

## SOME FANTASY NOVELS...

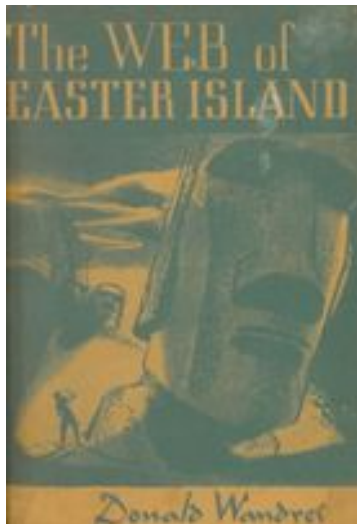
**I**magination lives from the search for atmospheres and climates found in music as in any art - what interest would present a creative expression if it did not stimulate imagination, escape, research of an elsewhere or a beyond of the triviality, the daily routine and its mediocrity? This article presents some paths and ways of traveling, inner exploration, prospective and utopian discoveries and speculations on the vanishing lines of what the present conceals, or ways to turn away from it through the windows or portals that open literary creation.

These are presentations, simple looks and indications, reading notes organized in two themes: speculations and metaphors of the present, gathered in the category of science fiction (see other article), or, here, paths from elsewhere and beyond in the universe of fantasy..

### DONALD WANDREI - *THE WEB OF EASTER ISLAND* (1948)

What is the need to hang out in the old cemetery when you're a child, as it's absolutely forbidden, and why bringing back a statuette that seemed to be waiting for being pulled off the ground? But how could a child's stupidity cause the death of the whole family? An adult who also spends his time searching the cemeteries, meaning an archaeologist, will realize that there is here something quite abnormal and will undertake a very long journey in pursuit of this statuette. A journey which will not leave him intact ...

This novel was published in France as the number 1 in the mythical Fleuve Noir's Angoisse series, and was reissued in the 1980s in the (also mythical) Néo collection, like the first Clark Ashton Smith's almost complete French edition. Donald Wandrei's novel is also part of the Lovecraftian tradition, of which Smith was a great inspiration. This novel shows a thorough mastery of the suspense processes in writing a novel of horror by exceeding its frames. Although many texts from the Neo collection can today seem very dated or even quite unequal (for example the plethora of novels and collections by Robert Howard), *The Web of Easter Island* plunges us all in a plot that stands out from many texts of Lovecraftian inspiration, often all somewhat similar when one attended August Derleth. If the fantastic is characterized by the absence of a rational explanation of the phenomena that it sets in scene, and very often by the use of powers and intangible entities (starting with the traditional stories of ghosts), what does Donald Wandrei give us here? Following the tradition of the Master of Providence, we are confronted with a horror that does not fit into the categories of the supernatural or the inexplicable. Fantastic ? Science Fiction? This novel knows how to explode genres, especially by its brilliant and surprising conclusion, and seems able to overcome the ordeal of time ... But may not be as much as this old cemetery that mysteriously cuts a very old paved path, in the desolate hills of the English countryside...



## PETER CLINES – 14 (2012)

What could happen at the neighbors' place? First, who are they? What do they hide behind their closed doors, and what does this door 14 hide, that no one has ever seen open in this small, so ordinary building? For starters, what about going down to the cellar? The author reveals a real talent as a storyteller to distill such strangeness, such a fascination for a banality that gradually ceases to be of so mundane. Aren't we all wishing it: discovering the mystery, the inexplicable and also the growing sense of danger behind the closed door at the floor below, but also even reading the settlement, simply paying the rent, or noticing the very ordinary person spending all his days watching the building.

How to frighten the reader and arouse the suspense, write a novel that one does not let go of the hands even if one knows, by dint of readings, that all these elements, details and processes have already been encountered in multiple texts? The "answer" may be called talent: to take up many details of a daily newspaper or to intrude on the mystery, which is first of all the neighboring apartments' doors of a house where one comes from moving in. The fantastic is traditionally the fantastic house. It can certainly be a metaphor for the soul of the romantic character inhabited by horror and madness, but here the fantastic lives in the neighbors, a somewhat bizarre house and people who are also unusual because they are unknown. What is behind the door that you should not open?

The triviality of these narrative elements can make the literary process easy to believe in a pulp novel, but to succeed in a good novel includes an alchemy that does not allow itself to be enclosed in a recipe, nor the pleasure of reading a good suspense novel can not be expressed by describing its plot. Peter Clines knows how to raise the stakes of his narrative very gradually, also the investigation in which his characters can not help but invest and become more deeply involved in. The idea of Scooby Doo in the land of Cthulhu can be a smile (already, there is not really a dog as mascot of the team in this novel, nor that there is tentacle behind the door 14). But there is no real fear or danger in the lives of these gentle cartoon characters, unlike this novel in which the wicked do much more than put on a costume to scare the neighborhood. If his characters can naively believe that they are launched into an innocuous investigation that will not change their lives, the subtle rise of the dangers and discoveries of what lies behind this building reveals an author able to brilliantly insert a falsely banal story in a surprisingly renewed tradition of fantastic literature.



## CAITLIN R. KIERNAN – THE DROWNING GIRL: A MEMOIR (2012)

There are two tendencies, in horror fiction, two ways of approaching interiority: the most well-known and widespread is that of the supernatural haunting in which beings from the beyond seek forms of manifestation through places or people, the classical haunted house being very often a metaphor for the very spirit of the main character whose possession is the central stake of the narrative. On the other hand, such possession and the seemingly supernatural phenomena that it projects can also express mental illness, with powerful narrative and imaginary means, from the novels of Henry James to the remarkable film *Shutter Island*, and even the shapeshifting of *Psycho* to *Bates Motel*. There are few meetings between these two schools, one "metaphysical" and the other clearly psychological. Caitlin Kiernan's novel is a particularly brilliant example of such an encounter, a literary UFO designed to fill the most jaded readers with horror stories and perhaps more demanding amateurs of tormented interior explorations.

For it is clear right from the start that the narrator is crazy, as she declares herself spontaneously from the first pages. Her diary brings out the story between a multitude of possibilities, to read such a text is a plunge into the abyss of a sick psyche to which it seems, however, that something real did happen, not a simple series of hallucinatory states. There is someone who came into the apartment one night. There is a witness. Then ... Can mental illness really encounter the supernatural, is the narrator



really possessed by anything other than her own demons and fixed ideas? Everything would be explicable without these terrifying elements that punctuate the narrative and make it panting, without any magic, adventure, or incantation: pure horror in a gallery of paintings, on a sunny afternoon. Can a painting be haunted? Has something really happened, and what, beyond the multiple, contradictory and intricate versions of an encounter in a car, at night?

The narrator, the real subject of this masterly text, is particularly moving and realistic, an extraordinary construction that takes shape along the lines in all the excess and irrationality of her personality, in the meanders of a sexuality whose painting never does linger to easy voyeurism or noisy pornography. Through all the dangers and inner trials, in a novel that still leaves the deepest doubt that is at the heart of every good fantasy novel, one never ceases to wonder: what was it? Was there really something, even if I could never explain it? Reality or madness? Even at this level, the reader is inclined to believe the most contradictory things, in a novel as difficult to let go as a fixed and obsessive idea, a form of

haunting of the mind ...

## GUY GAVRIEL KAY - THE FIONAVAR TAPESTRY (1984 – 1986)

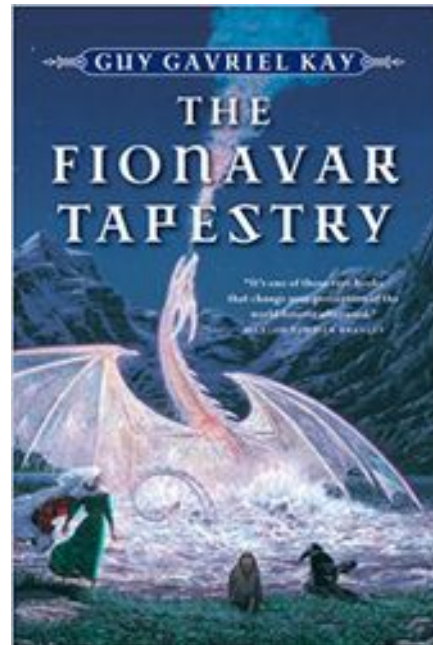
"The genius is the one who gives his rules to art," said the Great Sage of Königsberg. Thus can the pale imitators of the rare enlightened spirits flourish, those whose work, sometimes very brief, brings forth a style, a current, a school. Consider Tolkien, so imitated, who has sought so much from the sources of our imagination archetypes that it is now so simple to take back and combine to generate stories without much interest or originality. All science fiction shelves in bookstores, these recent years, have been colonized by such writings, amid stories of vampires and zombie invasions. One can also try to distinguish himself from the Master by projecting the easy and very commercial fantasies of the most unrestrained, unhealthy and non-cathartic violence under the pretext of political stakes which encounter great difficulties in making present the myth and the depths of the imaginary, in the tradition that Tolkien had pursued since Homer.

Is there a fantasy that is really worth reading since Tolkien? The trilogy of Fionavar, by Guy Gavriel Kay, undeniably pursues and renews the genre and offers a plot wonderfully tied, palpitating, deep and really moving, which confronts us with the depth of the myth and the reality of the dream.

Continuity, for there is a medieval world, knights, princesses, swords, mysterious forests, sorcerers in their towers, ancient places inhabited by strange creatures in deep forests, and even elves even if they do not say their name, always few amateurs of trading with the dwarfs. There is even at the root of history the essence of the evil, liberated and seeking to extend its darkness.

Renewal especially, which gives this trilogy all its interest. The story begins in our world, with the Five, initially students at the University of Toronto, who are led by real magic, practiced by a real magician, into a strange world: the root of all the worlds, the ultimate reality, that of the dreams and the myths which are real: Fionavar. All destinies are linked like the threads of a tapestry, which intertwines lives beyond all chance. But is this a destiny? The three novels portray freedom, the weight of the acts of each of the Five on the course of things and the world they may have to save if they are not sacrificed. At the center, the role of free will in the continuity of a very, very ancient history about places and magic, still acting on the course of things.

But the most significant revolution introduced by Guy Gavriel Kay in a fantasy novel is the place he gives to women. They may be princesses, lovers or magicians, or all of them at the same time, they are nonetheless completely active, whether they are part of the Five or are major figures in the world of Fionavar. Their personality is strong, asserted, their actions full of meaning and importance in this great meditation on freedom, their evolutions and transformations hold a prominent place without the author transforming them into furious amazons or intriguing courtesans behind aging kings. If it was necessary to create a feminine role in the adaptation to the screen of *Bilbo the Hobbit*, *Tapestry* is, on the contrary, a universe that knows how to give women a real place, thus revolutionizing this literary genre while assuming its continuity. Beyond the complexity of the first 50 pages which pose an extremely rich and abounding universe, these three books will long inhabit their reader by the echoes of the archetypes that they know how to find in us, in the continuity of the universe of the Middle Earth.

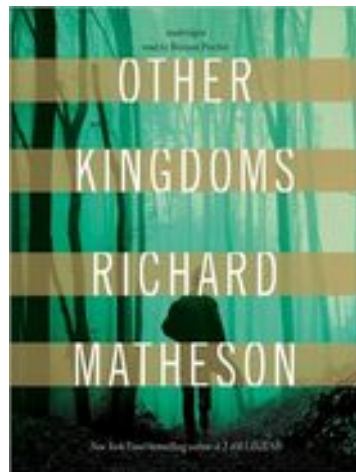


## RICHARD MATHESON – OTHER KINGDOMS (2011)

This novel is the penultimate of one of the great fantasy and science fiction writers of the twentieth century, died in 2013. Known for his novel "*I am legend*" adapted many times as movie, Matheson gives us at the evening of his career a moving story wonderfully told. Its elements are certainly classical: Alex White, veteran of the First World War, settles in the village of one of his companions in arms in the trenches, to discover that this village and his friend shared a secret, the door to what some call the Little People, and others Elves. White lives in a seemingly haunted house and chooses to venture into forest trails that he was told not to take. He will be saved by a strange woman: fairy or witch?

Throughout the narrative, the narrator leads a questioning about his own style - his life has allowed him a later literary career, but how did he emerge from these Other Kingdoms? We are also wondering about the scope of this return to himself of a writer: is it Matheson himself who questions his writing and reveals us some secrets, or at least the elements of a very precise self-criticism on the elements of a writing style? How to construct beautiful sentences, through examples of some bad and well stressed ones?

A story that can be read with great pleasure, the work of a great gentleman of the last century's horror fiction.





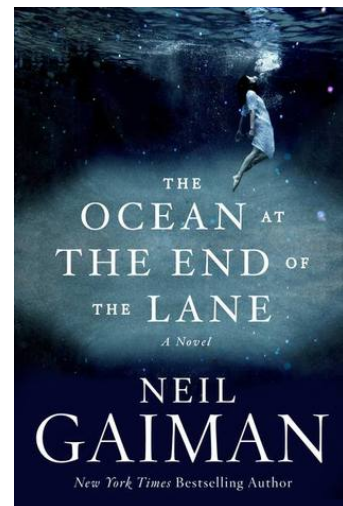
## NEIL GAIMAN – THE OCEAN AT THE END OF THE LANE (2013)

In any childhood is a backyard, a track or a path full of mysteries, a forbidden or secret place, and the house of friends very rare to enter. Or a strange girl for whom the pond at the end of the path is an ocean. Then ends childhood and begins oblivion, under the pressure of more important and urgent things that make life. Successive layers come thus as sediments over memories that still sometimes haunt and torment a personality, as if they could be much more important than anything else - and sometimes they are.

What's more important - and strange - than a tenant in the family home? What more disturbing than a governess who imposes herself on the family, especially if she is only a monster who dwells in the dreams of childhood, populated by these strange women of the house at the end of the alley?

Neal Gaiman proposes here a renewal of the fantastic creatures that is deeply rooted in the imagination of the fairies and witches to transform it in a striking way, for the imaginary of what dwells at the end of the street remains so personal that it has made us ourselves, although we come to forget it. The author succeeds in introducing or rather restoring an emotional and imaginary content in the most trivial things, his text reactivating an astonishment, a wonder in the depths of ourselves that built us, like that big gray cat that contemplates the world.

A profound renewal of fantastic literature like Neal Gaiman is used to it.



**YVES POTIN (2015)**

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