

DANIELLE KIRBY: *Fantasy and Belief: Alternative Religions, Popular Narratives and Digital Cultures*. Sheffield and Bristol, CT: Equinox, 2013; pp. 194.

Popular culture is resplendent with fantastical narratives populated by mythical creatures of infinite variety. Very often these narratives have spiritual overtones, plumbing commonalities with various religious traditions and offering an alternative and accessible portal into a spiritual life. Kirby's *Fantasy and Belief* is an exploration of the nexus between these narratives, popular culture and spiritual belief, using the Otherkin as a particular case study. The Otherkin, those individuals who identify as non-human, believe themselves to have non-human souls, or at least not entirely human souls, that are spiritually oriented. Kirby distinguishes the Otherkin from other enthusiastic consumers of fan fiction.

After an introduction that lays out Kirby's approach to this undertaking and makes explicit her assumptions, the book is made up of four chapters. Kirby approaches her subject through a detailed examination and deconstruction of Otherkin websites, online discussion forums and a survey completed by 80 individuals identifying as Otherkin. She investigates the way in which these individuals leverage various media resources in a way that corresponds to usage trends in the broader community. The first chapter, "Religion, Occulture and the Modern World," sets the scene for the book and defines relevant terms such as religion and spirituality. She places this work in the context of the literature of Christopher Partridge, Paul Heelas and Wouter Hanegraaff, among others, who are prominent in this and related fields of enquiry. By the second chapter, Kirby warms to her topic. Entitled "The Otherkin," this chapter contains Kirby's examination of the web presence of the Otherkin and the results of the survey. The focus of this chapter is an examination of the alternative metaphysics of the Otherkin, how those who identify as Otherkin use texts to create their identity. She borrows from Colin Campbell's idea of the "cultic milieu" to describe how Otherkin borrow deeply and freely from a "fantastic milieu" of fantasy texts, pop culture idioms and classical mythology. Even so, the identity of the Otherkin is not restricted by these borrowings; rather, they act as points of beginning or grounding. Whole histories evolve from such starting points. This chapter examines some of the more interesting facets of how Otherkin awaken to their non-human identity, the remembering of past lives, and how these may impact on their perception of reality and the world in which they live.

The third chapter, “Fantasy and Re-Enchantment: Sources of Content,” attempts to provide an overview of the fantasy genres from which the Otherkin draw. It is here that Kirby claims that the Otherkin are situated within a broader paradigm of re-enchantment, decidedly more towards the magical end of the spectrum. They share this space with ceremonial magic and contemporary paganism. Kirby concludes with the claim that the identification as Otherkin coincides with a radical realignment of notions of the self.

Kirby’s concluding chapter, “The Internet and Popular Cultures: Sources of Context,” relays Kirby’s view that the Otherkin are an idiosyncratic manifestation of a broader cultural trend, tightly bound to digital cultures made possible by broad accessibility to the internet, rather than a cul-de-sac. Indeed, immersion in digital culture leads to an expansion of notions of self, the facilitation of membership in a large number of digital communities enabled by the broad acceptance of social media and the mix and match practice of bricolage into intensely personal forms. In contrast to many others, the Otherkin have extrapolated this material to form something religious. Perhaps the most interesting of Kirby’s assertions is that the terms “mainstream” and “subculture” are increasingly obsolete with the diversity of ways that consumers engage with online content and engage with its communities. The individual has almost unlimited scope for personalisation.

Kirby’s examination of the Otherkin is thoughtful and intelligent, and somewhat sympathetic of a cohort that is the focus of frequent derision and discrimination. This book is a welcome addition to the growing literature on spirituality in the digital age.

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