives, and their fates, and it was from this mythic consciousness that the literature of fantasy developed hundreds of years later. However, while in the ancient world myth (Μύθος) aspired to describe a concrete and enduring reality, fantasy as we understand it today is essentially fiction, and therefore bound neither to the world of phenomena nor to historical truth. Admittedly, fantasy stories in contemporary literature tend to deal with existential questions, but they are mainly issues of freedom of thought, such as, how much are human beings capable of directing or controlling space and time, of changing or bending the laws of nature to their will, of independently determining their fate, of striving for achievement, of dreaming dreams, or of fulfilling secret wishes.

The use of the term “fantasy” to identify a literary genre requires clarification because of its many connotations in everyday conversation. When critics use the word, they mean that the story “didn’t really happen,” that the literary work is not based on actual historical reality. In ordinary language, we call something “fantastic” if it is exceptional and arouses our curiosity. On the other hand, to dub a person a “fantasist” or “fantasizer” is to claim disparagingly that they are delusional or, in

1 Consider: “A man does not possess a ground outside himself on which he could both stand and know that he is standing there. He must start with himself,” Leszek Kolakowski, The Presence of Myth, trans. from the Polish by Adam Czerniawski (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 12.

2 The word “fantasy” is derived from the Greek phantastikós, meaning fictitious, unreal, or imaginary. It is interesting to note the closeness in Hebrew between the word dimyon (imagination or outside reality) and the word domeh (similar or resembling reality).
popular Hebrew idiom, that “they live in the movies.” J.R.R. Tolkien, the well-known philologist and writer, defined fantasy as “arresting strangeness.” In its ancient and exalted meaning, Tolkien explained, fantasy is synonymous with “imagination,” with “non-reality” or “unreasonableness” in the primary world, that is, contrary to the familiar world. As people have always recoiled from changes in the world they know, any innovation or discovery is likely to be perceived initially as unreasonable, and perhaps even dangerous.

With this in mind, we can now refine the genre definition, and say that fantasy literature uses poetic means to examine the limits of the possible out of a belief in a purposeful order. Through this belief, people organize their thoughts in the realm beyond the familiar. The borders of the familiar, however, must always remain relative, because perceptions of what is “familiar” and “known” and what is “choice” and “free will” differ in different times and places. The fantastic creation engulfs us in varying degrees of fear, doubt, and danger, but above all it encourages action and resourcefulness while also raising philosophical questions, such as “what if?”

This unique literary style is divided into sub-genres, including the marvelous, science fiction, weird fiction or strange stories, magical realism, and the fantastic. While these categories may overlap to a certain extent, there are clear distinctions between them. Understanding the precise definitions can help create a bridge between the reader’s expectations and the work in question.

2.

The marvelous is a narrative style, born in the Middle Ages, which combines supernatural foundations with an adventure in the natural world. In medieval times, there was no essential difference between reality and thought, between the visible and the conceptual, or between the concrete and the imaginary. People believed that the world was filled with supernatural phenomena and had no doubt as to the existence of wondrous creatures, whom they saw as integral parts of their lives. This belief was incorporated into the conventional worldview of

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Western-Christian culture. Integrating supernatural phenomena into a literary plot was therefore a reflection of the beliefs and traditions, customs and rituals, and aspirations and needs of medieval Christian society, in which the possible and the impossible were interwoven into a single tapestry. Thus the lion and the fox could coexist with werewolves, basilisks, and unicorns, and human beings could live side-by-side with angels and demons. It was only around the twelfth century that these stories started to be associated in Western literature with fiction. The process began in the British Isles with the appearance of the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*, which describes how Beowulf the Geat fearlessly fights Grendel, the man-eating demon, and overpowers him. It continued in Middle Age Arthurian tales, describing the adventurous and courageous dragon-slaying knights. In early Jewish tradition, fantasy literature of this nature was a significant driving force in the nation’s history and thinking. The tales in *Aggada* and *Midrash* are replete with marvelous acts, magic, and miracles aimed at hastening the Redemption, as well as a rich diversity of unbelievable stories of journeys to the Holy Land.

A contemporary work is classified as belonging to the sub-genre of the marvelous if it contains two parallel worlds that do not merge. The events that take place in the natural world can be rationally, logically explained, while those in the other world include spells, magic, and sorcery, and it is perfectly reasonable to move from place to place on a broomstick. In the marvelous story the hero requires the services of an unnatural agent to reach the other world. The tale begins with a few introductory words that take the reader directly into the parallel world,

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7 Arthurian romance appeared in an uncharacteristic Hebrew version published in 5039 (1279 AD), *King Artus: A Hebrew Arthurian Romance*. This was an unacceptable literary choice in Jewish medieval culture. Indeed, the writer apologizes for writing about the trivialities of foreign culture, rather than about holy matters. See Haim Pesah and Eli Yassif (eds.), *The Knight, the Demon and the Virgin: An Anthology of Hebrew Stories from the Middle Ages* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1998), 132-150.

8 See in this volume Dov Schwartz, “The Borders of Messianic Imagination in Jewish Thinking” (p. 263); Bilkah Rubinstein, “A Terrible Case and Wonderful Fiction: The Story of Rabbi Joseph della Reina in the Novels of Yehoshua Bar-Yosef” (p. 248); Anat Aderet, “Travel Literature: Itinerary of an Armchair Traveler’s Journey to Eretz Israel in the Seventeenth Century Yiddish Story” (p. 207).
where everything is possible, as in “Alice in Wonderland” the white rabbit leads Alice down the rabbit hole in the opening lines. Alternatively, the story may begin in the area of the familiar, describing daily routine, when “suddenly” a marvelous agent appears to direct the hero toward the entrance to the other world. In the first volume of the Harry Potter books, for example, the genial giant Hagrid makes an unexpected appearance in the book’s fourth chapter and shows Harry the way to the hidden passage on Platform 9¾, from which he catches the train to the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. In Hebrew literature, the category of the marvelous includes the adventures of Amir Mor-Tal on Shinar Estate in A Mere Mortal, the experiences of Jonathan and Ella in the horrific empire of Marduk in The Whale of Babylon, and the tales of Tom, Iris, Beigel, and their friends, the heroes of Maladar: The Magical Amulet.

A marvelous story recounts an exciting adventure interspersed with a sequence of supernatural events and alternating triumphs and failures, none of which cause the young and (necessarily) inexperienced heroes to lose their heads. On the contrary, their shock and astonishment at the marvels revealed to them in another world are soon replaced by the sense that they are embarking on a journey of discovery and gaining emotional fortitude not accessible to them in the natural, conventional world. Furthermore, not only are the heroes visible in the other world, but it is they who set events in motion: their name is on everyone’s lips, since they are “the chosen ones.” As part of the grueling journey of apprenticeship they undergo in the other world, every so often they are asked to save the world from destruction, with the salvation of all of humanity resting on their leadership ability and bold decisions. The hero’s young age and the fact that the adventures always end on an optimistic, triumphant note imply that the target audiences for these stories are primarily children and adolescents, although they may also be enjoyed by adults with fertile imaginations. The marvelous, Pierre

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9 Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland (London: Macmillan, 1865).
11 Alice: “There’s no use trying, one can’t believe impossible things.” The White Queen: “I daresay you haven’t had much practice. When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.” Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass (London & New York: Penguin Classics 1998 [1871]), 251.
Mabille explains, is a “mirror experience,” a world of images into which a person journeys to discover the inner truth, and at the end the promised kingdom awaits in the form of the discovery of self-esteem. We learn from the marvelous story that although the world is indeed filled with dangers and threats, we will ultimately get the reward and fame we deserve if we only hold our ground and defend principles that are moral, ethical, and worthy.

Another sub-genre of fantasy literature is science fiction, which deals with higher dimensions of space and time, and to a large degree represents a worldview similar to the religious. Like religious faith, science fiction is based on a belief in the existence of a purposeful, organizing cosmic order inherent in the flux of human experience. The story aims to instill in the reader the belief that there is a logical explanation for every phenomenon in nature, even if a reasonable person finds those phenomena implausible, or does not understand their significance. In science fiction, wizards are replaced by scientists, sorcerers by doctors, and magicians by engineers. This category features the application of sophisticated models and futuristic theories that employ advanced technology which might not yet exist, but certainly could in the future. Examples include David Niven’s Ringworld, or Douglas Adams’ Dirk Gently’s Holistic Detective Agency, in which instant displacement from place to place leads to the appearance of the electric monk in the trunk of Gordon Way’s car. In the classic television series Star Trek, the immortal words of Captain Kirk, “Beam me up!”, ostensibly demonstrated the technological simplicity of this kind of displacement, causing generations of youngsters to wistfully whisper this instruction into their plastic watches.

In Israel, there is very little original science fiction literature. What

12 Mabille, ibid., 7, 26.
13 This category also includes stories of demented physicians, such as Jules Verne, A Fantasy of Doctor Ox, 1874; H.G. Wells, The Island of Doctor Moreau, 1896; Mary W. Shelley, Frankenstein: Or the Modern Prometheus, 1831; Robert Louis Stevenson, Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde, 1886; and in contemporary literature the character of Doctor Tyler in Philip K. Dick’s Blade Runner (Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep), 1968. In Hebrew literature, with the necessary reservations, we could include the legend of the creation of the Golem of Prague, attributed to the Maharal of Prague. For more on the Golem, see Sahara Blau, “Kosher Vampires: Jews, Vampires, and Prejudice,” in this volume, p. 199.
14 Clute and Grant propose a more cautious definition of science fiction: “Whether or not a SF story is plausible, it can at least be argued.” In John Clute and John Grant, The Encyclopedia of Fantasy (New York: St. Martin Griffin, 1999), 844.
does exist is known only to a closed circle of sworn fans of the genre. There are, however, two local periodicals devoted to science fiction, *Fantasy 2000* and *Dreams in Aspamia*, as well the occasional film.\(^\text{15}\) The category of science fiction also embraces a more limited sub-genre, which is actually far removed from science and sophisticated technology, namely Utopia and its opposite, Dystopia or Anti-Utopia. The utopian vision in modern literature, which originated with Thomas More (1516), depicts an ideal world, a sort of Paradise on earth, where there is a cure for every ailment, education for all, no suffering, old age, or widowhood, and the inhabitants of the entire universe, humans and animals alike, live in peace, happiness, and well-being.\(^\text{16}\) In Jewish literature of the modern era, *Altneuland* might be said to fit into this category. Dystopia, on the other hand, is the complete opposite: a gloomy, suicidal vision that does not bode well for the future of humanity. Canonic dystopian literature includes Anthony Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) and George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945), and this genre can be found in Israeli literature in Amos Keinan’s *The Road to Ein Harod* (1984) and Binyamin Tamuz’s *Jeremiah’s Inn* (1984).\(^\text{17}\)

As opposed to the marvelous and science fiction, which both embody values and beliefs that might leave the reader with some sense of relief and comfort, three other sub-genres of fantasy literature deal with disorder. These categories, which relate to realms that originate deep in the recesses of the modern mind, are labeled weird fiction or strange stories, magical realism, and the fantastic.

3.

The development of modern philosophical, critical, and intellectual thought has led to a significant decline in literary writing on supernatural themes, and indeed in imaginary literature in general. In an


\(^{16}\) Thomas More, *Utopia*, 1551. Compare the Old Testament prophecies of Isaiah 11: “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat,” and in Christianity, the reconciliation and tolerance proposed in *De Civitate Dei* in the fifth century, Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, translated by Thomas Merton (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), as well as the structure of the state in the *Dialogues of Plato*. On Messianic fantasy and imagination in Jewish philosophy, see Dov Schwartz, ibid.

\(^{17}\) For a complete list of Israeli fantasy and science fiction since 1948, see the appendix (p. 282).
age of cynical skepticism, the human mind cannot (and does not wish to) depart from the stable basis of reality. Thus, over the years, works that exuded a “non-realistic” air were relegated to the sidelines or were perceived as lacking any scientific foundation. The strict rationalist taste that characterizes the modern era forces writers to lean on at least a possible reality, diverging from it only minimally and with caution. In order for a supernatural event in a work of literature to be accepted as credible, it has to be sequential, consistent, and, above all, short. The author is required to integrate the supernatural phenomena into the plot as a surprise, and even then, as part of the world of experience. Starting in the eighteenth century, effort was required to convince rational readers to willingly allow themselves to be drawn into the fiction. The renewal of interest in ghost stories, which had largely been neglected since the Middle Ages, can be attributed to the Gothic novel, which enjoyed short-lived popularity (1760-1820). These ghost stories, which appeared on the extreme fringes of the dominant Romantic Movement, portray people being haunted and tormented, sometimes to death, by mysterious terrifying entities that are not subject to the laws of nature (life and death or the restrictions of a physical body). However, unlike the literature of the Middle Ages, most Gothic novels aroused synthetic terror, that is to say, fear for the sake of fear intended to freeze the reader’s blood, virtually to the degree of self-parody. In a Gothic ghost story worthy of its name, the spine-tingling incident was the climax of the story and the point at which it ended. The realistic frame, if it existed at all, served only as a preface or psychological preparation for the impending unbelievable event at the core of the story. This principle is demonstrated by an amiable tale, familiar to all researchers of the genre, entitled “Climax for a Ghost Story”: 

“It’s so scary!” the girl said as she advanced cautiously. “And what a heavy door!” She touched it as she spoke and the door slammed shut. “My God!” the man said, “I don’t think there is a handle inside here. Why did you do it? You’ve locked us both inside.” “Not both of us, only

18 The name was inspired by gloomy Gothic architecture.
one of us,” the girl answered, and before his very eyes she passed directly through the door and disappeared.

A small, and rather eccentric, group of ghost story writers emerged who called themselves “the graveyard school of poetry” because of their fondness for telling chilling tales in cemeteries on dark nights. In Jewish culture, however, ghost stories have always been relatively rare. In “Ghost Stories in Medieval Hebrew Folktales” in this volume, Ido Peretz bemoans the paucity of such stories in Hebrew literature, as opposed to their narrative richness in European Christian society. He posits that the reason for this lies in the essential gap between Christian society, which sanctifies death, and Jewish society, explaining that “Judaism never introduced the liturgy of death into the religious canon, and kept its cemeteries at a distance from the town in order to prevent a cult of the dead.”

In the first half of the nineteenth century, secret passages and trapdoors inspired storytellers such as Edgar Allan Poe to work in a new narrative style known as weird fiction or strange stories. In macabre tales such as “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “The Black Cat,” Poe, considered the father of this genre, created a literary prototype never before seen. As opposed to ghost stories, which are essentially groundless, the weird does not represent a forced attempt to instill fear, but rather touches on our deepest secret anxieties, the most primeval of which is the fear of death. This style arouses semi-belief in the credibility of the event, thereby shaking and troubling the reader and generating uneasiness. The story aims to engender a genuine sense of distress and shock, and ultimately sufficient confusion so as to undermine the reader’s sense of personal security, sometimes to the verge of paranoia. Weird fiction seeks to prove how limited and restricted our view is, how the little we think we know about our immediate world is mistaken, and perhaps even delusive. Among the stories in this disturbing narrative category are Guy de Maupassant’s “Le Horla,” which describes the paranoia experienced by a man who is constantly being watched, and Marcel Ayme’s “Le Passe-Muraille,” which relates how one day a person who can pass through walls loses this ability and remains forever imprisoned

20 P. 220.
within a wall.\textsuperscript{21} The feeling of being cursed and persecuted, the horrifying thought of a living person imprisoned in a wall or a girl buried alive, intensify the reader’s growing sense of dread as the tale unfolds.

In contrast to the weird, which was regarded as a marginal literary category and did not initially earn the respect it deserved, the detective story, which appeared at around the same time, enjoyed overwhelming success. In the spirit of the times, the detective story pushed aside the world of the mystical, supernatural, and mysterious, replacing it with the character of the scholarly detective/investigator who provides an acceptable, reasoned explanation of events while tamping his pipe and, in a nonchalant, not to say patronizing, manner, remarks: “Elementary, my dear Watson.”\textsuperscript{22} At the end of the tale, the detective reveals who “was pulling the strings,” and proves beyond a shadow of doubt that everything in the natural world has a rational explanation.\textsuperscript{23} Edgar Allan Poe, who turned to the detective Monsieur Auguste Dupin for assistance in solving strange mysteries in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt,” understood this principle very well. Nevertheless, the genre of the detective story reached its height at the beginning of the twentieth century with the appearance of Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes and Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple.

Despite its relative marginality, we cannot dismiss the importance of the weird, as it constitutes an essential stage in the development of another unique narrative style, \textit{magical realism}, or the surrealist story. This genre was not only warmly received at its inception, but still continues to command great interest and undergo further development. The features of the style took shape in the 1920s in parallel to surrealist art. In both surrealist painting and the literary style that emerged from it, dreamlike elements (disruptions of time and place, skewed proportions) are placed within a realistic, at times hyper-realistic, framework. Kafka’s \textit{Metamorphosis} and Gogol’s “The Overcoat” and “The Nose” belong to this category, although the South American author Jorge Luis Borges

\textsuperscript{21} Guy de Maupassant, \textit{Stories}, 1887; Marcel Ayme, \textit{Short Stories}, 1943.

\textsuperscript{22} This well-known phrase does not appear in any of Conan Doyle’s books, but has come to be identified with his detective as a result of the Sherlock Holmes films. See: http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/elementary-my-dear-watson.html

\textsuperscript{23} Over the past few years, several contemporary Israeli writers have adopted the detective story narrative woven into the fabric of an urban fantasy, which seems to please Israeli readers. See Danielle Gurevitch, “May He Come in Haste: Urban Fantasy in \textit{Soothsayer} by Asaf Ashery,” in this volume, p. 56.
is usually considered the leading writer of the genre. Borges succeeds
in making impossible situations, no matter how strange, appear totally
plausible. In “Why doesn’t it rain fish?” in this volume, Ioram Melcer
relates to Borges’s work and describes the underlying power of magical
realism as the ability to merge physical reality with psychological reality
in a way that intensifies the specific expression in question.

Among all the branches of fantasy in Hebrew, magical realism is
clearly the most popular, with Israeli artists dealing both with the written
word and the performing arts (cinema and theater). In literature,
the works of Isaac Bashevis Singer may be classified in part as belonging
to this strange genre, as may most of the stories of Etgar Keret, whose
unique writing style, like that of Edgar Allan Poe, strikes the readers
between the eyes, leaving them stunned and perplexed.

In “Magical Realism in Israeli Cinema,” Shmuel Duvdevani explains
the significance of the relative flourishing of this style in contemporary
Israeli cinema in movies such as Sh’Chor (Shmuel Hasfari, 1994), The
Gospel According to God (Assi Dayan, 2004), and Jellyfish (Etgar Keret
and Shira Geffen, 2007). In the opinion of Duvdevani, the popularity of
the genre directly results from three situations of difference (or “other-
ess”) that are perceived to threaten the homogeneous Zionist Israeli
identity: the historical (Israel’s wars), the cultural (Ashkenazi versus
Mizrachi, ultra-Orthodox versus secular) and the social (displacement
and exile). That is, Israeli fantasy is possible as long as it has, in Gail
Hareven’s words, “a point, that it has some sort of connection to ‘the
burning reality of our life,’ that it examines some fractured symbol, or in
short, as Gogol put it, that it ‘benefits the country.’” Magical realism,
would seem, serves the required purpose of “benefiting the country.”
Theater researcher Eitan Bar-Yosef directs specific attention to a recur-
ring motif in contemporary Israeli plays, noting that playwrights and

24 Franz Kafka, Stories and Fragments, 1915; Nikolai Gogol, Petersburg Tales, 1842.
25 P. 190.
26 See Orley Marron in this volume, p. 87. Among Etgar Keret’s books, see The Bus Driver Who Wanted
To Be God & Other Stories (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001); The Nimrod Flipout (London: Chatto
& Windus, 2004); Missing Kissinger (London: Chatto & Windus, 2007); and The Girl on the Fridge
27 P. 141 in this volume.
28 Magical realism can also be found in the Yiddish theater of the beginning of the twentieth century,
See, for example, The Dybbuk (S. Ansky, 1922), and The Golem (H. Leivick, 1925).
29 Gail Hareven, What is Unimaginable?, p. 39 in this volume.
directors such as Hanoch Levin and Shmuel Hasfari deal at length with bereavement, sometimes with chilling, macabre humor.\textsuperscript{30} According to Bar-Yosef, the surrealistic Israeli reality, in which parents constantly carry on their hunched backs the memories of their children killed in terror attacks or in combat, is to blame for the affinity for this poetic sub-genre. We can only conclude that the need of the readers or spectators to identify with the burden of bereavement has led to the acceptance of this intense literary style here in Israel, of all places.\textsuperscript{31}

4.

The last sub-genre in fantasy literature is the \textit{fantastic}. Rather than merely a synonym for “fantasy,” the fantastic, which is currently enjoying great commercial success, is a self-contained narrative genre structure, and in a certain sense is the most significant of the sub-genres of fantasy because it encompasses characteristics of all the others.\textsuperscript{32} As a literary style, it is based on reality in crisis and deals with the characters’ anxieties about the future. Contrary to the marvelous, in which the hero is required to pass from one world to another, in the fantastic the arena of events is the world as we know it, or more correctly, as we think we know it. The story casts the familiar in a different light, and like a torch revealing what is hidden in dark corners, it draws attention to the dangers lying in wait for us. It aims to dismantle our indifference and warn us that dark forces are lurking under the surface. If we ignore their existence and wrap ourselves in a bogus sense of complacency and security, a bitter end awaits us.\textsuperscript{33}

The fantastic story presents an adventure suffused with extreme violence, and often blatant, not to say pornographic, sexual contents. Monsters and demons heighten the aura of threat, but unlike in the marvelous, where they are a crucial factor in the plot, here they are used as a manipulative technique to intensify the message. Fantastic heroes, generally reasonable, realistic people (not super-heroes), find themselves in complex situations from which they must extricate them-

\textsuperscript{30} On magical realism in Israeli theater, see Eitan Bar-Yosef in this volume, p. 112.
\textsuperscript{31} See, for example, Shmuel Hasfari’s 2003 play, \textit{Woman, Husband, Home}.
\textsuperscript{32} On the controversy surrounding the definitions of “fantasy” and “fantastic,” see Clute and Grant, \textit{The Encyclopedia of Fantasy}, 335-338.
selves. And just as in real life, they are required to deal endlessly with situations that are demanding both physically and mentally, to make painful decisions, and to pay the full price for them. In short, the fantastic describes an experience that might very well be our own. Awareness of this fact arouses in the readers not only profound shock but also anxiety, compounded with a sense of powerlessness to effect change or rectification, however courageous the reader might be. The encounter between the frightening fictitious scenes and the familiar scenes of daily life creates the fantastic’s “terror effect.” By virtue of this juxtaposition, the familiar and the mundane are transformed into something alien, threatening, and dangerous.

The fantastic is characterized by one of two narrative styles that describe extreme emotional states, namely terror and horror.34 The dictionary defines “terror” as an extreme state of fear.35 In literary fiction, it is the feeling of shock that the heroes (and the readers along with them) experience when they find themselves in a situation of unbearable tension resulting from mortal danger in the natural world, such as a terror attack, an assassination attempt, a natural disaster, or a disastrous relationship. Although Alfred Hitchcock, the master of the suspense film, did not differentiate between these two narrative styles, all his films portray fantastic terror. He created a diversity of fears and anxieties to suit the characters of his various protagonists. But they all belong to the same model of terror, whether it takes the form of attacking crows (The Birds, 1963), a serial killer (Psycho, 1960), or, to quote Hitchcock himself, “a curious person who gets into someone else’s room and starts searching through his drawers. You see the person whose room it is going up the stairs, and the audience wants to say to the person in the room: ‘Be careful, someone is coming up the stairs’. . . for example, Grace Kelly in Rear Window” (1954).36

In contrast, “horror” is defined as a painful, strong emotion caused by extreme fear, dread, or repugnance, the product of an event that might occur in the most terrifying of nightmares. Fantastic horror fic-

34 On the distinction between terror and horror, see H.P. Lovecraft, Supernatural Horror in Literature (Sauk City, WI: Arkham House Publishers, Inc., 1987 [1927]).
tion conjures supernatural powers outside the world of experienced phenomena, such as when the seduction of an innocent girl ends with a bite on her neck by a vampire, or a moment when two terrified hobbits hiding in the thicket are pursued by the Nazgul, its talons extended.

As early as 1943, the actor Boris Karloff, whose role as the monster Frankenstein transformed him into a cinema icon, warned against overstepping the boundaries when he cautioned, “Horror carries a connotation of revulsion which has nothing to do with clean terror, and if we are not careful we will end by giving simple terror a bad name.”37 Regrettably, this warning was not heeded, with the horrific depictions given in books and films such as *The Ring*, *Saw*, and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* descending to the basest level. A good artist does not need nauseating anatomical details in order to capture the audience’s attention. On the contrary, the value of a fantastic work is measured by the precision of the dose of “fear” it administers to the reader/viewer. In *Lord of the Rings*, for example, J.R.R Tolkien, who can be considered a master of the fantastic-horror story, confronts his reader with the recognition that the most frightening beings are not demons, spirits, and dark creatures, but rather humans. The actions of a cruel, power-crazed mortal who has lost his humanity transform him into a destructive monster who deserves to elicit real fear. On the other hand, the affable Frodo, who wants nothing more than a comfortable, quiet life, and to be left alone to deal with his own private matters, does not see himself as having exceptional qualities, and certainly prefers to avoid those “big wars” that he feels do not concern him.38 This may explain why *Lord of the Rings* has been so well received. Its message is loud and clear: “the big war” is the war for the survival of the human species, and each of us is Frodo Baggins.

It behooves us to ask why the tremendous success of fantasy literature shows few signs of abating. Tolkien, who was asked this question many times, claimed that fantasy literature has three major objectives:

38 Not coincidentally, the book was written against the thunderous background of war. Although the war in question was World War II, the author’s memories of World War I, in which he fought, were clearly still very strong.
recovery, escape, and consolation. First, it serves as a rehabilitative, curative means of mental convalescence. As adults, he explains, daily routine dulls the senses and blinds us to the wonders of the world, the magic and the mystery around us. Because of this, we need “window polishing.” The fantasy world is a means of mental recuperation that enables us to once again perceive the real world clearly. By liberating us from the grayness of our surroundings, fantasy enables us to see things around us glittering and sparkling, as we are meant to see them, or as they seemed to us when we saw them for the first time.

Furthermore, fantasy allows us to escape. Although the term “escapism” is frequently used in a derogatory sense, Tolkien does not regard it in this way. For him, escape into fantasy literature does not involve thoughts of fleeing from the terror of death, but the more minor escape of a momentary detachment from the burden of making a living and the ugliness around us that allows us to transport ourselves to a place of freedom of the spirit. In general, Tolkien was disgusted by the industrial world, and manifested a fondness for green, natural, simple surroundings in utter contrast to the technological, gray, ugly Mordor, “with the sophisticated machines.” Part of his antipathy towards Mordor is allied with a traumatic childhood memory that later found expression in his writing. Opposite his house in Birmingham was a forest that was mercilessly cut down and replaced by ugly buildings and factories. As he put it, “Part of the basic illness of those times—which arouses a desire to flee . . . from this period that makes itself miserable—is in making us so aware of the ugliness of our actions and of their latent evil.”

The third objective of fantasy that Tolkien suggests is consolation, the human yearning for a “happy ending,” for “miraculous grace [in the Christian sense] . . . the possibility of which is essential to the joy of deliverance . . . giving a fleeting glimpse of joy, joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.”

I would like to add a further aspect of fantasy that may help explain its popularity. As I see it, fantasy is a driving force that changes worlds. In effect, the origins of fantasy lie in people who dreamed of the return

of the dead to the land of the living (the hope for the return of King Arthur), or who invented underwater vessels (Jules Verne), or who envisioned a journey to the moon (Kepler). More than anything else, fantasy would seem to be a way of conveying a conceptual model with a distinct message: those who do not dream do not achieve.
What Is Reality?

Elana Gomel

What can a literary genre tell us about the culture it is embedded in? Or, more to the point, what can the absence of a literary genre tell us about the culture that refuses to accept it?

Fantasy is scarce in Israeli literature: that fact is the impetus for the writing this book. But why? Jews have excelled as writers of fantasy and science fiction in other countries, as will be discussed in Part 4, Israel has world-class literature and cinema, and the Israeli public’s appetite for fantasy and science fiction is attested to by a flourishing fandom and such popular events as the annual ICON, the Israeli science fiction and fantasy festival. Recently there have been several new horror and fantasy movies and TV shows locally produced and shown. There are signs of change in academic attitudes as well, and this book represents another such sign. And yet fantasy and science fiction are still regarded as marginal, quirky and “non-literary,” as evidenced by the reluctance of local publishers to employ fantasy and science fiction logos, in opposition to the international practice, which arose as other publishers discovered that such logos all but guaranteed good sales.¹

This issue is at the core of many essays in this volume, from Gail Hareven’s personal sketch of the Israeli unwillingness to confront the “unimaginable” to Orley Marron’s careful analysis of the interpenetration of fantasy and realism in Etgar Keret’s work; from Danielle Gurevitch’s broad overview of the abundance of fantasy in the West to Duvdevani’s and Bar-Yosef’s focus on its tender shoots in Israeli theater and cinema. But here I want to take a different tack. Instead of regarding Israeli literature as in some way deficient, I want to analyze the connection between the generic form of fantasy and the cultural form of reality. Perhaps Western-style fantasy cannot thrive in Israel because it does not fit the country’s cultural matrix. If fantasy is rooted in the soil of reality,

perhaps Israeli reality is in some way inhospitable to this exotic plant.

**Working Magic**

Asked to offer examples of fantasy, most people would probably name something like the Harry Potter books, or Stephen King’s *The Shining*. Perhaps those with greater affinity for science fiction would bring up *Avatar* or *War of the Worlds*. Asked why these books and movies are not realistic, a majority would shrug and point to their deployment of magic, ghosts, and aliens. As we all know, ghost and aliens do not exist, and magic does not work.

But do we really know this?

If a comprehensive survey across time and space were possible, the answer might be quite different. For millennia, a vast majority of humanity accepted the existence of disembodied spirits. In fact, it was the embodied spirits that were something of a problem. The New Testament asks, “Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?” (1 Corinthians 6:19). Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) reflects a Victorian worldview, in which ghosts and spirits were as familiar as uncles and aunts: “Besides this earth, and besides the race of men, there is an invisible world and a kingdom of spirits; this world is round us, for it is everywhere.”\(^2\) These words are spoken by Helen, a young girl whose joyous acceptance of early death might strike the contemporary reader as false and melodramatic. And yet, since Helen sincerely believes in “the invisible world,” from her point of view death is merely a fortunate escape from her gloomy boarding school. *Jane Eyre* is not a fantasy but a classic realistic novel; it is just that the reality it portrays is profoundly different from ours.

But who are “we” here? How can I presume to speak for the majority of humanity that, even today, subscribes to Helen’s point of view? I am not here referring to superstitious Third World “natives,” who we love to condescend to. In the United States, 92% of the population believes in God (with 6 in 10 adults having a “personal relationship” with the deity); 74% believe in life after death; and 79% believe that miracles still occur today just as they did in ancient times.\(^3\) Belief in aliens is

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\(^3\) John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *God Is Back: How the Global Rise of Faith is Changing the*
somewhat less widespread, but nonetheless in one poll almost 80% of respondents said that the US government is hiding some information on the subject, while 50% said that aliens have abducted humans and taken them to their spaceships. Membership in fundamentalist denominations is rising precipitously throughout the countries of the world (with the exception of those in Europe); millions are impatiently waiting for the Rapture, in which the faithful will be lifted bodily into the air to escape the End Times; and tens of millions of people are conversing with the dead, photographing UFOs, or poking pins into voodoo dolls. A similar poll in Israel shows similar results (even discounting the 20% of the population that defines itself as ultra-Orthodox and would probably not participate in such a survey). And yet, any literary text that features ghosts, aliens, or magic is automatically relegated to the bookshelf ghetto labeled “Fantasy and Science Fiction,” to be segregated from “serious” literature—the literature that expresses the world-view of a tiny (and shrinking) non-believer segment of the population.

Even though Israel stands out among developed countries in its deeply entrenched popular predilection for the literature that is so “realistic” and “about us,” it is hardly unique in appreciating this genre. Harry Potter may have outsold War and Peace, but J.K. Rowling’s place in the critical pantheon is not thereby ensured. Even theoretically sophisticated studies of fantasy often begin with an apology for tackling the subject: Neil Cornwell, in the preface to his important book on the subject, humorously suggests that it was the hardships of Thatcherite economy that sent him off “fleeing to the realms of escapist literature.” Danielle Gurevitch, in the previous essay, has provided a comprehensive survey of the critical definitions of fantasy and its various sub-genres. But this survey also demonstrates the critical impulse to justify fantasy, as if its very existence were somehow illegitimate. Even J.R.R. Tolkien who, with The Lord of the Rings, has done more to shape contemporary popular culture than any other twentieth-century figure, felt the need to do so. And significantly, in his seminal essay “On Fairy-Stories,” he


5 See Gail Hareven, in this volume.

justified it by appealing to an alternative world-view, one presumably not widely shared by his secular critics: Christianity.

The scandal of fantasy lies in the fact that it exposes something problematic about reality itself. And nowhere does this become as clear as in the critical attempts to pinpoint the elusive essence of this annoying genre (or concatenation of genres) by pitting it against “the real.” It turns out that the problem lies not in defining fantasy but in defining what it is not.

Many definitions of fantasy rely on a sort of commonsensical empiricism that inevitably results in categorical confusion. The object of their study becomes as wayward as Alice in the Wonderland, either spreading across the entire literary field or shrinking to an infinitesimal portion of it. William Irwin, for example, describes fantasy as “a story based on and controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility.” Rosemary Jackson argues that it is “any literature that does not give priority to realistic representation,” forming a category that has to include “myths, legends, folk and fairy tales.” But then she inexplicably narrows her actual study to a handful of Victorian texts. Kathryn Hume has an even broader definition: “By fantasy I mean the deliberate departure from the limits of what is usually accepted as real and normal. The works covered range from the trivial escapes of pastoral and adventure stories to the religious visions of Langland and Dante.” This is tantamount to offering a critical equivalent of what physicists call TOE—Theory of Everything—but without its scientific rigor.

The key words in these definitions are “generally” and “usually.” They express a highly subjective point of view: “usually” means what I consider to be usual and normal. Thus, the more theories of fantasy lay a claim to universality, the narrower their scope becomes. “Reality” is what is seen as real in the small world of the Anglo-American academy. But there are whole cultural galaxies beyond this world, and not a single rule of possibility travels across their boundaries.

9 Kathryn Hume, Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature (London: Methuen, 1984), xii.
10 The Theory of Everything is the colloquial name for a physical theory that would unify quantum mechanics and general relativity. No satisfactory TOE has yet been developed.
Every convention of contemporary fantasy was once upon a time embedded in some culture’s model of reality. Magic was the working equivalent of technology for thousands of years. Rather than dream-lovers for the teenaged fans of “Twilight,” vampires in medieval Europe were a terrible affliction, often devastating entire villages. Zombies were not a blockbuster gimmick but an everyday component of the voodoo cults’ practices in Haiti and the Caribbean. Conversely, what was part of “the game of the impossible” a couple of generations ago is boringly familiar today. A trivial example is technological progress, such as today’s smart-phones, which easily outdo Star Trek communicators. A more interesting situation arises with shifts in the basic understanding of nature: physics now enshrines as real the theory of quantum entanglement, which demolishes our ordinary ideas about space as effectively as do Mervyn Peake’s *Gormenghast* and Kafka’s *Castle*.

Fantasy and realism constantly pass into each other as reality shifts and fluctuates. But this passage is not automatic: it requires re-contextualizing familiar texts. There is a thriving pop-culture cottage industry that rewrites the religious visions of yesteryear—the epic of Gilgamesh, Greek mythology, and even Dante’s *Divine Comedy*—as horror novels or fantasy blockbusters. It is as if such visions can become fantasy only when clearly and unambiguously situated against the implicit secular, scientific background of contemporary Western civilization. We need this background to enjoy *Inferno* as a zombie fantasy rather than shrinking away from its alien realism. 11

A similar process of re-contextualization occurs when works of literature cross cultural and national boundaries. The Japanese novel *The Ring* by Koji Suzuki has been read as science fiction in its native land and as supernatural horror in the West. The distinction is clearly seen in the Japanese and American movies based on it. The former preserves the rational framework of the novel, which appears strange and even mystical to the Western eyes; the latter discards it altogether in favor of ghosts and demonic possession.

So fantasy has to be defined in relative, not absolute, terms. The “de-liberate departure from the limits of what is usually accepted as real and

11 *The Divine Comedy* has been rewritten as fantasy/horror several times, most notably by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle as *Inferno* (New York: Pocket Books, 1976) and by Kim Paffenroth as *Valley of the Dead: The Truth Behind Dante’s Inferno* (Cargo Cult Press, 2010).
normal” (Hume) has to be set against some definition of what “real and normal” is.

**I Am Real. Are You?**

In their classic 1971 book *Social Construction of Reality*, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann argued that our understanding of reality is culturally contingent. The book has ushered in a storm of controversy, which it is not my purpose here to revisit. It is enough to point out that constructivism is especially problematic in the realm of natural sciences, as it is hard to see nature as so accommodating that it allows both astronomy and astrology to be true (though some theoreticians, such as Paul Feyerabend, have subscribed to this view).

But while controversial philosophically, constructivism is self-evidently true in relation to literature, since every fictional text constructs its own world. It is up to the author to decide whether this world will or will not conform to the rules of the extra-textual reality. Hence the rise of fictional-world theory of literature.

Fictional-world theory offers a way to analyze both text and context in terms of the relationship between different ontologies. A realistic text reflects the author’s cultural reality; a fantastic text violates it. As Eric Rabkin shows, the fantastic text is characterized by a “180-degree reversal” of the “ground rules” of realistic representation. The fantastic fictional world is deliberately subversive of what the author and his/her readers accept as reality.

Fictional-world theory avoids the pitfalls of trying to define fantasy independently of its cultural matrix. Such attempts, as I have argued above, result in a sort of critical imperialism, labeling as fantasy every major literary text written before the eighteenth century. Fictional-world theory, on the other hand, is heuristically precise and yet philosophically modest: instead of comparing apples (literary texts) to oranges (the material world), it juggles two varieties of the same cultural

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