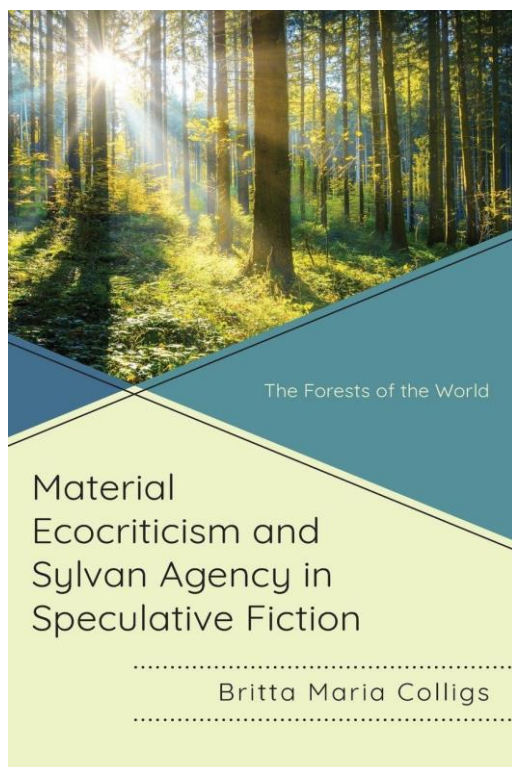


BOOKS

Britta Maria Colligs, *Material Ecocriticism and Sylvan Agency in Speculative Fiction: The Forests of the World*, Lexington Books, 2023, 218 p.



Our understanding of ecocritical issues often tends to revolve around the preservation of various ecosystems affected by disasters such as pollution or climate change—and for good reason. In many aspects, papers have shown that human intervention has been a double-sided sword in the ecological development of the world, as conservation efforts remain high in the face of decades of sylvan exploitation at the hands of the Northern hemisphere, is what Britta Marie Colligs points out in her study, *Material Ecocriticism and Sylvan Agency in Speculative Fiction*. By taking a look at the literature of the past century, Colligs manages to reconfigure our understanding of ecocriticism not from an Anthropocene perspective as has often been the case, but rather by proposing that we dispel portrayals of the environment as an object to be saved, but rather as an entity that expresses its own agency.

Published in 2024, the book is an incursion into man's literary relationship with the environment, specifically forest areas and how its portrayal affected our own understanding of humanity along with that of the post-Anthropocene. In order to achieve this, Colligs set out to analyse arboreal characters and realms



belonging to the speculative fiction genre through the lens of ecocriticism, ranging from works such as those of J.R.R. Tolkien, Ursula K. Le Guin to those of George R.R. Martin, J.K. Rowling and Christopher Paolini. By offering such a comprehensive look at many classics of this particular genre, she seeks to define what contemporary fiction's relationship with the sylvan environment means in the current climate, as well as the many aspects that tend to be shared among these works.

Divided into seven chapters, Colligs' study provides a fascinating insight into fantastical depictions of forests focusing on the ecocritical reading of these environments and deconstructing many of the typical portrayals as being remnants of an Anthropocene understanding of the world at large. Among her most important observations is the romanticization of the forest—a tendency which she remarks dates back to much older literature—and various authors' insistence to reinvent it as a healing space, or a vast wilderness offering refuge from the cacophony of society. By drawing on examples such as the works of Le Guin, she posits the image of the forest as being intrinsically linked to that of humanity as well: "The single tree and its life cycle have long been used to illuminate various aspects of life, such as the cycle of birth, death and rebirth as well as history, which uncovers a close connection between the human and the arboreal sign" (73).

Symbols of the sylvan realm thus become innately connected to our perception of humanity as well, she argues, given that tree symbols are to be found all around the globe and the portrayal of their state can be a "potent symbol of an ecological degradation caused by human's neglect and abuse of nature" (86). The loss of the 'vast wilderness' thus represents a loss of humanity as well and acts as criticism regarding the state of human society nowadays in Colligs' perception. Images of decayed or dead trees are thus representative of ecological degradation at the hands of human intervention, a theme all too often present in many speculative fiction works. It is for this reason that Colligs considers an ecocritical approach as crucial for truly understanding such literature, departing from "the consensus reality and shift away from an anthropocentric point of view by including non-human characters" (97) and introducing "an animistic language in which they acknowledge nature's own form of articulation and intrinsic value" (97). Nature is no longer an object, she argues, but rather an entity with its own distinctive voice. To further expand upon this, Colligs approaches the inherent Otherness of natural environments by remarking that the shared consciousness of natural environments opens up an entirely different conversation regarding agency and Humanity in the speculative fiction genre.

Portrayals of nature sharing a consciousness are not only rooted in reality, but Colligs argues that the fictional depictions of the vast root and intricate fungal network serve the function of presenting an alternative view of nature as alien yet still connected to humanity to a certain degree. Such interspecies exchanges help highlight the spiritual dimension that a connection to nature can confer on a character. To be able to tap into this network and communicate with the forest environment of which it is part, allows them to experience an ecocritical awareness of the environment which had not been possible before. Colligs uses the Ents of Tolkien as an example of the complexity that ecocritical awareness can bring, pointing out that the Entish language's complexity

supersedes all others within the universe of Tolkien's Middle-Earth, situating it as far too advanced for the humanoid characters' understanding. As a result, it is implied to the reader as well that the value of the natural environment is not something which ought to be dismissed on the basis of Otherness, but rather understood on its own merits.

This, in itself, can be even further simplified into an environmentally aware message typical of the Dr. Seuss formula, in which the impact of humanity's interference upon the ecological setting can be devastating and that humans need to start establishing themselves not as disconnected from nature, but rather as allies which are aware of the precarious relationship between the two. This is an important position to occupy, Colligs remarks given that much of the speculative fiction genre seeks to establish "an emotional link between humans/humanoid characters and the wider natural environment" (133). If in the past, the role of the forest was a passive one, then in the literature of today the same sylvan environment manages to function more akin to its own individual whose perception of humanity tends to be informed by the same relationships humans have with their environment in reality: pollution, deforestation, wildfires and various other issues which tend to plague real-world forests become precursors to the animosity towards humanity and the environment which need to be addressed should characters desire to open a dialogue with nature.

Thus, what Colligs' study very aptly manages to convey is that with many works in the speculative fiction genre adopting an environmentally friendly approach towards the forest and sylvan realms in general, the overall worldview which had been dominated by the Anthropocene has now shifted away towards a recognition of the human individual's position within the forest world. As a result, the genre in itself becomes an advocate of ecological alertness and acknowledgement of sylvan agency in the face of humanity's tendency towards human superiority. By recognizing the Otherness of nature, Colligs' study manages to expand our understanding of humanity and its portrayal within the realm of literature.

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