Michael Whelan, 'Legends: The Gunslinger'.

The Mythology of the Dark Tower Universe

Robin Furth

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On 19 June 1999, at 4:30 in the afternoon, the bestselling horror writer Stephen King was hit by a Dodge Minivan while out walking near his family home in Lovell, Maine. The driver was 42-year-old Bryan Smith, a former construction worker living on disability who had already notched up eleven convictions for speeding and driving under the influence.

As King himself has said, the scene could have come from one of his own novels. While cresting the hill of Route 5, Smith turned to push one of his Rottweilers, Bullet, away from a backseat beer cooler filled with raw meat. As he did so, his van careened onto the wrong side of the road and hit King, who had just come out of the woods where he'd been relieving himself. Although King bounced off Smith's windshield and landed in a ditch, the driver was convinced that he'd hit a small deer. That is, until he saw a pair of bloody glasses sitting on his passenger seat …

I remember the day of King's accident very well. I was in the University of Maine library at Orono, working on my PhD in supernatural fiction. I heard the news from an undergraduate student whom I'd taught in one of my freshman composition classes. When my husband picked me up, I buckled my seatbelt and told him the story. Stephen King – the University's most famous graduate and most generous patron – had suffered a shattered hip, shattered pelvis, broken ribs, a punctured lung, a fractured thighbone, a lacerated scalp, and a chipped spine. (I later learned that he very nearly lost his leg as well.) As we pulled out of the parking lot, I told Mark that Bryan Smith wouldn't last a year. In the State of Maine, Stephen King is very popular and I didn't think that his legions of fans would look kindly upon the man who had almost killed him. It turned out I was right, though the cause of Smith's passing wasn't foul play but probable suicide. (On 21 September 2000 – which also happened to be King's 53rd birthday – Bryan Smith was found dead in his trailer from an accidental overdose of painkillers.)

In late October of 2000, almost a year and a half after King's accident, I was standing in the English Department office checking my mailbox when I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was Burt Hatlen, one of my supervisors, who also happened to be one

of Stephen King's friends. He told me that King had a temporary research job available and wanted to hire a graduate student. Since I studied supernatural fiction and was a published writer, he'd thought of me. Was I interested?

During the first year of his long and painful recovery, King had finished *On Writing*, his autobiographical book about his craft. In it, he had offered readers the chance to send him a story based on the guidelines he included in his book. The response was so overwhelming that King couldn't sort through the pile on his own. Hence, I was hired. As Burt Hatlen directed, I contacted King's Personal Assistant, Marsha DeFilippo, and arranged to pick up the first of many boxes of manuscripts.

Two months later, on a snowy December afternoon, I returned to the King office to collect my final pay cheque. The state had just suffered another of its infamous ice storms and I'd been without power or running water for a week. Despite a sponge bath I felt filthy and almost didn't brave the slick roads, but in the end I decided to set off. I made it to the office only moments before it closed.

Much to my surprise, Marsha wasn't alone. Sitting in a chair by her desk was Stephen King himself, whom I'd never met. Stunned, I managed a choked *hello*, and then King gave me the surprise of my life. He was returning to his Dark Tower series – an epic which he'd been writing for thirty years – and he needed someone to create an index of characters, places, and important events so that his new novel could maintain continuity with the existing four books. Did I want the work?

Until I met Stephen King on that cold and wintry day in 2000, I'd never read the Dark Tower novels. In fact, though I was a fan of King's other work, I didn't even know that the Tower books existed. But after I'd read that famous first line, 'The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed', I was hooked. Over the next month, I read the four published novels and one novella of King's Dark Tower series: *The Gunslinger* (1982), *The Drawing of the Three* (1987), *The Waste Lands* (1991), *Wizard and Glass* (1997), and 'The Little Sisters of Eluria' (1998). The books appealed to my love of fantasy and science fiction, but on an even deeper level they resonated with my lifelong love of folklore and mythology. What I found in the pages of the Dark Tower books was a post-apocalyptic universe of legend, myth, and dark magic. I couldn't wait to get started on my lists.

Using S. Foster Damon's *A Blake Dictionary* and *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* as my models, I attempted to focus on the underlying mythology of King's magnum opus. As a result, I compiled a cross-referenced encyclopaedia of all things Mid-World, from characters and magical objects to places, languages, games and diseases. I even included a section on magical and mechanical doorways leading into and out of Mid-World. In fact, in order to honour the novels' particular forms of technological enchantment I drew a door at the beginning of my manuscript for King to enter. (I labelled it 'The Author'.) Then I bound the manuscript in black and taped a key to the binding so that King could open the magical door and re-enter his universe.

I had no idea how King would react to my unbridled enthusiasm. Would he think that I was a crazed fan, or would he like it? Luckily for me, he enjoyed it so much that he asked whether I would like to continue my work. He had decided to conclude his series about his wandering gunslinger-knight with three more novels, and my *Concordance* (as he called it) would be a tremendous help.

Over the next three years, Stephen King sent me his manuscripts for *The Wolves of the Calla* (2003), *Song of Susannah* (2004), and *The Dark Tower* (2004) in instalments, and I continued to build my *Concordance*. In the process I marked continuity problems, answered questions about characters' histories, and conducted any additional research he required, from the cost of a cab fare in New York, 1964, to firearm brands, to methods for brain-tanning animal hides.

At Stephen King's instigation, my work was eventually published, first as a two-volume set and then as *Stephen King's The Dark Tower: The Complete Concordance*, a book which I expanded and updated when King published *The Wind Through the Keyhole* in 2012. In 2005, when Stephen King and his agent, Chuck Verrill, were in talks with Marvel Comics about adapting one of King's novels into graphic novel form,[1] King said that the company should focus on the Dark Tower story. However, instead of a straightforward recounting of the existing novels, he wanted the comics to begin with Roland's youthful adventures recounted in *Wizard and Glass* and then to move into uncharted territory, namely, Roland's adventures leading from the collapse of his home city of Gilead to the gunslingers' last stand at the Battle of Jericho Hill. Finally, he wanted to me to be one of the writers, since I knew the Dark Tower books as well as he did. To date, I have co-written eleven Dark Tower graphic novels, and another five are slated for publication.

To my rational mind, my meeting with Stephen King had been a startling stroke of good luck, the result of a series of coincidences combined with the fact that I was particularly suited for the type of work that King required. I already had an MA in Literature from the University of York and had studied Folklore while an undergraduate; I was a published poet and an aspiring fantasy and horror writer, and I was also a fan of Stephen King's work. But my imaginative, non-rational side couldn't help but realise that within the Dark Tower universe, there is a word for these seemingly random acts of chance that completely alter the course of our lives. That word is *ka.*

For weeks before Burt Hatlen approached me in the English Office, telling me that he had an excellent job opportunity for me, I'd been having the strangest dreams. They'd featured a fiery red demon moon and an eerie, looming black tower. During each dream I'd braved the tower's spiral stone staircase so that I could stare down into the tower's hollow centre. But I soon discovered that the tower's centre was not hollow at all. Inside was a vortex of wind so powerful that I could feel it trying to suck me into its whirlwind heart.

In High Speech – the language spoken by Mid-World's gunslinger elite – *ka* means life force, consciousness, duty, and destiny. In the vulgate, or low speech, it also means a place to which an individual must go. The closest terms in our language are *fate* and *destiny*, although *ka* also implies karma, or the accumulated destiny (and accumulated debt) of many existences. If the philosophy of our contemporary society is based on the tenants of science, then the metaphysics of Mid-World rest on the concept of *ka*.

The Dark Tower Series

Even if you've never read any of the Dark Tower novels, if you've perused any of King's works you have probably unknowingly travelled through at least a small corner of this vast and complex multiverse. *'Salem's Lot*, *The Stand*, *The Talisman* and *Black House* (these last two both co-written with Peter Straub), *Eyes of the Dragon*, *Insomnia*, *Bag of Bones*, *Hearts in Atlantis*, 'Everything's Eventual', and 'The Mist', all ultimately tie into the Dark Tower mythos. Part Western, part Arthurian Romance, part sci-fi dystopia and part high fantasy, the series' influences are many, from Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Western classics to Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* to Robert Browning's poem, 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came'. To King, the series was imbued with magic from the very start. As he wrote in his Afterword to the 1982 version of *The Gunslinger*:

> The Dark Tower began, I think, because I inherited a ream of paper in the spring semester of my senior year in college … The ream of paper I inherited was bright green, nearly as thick as cardboard, and of an extremely eccentric size – about seven inches wide by about ten inches long … I was working at the University of Maine library at the time, and several reams of this stuff, in various hues, turned up one day, totally unexplained and unaccounted for. My wife-to-be, the then Tabitha Spruce, took one of these reams of paper (robin's egg blue) home with her; the fellow she was then going with took home another (Roadrunner yellow). I got the green stuff. As it happened, all three of us turned out to be real writers – a coincidence almost too large to be termed mere coincidence …[2]

The first section of *The Gunslinger*, written on that enchanted paper, was begun while King was living alone in a riverside cabin not far from the University. He was 23 years old. Although he didn't know it, the words he typed on that strange paper with his old office-model Underwood with a chipped 'm' and a flying capital 'O' were the beginnings of the über-tale which would define, unite, and unify his creative universe. As King recorded in 1996:

> I have written enough novels and short stories to fill a solar system of the imagination, but Roland's story is my Jupiter – a planet that dwarfs all the others … a place of strange atmosphere, crazy landscape, and savage gravitational pull. Dwarfs the others, did I say? I think there's more to it than that, actually. I am coming to understand that Roland's world (or worlds) actually contains all the others of my making; there is a place in Mid-World for Randall Flagg, Ralph Roberts, the wandering boys from The Eyes of the Dragon, even Father Callahan, the damned priest from 'Salem's Lot … This is where they all finish up, and why not? Mid-World was here first, before all of them, dreaming under the blue gaze of Roland's bombardier eyes.[3]

The Dark Tower novels tell the story of Roland Deschain, the last of a long line of gunslinger-knights living on a parallel earth known as Mid-World. Like his ancestor, the semi-mythical hero Arthur Eld, Roland is on a quest. His grail is a magical edifice called the Dark Tower, which exists in a fey realm known as End-World. According to legend, the Dark Tower is the linchpin of the time-space continuum. Roland's goal is to enter the Tower and to question whatever god or demon resides there so that he can find a way to save his dying world.

Millennia before Roland's birth, Mid-World was ruled by the Great Old Ones, a technologically advanced race that attempted to redesign the nexus point of the time-space continuum by merging its innate, eternal magic with their technological wizardry. The effects were disastrous, but the Old Ones could do nothing about their mistake since soon after their botched rebuilding project they destroyed themselves in a devastating war. The toxins left by this war ushered in a period known as The Great Poisoning, during which much of Mid-World's animal and plant life died, and a large percentage of what was left became genetically mutated. Thousands of years later, a second great war – waged against the gunslingers and the Affiliation by a mad bandit named Farson – destroyed whatever progress had been made in alleviating Mid-World's affliction. John Farson (also known as the Good Man) reactivated the Great Old Ones' machinery and brought about a second apocalypse.

By the time the Dark Tower novels begin, two of the magnetic Beams that maintain the stability of the Dark Tower have snapped and the fabric of existence is coming unravelled. Neither time nor directions hold true: the sun doesn't rise in the east and it doesn't set in the west. Day length fluctuates and compasses no longer work. Thinnies, or places where the weave of reality has worn through, are appearing like sores on the landscape. As a result, deadly, monster-filled mists from the void places between worlds are beginning to leak into Mid-World. On a human level, society has

collapsed and there is no distinction between law and lawlessness. A terrible desiccation is drying out the land, leaving it lifeless. As the series progresses, we begin to realise that the instability of the Dark Tower doesn't just threaten Mid-World; it threatens all worlds, including our own.

Over the course of the series Roland comes to understand – as do we – that his two great enemies (first John Farson and later a sorcerer known as 'the man in black') both serve a greater evil, namely a supernatural shape-shifter known as the Crimson King, who wants to destroy the universe and feast on the wreckage. In order to save his world (and by extension, all worlds) Roland must not only locate the Dark Tower, but he must also find a way to make both the Tower, and the magnetic Beams that support it, regenerate. Foiled at every turn by the Red King's minions, Roland discovers that his task is too great for one man. Aided by Mid-World's innate divine magic (known as the White), Roland finds a series of magical doors that lead into our world's New York City *circa* 1964, 1987, and 1977. Using these doorways, Roland draws three companions from our world into Mid-World, where he trains them to be gunslingers. Each of Roland's new *ka*-mates (or allies bound together by fate) has powerful inner demons to overcome. But even more challenging to the unity of the group is the fact that all three new *ka*-mates must learn to trust Roland, a man who is willing to sacrifice everyone and everything he loves to the necessities of his quest.

Early influences on the Dark Tower series

I: J.R.R. Tolkien, Sergio Leone, and the transformation of the Spaghetti Western

Like so many fantasy novels begun in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Dark Tower cycle was profoundly influenced by J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, an epic which grew out of Tolkien's Anglo-Saxon scholarship. King read the series while an undergraduate at the University of Maine at Orono, and was taken by the sweep and power of Tolkien's imagination. Yet as a profoundly American writer who drew his inspiration from the world he knew best, King could see that the elves and dwarves of Tolkien's narrative would never work for him, and that any attempt to reproduce or duplicate Tolkien's Middle Earth would be a mistake.[4]

In 1970, when King was 22, he entered an almost empty movie theatre in Bangor Maine. The film he saw there would change his life and his literary career. It was *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, directed by Sergio Leone. As King writes in his Introduction to the 2003 revised version of *The Gunslinger*:

> … before the film was even half over, I realized that what I wanted to write was a novel that contained Tolkien's sense of quest and magic but set against Leone's almost absurdly majestic Western backdrop … What I wanted even

> more than the setting was that feeling of epic, apocalyptic size. The fact that Leone knew jack shit about American geography … added to the film's sense of magnificent dislocation.[5]

King, the quintessential American writer, had finally located the setting for his magnum opus: a vast desert world whose geography echoed that of our world, but which was subtly – and at times disturbingly – different from it. The dislocation King felt in Leone's American West became one of the trademarks of Roland's disintegrating world. In fact, it could be argued that this fragmented world of drifting directions plays such an important role in the narrative that it almost functions as a sentient character. The demons of its stone circles, and the computers and weapons found in its Dogans (abandoned military centres/experimental laboratories) propel the story forward in new and often unpredictable ways.

II: Robert Browning and 'Childe Roland'

Another early influence upon the Dark Tower novels was Robert Browning's 1855 poem, 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came'. When King read 'Childe Roland' in a sophomore English class, he found the bleak medieval landscapes and surreal yet disturbing journey of the questing knight extremely inspiring. For many years he played with the idea of trying to write a long Romantic novel embodying the feel, if not the exact sense, of Browning's poem, but it was not until his discovery of Sergio Leone's films that he found a way to inject the energy of medieval Romance into the Dark Tower's heady mix of Western gothic, high magic, and technological ruin.[6]

The parallels between Browning's poem and King's series are numerous. As in Stephen King's tale, Browning's 'Childe Roland' tells the story of a young man wandering a desolate wasteland in search of a Dark Tower. By the time we meet Browning's knight, he has been travelling for many years. Along the way he remembers his lost friends (one of whom shares a first name with Roland Deschain's childhood companion, Cuthbert Allgood). He also suffers terrible pangs of self-doubt. After all, have not many knights before him failed in this most terrible yet significant quest? Despite the almost supernaturally oppressive landscape he must traverse and despite the strange, fey beings he meets, Childe Roland eventually triumphs. Although King changes the appearance of the Tower (in Browning's poem it is described as a 'round squat turret . . . Built of brown stone'),[7] in both poem and novel it is a haunted place of drifting shades and echoing, ghostly voices.

III: Rolands of Literature and Folklore

Although Stephen King often states that his gunslinger's name came from Browning's poem, legend is *full* of warriors named Roland. The most famous of these is Charlemagne's heroic knight, the protagonist of the *Chanson de Roland*, or *Song of Roland*. According to folklore,

Roland stood eight feet tall and had a countenance so open and so regal that men automatically trusted him.[8] Just as the Roland of Stephen King's epic wears the sacred, sandalwood-handled guns of his fathers at his hips, Charlemagne's Roland wielded a magical sword named Durandal,[9] which contained saints' relics. He also owned an enchanted ivory horn called Olivant, won from a giant named Jutmundus.[10] (Readers of the Dark Tower series will remember that Roland Deschain also carried a sacred horn, though Roland's *ka*-mate, Cuthbert Allgood, dropped it as he died at the Battle of Jericho Hill.)

Another legendary Roland – one that Browning maintained directly influenced his poem – came from a Scottish ballad entitled 'Childe Rowland', referenced by mad Edgar in Shakespeare's play, *King Lear*:[11]

> Child Roland to the dark tower came,
> His word was still, Fie, foh, and fum,
> I smell the blood of a British man.[12]

Echoes of this Scottish ballad can be heard in King's novels, though the ballad tells of a very different Roland (or Rowland) from the ones found in either Browning's poem or *The Song of Roland*. Unlike his French namesake, this young Scottish hero does not have to face an army of trained soldiers but a single, magical being. Rowland's sister, Burd Ellen, is stolen away by the King of Elfland. Rowland's two elder brothers try to rescue her, but each, in turn, is captured. In the end it is left to the youngest boy, Rowland, to save his family. Guided by magical advice (in many versions of the tale this advice is given by the magician Merlin),[13] Childe Rowland straps on his father's sword Excalibur and enters Elfland. After slaying all of the magical beings who speak to him, and after going without food or drink for many days (to eat or drink in the land of the faeries is to be trapped there forever), Childe Rowland arrives at the Dark Tower. Just as the Roland of Stephen King's novels is waylaid by a shape-shifter as he nears the Tower and then is attacked by the Crimson King once he reaches his goal, so Childe Rowland is set upon by the shape-shifting Elf King. Yet once again, both Rolands triumph. While the Scottish Rowland uses his father's trusty sword to slay his enemy and by so doing, frees his sister and two brothers from their magical enchantment, Stephen King's Roland is saved by two *ka*-mates. The shape-shifting Dandelo is destroyed by two bullets shot by Susannah Dean, and the Crimson King is erased from the world by a mute but talented artist with a gift for reshaping reality.

IV: The Dark Tower and the Arthurian Legends

Although most of the settings found in the Dark Tower novels are reminiscent of the 19th-century American West, Stephen King frequently reiterates that Roland and his fellow gunslingers are not merely sharpshooters. They are knights of the White (sworn

to fight the evil of the Outer Dark) and are directly descended from Arthur Eld, Mid-World's version of King Arthur.

Like the legendary Arthur of our world, Arthur Eld was a great hero who ruled All-World during a mythic epoch before swords were replaced by guns. Wielding a blade called Excalibur, he united a warring land and ushered in a time of peace and unity. Arthur Eld's court magician was a mage named Maerlyn, and his knights were sworn to follow a code of chivalry popularly known as the Way of Eld. According to this code, knights had to submit themselves to rigorous physical and mental training. They were beholden to help those in distress (if it was within their power to do so), and they were forbidden from taking any reward from those they aided.

Just as the legendary King Arthur of our world was fatally wounded by his son/nephew Mordred,[14] both Arthur Eld and his descendant, Roland, fathered their greatest enemies. At some point during his long and eventful life, Arthur Eld must have had sexual relations with a demon, since the Crimson King – the great supernatural villain of the series – is also his descendant. Late in the novels, we discover that the Crimson King's minions have reactivated the Great Old Ones' machinery and have tricked Roland into co-siring a hybrid were-spider named Mordred who (the Red King hopes) will destroy Roland and then bring the Dark Tower crashing down.

Perhaps the most important debt the Dark Tower series owes to the Arthurian legends is one filtered through T.S. Eliot's 1922 poem, 'The Waste Land', an influence made explicit in King's third Dark Tower novel, aptly entitled *The Waste Lands*. The book opens with three epigraphs, the first of which is from Eliot's poem:

> A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
> And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
> And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
> There is shadow under this red rock,
> (Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
> And I will show you something different from either
> Your shadow in the morning striding behind you
> Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
> I will show you fear in a handful of dust.[15]

For Eliot, living in a country spiritually devastated by the First World War, the image of the wasteland must have seemed a fitting description for the landscape and lives destroyed by the trenches. For Stephen King, Mid-World's poisoned environment is a comment on the dangerous trajectory of western culture. As King shows us in *The Waste Lands,* when Roland and his *ka-tet* stumble across the remains of the George Washington Bridge, Roland's reality is one of our world's possible futures.

In his original notes to 'The Waste Land', Eliot states that his poem's title, plan, and incidental symbolism owe a tremendous debt to Jessie L. Weston's 1920 study of the Grail legend, entitled *From Ritual to Romance*.[16] In this book, Weston theorises that the legend of the Waste Land, found in the Arthurian story cycle, is the Christianised remnant of an older, pre-Christian fertility rite.[17] Reduced to its essence, the Grail legend tells of a wounded, ill, or aging king, whose infirmity mysteriously transforms his land into a war-torn or desiccated wasteland. According to Weston, the imagery in it, both that of the feminine chalice and the masculine bleeding spear, are sexual in nature, and the dryness or ruin of the land is directly related to the King's imminent death and lack of virility/fertility.

In Stephen King's series, the land's renewal comes not just from a regeneration of the male and female sexual principles, but from an acknowledgement and acceptance of the two sides of human nature and human culture – one that is destructive and one that is nurturing. Mid-World's wasteland is the result of its bloody and reckless history, beginning with the human sacrifice practiced in its *druit* stone circles and culminating with the poisonous wars of the Great Old Ones. Not even the gunslingers are innocent, since their hierarchical, warlike culture and the oppression of the poor led to the war which, in turn, brought about their downfall. As Arthur Eld's heir, Roland inherits not only the responsibility for rejuvenating the land, but the guilt for its barrenness.

At the outset of the Dark Tower novels, Roland Deschain is an isolated loner who is willing to sacrifice everyone (including his lovers and surrogate child) to the necessities of his quest. It is only when he begins to regain his humanity and human feeling that the landscape around him becomes more fertile.[18] As the novels progress, Roland learns that the masculine Tower which he wishes to reach has another incarnation, that of a delicate rose – a traditional image of female beauty. Roland realises that in order to restore his world he must protect both of these incarnations of the time-space nexus, and that for a knight to succeed in his quest, the might of war must be balanced by the gentleness of love.

In almost every version of the Grail legend, the questing knight must save the injured king in order to restore the land. In book seven of the Dark Tower series, this rescue becomes literal. In *The Dark Tower*, Roland discovers that Stephen King is destined to be killed by Bryan Smith's van while he is walking on Route 5. By this time Roland also knows that he is King's creation, and that unless King lives, Roland will never finish his quest and the Tower will fall. Roland saves King, but at a terrible price. His *ka*-mate and surrogate son dies in King's place.

V: The Axis Mundi

For many Dark Tower fans, the image of the Dark Tower feels both ancient and archetypal. This is not surprising, since the Dark Tower is a manifestation of the archetypal Axis Mundi, or 'axis of the world'.[19] Sometimes imagined as a tree, sometimes as a column, sometimes as a mountain, and sometimes as a pole passing through the centre of the earth, the Axis Mundi is always located at the centre of creation, and is the point upon which the heavens turn. In many versions of this archetypal image, the Axis Mundi is not just the central axis of the universe: it is also a living entity whose extended body holds all of the multiple worlds within it. In Scandinavian mythology, the Axis Mundi manifests as *Yggdrasil*, the World Tree, whose branches and roots bind together the nine worlds, including the realms of gods, giants, ghosts, and men.[20] Similarly, the Dark Tower is simultaneously a living entity (the god Gan) and the nexus of the time-space continuum, which links together alternative worlds and parallel realities. Its Beams (which radiate from its apex, much like the branches of a tree radiate from the trunk) maintain the divisions between worlds and maintain the alignment of time, space, size, and dimension. Just as *Yggdrasil* is sustained by the waters of the Well of Urd, or Fate (drops of which are sprinkled on it each day by the Norns), so the music of the singing red roses in End-World's Red Fields of None feed the Tower and Beams in an endless cycle of regeneration. Like the Dark Tower, the Axis Mundi is timeless, but it is not unassailable. Within the Norse cosmos, as within the Dark Tower universe, both worlds and gods can die.

Conclusion

Just as Stephen King's famous novel, *The Stand*, warns about the dangers of genetically engineered diseases, so the Dark Tower series warns against the potential dangers of technology, reckless bioengineering, and the human race's refusal to acknowledge the toxic fallout of its wars and industry. To increase his tale's emotional resonance, King delves into the world of myth and folklore. Using these powerful storytelling devices, he holds a mirror up to our culture, forcing us to look at our own destructiveness. Moulding elements of the same folklore and mythology, he creates an imperfect hero who is – like each of us –both a sinner and a potential redeemer. In a world facing the fallout of global warming, the threat of biological and chemical weapons, and the development of new and ever more virulent diseases, the Dark Tower cycle is truly a series for our times.

Robin Furth

Notes

1. Many readers are confused by the terms 'graphic novel' and 'comic book'. What distinguishes one from the other? For publishing companies such as Marvel and DC, a comic book is the single, 20- to 30-page soft-cover publication which appears monthly (or sometimes bi-weekly). A graphic novel is made up of approximately six of these comics (renamed chapters), that are bound and published as a book.
2. Stephen King, 'Afterword', *The Gunslinger* (New York: Plume-Penguin, 1982), 219-20.
3. Stephen King, 'Afterword', *Wizard and Glass* (New York: Plume-Penguin, 1997), 671.
4. Stephen King, *The Gunslinger* (New York: Plume-Penguin, 2003), xiv.
5. Ibid.
6. Stephen King, *The Gunslinger* (New York: Plume-Penguin, 1982), 221.
7. Robert Browning, 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came', reprinted in Stephen King, *The Dark Tower* (Hampton Falls, New Hampshire: Donald M. Grant, in association with Scribner, 2004), 833-42.
8. *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (London: Cassell, 2001), 1007.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Interestingly, the traditional Scottish poem (as collected in 1770) doesn't contain references to a Dark Tower but to a fairy hill or Erlkönig's (Elf King's) lair. However, as Joseph Jacobs asserts in his notes to his 1892 collection entitled *English Fairy Tales*, it is very possible that a version of the tale, including a Dark Tower, existed in Shakespeare's day. (It is upon this assumption that Jacobs reinserted the Dark Tower into his own version of the ballad. See Joseph Jacobs, 'Notes and References: Childe Rowland', *English Fairy Tales* (Authorama: Public Domain Books. December, 2003) http://www.authorama.com/english-fairy-tales-24.html, accessed 17 September 2014).
12. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, III, iv, lines 195-7.
13. Joseph Jacobs, 'Notes and References: Childe Rowland'.
14. Accounts of Mordred's parentage vary. In some versions of the tale he was Arthur's nephew. In others he was Arthur's bastard child by his half-sister. See *LaRousse Dictionary of World Folklore*, 308.
15. T.S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land', lines 22-30.
16. T.S. Eliot, 'The Waste Land', in the *Anthology of Twentieth-Century British and Irish Poetry,* ed. by Keith Tuma (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 131-44.
17. Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance*, 'Chapter I: Introduction', Project Gutenberg, May 2003, http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4090 (accessed 20 September 2014).
18. I discuss this at length in my article, 'Introduction Part I, Volumes I-IV: Roland, The Tower, and the Quest', in *Stephen King's The Dark Tower: The Complete Concordance*.
19. 'Axis Mundi', *The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 22.
20. Alison Jones, *LaRousse Dictionary of World Folklore* (New York: LaRousse, 1995), 465. For a more extended discussion, see Kevin Crossley-Holland, *The Norse Myths* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), xx-xxv.

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