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MAGIC AND REALISM: AN INTERVIEW WITH GUY GAVRIEL KAY

IN CANADIAN FANTASY CIRCLES, Guy Gavriel Kay needs no introduction. The bestselling author regularly makes lists of both best Canadian authors and best fantasy authors. While he has published some poetry, he is best known for his fantasy novels (fourteen to date, with another to be published in 2022), yet the category "fantasy" doesn't sit well with him. Indeed, he is rather notorious for resisting genre labels and pigeonholes. Many of his works could equally be called historical fiction because they are thoroughly researched and based on real times, places, and people, except they also contain magic and made-up places. The magic, however, is of a specific kind.

In this year's J. R. R. Tolkien Lecture on Fantasy Literature, broadcast live from Toronto to Pembroke College, Oxford, Kay discussed his attitude to magic, which has developed over the course of his career. His works contain a kind of magic that is not random or merely fantastic but arises out of the real beliefs of a society in a particular time and place. This explains why his novels do not have a consistent level of magic; rather, the amount of magic in a novel, be it spells or curses or magical objects or fantastic beings like ghosts or angels, is entirely dependent upon the historical beliefs and myths of the societies on which that novel is based.

Kay's career shows that he did not always have this attitude but gradually worked it out over time as he settled into—indeed, created—his own genre of writing. His first trilogy, marking his entrance into the ranks of fantasy writers, began with the novel *The Summer Tree* (1984), which fell squarely within the "high fantasy" tradition established by Tolkien and the Inklings. As fans of Kay know, he spent a year working with Christopher Tolkien on Tolkien's papers and *The Silmarillion* (1977). Clearly—and Kay has been frank about this fact—his experience editing *The Silmarillion* was forma-

tive for this trilogy, collectively known as *The Fionavar Tapestry*, which was written in Tolkien's tradition of high fantasy yet without being strictly derivative or "Tolkienesque." The magical aspects of *Fionavar* are typical fantasy: mages, magical objects, dragons, dwarves, flying unicorns, earth magic, sky magic, etc. Gods walk the earth, and humans sacrifice themselves in ritualistic ways to save the world in an epic battle between light and dark. Drawing on the same mythological traditions that Tolkien drew on (Arthurian legends, Norse myths, and Welsh folklore) and adding even more to the mix (the Paraiko have Maori names, and the tattoos of Eridu evoke Maori *moko* body art), *Fionavar* manages to weave magic, myth, and ritual into a fantasy world large enough to contain them all. Some of this magic comes out of real traditions and myths that the cultures of Fionavar are based on, but much of it is imagined and invented by Kay.

Tigana (1990) is in many ways a half-way book. A major departure from the *Fionavar* trilogy, *Tigana* was Kay's first attempt at a different sort of fantasy writing—one based on the history of a particular time and place. It was also rejected at first by his publishers, who wanted more of the same kind of high fantasy. The province of Tigana is on a peninsula called the Palm, which was loosely based on 15th-century Italy. Just as late-medieval Italy was fought over by Spain and France, the Peninsula of the Palm is torn between two warring powers, Ygrath and Barbadior, and infighting and rivalries between city-states preclude the possibility of collective resistance.

In terms of its magic, however, *Tigana* is closer to *Fionavar* than to Kay's later works, as the main conflict is between two powerful sorcerers who divide the peninsula between them. The most important magic is a spell that has taken away Tigana's name—no one who is not a native of the province can hear or remember the name. There is a paucity of magical creatures, but one does show up—a riselka, loosely based not on 15th-century Italian beliefs but on Slavic mythology. So *Tigana*'s geography and cultures are rooted in real history, but its magic is fantasy.

It is in Kay's next books, *A Song for Arbonne* (1992) and *The Lions of Al-Rassan* (1995), that he fully makes the shift to a quasi-historical, quasi-fantastic genre of fiction. *A Song for Arbonne* is a transposed Provence during the 13th-century Albigensian crusade. It draws not only on the historical events of the period but also on real Occitan troubadours, such as Bernart de Ventadorn. The "magic" is limited to the rituals of one of the religions, largely visions; indeed, one seemingly "magical" occurrence is shown, at

the end, to be faked for political ends. *The Lions of Al-Rassan* is set in the Christian-Jewish-Islamic cultures of 11th-century Andalusian Spain and has a character clearly modelled on El Cid; the only quasi-magic in that is a prophecy and some telepathy.

Many reviewers, especially in the late 1990s, thus thought that Kay's writing trajectory was from heavily magical high fantasy to less magic and more reality. But with a longer view, we can now see that's not quite accurate. A linear progression, from more magic to less magic, oversimplifies things. *Sailing to Sarantium* (1998) and *Lord of Emperors* (2000), based on 6th-century Byzantium and Justinian II but containing elements of the later First Iconoclasm struggles, contains some broadly defined "magic," such as a telepathic talking mechanical bird and angels from a pagan god. Likewise, *The Last Light of the Sun* (2004) has a lot more magic than earlier works like *A Song for Arbonne* or *The Lions of Al-Rassan*. So why the shift back to magic?

The Last Light of the Sun may provide an answer. The three main cultures in the book—the Erlings, the Anglcyn, and the Cyngael—are based on three historical cultures: the Norse Vikings, the English under King Alfred, and the Welsh. The magical elements are concentrated in the parts that take place in the lands of the Cyngael. Historically, Celtic Welsh culture held much stronger beliefs in the Otherworld and faeries than the Germanic Angles or Norse. Kay, therefore, only uses the magics and supernatural creatures that were believed in—whether fully or not—by 9th-century Welsh people. Likewise, while we know that crafted animated birds are purely mechanical creatures, to people in 6th-century Mediterranean they must have seemed magical, and so the mechanical birds in *Sailing to Sarantium* are created using actual, sacrificed, souls.

"It's a way of diminishing the smugness we so often bring to the beliefs of the past," Kay says in the Tolkien lecture. There is no suggestion "that this worldview is quaint, folkloric, or superstitious." When you're reading *The Last Light of the Sun*, you believe in uncanny faeries and a sometimes ominous fairy queen. When you're in Kay's parallel world to 8th-century China under the Tang Dynasty, in *Under Heaven* (2010), you not only believe in ghosts but know that they will haunt a place until they are properly buried. You believe these things because the characters believe them, and the characters draw you into their worldview.

Except for *Ysabel* (2007), which is set in present-day France but in the

Fionavar universe, the rest of Kay's works follow this general rule: they only contain elements of the supernatural that the original societies would have believed or at least half-believed. Most of Kay's books after *Fionavar* also buck the trends of the fantasy genre by being stand-alone novels (*Sailing to Sarantium* and *Lord of Emperors* are the exceptions). In recent years (Kay has a pretty steady three-year cycle of producing books) he has returned to the world of *Sailing to Sarantium, Lord of Emperors, The Last Light of the Sun,* and *The Lions of Al-Rassan* with the novels *Children of Earth and Sky* (2016), which is set in late 15th-century Dubrovnik, Italy, and the Adriatic Sea, and *A Brightness Long Ago* (2019), which is set in the same locations in the mid-15th century. Again, different cultures meet, clash, trade, and merge, and the supernatural appears primarily in the form of ghosts and dreams, which makes manifest what the people of the place and time would have believed.

Kay, in his books, does what I try to do in my classes: show the beliefs and assumptions of a time period from the inside-out, which clarifies to students that they would have believed the same things if they had been born in the same culture. This inside-out approach explains the title of Kay's Tolkien Lecture: "Just Enough Light: Some Thoughts on Fantasy and Literature." He also quoted Walter Bagehot, who said that "we must not let daylight in upon magic." Bagehot was referring to the "magic" of British royalty and politics, but Kay adapts the saying to explain why he leaves the exact details of the workings of magic unexplained in his works. Some fantasy writers, of course, do the opposite by detailing the nuts-and-bolts of magic in almost scientific fashion, but Kay believes the mystery and power of magic is lost with such explanations. Moreover, keeping the readers in the dark about how magic actually works is part of portraying the characters' worlds from the inside-out. The characters would not question or analyze their beliefs, and so neither do the readers.

Whether it is medieval China, Alfredian England, or Justinian Byzantium, readers of Kay are immersed not only in the historical details of the times—objects, geography, military practices, etc.—but in their attitudes and worldviews. Kay says in the Tolkien lecture that the setting "renders these beliefs as true." I would add that the characters also reinforce the truth of the beliefs. When reading his novels, it is impossible to feel superior to or patronizing of the characters' worldviews or assumptions, the way you might if you read about them in a history textbook. You have *been* those

people and *cared* about them, so you cannot remain distanced from them.

The following interview was conducted over email in 2021.

Kathy Cawsey: For people who aren't familiar with you and your work, could you talk about how you first became interested in writing? You trained as a lawyer, correct? When did you start thinking of yourself as a writer?

Guy Gavriel Kay: I always wanted to write, and I did write poetry in high school and as an undergraduate. My first publications and awards were for poetry. But at the same time, I'm an oldest son from the prairies, and who makes a living writing in Canada? I did allow myself a year off after finishing law school to see if I could write a novel and did the only practical thing and went to Greece to do it (Leonard Cohen, Irving Layton, exemplars!). That book (a picaresque, innocents abroad novel) was never published, but an agent sent it to several houses in New York, and the responses were hugely encouraging (I was only 24!). That did give me a sense that maybe I can do this. The next thing, which we submitted two years later, was the first part of *The Summer Tree*. Based on that, the trilogy sold in London, Toronto, and New York. I still kept my day job (I was Associate Producer of CBC's *The Scales of Justice* by then), but I did realize that I could write fiction and that, indeed, I had to. I had a contract!

Cawsey: Aside from the "high fantasy" influence of Tolkien, what other works are in the background of *The Fionavar Tapestry*?

Kay: James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890), Robert Graves' *The White Goddess* (1948), Joseph Campbell, *The Mabinogion* (1840), Thomas Malory, The *Poetic Edda*. I was so much steeped in myth, legend, and folklore at that time. The trilogy is infused with it.

Cawsey: Do any of these works still influence your writing today?

Kay: Less so, in any direct way, though they are still a part of my mental framing of many things. That doesn't go away. I became more engaged by history than by folkloric variations, but history of course includes myth and legend.

Cawsey: You've said quite often that you don't really like the term "fantasy," at least as applied to yourself, and you are quite unique for the kinds of books you write, which are part historical fiction and part fantasy. How would you describe the books that you write, and what draws you to that genre?

Kay: I actually don't like any literary labels much! That goes way back to a university paper on William Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (1609). I went into the campus library and pulled out seven or eight books of essays on it to prepare and found the play listed among his "problem comedies" and his "problem tragedies"—with savagely hilarious vituperation in the academic brawls over which applied. I ended up writing a "plague on both their houses" paper and have, ever since, felt that slots, categories, genres, and labels can obscure more often than they illuminate. Complicating it, in my own writing, is that you are correct, I suppose: I don't sit easily in any category. I'm all right with that. I prefer to be known for blurring boundaries in this way.

Cawsey: The Arthur legendarium, especially Malory, was a major influence on *The Fionavar Tapestry*, and then you seemed to leave that behind, yet you recently published a poem about Merlin and Nimue in *The Medieval Magazine*. Can you explain or explore that enduring appeal (one shared with so many others)?

Kay: It isn't so much a matter of leaving something behind. It is about two things, for me. One is having said what I feel I want to say on a subject, being the Arthurian triangle or traditional epic fantasy. It may very well be commercially useful to stay with something that has worked in the marketplace, but I find it creatively problematic. I need to be energized and challenged when I write. New things are what does that. Beyond that, as we grow, age, and change, we become interested—or perhaps I even mean we should become interested—in new and different things, and our art will (or should) evolve to embrace that.

Cawsey: In returning to this material in the recent poem, how are you exploring it in new or different ways? Or, to ask the question in a slightly different way, what "energized and challenged" you this time around?

Kay: There are many variations of the Merlin and Nimue story, including different names for her and diverse settings in England and France. I think this particular poem has its origins in a trip I took to Brittany, which of course is profoundly imbued with Celts and Arthuriana. I was a guest for a day at the Arthurian Centre in their castle on the edge of the forest of Broceliande, and I took a guided walk through the forest with one of the people coordinating their lecture series and year-round events. But, because art is usually not a straight line, it was months and months before the specific idea and tone of a poem emerged, long after I was back home.

Cawsey: When I was teaching a Canadian literature course in Hungary, I taught *Tigana* using Robert Kroetsch's essay "No Name is My Name," which argues that many traditional Canadian novels have a nameless protagonist and that the quintessence of being Canadian is namelessness. His argument seemed to provide a perfect description of the central plot of *Tigana*! Is there a way in which your exotic, international, fantastic novels that seem to be set in Greece, Byzantium, or Italy are really about Canada?

Kay: Actually, no. In my case, *Tigana* was the book where I began to think a lot about an underexplored strength of the fantastic: how it can universalize a theme. The idea of erasing the culture and identity of a conquered or subjugated people has long been a tool of tyranny. Examples are so widespread, in history and our own times, that when I've done book tours around the world I am often asked: "When you wrote *Tigana*, were you writing about us?" That question, for me, is a marker of what I wanted to achieve. Certainly in Quebec there is a real sense of identifying with the idea of a beleaguered culture and language, but that is true—and that is precisely my point—in so many places and times.

Cawsey: Could expand on that a bit? In what way does your kind of fantasy enable the universalization of a theme?

Kay: I think the absence of a specific time and place can cause a reader to be able to see a story as not tied to, not solely about, a particular time and place. So it is the very fact of being in an invented setting that does this. A reader can't, if it is done right, avoid addressing the wider possibilities of, for example, the endless, ubiquitous actions of occupying powers, as in *Tigana*.

Cawsey: Is there anything lost in that universalization?

Kay: Yes, I think so. From the writer's point of view, you can gain and lose readers! There will always be those who want a novel to "educate" them about the events surrounding the Treaty of Utrecht or the fall of Muslim Spain. These readers can find this shift into an invented setting frustrating. I suppose the technique can also relinquish the intensity of specific events and histories in exchange for a different sort of intensity of reading experience. But, really, there are a lot of novels that seek (with varying degrees of success or accuracy) to capture real events. I suppose I like aiming for a different thing.

Cawsey: The religions of the Jaddites, Kindath, and Asharites, which run through quite a few of your books, pretty obviously calque onto Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. You have said that you don't outline very much and that writing is a process of discovery for you as you are creating. Did you discover anything surprising or unexpected in writing about these religions?

Kay: What I wanted to do was explore the dynamics of religious difference, and hostilities, not the elements or beliefs of any actual faith in our world. These three invented faiths started, as you know, with *The Lions of Al-Rassan*, and then I stayed with the three of them when I came to write *Sailing to Sarantium* and *Lord of Emperors* because one of the faiths worships the sun—a god of light! My protagonist in these novels was also a mosaicist, and my reading into the art form made it so clear that it is an art form that uses light in such compelling ways. To not stay with that religion—and thus also keep the other two—felt as if it would be a terrible missed opportunity. So that counts as a surprise because I hadn't planned to do this when I first began researching Byzantium.

Cawsey: It was really thought-provoking in *The Lions of Al-Rassan* how personal friendships, loves, and loyalties crashed up against religious beliefs and loyalties (and political commitments, I might add). Could you talk a little about that? Does that dynamic carry over into other novels?

Kay: I am profoundly interested in bringing "great events" down to the personal level, so yes, this idea of the personal runs through much of my fiction.

The death of the emperor far off means far less to a farmer than the broken leg of his hired hand at harvest time (Yeats wrote about this) or a first kiss on that same day between two young people in a village. In *The Lions of Al-Rassan* I was specifically exploring how holy war, or any major conflict, can take away the space for people to make their own decisions as to friendship or love—even important people. You become caught up in the sweep of events—a cog in the turning of those gears.

Cawsey: You are one of the relatively few authors I know of who seems aware of the complexities of religious belief—how some people believe in an unquestioning, fanatical way and feel no need to question their beliefs, while others have a deep need to question their beliefs or don't believe at all but take comfort in the rituals of their tradition. Is this something you deliberately set out to do? Where does this come from?

Kay: In truth, I suspect it comes from the same place that your own response, and other readers' responses, come from: thinking about these matters, especially in a historical context. I really am anchored, to an extreme degree, in reading and considering aspects of many times and places—how they differ from each other and from our own times. I also have a drive towards complexity, I think—even towards celebrating it. That can, as a sidenote, cut hard against the cultural tendencies of our own day, but I don't mind that either.

Cawsey: Yes, I think that the complexity or even contradiction—the way real lives are lived—is something your readers appreciate in your writing. Does the "reading and brooding" you do on the historical context add to this complexity or contain it in some way by making it manageable?

Kay: All of the above at various times and in various situations!

Cawsey: How important is historical accuracy? Most readers would think that a strange question—you are "making up" entire worlds, after all—but I suspect that historical research and context matters a lot.

Kay: Here's a story about that. When I was researching *Under Heaven,* my novel inspired by Tang China and the An Lushan Rebellion, I was in touch

with many Asian Studies academics (and one brilliant pipa player!). I had lunch with one such academic to throw questions at her. Partway through she shook her head and said, "I don't get it! This is a fantasy, right? Why do you care what really happened?" It was a complete miss as to my own process, which is very much as you imply with the question. Later, another academic in the field, who by good fortune happened to be a lifetime reader of my work, was steered to me (by the one I had lunch with!). As a reader, knowing the books, she completely got my methods and my desire to learn the historical reality as much as possible. I have often said that if you are going to do variations on a theme, you need to try to know the theme.

Cawsey: Looking back over the arc of your writing—if there is one—does there seem to be a progression or development in the themes that you're exploring? I'm thinking in particular of the concept of free will vs. destiny, which is a major thread (pun intended) of *Fionavar*. Free will is still present in later works, but there seems to be a shift away from a sort of cosmic destiny to a more social concept of destiny, such as the expectations of one's parents or superiors.

Kay: Well, certainly the movement from *Fionavar* through *Tigana* and then *A Song for Arbonne* is a movement from myth, legend, and folklore towards being more directly inspired by history. But let me add something pretty basic: I began *Fionavar* in my late twenties. That's a really long time ago now. Perhaps some artists have chosen to stay put for market-driven reasons, but isn't there something wrong if we don't evolve in what engages and compels us? I haven't left behind my fascination with the past, but the past covers a lot of ground, and there are so many different themes, different reasons for writing a book, and different things one wants to say.

Cawsey: To take another example: your earlier works often deal with the "movers and shakers"—gods, kings, queens, generals, lords, and leaders—whereas *A Brightness Long Ago* deals with what Ken Dryden called "the moved and the shaken"—that is, the people on the periphery who are affected by the decisions of kings, queens, and generals. Even your inspirations seem to have changed from El Cid, King Alfred, and Queen Guinevere to the nameless people who are caught up in big events. Is that an accurate perception, or have you always been interested in the dynamic between the two?

Kay: Yes, I think that's accurate. I've always been interested in this. This is also a theme in Shakespeare's Henry IV and Henry V plays, which move between court figures and a motley crew of people (plus Falstaff!). I have, in recent years and books, become even more engaged by this idea of giving value to lives that often go unrecorded. This, by the way, links up and benefits from a major strand in the last generation or so of historians, who have—sometimes brilliantly—done exactly this, and who have thus provided me with superb research materials and inspiration!