REVIEW: Deborah Lindsay Williams. *The Necessity of Young Adult Fiction*. Oxford University Press, 2023.

by Lee Anna Maynard

Early in *The Necessity of Young Adult Fiction*, Deborah Lindsay Williams confronts head-on the prejudices encountered by students, teachers, scholars, and even casual readers of young adult (YA) novels, arguing that, rather than examples of pandering, populist escapism, as they not infrequently are characterized by scathing academic colleagues or literary critics, these texts can constitute philosophically-, cognitively-, and psychologically-significant spaces of great value to all readers – but especially to readers in adolescence and young adulthood.

The Necessity of Young Adult Fiction is one of the latest entries in Oxford's *The Literary Agenda* series, and this context is relevant to Williams' approach and resonant with her monograph's central themes. The Literary Agenda's editor, Philip Davis, charges series authors with presenting a case for literature's purpose in the face of societal and educational discounting and with demonstrating literature's ability to "[make] available much of human life that would not otherwise be existent to thought or recognizable as knowledge," as well as to spur readers to "see the world more imaginatively as a result of reading novels" (vi). Williams answers the call ably in *The Necessity of Young Adult Fiction*, positing that YA fiction in general, and the novels she analyzes particularly, offer a uniquely powerful intersection of reader, subject matter, and theme.

Williams turns her focus to speculative YA, and the often dystopic, supernatural, and/or futuristic settings featured in these novels provide fertile ground for her analysis. By weaving a theoretical framework that combines cosmopolitanism and monster theory, Williams examines not only the portrayal of outsiders and marginalized characters within the novels but also the readers who frequently occupy disempowered and marginalized positions themselves.

The first chapter, "Children of the Book," explores the relationships between characters' effectual readership and their "cosmopolitan citizenship" in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998) and G. Willow Wilson's *Alif the Unseen* (2012). Williams identifies the singular importance – for survival and, potentially, success – of being an accurate and nuanced reader within the worlds of these novels, and she links this good readership to the practice of cosmopolitanism whereby characters/participants acknowledge the possibility of error in their existing belief systems and thought processes, recalibrate their opinions and reactions based upon increased knowledge and exposure to other perspectives, and actively work to

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struggle against binary ways of viewing their communities and their relationships to others. In this, as in subsequent chapters, Williams helpfully includes sufficient summary and context for readers unfamiliar with her primary texts to be able to both follow her argument and see the broader connections to (and among) YA texts not covered by the monograph.

The second chapter, "Loving the Monsters," treats Rebecca Roanhorse's *Trail of Lightning* (2018) and *Storm of Locusts* (2019) and Nancy Farmer's *The House of Scorpion* (2002) and *The Lord of Opium* (2013). Williams builds upon the theoretical base established in the previous chapter, adding the strand of monster theory, a deeply profitable lens through which to view the adolescent experience for both characters and readers. These novels, Williams posits, not only encourage an awareness and critique of "Us vs. Them" dynamics in the societies they depict but also generate moves whereby monstrous Others become part or even the centers of affiliative communities, groups that align for ideological or social reasons instead of proximity/locality or natal kinship. Importantly, Williams notes, the ostensible monstrous Others are not required to change, to transform, to become normative in order to gain new communities or connection. The real monsters, Williams claims, are revealed by the novels to be "those who think only in terms of commodity and domination" (50).

Williams' third chapter, "Making Bridges," considers Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998) and Nnedi Okorafor's *Nsibidi Scripts* trilogy: *Akata Witch* (2011), *Akata Warrior* (2017), and *Akata Woman* (2022). Williams traces the cosmopolitanism that underpins the novels' Afrofuturistic perspectives, finding alignment between the dialectic cosmopolitan practice of recalibration and Afrofuturism's "dynamic process of exploration and reanimation, reframing [of] aspects of the local, including religious and iconographic traditions, while also challenging aspects of the local that may be limiting, oppressive, or static" (81). These texts center on young women protagonists, ranging from twelve years old to late-teenage, who navigate social, political, and physical landscapes that have been shaped by the "monsters of commodification and exploitation" – monsters that "must be defeated" (79). Each protagonist has to harness beliefs and/or powers from her own ancestral or cultural tradition in order to effectively "serve spirit," a term Williams uses to include both specific practices in Okorafor's novels and the general ethos in both Okorafor's and Hopkinson's texts (100). Serving spirit ultimately encompasses both authors' fictional worlds' positing of the need for the building of affiliative communities that prioritize individuals and connection and the environment/the planet over the prevailing push for the exploitation of resources.

In Williams's final analytical chapter, "Reading *Harry Potter* in Abu Dhabi," she shares the lessons gleaned and conclusions drawn from teaching J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels to cohorts of students from a wide array of nationalities and cultural and

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religious traditions at New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD). That this is the culminating text-based chapter of the monograph is apt: Williams' textual analysis of *Harry Potter* and her case-study approach to her students' responses and biographical experiences of reading *Harry Potter* seamlessly reiterate and reinforce the arcs of her theoretical explorations as well as the themes of the earlier texts under discussion. She tracks the importance within the *Potter* novels of cosmopolitan practices, of the formation of affiliative communities grounded on principles of inclusion and freedoms rather than "purity" and suppression/exclusion, of being an accurate reader amidst the manipulation and suppression of the press, and of the true powers of empathy and imaginative connection. Likewise, Williams highlights her students' experiences of reading *Harry Potter* on their own and in the academic context, finding it operates both as a global text and a local community, providing content around which they can affiliate, despite their disparate backgrounds; offering a fictional geographical space that functions as a shared "local" for readers who often experienced displacement, migration, or the diaspora; and modeling an empowering coalition-building (114).

The Necessity of Young Adult Fiction concludes with a robust defense of some of the very characteristics of speculative YA fiction that often lead to its exclusion from high-school curricula, K-12 reading lists, and library shelves: its tendency to question dominant hierarchies and power structures, its attention to and empowering of characters whose senses of self and relationships to others are fluid (characters whose stage of life often echoes the texts' primary readership), its emphasis on environmental decline or destruction, and its insistence upon readers' considering multiple perspectives rather than binary world views. Young Adult fiction, Williams convincingly argues, is good for readers adult and young-adult alike, precisely because it unsettles, because it encourages us to reflect upon ourselves, our world, the systems in which we participate.

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