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Building Imaginary Worlds (2012) by Mark J.P. Wolf and Revisiting Imaginary World (2016) edited by Mark J.P. Wolf

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Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation, by Mark J.P. Wolf. New York: Routledge, 2012. xiv, 394 pp. $52.95 (trade paperback) ISBN 9780415631204. [Also issued in hardcover and kindle formats.]

Revisiting Imaginary Worlds: A Subcreation Studies Anthology, edited by Mark J.P. Wolf. New York: Routledge, 2016. xxx, 375 pp. $150.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9781138942059.

It is not often that a book comes along that offers a different contextual approach to the study and analysis of texts in their broadest sense. Literary analysis has tended to focus on the authorial narrative of a novel or its extension through narratives for film, radio, television, online and interactive media. However, in recent years a new approach to exploring texts has been developed in not only literary but also media studies which suggests looking behind the authorial narrative to the actual world the "author" creates for the narrative and characters of their stories to live and exist in.

In 2012 Professor Mark J.P. Wolf of Concordia University Wisconsin published his monograph *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation.* This revelatory book has become one of the key handbooks to applying this approach and, for me, it represents one of the most important literary/media studies books I have ever read and used in my own research. Wolf offers students and scholars of fiction and fantasy, including J.R.R. Tolkien's, a road-map to exploring and theorising the practice of fictional world-building; a practice that authors have been using arguably as early as Homer in the *Odyssey* and which the mythopoeia of Tolkien both built upon and greatly influenced.

In his very comprehensive 2012 monograph Wolf first sets out his overall argument. That the worlds invented by "authors" for their narrative are in themselves "dynamic entities" (3) and that these worlds are transformative, transmedial and transauthorial in nature and therefore compelling objects of inquiry which invite speculation and exploration through imaginative means. For Wolf these worlds are also realms of possibility leading to reader and participant reception and, in some cases, causing the expansion of the world through various authorised and unauthorised channels. In the introduction and seven chapters that follow Wolf forensically explores, argues and very much proves his thesis. He achieves this through focused analysis which combines theory with many illustrative examples drawn from a multiplicity of texts. J.R.R. Tolkien's works and influence on Wolf in making his argument is prevalent from the start with Wolf's declaration that Tolkien is his favourite author. Throughout the book, Wolf uses the fictional works of Tolkien (using Tolkien's name "Arda" to describe the diegetic world Tolkien built in his Legendarium) to illustrate many of his points. Wolf also heavily draws upon Tolkien's theories on fantasy and world building by citing his published letters and his seminal essay "On Fairy-stories" (1947). Indeed throughout the

monograph Wolf adapts some of the key terms that Tolkien coined in "On Fairy-stories" to describe the difference between our real world (which Tolkien called the "Primary World") and the invented "Secondary World" that an author creates through the art of imaginative world-building.

As indicated, Wolf's monograph is organized in seven chapters with an introduction and two very important appendices. One of these, "A Timeline of Imaginary Worlds," offers a voluminous collection of invented worlds listed in chronological order of creation (worth the price of the book alone!). This is an incredibly useful compendium; a gateway to a host of imaginary worlds for the reader to explore. The second appendix is an equally detailed and very helpful glossary of the terms used in this book; giving the reader a vocabulary to define the different elements and characterisations of transmedial world building. Included in these definitions are the Tolkien created terms "Primary World," "Secondary Belief," and "Secondary World."

Wolf's curtain-raiser is an exploration of world-building as a very human activity that is evidenced in the act of the play of children. Wolf cites the term "paracosm" which first appeared in the 1970's to signify this type of embryonic act of world-building. He explores the early world-building of several fictional authors including Hartley Coleridge (the son of Samuel Taylor Coleridge), the Bronte siblings, J. M. Barrie and even C. S. Lewis. Wolf convincingly suggests that the impact of this early experience of world-building through childhood play would be influential on these authors later creative efforts; demonstrating that the inclination to world-build, in many varying forms, is with us from early childhood and remains in some of us in adulthood; including authors and artists.

In this first chapter, "Worlds within Worlds," Wolf offers a very well structured and easy to follow overview of the theorising of world-building. Wolf moves from exploring the ontological concept that in the primary world there are other possible worlds; a theory which started as a branch of philosophy designed for problem solving in formal semantics, to exploring the role of the imagination and its link to the creation of imaginary worlds. Here Wolf charts the birth of the theory of imaginary worlds in Romantic poets like Samuel Taylor Coleridge's exploration of the imagination where, as Coleridge said, "the mind must enlarge the sphere of its activity and busy itself in the acquisition of intellectual aliment to develop the powers of the Creator is our proper employment—and to imitate creativeness by combination our most exalted and self-satisfying Delight" (21). Wolf moves to the works of the Scottish author of fantasy George MacDonald who explored the imagination as "man may, if he pleases, invent a little world of his own, with its own laws, for there is in him which delights in calling up new forms—which is the nearest he can come, perhaps to creation" (22). Wolf then brings in Tolkien's "On Fairy-stories" making the key point that Tolkien thought the act of imagining a secondary world was an act of creation, what Tolkien called "sub-creation" which reflects God's act of creation. Wolf also explores Tolkien's concept of secondary belief where an author invents a secondary world that

has what Tolkien termed an "inner consistency of reality." Wolf uses Tolkien's terms to suggest that all fictional worlds have a degree of "secondariness" which depends "on the extent to which a place is detached from the Primary World and different from it, and the degree to which its fictional aspect has been developed and built" (26). The establishment of this contextual spectrum of a fictional world's secondary aspect allows for a much wider exploration of the world-building elements of fictional texts outside of just fantasy and science fiction (as attested by Wolf's encyclopaedic "Timeline of Imaginary Worlds" in the appendix where such diverse "worlds" as Thomas Hardy's Wessex, "Collinwood" of the gothic television series *Dark Shadows* and "Bedrock" of the cartoon *The Flintstones* exist with the more familiar worlds of Tolkien's Arda and Lewis's Narnia).

In chapter two, "A History of Imaginary Worlds," Wolf offers a detailed exploration of the history of imaginary worlds. He sets out for the reader several potential strands of origins for authorial focus on the development of the place and geography of fictional texts. Wolf's key argument here is since Plato's *Republic*, imaginary worlds have existed for their own sake, not merely as narrative settings. In his comprehensive exploration, Wolf very helpfully gives the readers good chunks of text from some out of print texts and this chapter alone encourages a large reading list for further exploration. Wolf suggests that one of the simplest literary indications that a world exists beyond the text is through the "trans-narrative character"; one that appears in more than a single story and links worlds together by being present in them. Wolf cites such characters as King Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon who appears in several books of the Old Testament or the multiple stories of the Trojan War, King Arthur or Robin Hood cycles which Wolf interestingly characterises as the "precursors of media franchises, wherein a series of works, sometimes produced by multiple authors, features the same characters, objects and locations" (67). Another strand Wolf explores is the growth of fantastic worlds from classical myth and especially focuses on the tale type of a voyager encountering strange lands and peoples—best exemplified by Odysseus in Homer's *The Odyssey* who becomes the reader's point of view to the strange lands described in the Homer's text. According to Wolf the classical epitome of this type of work is Lucian of Samosata's *True History*; a 2nd century C.E. fictional account of a trip to imaginary places and cultures which became the model for the traveller's tale topos that would emerge in the late Medieval / early Renaissance period (indeed one of Wolf's excellent footnotes indicates that Thomas More, the author of what is considered one of the first traveller's tales *Utopia* (1516), worked with Erasmus on an early translation of Lucian's *True History* into Latin). Wolf explores the traveller's tale as a key narrative structure that was used to give the lands or worlds being visited by the narrator more prominence in the text. He takes the reader through a detailed history of these tales starting with the real world explorer Marco Polo's semi-factual account of his journey to the unknown East in *The Description of the World or The Travels of Marco Polo (1310)* to the early fictional work *The Book of Sir*

John Mandeville (1357) which mixes factual travel information with fictional fantastic locations and peoples. Wolf cites Percy Adams's work *Travelers and Travel Liars (1600-1800)* who suggests there are three types of travel writing: true tales of travels, fictional tales which were considered to be fictional and fictional tales that were passed off as real by their authors (Adams calls these "travel liars"). Wolf characterises the most popular and influential book of the traveller's tale genre, and one characterised by Adams as a "traveller's lie," as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) whose popularity created a host of imitators known as "robinsonades" and brought the traveller's tale topos to the mass market. This was followed by Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travel's* (1726) which put focus on the fictional islands, cultures and languages that Lemuel Gulliver encounters on his shipwrecks and, like Defoe, generated a series of imitators. As real-world explorations and discoveries made more of the real world known, fictional traveller's tale reached out to other under-explored realms; including deep below the surface of the earth and into outer space. Wolf cites many sources here for further exploration.

Another related strand Wolf explores is the worlds that were created in the texts of utopian and dystopian novels. The first of these is the aforementioned work of Thomas More *Utopia* (1516) which included one of the first geographic maps and elements of an invented language for a fictional world. Wolf then gives the reader a good list of utopian/dystopian novels that followed including Lady Margaret Cavendish's *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World* (1666) which besides being a utopian novel is also considered to be one of the earliest works of science-fiction. Wolf makes the point that as this genre developed the descriptions of the lands in them became more detailed and layered. A good example he cites is Tommaso Campanella's *The City of the Sun* (1602) which begins with a lengthy description of the island of Taprobane which Wolf intriguingly remarks reminds one of Tolkien's description of Minas Tirith in *The Lord of the Rings*: "The greater part of the city is built upon a high hill, which rises from an extensive plain, but several of its circles extend for some distance beyond the base of the hill" (89). Wolf makes a nice transition to the next strand of the development of world-building by stating: "If traveller's tales brought audiences to imaginary worlds and utopias gave them a sense of how their inhabitants lived, the genres of science fiction and fantasy invited audiences to live in them vicariously" (96).

As Wolf continues his survey of the development of fictional worlds, he brings in an exploration of how other types of texts were used in the description of fictional worlds; first through illustrations and then at the turn of the 20th century through early cinema and comic strips. Wolf cogently shows that Frank L Baum's Land of Oz (1900-1920) is one of the first great transmedial worlds which over the two decades of its development encompassed most of the existing media of the time (text, images, comic strips, musical plays, radio, newspapers, games, and several cinema adaptations). Wolf characterises the transmedial nature of the Oz world as "Oz

did not simply originate in Baum's books and then get adapted to other media; new Oz stories could begin as books, musicals, comic strips, or plays and then be adapted across media, and those adaptations would often add new material events, and characters as well, making Oz a truly trans-medial world" (118). Wolf rightly dedicates a section of this chapter to "*The Lord of the Rings* and Tolkien's Influence" which he characterises as "one of the most beloved and influential imaginary worlds of all time" (130). He gives a good background on Tolkien's mythopoeia commenting that "Arda was unique, but not without its influences" (131). Wolf emphasises that while the types of world-building that Tolkien worked on had already been done what distinguishes his work was the degree to which he gave his world its rich verisimilitude with "meaningful details integrated into an elaborate backstory" (131). Wolf cogently explores Tolkien's development of his Legendarium, the audience and reader reception of it and its impact on a new crop of fantasy authors and world-builders.

In the last part of this information packed chapter (worth several reads) Wolf explores the role of modern day franchising in building fictional universes and imaginary worlds. Wolf explores the genesis of some of the largest and most important franchises that exist today, such as *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *Doctor Who* and others, which all use transmedial story-telling (books, films, television shows, gaming, multimedia and immersive environments) to build their worlds. Of course, with the various cinematic adaptations of the novels (especially the recent Peter Jackson films) Tolkien's Arda has also become one of these franchises as well (a point that is further explored in the 2016 reader see below). I was especially impressed by Wolf's concluding statement for this chapter which very aptly summed up this historical and conceptual survey and again evokes Tolkien and his idea of "recovery": "Although they can be everything from escapist fantasy to lenses that help us see our own world more clearly, imaginary worlds are more than art, entertainment, games, tools, dreams, nightmares, experiments, or laboratories; they are nothing less than the fulfilment of humanity's sub-creative vocation" (152).

In chapter three, "World Structures and Systems of Relationships," Wolf focuses on the importance of the authorial use of primary world elements in the construction of their imaginary worlds. He starts again by quoting Tolkien in "On Fairy-stories" and his emphasis on the use of primary world defaults to give an imaginary world an "inner consistence of reality." Wolf explores this by examining several key infrastructures which he suggests is important for a secondary world to have to create a sense of deep reality and to encourage audience engagement with it. The first and most obvious of these elements is the texts, the stories themselves, which Wolf introduces here but given the scope of this element delays exploring to the next chapter. Wolf demarcates three key elements beyond the narrative. First, a space in which things can exist and occur. Secondly, a duration or span of time in which events can occur. Thirdly, a character or characters that can be said to be inhabiting the

world. Wolf shows how each of these three elements are realised in world-building through para-textual elements which exist outside of the narrative (usually found, as Ursula K. Le Guin characterised them in her world-building work *Always Coming Home* as "the back of the book"). For the space in which things exist there are maps of the world. For the duration or space of time in a world there are descriptive timelines and chronologies. For characters there are genealogies which give a given character a rootedness; a history and pedigree. All three key world-building para-texts have become the staple of many imaginary worlds, including of course Tolkien's. Wolf then outlines five more structures which span the physical to the philosophical elements of a world. First there is the detailed physical description of the world; the environment and the flora and fauna. Second is the culture of the world and closely linked to this, and crucial to Tolkien's world building, is the languages these cultures speak. Others are the mythology and metaphysical and philosophical systems of the world. Wolf suggests that all these elements work together to create the "gestalt" of a world which gives it, in varying degrees, a sense of reality and depth.

In chapter four, "More than A Story: Narrative Threads and Narrative Fabric," Wolf returns to the key element of narrative in world-building which he characterises as "the most common structure found in imaginary worlds and the reason most of them exist in the first place" (198). Wolf focuses on several examples of narrative as an element of world-building. One of these is the authorial construction of backstories and world history which are only glimpsed of in the core narrative. This of course was a chief hallmark of Tolkien, and Wolf spends some time in this chapter exploring how Tolkien actually achieved this by just hinting at a vast back-story in his core narrative; as when in *The Lord of the Rings* Tom Bombadil gives the hobbits a brief history of his land ("There were fortresses on the heights. Kings of little kingdoms fought together, and the young Sun shone like fire on the red metal of their new and greedy swords"). Wolf also cogently shows how Peter Jackson adapted this same technique in *The Lord of the Rings* films; as in the opening sequence of *The Fellowship of the Ring* which gives a compressed backstory to the history of the Rings of Power. Wolf makes the key point that narratives build worlds and each additional story to be added to the world must take into account all of the narrative material already present in a world (205). This sets off an interesting exploration of several terms for how additional narratives to a world are defined in the sequence that they exist in the chronology of this world. First there is the "sequel" which shares some of the same features of the first narrative of this world and carries the story forward in time while expanding the worlds with new lands, characters and story-lines. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55) was started as the sequel to *The Hobbit* (1937). There are also new narratives that take place before the first narrative of the world which are called "prequels" For example, C.S. Lewis's *The Magician's Nephew* (1955) is a prequel to his first book in the Narnia sequence *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950).

Then Wolf considers stories that come in between already existing story materials which he gives two category designations. An "interquel" is a sequence element that occurs between existing works in a series, while an "intraquel" is a sequence element that occurs during a gap within a single existing work. Another interesting term is the "transquel" which takes place before, during and after a previously released sequence. Wolf states that *The Silmarillion* (1977) is the best known transquel as it "encompasses thousands of years of history, and condenses all the events of *The Lord of the Rings* down to a few paragraphs on two pages" (209). Wolf suggest that "transquels" are generally broad in scope, giving historical context to the works they encompass (210). He also suggests another type of narrative the "paraquel" which are texts in which the same events are seen from a slightly different perspective. As an example from Tolkien, Wolf cites the unauthorized "paraquel" to *The Lord of the Rings* Kirill Eskov's *The Last Ringbearer* (1999) in which the later events of T*he Lord of the Rings* are told from the perspective of the orcs in Mordor.

In order to maintain the "gestalt" of a world and Tolkien's "inner consistency of reality" world-builders must insure that all the narratives of the world maintain a sense of coherence and consistency otherwise the perception of the "gestalt" of the world will be in jeopardy. To that end, authors have had to resort to certain "tricks" to make these narratives, added at different times to the world, make sense. Wolf concludes this chapter by exploring one of these techniques which is known as "retcon" or "retroactive continuity." One of the most famous examples of this act was by Tolkien himself who went back and revised the "Riddles in the Dark" chapter of *The Hobbit* after it is initial publishing to bring it in alignment with *The Lord of the* Rings and then, to preserve the gestalt or order of this narrative thread, created a rationale within the context of his world for why these two versions of the story of the finding of the Ring existed. I was especially interested in Wolf using his media studies focus to characterise Christopher Tolkien's twelve-volume *History of Middle-earth* series as "perhaps one of the most extensive 'Making Of' documentations in literature" (215). Wolf intriguingly juxtaposes the background and additional material received when watching the documentary and extras on a DVD with what the reader of this edited compilation of Tolkien's writings on his world-building provides (I wonder where the "easter eggs" are?).

In chapter five, "Sub-creation within Sub-created Worlds," Wolf explores the act of creation which occurs within a sub-created world where the characters are themselves sub-creators. In Tolkien this is characterised by the self-reflexive act of authorship attributed to characters within the text. For example, Tolkien's "Red Book of Westmarch" is the fictional book that preserves and transmits the stories of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*; a point well explored by Verlyn Flieger in various papers and books which Wolf cites from extensively. In chapter six "Transmedial Growth and Adaptation," Wolf explores how worlds are created and develop through different

transmedial channels. Like narrative, the first and most evident of these channels is the words and description of the text itself. Wolf explores this by giving examples of Tolkien's excellent use of narrative description to create the world of Middle-earth and the characters in it. The next channel Wolf explores is the visual; here citing depictions of Tolkien's world first in Tolkien's own drawings and illustrations and then in subsequent visual forms by artists like Pauline Baynes, Ted Nasmith and many other artists—including the samples of illustrations from the foreign language editions of *The Hobbit* from around the world which Douglas A. Anderson explores in his *The Annotated Hobbit*. Wolf extends the visual into cinematic representations as in the various adaptations of Tolkien's work; the last being Peter Jackson's films. Wolf uses the term "auralization" to refer to the sound representation of a world through radio plays of which Tolkien's works have received several major adaptations (the most well-known being the Brian Sibley's adaptation for the BBC in 1981). Another channel Wolf explores is "Interactivation" which is the building and engagement of a world through video, computer, immersive and digital technologies.

In the final chapter "Circles of Authorship," Wolf masterfully explores the role of authorship in world-building. He shows the role of the author in world-building has moved from being a lone figure working in isolation to one of a variety of roles and acknowledged contributions that make a work what it is, while still maintaining the need for attribution (268). I found Wolf's conceptualization of his thinking on authorship very helpful and worth quoting in full here.

> [authorship is] a series of concentric circles extending out from the world's originator (or originators) with each circle of delegated authority being further removed from the world's origination and involving diminishing authorial contributions, from the originator and main author to estates, heirs and torchbearers: employees and freelancers; the makers of approved, derivative, and ancillary products that are based on a world and finally to the non-canonical additions of elaborationists and fan productions (269)

Wolf followed up his 2012 monograph in 2016 with an anthology, *Revisiting Imaginary Worlds*, of papers by leading scholars exploring the role of world-building in fictional texts (ranging from Oz, Arda, the *Star Wars* universe and Caprica of *Battlestar Galactica*) as well as physical and virtual environments (including Minecraft and the immersive *Doctor Who* experience in Cardiff). This reader is well organized into the key contextual sections of: Structure, Practice and Reception.

For the Tolkien scholar there are two key papers that explore Tolkien's world-building. In "The Subcreation of J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth and How it Became Transmedial Culture," Lars Konzak builds on Wolf's work in the 2012 monograph by showing how Tolkien's Arda become transmedial

through adaptations and fandom. He gives a very focused and comprehensive chronological account starting with the earliest intertextual references (the first being the mention by C.S. Lewis of "Numinor" in *That Hideous Strength*, published in 1945) and moving to plays based on Tolkien's works and even the unfortunate recording by certain pointy-eared Vulcan of *The Ballad of Bilbo Baggins* (in 1967), board games, satirical novels and finally films. Konzak makes the good point that by 1970 (when Tolkien was still alive!) Middle-earth had already been transmedially presented and received in stage productions, several radio dramatizations, a visual series, a short film, song and music video for television, a progressive rock album, a satire novel, calendars and board games. Konzak also digs into the rise and role of Tolkien fandom and concludes his exploration by giving an in-depth exploration, up to the present day, of media adaptations of Tolkien's work. The detail in this section is quite interesting; including mention of Paul Corfield Godfrey's full-length operas based on *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* composed between 1971 and 1986. The salient point Konzak concludes with is that all these transmedial elements of Tolkien's Arda have had an impact on visualising and redefining his works, illustrating Wolf's point about the concentric circles of authorship above.

In "The Past as an Imaginary World: The Case of Medievalism," Dimitra Fimi cogently explores three different authors—Thomas Chatterton, J.R.R. Tolkien and Umberto Eco—and their work on inventing an imagined world aimed at representing a medieval past. Fimi's argument which she convincingly proves with focused examples is that each of these authors "dreamt" of the Middle Ages in strikingly similar ways: by following the "rules" of inventing a Secondary World. Fimi puts in-depth focus on the actual process each of these authors utilized in inventing their versions of medievalism through their making of actual artefacts (forged and feigned documents) as well as constructing narrative transmission schemes to ground these worlds in a sense of reality. Fimi's re-contextualisation of what has been considered up to now as the forgeries of an author like Thomas Chatterton as actually an inventive act of world-building was quite revelatory and is sure to open up new vistas of exploration around these and related texts such as James Macpherson's Ossian cycle of poems.

Wolf includes an appendix in this reader in which he attempts to construct a canon of twenty-five imaginary worlds for further study. Given the voluminous timeline in the 2012 monograph this must have been a difficult list for Wolf to compile. Wolf characterises these worlds (of which Tolkien's Arda is chronologically number 15) as those which are deserving of study, each of which have advanced the history of imaginary worlds and contributed to its history in some way. Like the timeline in Wolf's 2012 monograph this canon gives the reader much to set out to discover and explore.

I think it is fairly evident throughout this review that I am a great admirer of Professor Wolf's work as exemplified in these two books. I highly recommend both these books to all students, scholars, authors, torchbearers,

employees, freelancers and fans. Wolf's scholarship has unlocked the worlds that lay behind texts and stories for discovery and exploration and I hope there is much more to come from him.

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