

Urban Fantasy: Conjuring collapse or a sense of place?

Dean-Liathine Mcdonald

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Dynamiques de l'effondrement dans le fantastique, la fantasy et la SF

Dynamics of Collapse in Fantasy, the Fantastic and SF



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Urban Fantasy:
Conjuring collapse or a sense of place?

Dean McDonald*

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Consider the following image of western society: a media personality becomes president of the USA, England shows signs of social unrest under a conservative government, anarchist groups and angry youth jump between causing violence and criticising the mainstream population for not accepting minorities, and a deadly virus affects millions worldwide. One could be forgiven for believing this to be a representation of 2020. It's true that in many ways the 1980s were coloured by similar issues to those we currently face. Although, it was not Trump and Covid-19 in the headlines, but rather Reagan, the Cold War, Thatcher, Punk and AIDS. For many, collapse felt imminent. It comes as no surprise that the widely-associated underlying tension and ubiquitous fear should find expression through the arts. Such was the climate from which the genre known as Urban Fantasy emerged.

Magic exists. It undulates unfettered through the unseen, underground elements of urbanity. This is the premise of Urban Fantasy (UF),[1] a genre that has evolved over the last forty years to include paranormal romance,[2] such as *Twilight*,[3] and supernatural detective fiction, like *The Dresden*

* Université d'Orléans.

[1] Windling, Terri, "On the Magic of Cities." *Myth & Moor* (blog), 23 October 2014, accessed September 2020. https://www.terriwindling.com/blog/2014/10/urban-walking.html.

[2] Ekman, Stefan, "Urban Fantasy: A Literature of the Unseen." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 27, n° 3 (2016), 452–69.

[3] Meyer, Stephanie, *Twilight* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005).

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Files.[4] Humanity at large somehow ignores the paranormal presence while the UF protagonist who lives on the fringes of society, often a musician, an artist, or even a private eye, manages to walk the line between magic and mundane. In these characters, Attebery sees the creation of "a perspective close enough to common sense to allow for a sense of continuity with the reader's world but at the same time open to impossible events and miraculous explanations."[5] As such, Charles de Lint's eccentric writer glimpses the native spirits in an Ottowan restaurant,[6] Emma Bull's rocker meets the creatures of Faerie that inhabit our world,[7] and a host of teenage rejects find their way out of contemporary society into Windling and Arnold's Elfland adjacent city: Bordertown.[8]

Terri Windling is the mother of Urban Fantasy. It is difficult to talk about the seminal UF texts without mentioning this fairy-tale specialist. While at ACE books she edited Charles de Lint's groundbreaking 1984 book *Moonheart* before creating her shared-world anthology series for teenagers to which de Lint,[9] Bull,[10] Boyett, Kushner and many others contributed. While de Lint's books rejected the confines of secondary world, traditional high-fantasy and, flirting with magical realism, brought the mythic to our doorstep,[11] Windling, through the appropriation of Punk-folk music and the creation of an urban *and* elfin play-space, birthed a genre. Neil Gaiman claims "Bordertown is one of the most important places where Urban Fantasy began."[12] But, why bring magic to the city?

American cities in the 1980s were anything but enchanted. Rampant drug use, violent crime, and homelessness were the backdrop to an

[4] Butcher, Jim, *The Dresden Files* (New York: Roc Books, 2000-present).
[5] Attebery, Brian, *Strategies of Fantasy* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992).
[6] de Lint, Charles, *Moonheart* (New York: Orb, 1984).
[7] Bull, Emma, *War for the Oaks* (New York: Orb, 1987).
[8] Windling, Terri and Mark Alan Arnold, eds. *Borderland* (New York: Signet, 1986).
[9] Windling, Terri, "Charles de Lint: A Life of Stories." *Myth & Moor* (blog), n.d., accessed September 2020. https://www.terriwindling.com/mythic-arts/charles-de-lint.html.
[10] Bull contributed to the Borderland series multiple times, even writing her own stand-alone novel: Bull, Emma, *Finder* (New York: Tor, 1994). Arguably her most well-known work, *War for the Oaks,* was also edited by Terri Windling.
[11] Windling, Terri, "Charles de Lint."
[12] Black, Holly, and Ellen Kushner, eds. *Welcome to Bordertown: New Stories and Poems of the Borderlands* (Borderlands. New York: Random House, 2011).

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emotional drama of LGBT and racial discrimination due to AIDS.[13] Both deindustrialization and *down-sizing* had begun to have an impact not only on poorer demographics and ethnic minorities but also on middle-class families.[14] Teenagers were faced with the bleak reality of competition for low-income jobs and little hope for success as a result.[15] Many chose another route: fuelled by anger and a need to be heard, they rebelled through music.[16] It was the rejection of the culture that had failed to provide them with a place that led to the birth of Punk music or as Worley puts it: "Punk meant thinking for yourself, freedom of speech and finding room to move."[17]

Capitalism had lost its charm. Indeed, many saw complete destruction as its final destination. Contemporary social movements that scream apocalyptic warnings were adopted and amplified by Punk throughout the 80s: ALF (Animal Liberation Front), Earth First!, Greenpeace, etc., called for an end to the practice of economy before ecology that contributed to the use of "animal-killing pesticides, trapping, water waste and unnecessary and wasteful land development"[18] all while encouraging a turn towards vegetarianism and veganism.[19] Although optimism for a better tomorrow could be found in these parts of the scene that called for direct action, or political anarchism, the inner-city dystopian image[20] as well as the threat of nuclear war meant it was undercut by a deep sense of nihilism. Moore sees the Punk revolution as being "about the end, about going the whole way, about the collapse of the self into chaos."[21] This explains the "punk conjured visions that were post-industrial, post-democratic and post-apocalyptic"[22] presented to us in songs like the Sex Pistol's 'No Future': "God, save the

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[13] Jones, Maldwyn A., *The Limits of Liberty: American History 1607–1992*. Second. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 628–31.
[14] Moore, Ryan, *Sells Like Teen Spirit: Music, Youth Culture and Social Crisis* (New York & London: New York University Press, 2010). 16–17.
[15] Moore, Ryan, *Sells like Teen Spirit.*
[16] Moore, Ryan, *Sells like Teen Spirit,* 21.
[17] Worley, Matthew, *No Future: Punk, Politics and British Youth Culture, 1976–1984* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 35.
[18] O'Hara, Craig, *The Philosophy of Punk: More than Noise!* Second ed. (London, Edinburgh & San Francisco: AK Press, 1999). 129.
[19] O'Hara, Craig, *The Philosophy of Punk,* 134–135
[20] Moore, *Sells like Teen Spirit,* 17.
[21] Moore, Suzanne, 'Is That All There Is?', *Punk Rock: So What? The Cultural Legacy of Punk*, ed. Roger Sabin (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), 234.
[22] Worley, Matthew, *No Future*, 221.

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queen, her fascist regime/ It made you a moron, a potential bomb/ God, save the queen, she ain't no human being/…There's no future, no future, no future for you."[23]

It seemed as if there was no hope. The dragon of chaos lurked ever closer and there was no hero to rise to the challenge. Enter Windling and her fictional city: in Bordertown magic has resurged in the world and reclaimed *the city*—causing quasi-complete collapse. It was all cities at once blended together and surrounded by the dark and dangerous enchanted forest: "Once the Border appeared, any city out in the World—be it New York, Chicago, Berlin, Beijing, you name it—became a gateway to Bordertown."[24] By creating this fictional, post-capitalist play-space, Windling allows readers to experience societal collapse with magic acting as the catalyst. With hardly any technology, no government, and no free-market, Bordertown demonstrates multiple levels of collapse as represented in Orlov's five step model: Financial and economic collapse, there is no money or banks and trade happens by bargaining and exchange alone (two loaves of bread for a beer); Political collapse, there is no government in place and no social services; Social collapse, tribal warfare and a "*chacun pour soi*" attitude prevails.[25] On the other hand, cultural collapse, or losing faith in the positive elements of human kind, is unlikely in Windling's world.

The lost find kinship in Bordertown. They find a home, a sense of place—be it in a gang, a band or a bookstore. The UF writers sought to demonstrate how it was possible to find a connection to *place,* "even at the heart of the beast: the big, noisy, crowded, diverse, dangerous, exciting modern city." [26] Windling sees the human protagonists of UF texts as "those who hunger, in one way or another, to find that connection...and then to use it in concert with the unique gifts that cities alone can offer."[27] However, they can only do this if they leave behind their former lives and wander into the deep, dark woods, if they take on the mantle of the hero's quest and are

[23] The Sex Pistols, "No Future/God Save the Queen," recorded March 1977, A&M, vinyl record.
[24] Constantine, L. J., "The Borderlands." The Yellow Brick Road: Your Passport to the Borderlands, 2004, Accessed September 2020. http://www.loony-archivist.com/borderland/world.htm.
[25] Orlov, Dmitry, *Reinventing Collapse: The Soviet Experience and American Prospects* (Canada: New Society Publishers, 2008). Cited in: Servigne, Pablo, and Raphaël Stevens, *Comment tout peut s'effondrer* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2015), 187–191
[26] Windling, Terri, "Magic of cities."
[27] Windling, Terri, "Magic of cities."

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transformed by facing the fear of the unknown, both without and within.[28] You're not lost, Windling's stories seem to whisper.

Like the fairy-tales of old, magic is our guide. Early UF stories created a pathway for the reader through the perilous jungle of capitalist society and the barren landscape of punk nihilism. Believing that we thrive best in nature, Windling sought to bring its numinous aspects into the urban setting.[29] To give a magical quality back to the human and a human property to the magical, perhaps even to the spiritual. This is to be found in those liminal spaces, when we push ourselves to the edge-land, on the border with the unknown elements of nature.[30] Cronan says it best: "These spaces reassert a vital truth: nature isn't just some remote mountain or protected park. It is all around us. It *is* us."[31]

Poets and bards walk the border between worlds. At least, this is the case for de Lint's characters. Magic is accessed through music, a magic that is simply an expression of harmony between mind and soul, between Man and nature.[32] This message is seen continuously in the early UF texts. In fact, the first story in Windling's anthology focuses on the issue, when the inner discordance of the protagonist's drunken, outrage-fuelled, musical outburst creates a monster that will not stop until it devours the girl he loves. A renewed sense of inner-harmony is the only way to defeat it.[33] Bull drives this home in her novel when the Faerie courts fight for control of Minneapolis.[34] The main character Eddi must navigate the intricacies of both courts, one representing light, music and art, while the other, only darkness, decay, and discordance. She does this by aligning herself with the former as

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[28] Windling, Terri, "The Dark of the Woods: Rites of Passage Tales." *Realms of Fantasy*, 1999. Endicott studio. https://www.endicottstudio.typepad.com/articleslist/the-dark-of-the-woods-rites-of-passage-tales-by-terri-windling.html.

[29] Windling, Terri, "The Only Real Story." *Myth & Moor* (blog), 24 September 2020, accessed September 2020. https://www.terriwindling.com/blog/2020/09/place.html.

[30] Windling, Terri, "On the Border." *Myth & Moor* (blog), 22 September 2015, accessed September 2020. https://www.terriwindling.com/blog/2015/09/borders.html.

[31] Cronan, William, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature", *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronan, 69–90 (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995).

[32] de Lint, Charles, *Moonheart*. 132–133.

[33] Boyett, Stephen R., "Prodigy", *Borderland* (New York: Signet, 1986), 9–113.

[34] Bull, Emma, *War for the Oaks*.

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an independent entity and taking on the Queen of air and darkness in a musical battle for the soul of the city. As we can see in the above stories, when inner harmony is found and expressed through music it becomes reflected in the setting: the urban is infused with the numinous elements of nature and the musical, even magical, elements of humanity.

Urban Fantasy writers, such as Windling, Bull, and de Lint allowed magic to come into the world and reconnect the reader with nature. When the toxic elements of our current capitalist society are given metaphorical substance through the use of Faerie, they can be incorporated, tackled and, most importantly, understood. These stories present collapse, but also hope. There is an underlying warning to take care of nature and restore balance both within ourselves and in our societies before we reach a point of collapse. Windling emphasises the need for personal responsibility and courage in the face of the unknown. Bordertown's post-collapse city has stripped away the illusory elements of modern western society, and shone a light on what is truly important, on what makes us human, that punkish search for authenticity, creativity and a connection with nature. She tells the reader that no matter where they find themselves, searching for harmony within, with oneself and with nature, will lead them through the dark woods and help them find their *place*.

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Alors que beaucoup appellent désormais non à prévenir une lointaine apocalypse, mais à freiner un effondrement en cours (climatique, énergétique, etc.), ce recueil applique la réflexion technique et anthropologique des collapsologues aux fictions de l'imaginaire. Fort de ce cadrage plus politique qu'eschatologique, il étudie des œuvres récentes influencées par le contexte de l'effondrement, et relit des œuvres anciennes à la lumière de cette nouvelle perspective. Les articles portent sur des œuvres littéraires, des séries télévisées, ou encore des jeux de société. Textes québécois, philippin et irlandais s'ajoutent au corpus étasunien et britannique. L'apocalypse scientifique de la fiction de la Guerre froide est confrontée aux classiques de la *fantasy*, et la désintégration sociopolitique aux impacts des pandémies et du changement climatique.

Dynamics of Collapse in Fantasy, the Fantastic and SF

While many now call out not to prevent a distant apocalypse, but to slow down an ongoing collapse (of climate, energy resources, etc.), this collection applies the technical and anthropological thinking of theoreticians of systemic collapse to fantastic fiction. Relying on this political rather than eschatological perspective, it explores recent productions influenced by the context of collapse, and reconsiders old works in the light of this new frame of reference. The articles examine literary works, television series, or even board games. Quebec, Filipino and Irish texts supplement the American and British corpus. The scientific apocalypse of Cold War fiction is set against the classics of high fantasy, and socio-political disintegration against the impacts of pandemics and climate change.

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