

JOHN SEARS¹

Emily Alder

WEIRD FICTION
AND SCIENCE AT
THE FIN DE SIÈCLE

Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

Emily Alder’s detailed examination of the scientific contexts of British weird fiction around the *fin de siècle* is a welcome addition to recent scholarship on the weird. The book analyses works by the British authors H. G. Wells, R. L. Stevenson, Arthur Machen, W. H. Hodgson, E. and H. Heron, Algernon Blackwood, and E. Nesbit, all either rarely subject to critical scrutiny, or often analysed but rarely in the context of the weird. Alder’s clear and careful critical discussions add much to our understanding of the resonances of weird fiction in its historical contexts. She is refreshingly forthright in confronting and attempting to describe critically the category of the weird, defined here as “a mode of fiction that does not want to be known”²—thus presenting problems for the literary-critical project of enhancing knowledge through textual elucidation. She argues (via H. P. Lovecraft’s famous definition of weird fiction) that its apprehension is made easier if perceived through the lens of *fin de siècle* science, a scientific discourse “already weird” in its “emphasis on the limits of human knowing and the questionable stability of ‘laws of Nature.’”³ This brings weird fiction closer to science fiction (but Alder emphasizes that it reveals

¹ John Sears is a freelance writer and curator. His books include *Stephen King’s Gothic* (2011) and *Reading George Szirtes* (2008), and he curated *Taking Shots: The Photography of William S. Burroughs* (2014) and *4 Saints in 3 Acts: A Snapshot of the American Avant-Garde* (2018), both at The Photographers’ Gallery in London.

² Alder, 6.

³ Alder, 10.

in, rather than avoids, the irrational or implausible), a proximity that doesn't weaken its strong links to the Gothic mode. It offers "tales of possibility and opportunity," its monsters are only "partially recognizable"⁴ and thus distinct from Gothic's concerns with spectral resemblance or physical exaggeration (as in *Frankenstein*), and it concerns itself with intimations of secret horrors of cosmic scale, as well as with "the inability of language to represent those secrets as anything other than hints and secrets."⁵

Alder's focus is on the centrality of scientific modes of enquiry to the weird aesthetic, and she makes good use in particular of the strange relation of the category of the weird to the speculative aspects of scientific enquiry. Her introduction maps the tensions between the emergent conventions of materialist and empiricist science and those schools of thought that emphasized the immaterial and the spiritual. The latter were of particular interest to psychical researchers, occultists, and Theosophists concerned with accounting for phenomena and experiences apparently beyond the scope of scientific explanation, or (as Machen believed) simply too wondrous to be susceptible to rationalist thought. A great strength of this book is its mapping of *fin de siècle* Western science as a fragmentary, evolving body of knowledge, fissured by competing theories and hotly-contested practices, separating itself from centuries of folklore and magical thinking while establishing its own internal rules of intellectual and experimental conduct, its own criteria of self-validation. *Fin-de-siècle* science was in the process of becoming, a fluid and often apparently overlapping set of emergent fields of knowledge. Evolutionary theory, positing (Alder argues) a "'melted' state in which no species differentiation existed,"⁶ exemplifies one aspect of this epistemological fluidity, directly challenging the fixed hierarchies of Victorian credo that guaranteed human exceptionalism. Likewise, the ontological ambiguities of quantum theory suggest disturbingly overlapping realities akin to those implied in weird tales like Blackwood's "The Willows" (1907). Weird fiction, Alder contests, occupies the borders and fissures inevitably opened up by this continual process of discursive evolution, flourishing in "gaps in knowledge or beyond its edges."⁷ It offers visions of the unknowable where science offers ideas of the knowable. Its interest in indeterminate species (as in Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896)) or the apparently paradoxical life-within-death of slime moulds and fungi (in Hope Hodgson's "The Voice in the Night" (1907) and "The Derelict" (1912)) evinces a concern with the unstable identities and uncategorizable beings that science was in the process of classifying.

Weird fiction's themes, in the context of science's claims to veracity and certainty, are, Alder argues, "troubling," elusive of definition and comprehension. Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) is thus read as an exploration of the weird instabilities of human mental states and of identity itself. Alder's careful

⁴ Alder, 14.

⁵ Alder, 15.

⁶ Alder, 162.

⁷ Alder, 27.

reading of the text demonstrates how “the language does not exist” to define Hyde or what he means; he “eludes the systemic mastery of language, and remains troubling.”⁸ Machen’s stories explore transcendence as “an absent presence, a gap beyond the current state of knowledge that, for exactly that reason, cannot be filled.” Alder claims that this “is the space of the weird,”⁹ a space equally resistant to literary-critical definition and scientific analysis, and ultimately difficult to distinguish clearly from overlapping genres: “In fact, many of the texts I will be discussing might also be identified as fantasy, as gothic, as horror, as ghost stories, and as science fiction.”¹⁰ Boyd Thomson, the protagonist of Nesbit’s “The Five Senses” (1909), glimpses “the weirdness behind the quotidian world,”¹¹ a weirdness insistently unamenable to conventional understanding. In Heron’s Flaxman Low tale “The Story of Yand Manor House” (1898), the house presents “something incomprehensible and unknowable,” “a failed absence that is not a presence.”¹² This linguistic uncertainty reinforces the discursive bleed between registers of knowledge which is, Alder argues, key to understanding the weird mode—weird tales “present storyworlds that are weird *because* they are woven tapestries of science, metaphysics, occultism, imagination, and genre tropes.”¹³

Alder’s reading of Hope Hodgson’s Carnacki tales is particularly perceptive. She emphasizes their troubling subjectivity, their reliance on pseudo-esoteric knowledge that seems specific to Carnacki and defining of his uniqueness, but is shared by his friends and the audiences he addresses. These tales construct, Alder emphasizes, “an uncertain, ambiguous reality” based on “doubtful distinctions between the ‘true,’ ‘weird,’ and ‘extraordinary.’”¹⁴ Carnacki is one of several “weirdfinders” Alder discusses, charting the emergence of a new subgenre involving a modified (and usually male) detective figure, an expert but pointedly not a positivist scientist, displaying in his wide reading and esoteric knowledge something of the literary critic, and functioning as both guide to and combatant of the weird. The weirdfinder works ideologically too—he “secures boundaries of expertise, masculinity, and nation against the myriad of weird threats that menace the *fin de siècle*.”¹⁵

Alder’s elegant, well-organised, and critically insightful book explores the historical significance of these “weird threats” across a wide range of examples, shedding important new light on the complex and significant influences of scientific thought on *fin-de-siècle* weird fiction in Britain. □

⁸ Alder, 52.

⁹ Alder, 59.

¹⁰ Alder, 3.

¹¹ Alder, 105.

¹² Alder, 130.

¹³ Alder, 201.

¹⁴ Alder, 147.

¹⁵ Alder, 141.