Arthur Rackham, 'Autumn Fairies' (1906), used on the cover of Charles de Lint's *Ghosts of Wind and Shadow*.

Changelings with a Caffeine Addiction: How Urban Fantasy Adapts Folklore

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Narrative folklore genres such as legends, fairy tales, and ballads have explored the multiple ways in which humans and non-humans interact for centuries. Much of fantastic literature and speculative fiction does the same, albeit from different vantage points: the Others in science fiction are frequently aliens, while those of horror and fantasy tend to be the ghosts, monsters, and faerie folk of earlier folklore forms. Folkloric motifs in urban fantasy create new contexts for folklorists to study their use and transformation for new audiences, as the role of teller and audience belief in folk narrative which determines its truth value (or lack thereof) is altered uniquely in urban fantasy in contrast to other fantasy genres. This distinguishes urban fantasy from other types of fantastic literature as a mode that is not merely reliant upon the fiction's contemporary cityscape setting, but which, crucially, interrogates the nature of belief for the characters and cultures involved.

Academic folklore studies can lend a degree of terminological specificity to conversations about urban fantasy. Some fantasy scholarship lacks this precision, as in John Clute and John Grant's *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, which mistakenly categorises the *Kalevala* as both a folktale and a myth and which conflates urban legends with tall tales.[1] Getting a few genre names wrong of course does not invalidate a work of scholarship, but it is vital to understand the belief implied by various folklore genres in order to grasp their inclusion and transformation in urban fantasy. Besides, as folklore and fantasy scholars all know: names have power. Librarian Nanette Donohue made a similar error when she wrote: 'Traditional urban fantasy is highly influenced by folklore and fairy tales and often has the feel of a modern folk or fairy tale'.[2] This conflates the general arena of folklore – informally transmitted traditional culture – with folk narrative, folk tale, and fairy tale. This leads to the question, are we discussing these genres in terms of their plot structure; their content such as motifs, themes, and symbols; their functions or the roles they play in society; their aesthetic style; or some combination of the above? It is insufficient to state that something is influenced by folklore; as a folklore scholar I want to know *how* it is influenced by folklore. Thus, here I explore the

important question of how exactly folk narrative genres impact the literary genre of urban fantasy, with special attention to the roles of belief and power.

The main two premises of this article come from academic folklore studies. First, in defining folklore genres their truth value informs their categorisation. This is especially true for narrative folklore, or those folklore genres that are in the form of a story: myths and legends are told as though true while folktales and fairy tales are fictional, not believed to be true at all.[3] To be a little more specific, myths are set in ancient time, during the creation of the world, and their typical cast of characters includes gods, cosmic forces, the first humans and animals, and the earth itself. In contrast, legends are set in historical or recent time, and the characters tend to be ordinary people who have extraordinary, often disturbing, encounters. The migratory legends of Europe tend to feature encounters with faerie folk, trolls, vampires, and ghosts depending on region, and religious figures such as the devil, while urban or contemporary legends tend to feature encounters with murderers, unethical fast food vendors, cultists, UFOS, and, still, ghosts. With either type of legend, the narrators of the legend potentially believe in the existence of the narrated elements, even if a particular teller or audience member does not necessarily believe in the supernatural. What happens with urban fantasy is that it sets up a truthful relationship with folklore and more specifically folk narrative: urban fantasy depicts a world where selected characters, events, and motifs of various folk narratives are true and actually exist. The type of folkloric creature under discussion – such as faeries vs. vampires, both popular types of characters in urban fantasy – does not matter for this assertion to be useful.

Second, utilising a perspective from academic folklore studies can contribute a useful paradigm for interpreting appearances of folklore in literature. Alan Dundes, in his landmark article on folklore in literature and culture[4] identifies a two-step process: we identify the folklore that's being used in literature (a certain tale type, superstition, and so on) and then we interpret it, asking questions such as: Why did the author choose that version over any other? How did the author make changes to that bit of folklore to adapt it to their work? And so on. My contention is that applying this process to urban fantasy would help us understand both how and why urban fantasy authors are adapting folklore in their works.

My project engages with folklore, the cultural materials, and folkloristics, the production of knowledge within an academic discipline. I am keenly interested in the role of belief in urban fantasy, both because of how the sub-genre is modelled upon belief-centred folklore genres like legends, and because of how belief is a key structuring element in all narrative. This is something Farah Mendlesohn describes in *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, except her focus is on how the author's rhetorical strategies manipulate the reader's access to information about the fantastic worlds in question.[5] Knowledge about a world is implicitly tied to belief; in an extension of Mendlesohn's project, urban fantasy frequently uses our real-world beliefs about the folkloric characters being used and the ways the characters themselves believe or disbelieve within the stories as a plot device.

The use of in-story belief to indicate tensions about the setting and characters has appeared in many sub-genres of fantasy, not just urban fantasy. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, for example, Sam Gamgee has a conversation with another hobbit before leaving on the quest:

> "Queer things you do hear these days, to be sure," said Sam.
>
> "Ah," said Ted, "you do, if you listen. But I can hear fireside-tales and children's stories at home, if I want to."
>
> "No doubt you can," retorted Sam, "and I daresay there's more truth in some than you reckon. Who invented the stories anyway? Take dragons now."
>
> "No thank 'ee," said Ted, "I won't. I heard tell of them when I was a youngster, but there's no call to believe in them now."[6]

It is, of course, amusing for us as human readers to envision hobbits – a fantasy race – discussing fantastic creatures that *they* do not believe in. But the aspect of this conversation that I want to focus on here is the conflation of childhood with belief in the fantastic. As folklorist Elizabeth Tucker demonstrates in her survey of scholarship on children's folklore, conceptions of childhood from the late 19th century to the present have influenced both research topics and research paradigms when it comes to the study of children's folklore.[7] One notable example is the equation of the child with the savage of unilinear evolutionary anthropology, characterised as a progression 'from savagery to barbarism and then civilization, [in which] groups of people evolve, retaining remnants of their earlier culture in folk tradition'.[8] And 'according to the early evolutionary scholars, children retain survivals of earlier days'.[9] For example, certain games like 'London bridge is falling down' were thought to be patterned off ritual sacrifice, which itself is no longer practised, and yet, supposedly, children unknowingly transmit such cultural fossils in their lore. Scholars of children's folklore these days do not hold to such antiquated notions, but many of these foundational ideas of our Western intellectual heritage remain in the background. As Tucker points out, the numerous ways Western scholars view children include 'as innocents, creators, conservators, secret-keepers, magic-makers, taboo-breakers, monsters, cerebral beings, bubble-wrapped packages, evolving organisms' (406). These overlapping and sometimes contrasting concepts of childhood reveal more about our views than about the children in question, though it is interesting to note that Tucker's labels could well apply to characters common in urban fantasy.

As mentioned earlier, urban fantasy borrows characters and tropes equally from the various genres of folk narrative without regard to the distinctions between them, which is a crucial point when we recall that the very definition of folk narrative genres hinges

on their perceived truth value. When we add children's folklore into the mix, which includes both narrative and non-narrative forms, as well as references to belief in the fantastic, the picture becomes a little more complicated.

Both classic and newer works in the sub-genre of urban fantasy can be used to demonstrate these folkloric themes. This case study examines the works of Charles de Lint, which represent a tradition in their own right, giving a mythic approach to the numinous as it intertwines with the life of a fictional North American city, Newford. On the other hand, the October Daye books of Seanan McGuire are thoroughly contemporary, set in a modern San Francisco with a resident population of Faerie and changeling characters. Spanning 'traditional' and 'contemporary' threads of urban fantasy, these texts both exemplify the use of folklore in new contexts. Focusing on tales not of Faerie kidnappers (as in the ballad 'Tam Lin') but of Faerie *rescuers* – in de Lint's story 'Ghosts of Wind and Shadow' and McGuire's novel *An Artificial Night* – allows us to compare and contrast these authors' incorporation and interpretation of European fairy lore in their creative works of fantasy along a similar theme. By comparing these two urban fantasy works and discussing their folkloric antecedents, I hope to contribute to a fuller understanding of both urban fantasy and folkloric intertextuality.

In de Lint's short story 'Ghosts of Wind and Shadow', teenager Lesli is poised to run away from home, where her father is mostly absent and her mother forces an oppressively normal lifestyle on Lesli, who would rather play her flute and learn about the world of Faerie. When Lesli is picked up on the streets by a man who would force her into sex trafficking, Lesli's flute teacher Meran, with her husband Cerin, must call upon the powers of Faerie to save Lesli from this fate.

In Seanan McGuire's October Daye books, the main character October (or Toby) is a changeling who is extremely cranky, especially when under-caffeinated. She inhabits a complex political world, whether she is passing as human or undertaking investigations on behalf of any of the numerous fae courts in the San Francisco area. *An Artificial Night* is the third book in the series and centres on Toby's efforts to recover kidnapped children, both fae and human, from Blind Michael, the leader of the Wild Hunt.

Both de Lint and McGuire adapt children's folklore, folk narrative, and other folklore forms in their works. Indeed, the connection between children/children's lore and faerie/fairy lore has been well documented, with faeries reputedly either stealing children as changelings or requiring human women to act as midwives to the fae[10] and with children's folklore and culture adapting motifs of faeries as invisible playmates.

In the de Lint story, Lesli's mother remembers Lesli playing games with invisible friends as a toddler, which is a form of customary folklore common to children all over the world. Of course, because Lesli came from a magical (though human) family, her invisible friends were actually Faerie folk who were only visible to the right people. As an adolescent, Lesli begins to see small Faerie-folk and when she tries to talk to her

uptight mother about them, their feud begins. When Lesli's mother expresses fear for her daughter during a talk with Meran, she says that her daughter's obsession with fairies and magic makes her uncomfortable: 'It … it just seems so obvious. She must be involved with the occult, or drugs. Perhaps both.' (181) A traditional European migratory legend (the existence of the Fair Folk) is ironically transposed into paranoia surrounding current American urban legends. To a small-minded person like Lesli's mother, so concerned with running a normal household and raising a daughter who will conform, the ability to see magic in the world is not valued, but rather feared. Anyone who sees the world of Faerie, from the rational perspective of Lesli's mother, must be under the influence of drugs or a cult. Alternately, and this is only implied in the beginning of the story, such a person might be mentally unstable. This last possibility becomes a reality when Lesli's mother realises that she, too, has the ability to see the Faerie world, and as she cannot come to grips with it, she suffers a nervous breakdown. The intrusive refusal of Faerie to stay in the world of childhood, imagination, memory, and the past condemns Lesli's mother with her inflexible worldview to madness … but it does save Lesli from rape and sexual slavery. The benefits of retaining belief rather than relegating it to childhood or the realm of the irrational thus vary in de Lint's work.

In *An Artificial Night*, children's folklore takes on a very prominent role, but so do the other narrative genres of folklore, such as legend, myth, and fairy tale. Fairy tales give the book much of its structure, with quests and the triple repetition of motifs, while legends supply many of the characters, such as the many types of fae folk inhabiting this world. In an intriguing transformation, we hear about fae characters whom *we* would consider fictional, such as Oberon and Titania, take on mythic significance to the fae characters of the book, as the very first fae-folk to which all contemporary fae trace their origins. Children's games, stories, and rhymes are also transformed into items of greater importance than they are in this world. When Toby has to track down Blind Michael to retrieve the kidnapped children, the Luidaeg (an ancient sea witch) tells her: 'Blind Michael is a child's terror. When you're hunting bogeymen, you look for the nets in the stories you've almost forgotten.' (90) Toby can enter Blind Michael's lands, but only if she plays by the rules, rules which are patterned on children's games. Again, the Luidaeg enlightens Toby: 'Children's games are stronger than you remember once you've grown up and left them behind. They're always fair, and never kind. Remember.' (93) Once Toby enters Blind Michael's lands, her life depends on adhering to the rules of children's folklore, which are arbitrary and cruel most of the time. She makes a deal with Blind Michael to get the kids out, thinking to herself, 'If Blind Michael followed children's laws, he'd have to play fair with me, or winning wouldn't count.' (123) Since Blind Michael is bound by rules, Toby eventually makes it out with the kids, though not without a good deal of sacrifice on her end.

McGuire's adaptation of children's folklore in *An Artificial Night* conforms to what we as scholars know about children's folklore: it decentres power through inversion,

amplification, and metaphor. As folklorist Simon Bronner notes: 'The theme of power pervades children's folklore because, first, children compose a subordinate group in relation to adults, and second, to raise their own prestige children often try to subordinate others, often younger children.'[11] In mimicking and amplifying the power structures observed in the adult world, children overemphasise the importance of rules and fairness. By picking up on these elements of children's folklore, *An Artificial Night* invites readers to a dialogue on power. Children construct rules-based folklore in order to attain a sense of control in otherwise subaltern lives, which the fae also seem to do. They're powerless against iron and sunlight, but the real threat comes from within, because of how fae pride and easily wounded honour can lead to conflict. Their intricate rules-based society is meant to protect their immortality by preventing pointless feuding and death. Much like children's folklore, fae society is portrayed as subaltern to our own, but able to create a coherent sense of internal meaning. Similarly, there are rules in de Lint's urban fantasy, though in the story I have chosen here, they are not as explicitly laid out. Once you see Faerie, you cannot unsee it; and evildoers are generally punished. I chose these two textual examples, wherein faerie protagonists doing the rescuing rather than the kidnapping, as a way to illustrate the importance of inversion (of truth value, among other things) in urban fantasy. Inversion is always about relationships, and in both texts, the relationships of belief, power, and supernatural communities come to the forefront.

As Brian Attebery reminds us in *Strategies of Fantasy*: 'Fantasy depends on mimesis for its effectiveness.'[12] By incorporating real-world folklore materials, urban fantasy provides this sense of mimesis. And by shuffling around the internal registers of belief, such that readers are surprised by which folkloric conventions turn out to be true and which do not, the narrative engages readers, drawing them in with implicit promises of 'true knowledge' to be revealed as the plot progresses. Since the only way to learn more about which folklore is real in the narrated world is to read on and find out, works of urban fantasy utilise folklore as a plot hook. There is inevitably humour based on the non-human characters mocking humans in many works of urban fantasy, when one of the folkloric supernatural characters tells one of the uninitiated, either an in-story character or as an aside to us, the human readers, that humans have a certain incorrect assumption about the fae, vampire, or other folkloric community. In 'Ghosts of Wind and Shadow', the human error is in thinking that the Faerie world is a hallucination of childhood. In *An Artificial Night*, we learn that the fae are not happy critters dancing in sunlit fields, but are primarily nocturnal and can be quite scary. Other works of urban fantasy, paranormal romance, and related genres accomplish this in similar ways, such as dispelling the stereotype that werewolves only transform on the full moon, or the idea that vampires cannot stand sunlight but rather they avoid it because they sparkle in it (as is the case in the *Twilight* series). These assertions anchor works of urban fantasy to the mimetic world, and with that nod toward our reality taken care of, the authors can

freely rework folkloric materials into fantasy as they wish, having created buy-in for readers who come pre-equipped with some notion of the folkloric landscape that often shows up in fantasy and urban fantasy works.

Of course, belief is not a straightforward thing. We all unconsciously hold multiple and sometimes contradictory beliefs about the way the world works. When we dive into a work of urban fantasy, our beliefs about folkloric materials are alternately confirmed or challenged, depending on how the author manipulates those materials, ranging from children's folklore to narrative folklore. By depicting some folkloric materials as true, authors invite readers to compare what they know and believe, in contrast to what the urban fantasy characters know and believe. In particular, by depicting the fantastic aspects of children's folklore as true, urban fantasy asks us whether the assumptions underpinning children's folklore, such as the arbitrary distribution of power, might *also* be true. The fact that Toby in the early books of the series is a coffee-guzzling misanthrope who nonetheless has to remember the rules of children's games to get in and out of Blind Michael's lands provides us with an intriguing contrast – one with which readers might empathise (likely substituting more mundane heroics). The magical and the mundane nuzzle up against each other in urban fantasy, playing with our beliefs and assumptions. Knowledge of folklore genres and scholarship can illuminate precisely how this connection occurs, and what it reveals about power, play and the fantastic.

The influence of folklore on the works studied here is undeniable. Further nuance is added, however, by asking which folklore genres are incorporated by urban fantasy authors and how they are transformed in the retelling. Without resorting to author interviews or discussions of authorial intention, it is still clear that de Lint and McGuire have extensive knowledge of the folkloric traditions they chose to transform. Their anchoring in European folk narratives (primarily legends) of faerie folk keys (Western) readers to anticipate familiar motifs and story structures, and to be pleasantly surprised when the worldbuilding deviates from the familiar. Similarly, the reliance on children's folklore and links between childhood and irrational if not supernatural motifs presents an anchor point for many readers; while not all readers will have shared explicit beliefs in or folk narratives about faerie lore, all readers will have presumably passed through childhood and thus share a basic familiarity with children's folklore. Both folk narrative genres and children's folklore implicitly highlight questions of power (who has it; who lacks it), and in theorising the links between these folklore texts and urban fantasy, scholars can better understand the often-invisible workings of power.

By searching for folklore within literature, and by orienting the discussion of the works under study toward belief, I have demonstrated that folklore studies has much to contribute to scholarship on urban fantasy, and fantastic literature more generally. The two works that use children's folklore to create a fictional yet believable universe in which fae/Faerie characters sympathetically rescue children rather than abduct them illustrate

the need for interdisciplinary toolkits when studying newer, hybridised genres such as urban fantasy. The works of de Lint and McGuire are, like those of their peers, worthy of serious study and analysis, for in having scholarly conversations about belief, story, and power, we learn to look between the cracks of our own world for the voices of the marginalised and powerless, who may not be able to rely on faerie rescuers of their own.

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Notes

Charles De Lint, 'Ghosts of Wind and Shadow', in *Dreams Underfoot* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, LLC, 1993 [1990]).

Seanan McGuire, *An Artificial Night* (New York: DAW Books, 2010).

1. John Clute and John Grant, *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (Orbit, 1997), 359; 529; 976.
2. Nanette Donohue, 'Collection Development "Urban Fantasy": The City Fantastic', *Library Journal* http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA6561372.html. Accessed 4 October 2012.
3. See also William Bascom, 'Four Functions of Folklore', *Journal of American Folklore* 67 (266) (1954), 333-49; Lynne S. McNeill, *Folklore Rules: A Fun, Quick, and Useful Introduction to the Field of Folklore Studies* (Boulder, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 2013).
4. Alan Dundes, 'The Study of Folklore in Literature and Culture: Identification and Interpretation', *The Journal of American Folklore* 78.308 (1965), 136-42.
5. Farah Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).
6. J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (in *The Lord of the Rings*) (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994 [1954]), 43.
7. Elizabeth Tucker, 'Changing Concepts of Childhood: Children's Folklore Scholarship since the Late Nineteenth Century', *Journal of American Folklore* 125 (498) (2013), 389-410.
8. Tucker, 'Changing Concepts of Childhood', 392.
9. Ibid.
10. See Reimund Kvideland and Henning K. Sehmsdorf (eds), *Scandinavian Folk Belief and Legend* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), among others.
11. Simon Bronner, *American Children's Folklore* (Little Rock: August House Publishers, 1988), 32).
12. Brian Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 4.