
Danielle Kirby’s *Fantasy and Belief*, based on her 2009 PhD thesis of a similar title, is likely to be the first book published on the little-known phenomenon of the Otherkin, a community of people who identify as other-than-human beings. Kirby’s mammoth doctoral undertaking has been modestly edited down into a concise book dealing with the key points of her thesis: in the Western spiritual landscape new media and religiosity are intricately overlapping and influencing one another in ways so profound that identity groups, such as the Otherkin, are emerging as a result. Otherkin draw their ontological understandings of their non-human selves, often reported as being trapped in human bodies, from sources ranging from ancient myth to anime. After providing a glossary of sorts in her opening chapter, Kirby focuses on describing the unique community of the Otherkin in her second chapter, and spends the final two chapters elaborating on the vast, eclectic, and fascinating sourcepool employed in Otherkin myth-making. Kirby describes this work as a ‘limpet to the leviathan’ (p. 4) of Chris Partridge’s seminal volumes *The Re-Enchantment of the West* (2004) and indeed this book goes a long way in demonstrating Partridge’s re-enchantment thesis in action.

In framing her argument Kirby spends a chapter setting up her definitions, including concepts such as the cultic milieu, secularisation, occulture, and even some seemingly straightforward or common ideas like magic, science fiction, and myth. This segment, however, is concise and excellently referenced, providing a useful overview of central points for those readers who may be new to the field of religious studies. Even for the seasoned religious studies academic this chapter is beneficial as it sets the parameters, broad as they may be, for how Kirby will bring together the notions of spirituality, fantasy, fiction, and belief. When describing the nature of the Otherkin community, which exists mostly online, Kirby is again succinct, quoting canonical digital texts to allow the voices of Otherkin to explain what one calls their ‘unorthodox, and possibly quite bizarre’ belief systems (p. 40). Kirby then brings into the discussion an overview of Jediism, the Church of All Worlds, and Paganism to provide some comparison with how different groups have approached and absorbed fantasy, sci-fi, and mythological texts for religious purposes. While an interesting connection, one feels that it should either have been made in a simple footnote, or conversely, have become a major part of the discussion. As an addendum to the description of the Otherkin, it appears a little random, even irrelevant.

By the time we are at the third chapter, ‘Sources of Content’, Kirby’s style of delivering quick bursts of information under equally sparse subtitles is beginning to make the book look like an annotated index or encyclopaedia, making obvious this project’s origin as a doctoral thesis. However, perhaps this is not the worst way to go about a study of such a new and relatively unheard of group as the Otherkin. Kirby provides more of her characteristically short but information-rich mini-definitions for the most common kin-types, Dragons, Elves, Fairies, etc., and ties in magical practices and worldviews found in
both established traditions and the oc/cultic milieu, allowing us to see how these identities and concepts exist in both the mundane world around us, and in the intimate, personal space of identity construction.

Chapter 4 constitutes what this reviewer considers an invaluable analysis of the relationship of digital culture to metaphysical communities like the Otherkin. It is far from incidental that the Otherkin community exists almost exclusively in the virtual sphere. The multitudinous modes of information gathering and sharing, private and public communication, and identity-play and experimentation made available by the Internet have had a notable impact on most religious groups, but particularly those which are new, ‘alternative’, and technically attuned. Kirby unites the existence of gaming and virtual worlds, remix culture, and fandom, all things inherent to the web, to the development of creative ontological groups and their bricolage-style belief systems. She takes care to distance her theorisation, however, from the interpretation of this phenomenon as the product of consumer capitalism or as evidence of the ‘McDonaldisation’ of religion. Kirby makes an effective argument for the consideration of the Otherkin’s ‘radically idiosyncratic approach’ (p. 125) outside of the bounds of outmoded and potentially elitist dichotomisations like high/low culture, sacred/profane, and serious/playful. This book, in its totality, presents a very convincing case for the reassessment of such methodological constructs in the face of ever-changing and innovative styles of personalised religion.

This book is brilliant as an introduction to and analysis of the Otherkin community and the significance of its relationship with fantasy and fiction. It will be easily read and understood by any interested party, and provides a solid platform from which more studies of this group can launch. Even so, the style of the book has its issues. As mentioned, the entire work is cut up into tiny, arbitrarily arranged segments, and while these provide an informational power-punch, this configuration interrupts flow and direction. The editor has allowed for repetitious phrases, typos, and misspellings of names of scholars, which, in a work this short especially, irritatingly stand out to the reader. Curiously, the author includes an appendix of survey results, administered online to eighty Otherkin respondents, with some fascinating data emerging—for example, the propensity toward gender fluidity or androgyny, the majority of respondents as aged between 18-25, and a high number of individuals hailing from the U.S. Yet these data receive no analysis and the reader is left wondering why they were included at all, since they were not drawn upon to substantiate the 2009 thesis, nor, it seems, the claims in this book. This information does, nonetheless, provide a teaser, if you like, for what fascinating research is yet to be done on the demographic features of the Otherkin and what this might tell us about the direction of contemporary spirituality in the re-enchanted West.

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