***Doorway to Dilemma: Bewildering Tales of Dark Fantasy*, ed. by Mike Ashley**
(London: The British Library, 2019)

If you had asked me in the 1990s what 'dark fantasy' meant, I would have pointed you to one of my *Ravenloft* paperbacks, possibly Christie Golden's *Vampire of the Mists* (1991). Here, horror archetypes are deployed in a variant on high fantasy's stock quasi-medieval setting. There is really only one story in Mike Ashley's new reprint anthology *Doorway to Dilemma: Bewildering Tales of Dark Fantasy* (2019) that generally fits that definition, however – Lord Dunsany's 'The Horde of the Gibbelins' (1911). It's perhaps inevitable that such well-known stories as those by Dunsany and Arthur Machen (here represented with the justly famous and forever-fascinating 'The White People' (1904)) should be included in this anthology, but one senses that Ashley is more interested in exposing more obscure writers and works. The book is the stronger for it.

In his Introduction, Ashley demarcates 'dark fantasy' as being separate to the J. R. R. Tolkien or Robert E. Howard style of fantasy (these are, of course, markedly different from each other, and the label 'dark fantasy' has in fact been applied to the latter[1]) and also from horror. Tales of the kind included here, says Ashley, 'don't include ghosts or vampires or sorcerers of dragons. They tend to be set in our world, often the here-and-now, but where the characters experience things they cannot explain and which become unnerving and frightening' (p. 8). The term 'weird' might also apply, and indeed this book is part of a series called 'Tales of the Weird', but Ashley yolks together this set of stories under the label 'dark fantasy'. He reprints nineteen stories from between the 1850s and the 1930s. The earliest is Fitz-James O'Brien's 'What Was It?' from 1859, which also opens the collection and sets the tone as a story of strange happenings that are then subjected as best as possible to scientific scrutiny. It is one of several stories, also including Morley Roberts' 'The Anticipator' (1896) and Thomas Burke's 'Johnson Looked Back' (1933), with an urban setting, imagining the inexplicable arising within the dizzying new sights of modern life; dark fantasy as a reaction to urban modernity is a persistent theme.

The title of the volume refers to Frank R. Stockton's 'The Lady or the Tiger?' (1882), at this point surely a more familiar phrase than the story itself is. Ashley reprints the classic tale of a king's strange brand of justice, as well as its lesser-known sequel, 'The Discourager of Hesitancy' (1885). It establishes two of the major themes of this anthology – puzzle narratives with indeterminate endings, and their literary sequels. For example, Ashley

[1] See Edo Van Belkom, *Writing Horror* (North Vancouver: Self Counsel Press, 2000), p. 27.

includes Cleveland Moffatt's 'The Mysterious Card' (1896), the creepy tale of an American in Paris who is given a card that he cannot decipher. Every French speaker he shows it to becomes horrified for reasons that the story never explains, rejecting him with increasing severity. It's an effectively nightmarish tale, so it's perhaps not surprising that, within months of its publication in February 1896, Moffatt followed up with 'The Mysterious Card Unveiled', which provides some imaginative and disturbing answers to the earlier story's mysteries. Ashley's choices help illuminate the degree to which, even in the nineteenth century, writers were responsive to their readers, participating in a give-and-take of expectation and revelation. The collection ends with another imaginative puzzle story, Mary E. Counselman's 'The Three Marked Pennies' (1934), where the deciphering of a set of riddles, with both profitable and deadly results, forms the core of the narrative. These puzzle narratives are fascinating, stimulating the intelligence of their reader in specific ways in spite – or even because – of the fact that they sometimes fail to provide definitive answers.

Counselman is only one of a number of female writers reprinted here. Mary E. Wilkins's 'The Prism' (1901) is an especially bittersweet story of innocence lost, and pairing it with Machen's 'The White People' – both are tales of the 'little people' and their uncertain presence in the modern world – allows some interesting juxtapositions. One of the jewels of *Doorway to Dilemma* is Lucy Clifford's 'The New Mother' (1882), an unsettling fairytale variant in which a harsh punishment is brought down on misbehaving children; it is not at all surprising to find that Neil Gaiman used it as a source for *Coraline* (2002). Six of the fifteen authors represented here are female, and their stories are often about the weird erupting into rural and domestic settings, providing a contrast with the urban settings of other tales collected in *Doorway to Dilemma*.

This is a rich and rewarding anthology. The label 'dark fantasy' still gives me trouble; I wonder if the way that Ashley places it at a distance from both 'fantasy' and 'horror' seems more underwritten by taste categories than descriptive usefulness. Certainly, some – maybe even most – of the stories in *Doorway to Dilemma* could be categorised as horror. The word 'Bewildering' in the title, however, seems perfectly apt, with the experience of mystery, anxiety, and fascination uniting this diverse set of stories.

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