George R.R. Martin and the Fantasy Form (2019) by Joseph Rex Young and Tweaking Things a Little: Essays on the Epic Fantasy of J.R.R. Tolkien and G.R.R. Martin (2023), by Thomas Honegger

Andrew Higgins
asthiggins@me.com

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Tweaking Things a Little: Essays on the Epic Fantasy of J.R.R. Tolkien and G.R.R. Martin, by Thomas Honegger. Zurich and Jena: Walking Tree Publishers, 2023. [x], xxiv, 435 pp. $38.90 (trade paperback) ISBN 9783905703504.

If there is a contemporary living author of fantasy and speculative literature who is mostly likely to mentioned in the same breath as arguably the founder of modern fantasy J.R.R. Tolkien—then it has to be George R.R. Martin. Indeed, in 2005 writer Lev Grossman in an article in *Time* magazine dubbed Martin "the American Tolkien" (13 November 2005) and starting with the similarity in their names and moving on to both their bodies of work, the adaptations and active engagement by scholars and fans (as well as both their annoying habits of not finishing their works). Tolkien and Martin are without question comparable giants of the modern fantasy genre. Therefore it is great news for students and academics that we now have two compelling and contrasting critical monographs about both these authors bodies of work for review and study.

It was interesting to read and review both these works side by side as they each offer some interesting insights into Tolkien and Martin and the sources of inspirations and the techniques they both used to build their self-contained secondary worlds. Joseph Rex Young's *George R.R. Martin and The Fantasy Form* focuses on the texts Martin wrote and analyses them using several key critical frameworks for fantasy and speculative literature texts. Thomas Honegger's *Tweaking Things a Little: Essays on the Epic Fantasy of J.R.R. Tolkien and G.R.R. Martin* focuses more on Tolkien and Martin's act of authorial world-building and the elements that both authors focused on to construct their worlds. Most of Young's material is published for the first time in this monograph. In Honegger's case much of the material is adapted from previously published works; resulting in what Honegger calls a collection of essays.

Young's book has an introduction, six chapters, conclusion, bibliography and index. This is Young's first monograph and I was overall very impressed with the way he interweaves his close reading of Martin's texts with theoretical analysis using several key critical frameworks. Throughout his cogent and convincing analysis Young brings in such theories as Farah Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy,* John Clute's trope of the "Thinned World" in Fantasy, Thomas Weiskel's Three Staged-Structure of Romantic Transcendence, Todorov's theory of hesitation and David Sandner's concept of the moments of breakage and recovery in Fantasy. Therefore, Young not only provides an excellent close reading and analysis of Martin's narrative form but also provides

the reader with a good foundation in some of the key corpus of fantasy discourse that have grown from Tolkien's seminal talk *On Fairy-stories.*

Young's main point in his exploration, which I thought he proves time and time again, is that as opposed to the popular view that Martin was subverting or abandoning the conventions of the fantasy genre in his *Song of Ice and Fire* novels, what he actually was doing is using these traditional tropes of fantasy to a subtly powerful effect to depict human emotion, ambition and morality. In each of the chapters that follow Young explores different aspects of how Martin achieves this.

In the first chapter "The American Pratchett—Muck and Modality," Young explores how Martin tends to use a "low mimetic" register in both his characters and descriptions to bring his fantasy closer to reality. For this analysis, Young brings in Northrop Frye's theory of modes to suggest that while Tolkien tends to communicate in a high narrative register where we look up to characters, Martin uses more irony and ambiguity; two elements that pervade his work and characters. Young convincingly cites several contrasting examples. For me the one that really drove this point home is the comparison of Tolkien and Martin's depiction of a boat funeral. Young cites the high mimetic style Tolkien uses to portray the boat-funeral of the fallen Boromir who is set adrift on the River Anduin accompanied by the noble songs of Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli. He then compares this to the low mimetic nature of the description of a similar boat-funeral in *Song of Ice and Fire* when the son of the dead Lord of Riverrun Hoster Tully is too hungover from the funeral feast to aim the fire arrow that will set his father's funeral boat aflame. After cursing at the boat as it is passing out of view he tries one more arrow that finally hits the boat. In this respect, Young makes the very interesting observation that the British author Martin most resembles in terms of the irony of his narrative is not J.R.R. Tolkien but the writer and inventor of worlds Terry Pratchett. Young explores Pratchett's Discworld as an interesting parallel to Martin's. Both of these authors color their worlds with the low mimetic filth and muck that we do not get in Tolkien. As Young argues, "Martin's narrative closely parallel's Pratchett whose smelly dragons, earthy witches and accident-prone pale riders similarly deflate Frye's higher modes and the pretensions of those who fail to grasp the purpose of such notions" (38). True, Tolkien never gives us great details about what the refuse situation must have been like in a besieged Gondor.

In the next chapter Young continues this by exploring how Martin uses the low mimetic register in his treatment of sex and sexual violence, which critics of both the novels and the television adaptation have branded as gratuitous. Young suggests that Martin's use of sex creates nuance in his characters, giving both positive and negative aspects to point-of-view characters like Tywin and Tyrion Lannister, Theon Greyjoy and Catelyn Stark. In the case of the young Daenerys Targaryen and savage Dothraki Khal Drago, Young demonstrates that Martin is using a trope of Gothic novelists of the late 1700's to visit sexual and bestial barbarities on characters of high mimetic register who display discernibly modern manners and attitudes so that the reader can understand the

enormity of what they were suffering (although in the case of Daenerys she certainly turns this to her own advantage). Put simply Martin uses sex as a way of encouraging readers to think about how his characters interact with this world. Young concludes this chapter with the intriguing statement, "In short, sex sells *A Song of Ice and Fire* not because it leaves nothing to the imagination, but because it gives the imagination something to do" (66).

In the remaining chapters Young shifts to demonstrating how Martin is using, not subverting, traditional tropes of fantasy in his narrative framework. This is where Young really does a stellar job of bringing in some key critical frameworks to explore the forms of Martin's narrative. The first of these is his use of Farah Mendlesohn's taxonomy of invented worlds as she outlined in her work *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008). Young suggests that Martin's world is an example of what Mendlesohn calls "immersive fantasy" in which the characters are in a self-contained world with no links to "the primary world." However, within this immersive world Martin (like Tolkien) also creates examples of the other two types of Mendlesohnian fantasy—the portal and intrusion fantasies. Young explores Bran Stark's journey from Winterfell into the unknown places and his encounter with The Children of Forest as an example of a portal fantasy not unlike the Hobbits' journey out of the Shire into the unknown lands of Middle-earth. For intrusion fantasy, Young explores the appearance of the Others which serve throughout the novels as an unfocused cosmic evil and Young characterises as "appear[ing] in the prologue of the first volume and gradually infect the narrative via the creeping, visceral and dread of Mendlesohnian intrusion." (157).

The other critical fantasy trope Young explores is John Clute's "thinned" world concept, where magic has leaked out of the land. Young suggests that Martin's narrative "is shot through with references to and insinuations of a cleaner, nobler past of morality and good sense" (67). He cites a good example of this with mention of the now-past Targaryen dynasts who had the blood of Old Valyria which once soared and swooped through the skies on the dragons that adorned their banners. Young argues Martin here is utilising a key trope of the fantasy genre that was certainly used by Tolkien in his Middle-earth with Númenor and the fading of the Elves in the Third Age. As Young says, "Martin's entire written world appears to be a shadow of its former self, subject to precipitous decline from past glories" (69).

In the final chapter Young explores themes of recovery and what David Sandner in his *Critical Discourses on the Fantastic, 1712-1831* (2011) calls "the moments of breakage," a period of crisis and tension which will completely shape the emotional course and impact of the tale. What each of these very well-argued chapters demonstrate is Martin's clear knowledge and use of key fantasy tropes in his narrative. As Young says "the narrative achieves perfect Tolkienian and Clutean affect by dint of judicious authorial choices of Mendlesohnian rhetoric. *A Song of Ice and Fire* could be used as a textbook example of some of the core features of modern fantasy literature in action" (128).

Turning to Thomas Honegger's book, this is divided into five chapters which are each further subdivided into several sections that are somewhat linked to each other (although some do go off on diverting—but interesting—tangents). This volume has some wonderful and interesting pictures, illustrations and art—starting with the stunning cover by Jay Johnstone. It includes a forward by Carolyne Larrington (who has written two books on Martin), and a conclusion and bibliography. Unlike Young who focuses specifically on Martin's texts, Honegger opts to explore the core works, the prequels and the HBO adaptation *Game of Thrones*—using the collective term "Martinverse" (shades of the MCU); whereas he fixes his Tolkienian analysis on *The Lord of the Rings* ignoring the Jackson films as Tolkien was not directly involved with them (so no 'Tolkienverse'). The degree of Martin's actual involvement with the HBO series has been a matter of debate. In a 2022 interview in *The New York Times*, Martin stated that he was not as involved in the later seasons of the show stating that by seasons 5 and 6 and certainly 7 and 8 he was pretty much out of the loop.

Honegger's overall analysis is focused on exploring the shared themes, similarities and differences of Tolkien and Martin's world-building. The five chapters that follow each focus on elements that go into authorial world-building, including creating the perception of historic depth in a world, naming and language invention, narrative and the ethical and metaphysical frameworks of a world. In "World-Building, Icebergs, Depth and Enchantment" Honegger explores how each author created depth in their narratives to give a sense of a vast historic weight to their worlds. Honegger explores Ernest Hemingway's concept in his essay "The Art of the Short Story" (1959) of the "literary iceberg" in which stories are strengthened by leaving things or events out. This gives the sense that behind the story there are elements that are not told but which exist under the surface like an iceberg. Of course, with Tolkien and Martin we are dealing with two very different icebergs. In Tolkien's case the published stories of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* sat at the top of a vast "iceberg" of myth and language invention which Tolkien had been creating since the 1910's. Whereas Martin started writing *A Song of Ice and Fire* in the 1990's and invented his world from the top down—his "literary iceberg" was invented coterminous with the stories, with the backstories being invented after the main narratives. Honegger provides the reader with lots of background material on the sources both Tolkien and Martin would have been aware of in creating this sense of depth (Beowulf, Norse Sagas, etc.). Honegger argues that one of the key ways Martin achieved this sense of depth is through his use of poems in the narrative which tell of an older time (of course Tolkien did the same thing but the poems he wrote told of times that already existed in narrative form). Honegger explores three of the major poems in the narrative: "The Rains of Castermere," "The Bear and the Maiden Fair," and "The Doom of Valyria," which each in themselves create the sense of an older transmitted oral tradition and of lost tales from the past. In the case of "The Doom of Valyria" Honegger goes off on a bit of tangent with comparing the ancient doomed city of Valyria

with Tolkien's doomed island of Númenor—interesting but a bit diverting from the topic at hand.

In the next two chapters Honegger explores the key role that language and language invention plays in world-building. In Part Two he focuses specifically on the role names and naming play in world-building and compares and contrasts both Tolkien and Martin's invention and use of names. For Tolkien, world-building and story-telling started with a name; indeed the inspiration for the entire Middle-earth mythology came from Tolkien's interest in one specific name found in an Old English poem and Honegger goes into great depth about this discovery and how both the languages and stories grew from this discovery. There is a lot of good theory in this chapter about both language invention and name making. Honegger makes this interesting point that while Tolkien's world-building was inspired by a name and the story followed, Martin—like C.S. Lewis—was inspired by an image and vision. As Martin stated in a 2014 *Rolling Stone* interview, it was while working on another science fiction story that he had the vision from Bran's point of view of a man beheaded and the finding of some dire-wolf pups in the snow. Honegger explores this further through many pictures of shields and sigils to emphasise the strong visual quality of Martin's world. Of course, it should not be forgotten that Tolkien too employed the visual in his world-building through maps, art and drawings, heraldry and sigils very much like Martin's.

Honegger then moves from names to more about language and language invention as elements of world-building in general. I would say this section is heavy on Tolkien and lite on Martin. Honegger does well with an exploration of Tolkien's coeval language invention with his myth-making and how he sought through the found manuscript trope and The Red Book of Westmarch to create parallels with the languages of Middle-earth and the primary world. Tolkien's work on his languages created a precedent in fantasy world-building with readers expecting similar nexuses of language invention in other works of fantasy; suggesting almost an "anxiety of influence" for future authors of fantasy and speculative literature. Martin was quite clear as he said in an interview that Honegger cites, "Tolkien was a philologist, and an Oxford don, and could spend decades laboriously inventing Elvish in all its detail. I, alas, am only a hardworking SF and Fantasy novel[ist] and I don't have a gift for languages" (159). At best in *A Song of Ice and Fire* Martin created a very rudimentary form of language invention, primarily with a handful of invented words for the Dothraki. Honegger compares this to other writers of modern fantasy like Christopher Paolini in his *Eragon* series where the reader is given "a modern stock of words and phrases and some very rudimentary information on the grammar of the language" (158). An interesting point Honegger makes is while Martin was not focused on inventing languages, he, like Tolkien, did establish through his narrative a series of cultures and peoples for which distinctive languages could be invented to reflect their cultures, traditions and peoples. When it came to adapting *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the HBO show-runners for *Games of Thrones* brought on linguist David Peterson to do just that

and from the network of peoples Martin created in the narrative and a handful of words invented by Martin, Peterson invented a series of languages (Dothraki, High Valyrian) and a linguistic network that interrelated them all (as in Tolkien's Tree of Tongues) for which Honegger provides some good illustrations (164). Honegger concludes this section with this intriguing statement, "Again, we can note that while Tolkien created his legendarium together with its concomitant languages as a one-man show, Martin concentrated right from the beginning on the narrative construction of his world and wisely opted for outsourcing the work on his languages. And while Tolkien's legendarium grew in tandem with his languages, Martin's narratives have always taken precedence and the development of his languages came second—also chronologically" (165). I also was doubly intrigued by Honegger's interesting contrast between the study of Tolkien's language invention and Martin's: "So while Tolkien language scholars are like archaeologists busy unearthing and making sense of the rich linguistic heritage that the Professor has bequeathed to posterity, those investigating Martin's languages are more like architects and builders who are in the process of erecting and developing structures merely sketched by the author—yet both groups are contributing aspects vital to the secondary worlds of Arda and [Martin's] Known World respectively" (166).

Honegger returns to the narrative elements of world-building in the next chapter, "Riders, Chivalry and Knighthood," in which he explores in great detail how both authors use concepts of knighthood and chivalry in their works. Honegger argues through close text reading and examples that, while Tolkien and Martin approach this topic differently, they are united in what lies behind the acts of chivalry. Honegger suggests that Tolkien did not like the high-Medieval concept of chivalry. He does refute a critic's claim that the word "knight" does not appear *The Lord of the Rings* by reporting on a word-search and proving that the word "knight" appears eight times, "knights" forty-nine times, and once for "knighthood" (291). But clearly the image of the Knight in Shining armour is largely absent from Tolkien's description (he clearly preferred the word "rider" to "knight") and Honegger suggests that like organised religion, the chivalric element is absorbed by Tolkien into the story and symbolism through the subtext of Tolkien's portrayal of courage based on the concept found in *The Battle of Maldon* of the Northern Spirit—courage in the face of defeat and death. Honegger suggests that Martin too was not keen on chivalry but this was because of ethical and ideological reasons. Martin's Knights are a mixed bag, including ideal knights, new knights and flawed knights and they all display some of the more low mimetic and realistic human nature that Young refers to in his monograph.

In the concluding chapter Honegger explores the role that ethics plays in Tolkien and Martin's world-building through the types of choices and decisions characters make in the narratives. Honegger covers a lot of ground here exploring ethics, politics, fate, philosophy and religious beliefs. Honegger explores both authors worldviews, suggesting that while Tolkien's world seems

to have more of teleological structure that finds its climax in eucatastrophe and the return of the king, Martin's story seems to lack an underlying purpose with events happening with no specific reason. He explores in great depth the concept of the wheel of fate, and different characters movements on this changing and shifting wheel, and Martin's meaningless and random cosmic elements such as the appearance of the Others (White Walkers) as opposed to the more focused Tolkienian concept of the Dark Lord.

Taken together I think both these volumes offer a good source of analysis and inspiration for further study for students and scholars of both Tolkien and Martin. Young offers some really interesting insights into Martin's text and examples of how to employ key critical frameworks to explore what Martin is doing in his narratives. Honegger brings his Tolkien chops to the table in exploring how Martin's world-building is similar and also different from Tolkien's, with some interesting threads for scholars to pick up and explore further. Therefore these volumes both continue the academic discourse on the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and also add to the growing discourse on the works of George R.R. Martin—perhaps not so much the "American Tolkien" as he has been hailed, but a living writer of fantasy and science fiction in his own right.

Dr. Andrew Higgins
Balham, London