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Adapting bestsellers: fantasy, franchise and the afterlife of storyworlds

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Book Review:

Ken Gelder. *Adapting Bestsellers: Fantasy, Franchise and the Afterlife of Storyworlds*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 90 pp. ISBN: 978-1-1085-8960-4, £9.99 (paperback)

Adaptation, to revisit a truism, is concerned with transforming the extant or old into something partially new. Adaptation studies has its own internal version of this process, as do all scholarly fields. Long-held assumptions, central concepts, modes, methods, and methodologies are all reinterpreted and rewritten in an ongoing critical self-adaptation.

Ken Gelder's new book; *Adapting Bestsellers: Fantasy, Franchise and the Afterlife of Storyworlds*, participates in this same tradition of repetition and difference. At first glance, the content suggests traditional, even conservative, approaches to the study of adaptation. We have a series of case studies, all ostensibly taken from the well-worn word-to-image adaptive trajectory and including an extremely famous, arguably canonical, "classic" from the English literary tradition.

With such structural recurrences it would be easy to assume that this study treads old ground, perhaps tracing proximities within book/screen dyads of adaptation. This is not the case. What we get is a lively proliferation of difference between the supporting frameworks of familiarity, an adaptation of these scholarly tropes which underlines their continued relevance as part of the broader conversation around adaptation, transmedia storytelling, and franchising.

Gelder's book is concerned with the way that developments in the adaptations of fantasy bestsellers to a variety of media reveal how transmedia storytelling shifts into franchising, whilst raising the question of how inherent these processes are to the fantasy genre itself. Therefore, the work not only builds on recent scholarship which has brought adaptation studies and transmedia studies closer together, but also examines the role of these modes in contemporary franchising. As a connecting logic linking these concepts while suggesting examples from the forefront of the contemporary industry, genre is at the centre of the book.

The dynamic focus on genre is no surprise from a scholar of enduringly illuminating works on horror and vampire cinema. Here, though, it is fantasy which provides the connective tissue for the investigations. The book's central argument is that the fantasy genre has always been structured by processes of adaptation, transmedia, and franchising as a way in which its storyworlds are expanded through the afterlives of central texts. Consequently, in an industry that has adopted these modes as economic necessities, which in turn have shaped audience expectations, the fantasy genre has moved into a central space to become a quintessential example of modern creative industry practice – a natural evolution from the shifts it was subject to in the nineteen-fifties (perhaps before).

The chapters themselves are defined by heterocosm/franchise case studies arranged chronologically in terms of their bestselling 'source' texts, yet overlapping in the recent production landscape. After initially working through some central ideas and key concepts as a foundation, the chapters progress through extended engagements with the Middle Earth and Potterverse heterocosms, before ending on a short examination of

the *Game of Thrones* franchise. This structure takes the reader through some fantasy genre roots and their entanglements with adaptation and transmedia storytelling, before tracing these in the contemporary franchise era to demonstrate how the forms tie in with current economic imperatives.

This is not so much an examination of individual texts and their content, but rather an unpacking of the textual universes which *include* the texts and their multifarious transmedial adaptations, alongside a wide variety of other paratextual materials. The explorations take place within an industry-aware setting which recalls (and cites) the work of Simone Murray. However, Gelder still finds space to examine notions such as adaptation's ability to foreground assumptions of race and gender within genre through a shift into the performative mode, as well as working productively through the immersive implications of narrative framings in fantasy epics.

In a book of just seventy-six short pages, which takes as its subject matter the proliferating sprawl of fantasy worlds across media, the primary challenges would seem to be concerned with concision and elision. Indeed, the final section on *Game of Thrones* is rather truncated compared to those which precede it, and there is a sense of wanting a little more from this chapter in terms of its analysis and the conclusions reached. However, this is still an interesting section in its discussions of fandom, citational adaptive fragments, and seriality.

Despite space constraints, the book is often detailed and expansive with regards to its research into the production, distribution, and reception processes of franchises. While there are aspects of adaptation and related concepts which perhaps suffer from a rather

fleeting examination, the scope of the series makes this inevitable. Further exegesis of the ways in which scholars such as Henry Jenkins have described the adaptation/transmedia relationship would have been useful, as would a clearer definition from Gelder's perspective as positioned against such approaches.

The book draws on an extensive range of sources from adaptation studies, transmedia scholarship, writing on genre and narrative, examinations of authorship, and much specific material relating to fantasy and its authors. There is productive crossover here with the work of Murray, Kyle Meikle, Thomas Leitch, and Kamilla Elliott. The book particularly builds on the work done by Meikle in his book *Adaptations in the Franchise Era*, cited by Gelder. *Adapting Bestsellers* extends ideas of the interlinked nature of adaptation and transmedia storytelling, excavating this interrelation within the specifics of a genre which is demonstrated to be quintessentially adaptive and transmedial, a repository of aspects ripe for franchising development.

A particular highlight in terms of an argumentative thread lies in the analysis of worldbuilding from an adaptation and transmedia perspective. Similarly, the examination of historical modes of adaptation and transmedia is a somewhat neglected critical avenue, so it is interesting to see these nascent forms intersecting with genre in the work on early fantasy and William Morris.

Overall, the book is convincing in its argument that the sprawling heterocosms of the fantasy genre are inherently predicated towards adaptation, transmedia extension, and subsequent branding/franchising. There is a slight lack of definitive conclusions, but we are certainly left with a good explanation for the genre's current prevalence – one

rooted in its transmedial adaptability. In a short, punchy volume, Ken Gelder presents an illuminating and diverse journey through the franchises of three fantasy bestsellers, prompting an interesting, specific, and plausible argument to emerge.