

# A science-fiction fantasy

The magic of the written word.

**Paul Di Filippo**

*Making a Case for Morrisian Fiction: Why Heroic Epic Fantasy Is So Rare*  
by **Professor L. McCafferty**  
(University of Syrtis Major Press, 2011)  
Reviewed by **Thomas Brightwork** for *Nature*.

Some academics have nothing better to do with their time than fruitlessly to argue ‘What if?’ Of course, as any literate person knows, this mode of thought experiment is perfectly suited to science fiction, and in fact is one of the main tools of that all-encompassing literature that so dominates today’s bookstores, cinemas, classrooms and canonical journals. But professors seeking seriously to examine matters of literary history should restrict themselves to more scholarly tools and approaches, and avoid speculative avenues. We scholars cannot, after all, compete with the likes of such living masters as Bester, Sterling, Atwood and Weinbaum.

For the first half of his book, however, Professor McCafferty does hew to the straight and narrow in impeccable fashion. This portion of his study forms a useful primer on the roots and brief efflorescence of a minor genre of fiction that nowadays is as dead as the epistolary novel.

Professor McCafferty traces the birth of what he terms ‘Heroic Epic Fantasy’ or ‘Morrisian Fiction’ back to the late Victorian period, specifically the ‘prose romances’ of William Morris. He follows its haphazard development in the works of such forgotten authors as George MacDonald, William Hope Hodgson and Lord Dunsany. McCafferty’s analysis of the themes, tropes and styles of this kind of fiction are cogent and exhibit a keen intellect. He makes a particularly telling point when he focuses on the fact that the majority of these fictions took place in invented worlds, ‘secondary creations’ with no apparent ties to our own continuum. It was this tragic flaw, we learn, that would ultimately doom the genre.

In the twentieth century, during the era of the pulp magazines, there were minor eruptions of such fiction, most notably in the magazine *Weird Tales*. For instance, in 1932, the famous writer Robert E. Howard published his one and only story concerning a barbarian named Conan: ‘The Phoenix on the Sword’. But this abortive foray into what McCafferty labels ‘blades and black magic’ fiction was not to be

repeated. Howard — who died just last year at the lamentably early age of 105 on his Texas ranch — was tapped to pen the exploits of the pulp science hero Doc Savage, and turned all his energies in that direction. And *Weird Tales*, under the inexperienced editorship of H. P. Lovecraft, went bankrupt the next year, sending Lovecraft himself into a non-literary career. (Yes, that beloved national institution, Lovecraft’s Yankee Ice Cream Company, was founded by the same fellow.)

The subsequent several decades saw sporadic and limited incursions of such fiction, cropping up like occasional cuckoo eggs in the pages of various science-fiction pulps: works by de Camp and Pratt, Hubbard, Leiber and Brackett. But without a committed editor or dedicated venue to serve as a centre for their efforts, Morrisian writers did not prosper.

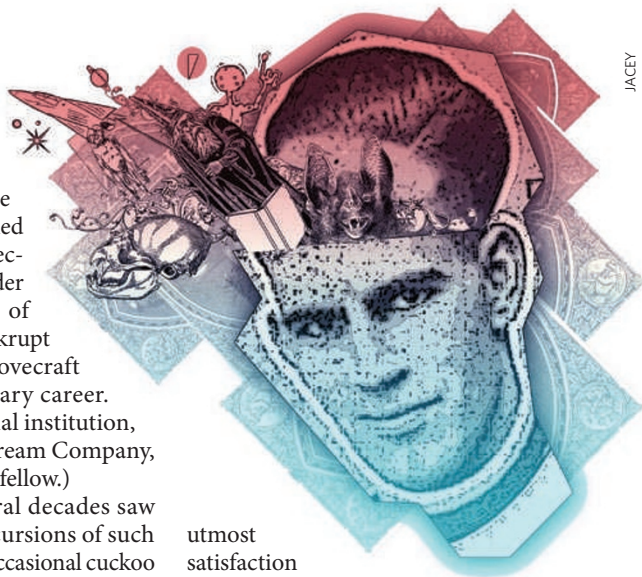
Then, of course, the Second World War intervened. The dire events of that global calamity — can anyone forget such atrocities as the Nazi fire-bombing of Oxford, which wiped out so many promising scholars, C. Lewis, J. Tolkien and a visiting Jos. Campbell among them? — concentrated the minds of both writers and readers on hard reality. Tales set in ‘secondary creations’ held no allure: they seemed to smell of shirking one’s duty, of a wilful, unpatriotic refusal to face tough facts and deal with them. ‘Escapism’ became a taunt and slur. Technology and science fiction, however, went hand in hand, the literature serving as a playful and entertaining, utopian laboratory to explicate and inspire the modern, scientific path of progress — admittedly, with no little allegiance to the military-industrial complex.

With the end of war, and the advent of the Western–Soviet détente, conditions became even less hospitable for the Morrisian writers. During the post-conflagration Renaissance, all the world’s attention was concentrated on such shared human enterprises as space exploration, undersea mining, macro-engineering and the construction of nuclear fusion power plants. Science education flourished at all levels, with competitive Knowledge Bowls — both domestic and between friendly rival countries — coming to overwhelm professional sports. International polls revealed that the majority of citizens experienced

utmost satisfaction and zest with their daily lives, their careers and civic challenges. The Age of the New Frontiers had dawned, and science fiction was the perfect embodiment of it, eventually coming to dominate the literary world as it still does to this day.

It is at this point in his narrative that Professor McCafferty goes off the rails of history and into a speculative terra incognita. He spins out an improbable scenario by which Morrisian fantasy — an unlikely and repugnant blend of megalomaniacal delusions; crude bipolar divisions of the world into good and evil; infantile narcissistic Messianic beliefs; contravention of the laws of physics and cosmology; retrogressive privileging of monarchies and feudalism; deliberate ignorance and suppression of the harsh crudity of pre-technological living conditions; and a reliance on clichéd supernatural entities — could have become a best-selling mode of fiction. So morbidly and upsettingly vivid is McCafferty’s portrayal of this ridiculous scenario — a world in which readers stick their heads, ostrich-like, into overblown and endlessly protracted multivolume tales of schools for wizards, omnipotent rings and battles between vampires and werewolves, rather than creatively face the real issues of the day and solve them — that one almost suspects the good professor has gained illicit access to the Large Hadron Collider’s Multiversal Viewing Scanner, and has actually seen a warped timeline where such a sordid state of affairs is the hideous norm. ■

**Paul Di Filippo’s new novel, *Roadside Bodhisattva*, will be available in spring 2010. He continues to review for various venues.**



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