



Speculative Fiction and Faith

— Christina Fawcett

Becker, Helaine. *Gottika*. Illus. Alexander Griggs-Burr. Toronto: Dancing Cat, 2014. 252 pp. \$12.95 pb. ISBN 9781770863910. Print.

Bow, Erin. *Sorrow's Knot*. New York: Levine, 2013. 348 pp. \$19.99 hc. ISBN 9780545166669. Print.

Goelman, Ari. *The Path of Names*. New York: Levine, 2013. 339 pp. \$18.99 hc. ISBN 9780545540148. Print.

Goto, Hiromi. *Darkest Light*. Illus. Jillian Tamaki. Toronto: Razorbill, 2012. 325 pp. \$12.99 pb. ISBN 9780143178279. Print.

Speculative spaces in science fiction and fantasy texts have long been bastions of cultural commentary. From the safe distance of a foreign planet or a mythical world, contemporary issues in religion, politics, and culture can play out. Young adult speculative fiction is a rich space for these sorts of examinations, using hypotheticals and wondrous others to explore and to engage with contemporary issues.

By incorporating supernatural or predictive elements, speculative fiction rests along the spectrum of cognition and estrangement. Readers having full access to and understanding of characters and their experiences would have full cognition and would lack

any of the strangeness or otherworldliness that are core components of the genre. Complete estrangement would leave readers disconnected, unable to understand or to access the text. Authors must strike a balance between cognition and estrangement by creating speculative spaces that readers can engage with and enjoy. In his paraphrase of Darko Suvin's definition of science fiction, Adam Roberts explains Suvin's use of the terms cognition and estrangement:

"Cognition," with its rational, logical implications, refers to that aspect of SF that prompts us to try and understand, to comprehend, the alien landscape of

a given SF book, film or story. “Estrangement” is a term from Brecht, more usually rendered in English-language criticism as “alienation”; in this context it refers to that element of SF that we recognize as different, that “estranges” us from the familiar and everyday. (8)

Fantasy and science fiction both hinge on this balance, this careful interweaving of the foreign and the familiar. This equilibrium requires many tools of familiarization to connect readers to a foreign space. In young adult fiction, the narrative focus on a young protagonist provides a point of access for readers, allowing them to find commonalities across cultural, social, and geographical differences.

Young adult speculative fiction sees many texts engaging with identity, particularly with the status of being an insider or an outsider to a larger system. The depiction of characters learning to embrace their uniqueness has been the trend in post-apocalyptic works such as Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* and its sequels or Rick Yancey’s *The 5th Wave*, magical fantasies like J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter books or Gail Carson Levine’s *Ella Enchanted*, and imagined histories like Meaghan McIsaac’s *Urgle* or Lois Lowry’s *The Giver*. These texts focus on outcasts who are isolated or otherwise ostracized and who need to trust in themselves, to believe in their abilities and strengths in order to find community and a sense of connection.

The protagonists overcome challenges and dangers to achieve their goals through their development of identity and community. The sense of belonging and the need for a larger context appears quite universal, yet some current works of young adult speculative fiction have moved a step farther, into ideas of belief.

The incorporation of personal belief draws on faith and spirituality. Protagonists need to demonstrate belief both in themselves and in a larger power in order to find resolution. The incorporation of faith is a point of individuation, as characters need to learn to understand their spirituality as separate from that of their parents. This development of self-identity is core to the young adult genre. The incorporation of faith gives not only an additional element to the plot but also another tool for these protagonists, who must use their beliefs to overcome the challenges they face.

The four books reviewed here take on the question of what it means to believe, to have faith, in powers larger than the self. These texts follow young protagonists who venture into uncomfortable worlds of faith and revelation and who come eventually to understand their part in larger frameworks. More than that, these texts engage with a troubling component of faith: the simultaneous discomfort and need to believe in something that cannot be touched, felt, or seen, yet must be accepted as a form of truth. The use of the speculative fiction genre enables the incorporation of magic and wonder as part of the protagonists’ discovery

of their truth. This process of developing personal beliefs is the central conflict in these narratives, as the protagonists develop faith in something greater. Growth tends to require the protagonists to move beyond the beliefs they are taught in order to come into a stronger and clearer sense of understanding. The development of faith by these protagonists is both a rejection of authority and an acceptance of greater powers, and it challenges readers to consider their own beliefs.

Gottika

Helaine Becker's *Gottika* tells the story of Dany, a young man living in Gottika. The land is in a state of unrest, with Dany and his people relegated to the ghetto. The Gottikans, the city dwellers, look down on the Stoons, the community of people who live in the Stews. The text follows Dany's life in the Stews as abuse and injustice mount. The book focuses on the struggles of the disenfranchised, as Dany's father, Judah Haleoni, uses both proper channels and civil disobedience to fight back against Count Pol. One of the tools that Judah draws on is magic:

Over the next few nights, peeping through that same door, I observed my father as I'd never seen him before.

With his hair streaming out behind him, as if blown by an unseen wind.

With a mist of holy, mysterious, magic letters

spilling from his mouth.

I heard him uttering incantations so deep and dark it was as if they emerged from an underground cave. (95)

The tale incorporates magic and the power of words as ways for Judah and Dany to fight back. The words of power are the means through which Judah can raise a golem and control elements around him. Dany must learn to understand the power of his heritage and connect with his faith in his own way.

Becker's story uses the speculative space to examine Jewish persecution. The Stews are an imagined space, while Count Pol and the Gottikans possess technologies dissonant with the pseudo-Renaissance setting. Count Pol's metal horses or his troops' advanced guns, for example, contrast with the release of information by posted sign and by word of mouth. The steampunk elements present a new space for an old problem. The Stoons live in a designated ghetto and must wear berets at all times to mark their status. Iconic elements of Jewish persecution give this story a historical grounding as well as a depth. The cues open up a space for conversation about travesties that have taken place while also encouraging readers to immerse themselves in a space of injustice and to read a story of the disenfranchised.

Both *Gottika* and *The Path of Names* weave elements of the Jewish mystical traditions of



The manifestation of power through written language is a key element of the kabbala and appears as a core concept in *The Path of Names* and *Gottika*.



Gnosticism and kabbala into their plots and characters. Gnosticism was a sect of Christianity in the early days of that church: as Kurt Rudolph notes, however, “There was also no gnostic canon of scripture, unless it was the ‘holy scriptures’ of other religions, like the Bible or Homer, which were employed and interpreted for the purpose of authorising the gnostics’ own teaching” (53). Gnosticism is, at its heart, the pursuit of knowledge, a practice of reading and studying to connect with the divine. “All gnostic teachings are in some form a part of the redeeming knowledge which gathers together the object of knowledge (the divine nature), the means of knowledge (the redeeming gnosis) and the knower himself” (55). Gnosticism was the basis for the kabbala, which developed in the thirteenth century.

The kabbala draws from the Book of Yesirah, which describes the process of knowledge emanation and the sefirot (Scholem 33). The kabbala focuses on mystical revelation, using words and concepts from Gnosticism and focusing on the prophet Elijah. While not a set of beliefs in itself, the kabbala is a means of reading spiritual text to try to define the relationship between humanity and the universe, between humanity and nature, as well as between humanity and the divine. The core concepts of the kabbala are the importance and the power of words to access the divine and to control the physical world. The Golem legend, from the Talmudic tractate Sanhedrin, tells “the tale of the artificial being created from earth clay and brought to life through the miraculous combination of letters” (Kieval 2). The manifestation of power through written language is a key element of the kabbala and appears as a core concept in *The Path of Names* and *Gottika*.

The Gnostic tradition, a belief system grounded in the balance of three elements of religious life, appears throughout *Gottika*. The three elements—the speculative and philosophical, the ritualistic and mystical,

and the practical and ascetic—are present through Dany’s father. He attempts to teach Dany the ways of his people and the traditions they once practised openly. Part of this tradition is magic, the use of words to control and create power: the kabbala. The focus on words as a means to access spiritual knowledge is at the core of Gnostic belief, as the core term “gnosis” means the knowledge of spiritual mysteries. A key story element, important enough to be featured on the cover of the paperback, is the golem. Judah Haleoni uses powerful symbols to create a man from dirt to protect his family members and keep them safe in the face of their persecution. This appears to be an interesting contradiction: the beliefs that have led to their abuse and threatened their safety can also be used to protect them. Becker’s text draws on the Gnostic traditions and the kabbala in order to show how Dany’s gradual understanding of his culture empowers him to face the challenges of his life.

Throughout the text, panel-style comics and splash pages interrupt the written text, changing the mode of storytelling. These graphic elements typically are without dialogue or description: readers can engage with the purely visual. The story also does not redundantly tell the events of the graphic insets, interweaving these forms of storytelling instead. The use of images as an alternative to text instead of a complement to text gives the graphic component more power. Illustration is just as valid a means of telling a

story. This shifting mode not only encourages different forms of reading but also engages young readers. In a text that highlights the power of the written and the drawn as well as the use of symbols to exert control over the natural world, the text is effective in using different forms of language to tell a single story. The power is not just in the spoken word but in it being drawn into the real world: the word made manifest.

Becker’s writing is clear and simple, accessible to young readers; this clarity makes the text all the more important, as it represents a dark historical period and a voice from within a disenfranchised community. It shows a space of oppression and the importance of people standing up for themselves. The mature topic of the text, accessible language, and use of graphic storytelling seem to be at cross-purposes, but the story carries an important message of facing and overcoming oppression.

The Path of Names

Ari Goelman’s *The Path of Names* is another examination of Jewish faith, specifically the tradition of the kabbala. Unlike in Becker’s *Gottika*, teachings and concepts are not implied but made explicit: a core character, David, is a student at the Yebavner yeshiva under Reb Isaac Ben Yisachar, a seer and mystic of the kabbala. David’s discovery of the name of God, written in *The Path of Names* in the traditional tetragrammaton of YHWH, sets the story in motion, resulting in his exile

from New York and the intersection of Dahlia's and David's narratives through the shared space of Avara Camp. The threat consists of The Illuminated Ones, a group of people who seek the names of YHWH to use their power and to gain immortality. The story hinges on a power struggle over words, specifically the words of God.

Like *Gottika*, this novel incorporates Jewish mysticism as a core narrative element. It puts the focus on kabbala within the frame of the Torah, specifically in its consideration of how meditation practices are means of accessing the names of YHWH. The story does not explain or instruct on these methods of reading, as David's discovery is presented with little background in chapter 4. Instead, readers see both the power of the meditative reading in which David has engaged and its danger. While David's discovery is delayed until chapter 4, the setting of the Jewish summer camp established from the outset of the story, introduces the concept of a young woman needing to explore and understand her cultural history.

The Path of Names centres on the structure of a maze. The icons in the upper right corner of each chapter opener set the maze motif from the beginning of the book, establishing clearly the theme and central focus from the outset. The maze is the core of the plot as well as the site of character growth and development. The construction of the story itself mimics the form of a maze and draws readers in with

slow releases of information and gradual revelations. The almost instantaneous introduction of the ghost-story element, for example, is an initial draw, but while that theme moves the story forward, multiple turns and switchbacks keep the text interesting.

The novel moves between character perspectives, noting the name at the beginning of each section. Such signposting works well while still allowing for different narrative spaces. The story is primarily a weaving of Dahlia's and David's stories with interjections from Tom, Dahlia's older brother. Tom's chapters are stand-alone interpolations into the story; he does not hold or carry the narrative but provides an outsider view of Dahlia's struggle to unfold and to understand the mystery. Dahlia is the core of the story, yet she is unaware of the power that she holds. She is able to access the memories of David, the one who made the maze. Dahlia is both the narrative point of access and the core of the puzzle, offering a balance between knowledge and mystery.

The Path of Names, while a mystery narrative that unravels slowly, also focuses on the death of two children and the ensuing ghost story. The novel introduces the two ghosts early and plays with the eerie visions and dreams that Dahlia experiences. The final chapters take on a greater sense of urgency and fear but never move into genuine horror. This careful touch means the story is not lost in the building of tension, and the focus remains on the power of the kabbala and on the use of words and names as the core forms of power.


As with the other texts reviewed here, Dhalia's embrace of her cultural history and her development of her own understanding of faith are core to the story and its conclusion. She learns about the history of the Jewish kabbala and needs to use Hebrew in order to uncover the mysteries of the maze and the threat of The Illuminated Ones. She enters the final confrontation arming herself with Hebrew words and her own belief in herself. Through the internalization of David's memories and the challenge of her faith, Dhalia becomes a formidable force and finds the strength to trust herself. That belief in the power of the maze and the power of the kabbala is key for her to save the lives of her fellow campers.

Sorrow's Knot


Erin Bow creates a narrative of Otter and the Shadowed People as a blend of Indigenous traditions from across North America. Bow notes in her acknowledgements that "the Shadowed People are not meant to represent any particular indigenous culture" (1–2). She expresses thanks to the ethnobotany project at the University of Minnesota, Buffalo Bird Woman's ethnographic testimony, and experts in food and foraging, ancient technology, and sacred drumming (2). She draws on broad historical elements in order to make a community that feels authentic without being tied to a particular geographical location or time period. The Shadowed People are a culture all their own.

The speculative fiction elements of the text appear in the macabre and in the spiritual. Not only do The Shadowed People bind their dead to keep spirits from walking, but also two forms of dead exist in the world of the book: dead things, which are simple shadows that attack the living and climb into them, and the White Hands, which are stronger and more dangerous spirits. These dead are held back by the casting of cords; simple casts can be done by anyone in the community, but stopping and repelling the dead is the work of the Binder. The supernatural element in the text is the undercurrent of the world the characters live in. This familiarity among the characters gives a greater sense of inherent cognition to readers, enabling the story to be about more than the threat of the dead.

The story centres on the maturation of three core characters—Otter, Cricket, and Kestrel—who are learning to find their place in the community. The roles of the people are determined by cords, and all young people must apprentice to a cord and take their position in the community as they mature. Otter, the protagonist, is rejected by her mother and her expected school of binding. She leaves her family home and is replaced as an acolyte of binding by another young woman; Otter must instead live with her friends, as she is left without a purpose or a home in the community. She develops into adulthood without a cord: without a place of her own. Instead, she has to grow her own understanding of community, separate from traditional



. . . Dhalia's embrace
of her cultural history
and her development
of her own
understanding of faith
are core to the story
and its conclusion.



teachings and expectations. This leaves the core protagonist ungrounded in the community, struggling to find her place in it and trying to understand her mother's rejection of her. The story, which deals frequently with death and grief, is a more mature tale and touches gently on many issues of family and belonging. It is through being ostracized and having to achieve self-definition that Otter brings about change.

Bow's text is far more complex than Becker's, as the vocabulary and narrative length set it as a story for an older audience. The style, however, interweaves oral storytelling as part of the Shadowed People's history. The tales Cricket tells maintain oral structures, including the repetition of words and phrases and the use of shorter, clear sentences, which fits with Walter Ong's description of oral culture markers: "In an oral culture, knowledge, once acquired, had to be constantly repeated or it would be lost: fixed, formulaic thought patterns were essential for wisdom and effective administration" (24). When Cricket tells the tale of the early life of Mad Spider, the first Binder, he repeats his phrasing and constructs the tale as he has learned it:

"Little Spider," said the people, "what are you weaving?"

"Little Spider," said the people, "what do you want to catch in your great big web?"

"I am weaving a web to catch the dead," she said. . . .

And the people said: "Take down your web, Mad Spider. We can live with the little dead."

And she said: "There is one who is not little."

And the people said: "It is of no use to keep out the dead. They are both in and out."

And she said: "There is one who is out." (135)

The language here has the repetition and the formulaic style to make the phrases flow. Cricket identifies the speaker and each statement seems to build from those that came before. Of course, as a written text, the novel cannot emulate the oral experience fully. As Erin Hanson explains concerning Indigenous oral traditions, “Transcription by its very nature must adhere to the rules and regulations of its written language—punctuation marks, for example, that give a sense of the way something was said but do not account for the rhythm or the melody of one’s voice or the variations in diction that emphasize different points or feelings.” Yet the focus on the oral mode of history in the text draws attention to its oral elements.

Not only does the story itself emulate an oral style at times, but also the plot centres on the stories that can and cannot be shared. The history and practices of the Shadowed People are transmitted through story, which results in the repetition of stories through the novel. Cricket is the storyteller in the community, the holder of the tales and history of the Shadowed People. Cultural history is shared in the form of story and song: as Ong notes, “Narrative is particularly important in primary oral cultures because it can bond a great deal of lore in relatively substantial, lengthy forms that are reasonably durable—which in an oral culture means forms subject to repetition” (138). Cricket’s role as storyteller gives him the power

of history, and he shares the stories of the Shadowed People with Otter and Kestrel and by extension with readers. By breaking tradition and sharing stories that have been restricted to storytellers, Cricket enables change. The three young members of the community challenge the rules and expectations through their maturation and learning about themselves and their history.

It is important to note that Otter’s spirituality brings change and growth to her community. While she learns of her people’s history and culture through forbidden tales and explorations far beyond their territorial lands, she does not tear down the existing beliefs fully; instead, she travels to learn more of her history and the traditions of her people and grows in the process. Otter is able to bring change to the community through her confidence and strength of character. Through their belief in themselves and their willingness to explore the past, Otter and Kestrel shape their community. Otter must internalize her community’s beliefs about binding and then redefine them, changing the way she looks at the world. Otter’s faith is not only in the stories of her people but also in the stories she creates, the experiences and the discoveries of a past before these tales were shared. Her strength is such that she can bring this message back to her fellow community members, to free them from the knots they have bound and to break the restrictive cords of their first Binder, Mad Spider.

Darkest Light

Darkest Light is a sequel to *Half World*, following the story of Melanie removing Mr. Glueskin from the Half World. As was the case in the initial text, Hiromi Goto's mythology is a hybrid of Christian and Buddhist philosophies, with elements of Jainism and Hinduism. The three realms—of flesh, of spirit, and of the half world—echo the reincarnation process to gain enlightenment while harkening to the Christian image of Purgatory. This blending of backgrounds gives Goto's text a sense of the spiritual without any grounding in a single cultural source. While the descriptions of the physical world bring to mind Japanese culture, the focus of the text remains on Gee, Cracker, and White Cat throughout their explorations in the Half World.

The story sets up the background and mythology of the text in the prologue, giving context and a framework of the worlds for readers who have not read *Half World*. The prologue, an excerpt from *The New Book of the Realms*, is visually distinct from the rest of the text, as the typeface in this section is a stylized script with the same form and angles of the brush-stroke chapter headings. The use of the typeface differentiates the material, setting the prologue apart from the introduction. The attribution at the end of the prologue makes the few pages feel like an excerpt from a larger work that readers cannot access. Gee discovers the text, shown to him by the White Cat, which explains his past and origin and which gives readers an additional

excerpt from *The New Book of the Realms*, providing further mythology and cosmology of this world. The tone and the framing of this spiritual text makes it clear to readers from the outset that the novel will centre on faith, spirituality, and the process of understanding.

The graphic component is quite a light touch, the illustrations being sporadic but lovely additions. Jillian Tamaki, known for her beautiful work in *Skim* and *Gilded Lilies* among other books, provides simple pen and ink drawings that complement the story with sparse graphic detail. The drawings typically are set on the page after the textual description, giving readers time to formulate their own visions of a character or a scene before the drawing fills in that mental picture. The illustrations become sparser in the last third of the book, which is also when Goto's writing becomes quite conceptual and ephemeral.

The Half World of *Darkest Light* addresses the morality of accepting personal suffering and moving through the Half World between the realms of Flesh and Spirit. Each individual in the Half World has his or her own pattern and moves through the experience of suffering in the Half World in order to reach the Realm of Spirit. As a former resident of the Half World, Gee escaped from his pattern and was pulled into the Realm of Flesh. Gee's development of identity and faith is a process of memory, drawing back into his earlier life in the Half World and the process of accepting his suffering. While Gee must go through the same process

of understanding where he comes from and accepting a larger spiritual world operating around him, *Darkest Light* has a greater component of horror in its spiritual revelation. The characters of Karu and Ilanna demonstrate the monstrous result of denying individual patterns of learning and accepting. Gee must learn his own role in their monstrous transformation and rediscover his part in the pattern of suffering and absolution.

Conclusion

The movement in young adult speculative fiction to incorporate the language of faith adds to the individuation process that protagonists typically undergo. The idea of individuals needing to understand what they believe in order to understand themselves is a logical one, and these texts use the speculative space to address this process.

Each of these texts examines the process of developing belief, depicting characters learning where they fit and how to have faith in themselves. Learning how to have faith and what to have faith in is a part

of the growing process for each of the protagonists in these texts. The idea of faith and belief is part of the estrangement in these texts, leaving readers to work through the struggle with the protagonists. It is interesting to note that none of these books presents an atheist perspective, but rather they all focus on how finding faith is a part of finding place and community. The fantastic spaces in these young adult texts allow for the supernatural, the strange, and the speculative. This space incorporates the magic, the mystery, and the impossibility that can demonstrate the complex relationship of young people with faith. Notably, none of these young protagonists comes to believe the ideas of surrounding parents or guardians. They all must come to their own understanding of the world: faith and spirituality are inherently personal, and each of these texts shows the tremendous struggle to understand personal belief. These narratives, while each dealing with a different belief system, show the universality of the challenges resulting from facing faith, as well as the interrelated nature of faith and culture.

Works Cited

- Hanson, Erin. "Oral Traditions." *Indigenous Foundations*. UBC, 2009. Web. 10 Aug. 2015.
- Kieval, Hillel J. "Pursuing the Golem of Prague: Jewish Culture and the Invention of a Tradition." *Modern Judaism* 17.1 (1997): 1–23. Print.
- Ong, Walter. *Orality and Literacy*. 1982. London: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- Roberts, Adam. *Science Fiction*. London: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- Rudolph, Kurt. *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*. Edinburgh: Clark, 1983. Print.
- Scholem, Gershom. *Origins of the Kabbalah*. Trans. The Jewish Publication Society. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987. Print.

Christina Fawcett is an adjunct faculty member in the Department of English at the University of Winnipeg. She completed her doctorate at the University of Glasgow, focusing on the developing moral role of monsters in historical fairy tales, fantasy literature, and the writing of J. R. R. Tolkien. Her research interests include children's and young adult literature, pertaining specifically to genre fiction, fantasy, science fiction, horror, and digital media. Her current research is on video-game narratives and the emotional and psychological representation of villains and monsters.