Urban Fantasy:
A Literature of the Unseen

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WHAT IS URBAN FANTASY? THE GENRE IS AS POPULAR AMONG READERS AS IT is unexplored by scholars. Yet, opinions about what urban fantasy is, or should be, are legion, offered by readers, writers, critics, and various professionals of the book market. This article is not intended to add another definition. Instead, it will examine the nature of urban fantasy by interrogating that wide range of opinions and construct a broader generic understanding from them.

First, I offer a brief overview of the historical roots that have been suggested for urban fantasy, followed by a discussion about how to circumvent some of the problems with genre definitions. I then aggregate the claims, suggestions, and observations from eleven different accounts of urban fantasy, analyzing their varied views on four main areas: worlds and settings, cities and urbanity, central characters, and the sources of fantastic elements. Finally, I discuss how three major threads in the accounts reveal the genre's central, thematic concern with what I call "the Unseen" (though that term is not generally used in the texts that I analyze), and I trace some major constituents of this theme and address a few of its expressions. Before turning to this analysis, however, I need to consider the status of urban fantasy as a genre.

As Brit Mandelo and others have suggested, it makes sense to refer to urban fantasy as a genre in its own right rather than see it as a subgenre to fantasy. That urban fantasy is at least a generic hybrid is often pointed out (for instance by McLennon, Holmes, and Mandelo); its root genres are not only fantasy but Gothic horror and romance, and it can also draw on mystery, science fiction, and crime fiction. How much, and what, each root contributes to the works of particular urban fantasists—indeed, to particular texts—varies greatly. It has been proposed that "'[u]rban fantasy' is almost as wide a term as 'fantasy' or 'science fiction' for how much space it can cover thematically" (Mandelo). In the face of such generic width and hybridity, two observations can be made: first, it is difficult to view urban fantasy in terms of a "fuzzy set"

in the way that Brian Attebery fruitfully analyzes the fantasy genre (*Strategies* 12–17). There are no prototypal urban fantasy texts, as each combination of roots creates its own set of central works. Second, calling urban fantasy a "subgenre" would not only belittle it, it would raise the issue of to what the form would be subordinated: would it be to fantasy, to horror, to romance, to crime fiction, or to any other possible genre? For these reasons, I will refer to urban fantasy as a genre in my discussion. (I invite readers with strong views on the subject to read "subgenre" where it says "genre" below.)

Determining what specific date or writer marks the appearance of a particular type of literature is always fraught with difficulties and entails a certain amount of arbitrariness. The beginnings of urban fantasy have been assigned to various points in time and connected to different originators. In his entry in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997), John Clute traces the history of urban fantasy from the edifices of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) to contemporary urban fantasists. To him, the mid-19th century writers Charles Dickens and Eugène Sue are literary progenitors, but he refrains from giving a specific date for when the genre began. Alexander C. Irvine proposes an even longer heritage for the fantastic city, tracing its roots "in utopian and quest literature all the way back to the Ur of Gilgamesh" (202). Helen Young similarly acknowledges a long history for one sort of urban fantasy, back to Plato's *Republic* and Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) (141).

Young and many others also see another sort of urban fantasy as a more recent phenomenon. Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James claim that Edith Nesbit "created what we now think of as urban fantasy" in the early 20th century (25–26), clearly seeing the genre as firmly rooted in fantasy history. Writer Jeannie Holmes suggests that Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) indicated the beginning of the genre (and mentions Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* [1818], Bram Stoker's *Dracula* [1897], and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" [1842] among its possible precursors). It is more common to locate the origin of the form at some point in the 1980s, whether in the early (McLennon; Di Filippo), early to mid (Irvine 200), mid to late (Beagle 10), or late 1980s and early 1990s (Young 141; Donohue). These six texts are also in some agreement about the literary progenitors of urban fantasy, naming Charles de Lint, Emma Bull, and Terry Windling as well as Mercedes Lackey, Tim Powers, Will Shetterly, and Neil Gaiman. Already from the various choices of beginnings, the hybridity of the genre is clear: the Victorian tale of the magic city, the Gothic roots, and the meeting between folktales and modernity are all present.

Mendlesohn and James as well as Clute make it clear that they consider the form to predate the term *urban fantasy*. In a recent review, Paul Di Filippo claims the term to "receive wide usage [...] around the start of the 1980s" (Di Filippo). Searching the large collection of texts that is Google Books (using the

Ngram Viewer), the earliest reference to "urban fantasy" as a particular type of literature that I could find comes from a 1978 issue of *The Magazine of Science Fiction and Fantasy*. In the Books section, Algis Budrys refers to Fritz Leiber: "when we speak so glibly now of 'urban fantasy', we pay passing homage to the man who practically invented it … in a 1941 story called 'Smoke Ghost'" (119). Leiber is certainly a perfectly valid candidate for a progenitor of urban fantasy, because of stories such as "Smoke Ghost" and also through his stories set in the city of Lankhmar, in Nehwon, the secondary world that is home to Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser. He is no more than yet another candidate, however, nor is the Google dataset evidence of *the* first use of *urban fantasy* as a label for a particular type of fiction. The *Ngram Viewer* also shows how the term "urban fantasy" is used with increasing frequency from the late 1970s to 2008, the final year for which data are offered. The genre may have appeared under that name at some point in the seventies, with roots that go much further back, but there is little doubt that its popularity has increased over the past three decades.[1]

This increased usage mirrors a growing popularity as well as a broader application of the term to different kinds of texts. This broader application is also observed by Leigh M. McLennon in her "Defining Urban Fantasy and Paranormal Romance: Crossing Boundaries of Genre, Media, Self and Other in New Supernatural Worlds." Di Filippo describes the wider application of the term *urban fantasy* as usurpation, but his point remains the same as McLennon's: the term can cover different kinds of works today than it once did. Assuming that the term was first applied only to a small number of writers and their very particular way of writing, this seems not only reasonable but indeed inevitable given the great number of new writers who are trying their hand at developing the genre (and publishers who develop the label for marketing reasons). Today, there are so many texts published as urban fantasy that critics have begun to subdivide them, for instance into two (Irvine 200; Donohue) or three (Beagle 10) subcategories. Alternatively, arguments have been made for urban fantasy being the same thing, or belonging to the same spectrum, as paranormal romance (e.g., McLennon). Clearly there is need to discuss how the urban fantasy genre can be defined.

Formulating a comprehensive definition of urban fantasy is far from easy, and it may not even be necessary. An analysis of how various people define a particular group of literary texts can in itself reveal something about those texts. My intention here is *not* to produce a new definition of urban fantasy, nor to select one and proclaim that it alone is correct or best suited to my purpose. I profess no comprehensive knowledge of the vast corpus of urban fantasy fiction: any discussion about the nature of the genre based only on my own reading would by necessity be idiosyncratic and limited. Moreover, Attebery points out how "genre criticism is rife with boundary disputes and definition wars" (*Strategies* 11) and McLennon's article provides a good example of how this is very much the case also when it comes to the definitions of urban fantasy. At the end of the day, however, it makes little difference whether a particular text *belongs* to one genre or the other. To paraphrase Attebery, "[t]he interesting question about any given story is not whether or not it is [urban fantasy or paranormal romance], but rather what happens when we read it as one of those things" (*Stories* 38; Attebery made his point about fantasy, science fiction, and "realistic novels"). As I believe that there are valuable insights to be gleaned from all the many definitions, I will do my best not simply to dig another trench.

Many—and there really are a great number of them—different definitions are not as problematic as one may be led to believe. Instead, they call to mind Ursula K. Le Guin's words, from her introduction to the English edition of Jorge Luis Borges et al's *Antologia de la Literatura Fantástica* (1940):

> Because ghosts inhabit, or haunt, one part of the vast domain of fantastic literature, both oral and written, people familiar with that corner of it call the whole thing Ghost Stories, or Horror Tales; just as others call it Fairyland after the part of it they know or love best, and others call it Science Fiction, and others call it Stuff and Nonsense. (Le Guin 10–11)

Le Guin's point is not only well made but, I would argue, well worth making. Rather than entering the "boundary disputes and definition wars," I start from the assumption that people who define or describe urban fantasy know a great deal about the genre; they just approach it from different perspectives—describing different corners, in Le Guin's words. These perspectives take various bodies of texts as their respective points of departure, look at different selections of traits and features, and examine longer or shorter time periods. Much as the fractured view of a bug's compound eyes can be reconciled into one complex image, the many perspectives on urban fantasy can be aggregated to discover some of the genre's underlying characteristics.

Aggregating several definitions and descriptions—accounts—of urban fantasy provides a better opportunity to understand its nature and its concerns than does any single defining venture. The accounts vary in how wide or narrow their definitions of urban fantasy are, and in whether they approach urban fantasy within "a rigid pattern of setting, character and plot" (Attebery, *Strategies* 9), that is, as a literary formula; or see it as a genre, "a set of artistic limitations and potentials" (Cawelti 7). To bring the various perspectives together, I assume that each account contains a number of ideas relevant to the nature of urban fantasy and that, taken together, these ideas will provide a broader understanding of the genre than would examining only a single account—or indeed an arbitrary selection of fiction. I will then use the aggregate to explore typical characteristics of urban fantasy further.

I use eleven accounts—both definitions and descriptions of urban fantasy—to create my aggregate. Six are scholarly sources (Clute, Ringel, Mendlesohn and James, Irvine, McLennon, and Young; originally published between 1996 and 2015), selected by virtue of being written about the genre for a scholarly audience. Although other scholars have occasionally approached urban fantasy, these six texts consider the genre in some depth and in relation to other forms of speculative fiction. Four of the remaining five are accounts by people who, in one way or other, operate in the urban fantasy "market": producers and purveyors of urban fantasy (published 2008 to 2012). They have been selected partly because of the variety of intended readers: professional librarians (Donohue), potential writers of urban fantasy (Holmes), knowledgeable readers/fans (Mandelo), and curious members of the public (Waller and Ormes). Their views are not unique, but provide good examples of particular types of ubiquitous opinions.

To these ten textual sources, I have added a final "account" (from 2015), itself a compound of multiple expressions of the nature of urban fantasy, in the form of a large set of cover art. When searching for images with the search term "urban fantasy" cover, the Google search engine returns hundreds of book covers. To provide detailed analysis of each one of them is beyond the scope of this article, but I have allowed my impressions of the totality of cover art examples to provide one of the perspectives on the nature of urban fantasy. From the eleven accounts, I have aggregated their views on settings, including both what kind of world the story is set in and whether a metropolitan setting is required; on typical features of central characters; and on fantastic elements and where they come from.

Settings and Worlds

Both primary and secondary worlds can provide settings for urban fantasy. The earliest critical source I have been able to find on the nature of the genre is Clute's "urban fantasy" entry in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. This entry, together with the entry for "city," was published in *Paradoxa* (2:1) in 1996, and in the encyclopedia the following year. To Clute, urban fantasies "are normally texts where fantasy and the mundane world intersect and interweave throughout a tale which is significantly *about* a real city" ("Urban Fantasy" *Encyclopedia* 975). He allows for the possibility of locating an urban-fantasy story in a city in a secondary world, but stresses that in such case, the city must be "an environment," not just a backdrop.

Other accounts take different positions on the primary/secondary world issue. In *A Short History of Fantasy* (2009), Mendlesohn and James equate urban fantasy with "low fantasy" (26), a term defined by Kenneth Zahorski and Robert Boyer as fantasy "set in the conventional here and now" (56), that is, in a primary world. Other accounts take a similar position: McLennon

includes a primary-world setting with fantastic elements on her list of seven prominent urban-fantasy elements. In a seminar on urban fantasy in 2012, Karin Waller and Nene Ormes (who work for Sweden's largest chain of SF book stores; Ormes is also a writer of urban fantasy) explicitly exclude stories that are not set in the "here and now" from the genre, but acknowledge that other definitions include such stories.

Other accounts take a more moderate position, proposing that the world is clearly recognizable as ours, although possibly in the near future (Mandelo; Holmes). Often, this could be read as an alternative present: according to writer and critic Brit Mandelo, there is a major subdivision in urban fantasy between stories set in a modern, recognizable world, and stories set in a world that has become aware of the supernatural. (I will address this point further below.)

Faye Ringel's contribution to *This Year's Work in Medievalism* for 1995 is one of the first scholarly texts to look more broadly at the form; she makes no explicit point about whether the urban-fantasy world is primary or secondary, and although the majority of her example texts are set in primary worlds, she also includes the secondary world of *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* (1994) by Michael Swanwick ("Bright" 180–81). To Irvine, urban fantasy can be set in either a primary or a secondary world. His chapter in the *Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* (2012) also offers a broad analysis of the form, and to him urban fantasy consists of two main strains, which he sees as opposite ends of a literary axis rather than as binary oppositions. One strain contains a more or less recognizable, contemporary city which is revealed to be in contact with Faerie; the other strain centers on a city which "creates its own rules, independent of existing canons of folklore" (200–201). The latter strain does not expressly have to be set in a secondary world, but Irvine's examples—such as New Crobuzon in *Perdido Street Station* and Ambergris in *Shriek*—all are. (Young agrees with Irvine on this point, but her interest lies with the former strain.)

City and Urbanity?

To what extent an urban-fantasy setting has to be urban is also an issue where views diverge. The opinions range from an emphasis on the urban (Clute; Ringel, "Bright"; Irvine) to any contemporary, primary-world location. To Waller and Ormes, urban fantasy does not have to be set in a metropolis but can be set in a town, in rural areas, or on a journey, as long as it is our contemporary world. Young similarly accepts urban fantasy without cities. In the chapter on urban fantasy in *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* (2016), she argues that the kind of urban fantasy she discusses, which she refers to as Suburban Fantasy "to delineate it within the broader sub-genre" (141), does not need a metropolitan setting. *Suburban*, according to Young,

should be understood both as literally suburban, in that the setting can be on the fringes of a metropolis; and as sub-urban, with the fantastic intruding from beneath as well as from the past. In Suburban Fantasy, (urban) modernity is confronted by that which has been pushed out of sight or out of mind. To Young, the "urban" in urban fantasy is a cultural feature or mind-set rather than a place: the stories explore situations in which modernity's suppressed history re-surfaces (141–42). This broad approach to the urban-fantasy setting is reflected in the book covers that I explored. On those covers, the urban landscape does not come across as dominant: the scenes portrayed are just as often set in forest locations or undefined locales. The impression is not of a genre where the metropolitan environment is central; instead, other characteristics of the books are brought to the fore.

The metropolitan setting is largely assumed, however. The urban or city locations are mentioned but neither emphasized nor downplayed by Mendlesohn and James as well as by Mandelo. In a *Library Journal* piece from 2008, Nanette Wargo Donohue writes with the intention of aiding libraries in developing urban-fantasy collections. Although she distinguishes between *traditional* and *contemporary* urban fantasy, the difference in setting between them is slight. In traditional urban fantasy, "the locales are modern urban environments," whereas works of the contemporary type are set in "grittier urban landscapes"—a possible reference to the urban landscape developed in the modern urban-Gothic tradition. Holmes, in a 2010 blog post meant to detail the "Rules" of urban fantasy (if only to encourage writers to break them),[2] establishes that the "setting is a large city such as Los Angeles, New Orleans, or St. Louis." The "urban" in urban fantasy is largely left unquestioned or unaddressed by these writers, although Mandelo accepts that stories which largely follow Clute's definition—they are set in identifiable, primary-world cities and the urban landscape plays a central role—make up "one subset of urban fantasy, and one of the oldest parts of the genre" (Mandelo, comment 2).

Clute, Ringel, and Irvine all emphasize the role of the city setting in urban fantasy, but in different ways. Ringel's view is that urban fantasy "juxtaposes medieval tropes and characters with urban settings" ("Bright" 175). Although Irvine sees the form as a continuum between two strains, both strains are dependent on a city environment. In one strain, the narrative redeploys tropes and characters of older fairy tales and folklore, forcing them into collision with a contemporary urban milieu. In the second strain, the city is "a *genius loci*, animating the narrative and determining its fantastic nature" (201). At the extreme are "stories of the fantastic city," according to Irvine, "distinguishable from real or almost-real cities in which fantastic events occur" (201). Clute takes a different position. "A city is a *place*; urban fantasy is a *mode*," he declares ("Urban Fantasy" *Encyclopedia* 975), and in *The Greenwood Encyclo-*

pedia of Science Fiction and Fantasy (2005), he insists that "stories merely about irruptions of supernatural forces within a city [...] do not qualify" as urban fantasy (852). There is a sense that not just any city will do, either: the density or intensity rather than size of the city is important. Clute argues that the form has its primary origin in the edifice, which is "more than a house and less than a city" ("Edifice" 309). And although neither says so explicitly, both Clute and Irvine give the impression (in the stories "of the fantastic city") that the city itself is one of the main characters in an urban fantasy.

Distinctive Characters

Regardless of whether the city is a central character or not, a wide variety of human and parahuman characters are suggested as distinctive for urban fantasy in the eleven accounts. This variety includes strong female protagonists, who are explicitly mentioned by five of the accounts. Judging from the book covers, the overwhelming majority of protagonists in urban fantasy today are women. (And a gender-based critique of these "cover-girls" with their bare midriffs, deep cleavages, and contorted poses would be interesting but is unfortunately beyond the scope of this article.) Most of them have long, dark or red hair, wield some sort of weapon, and their demeanor is largely one of confidence and boldness. The "tough female protagonists" (Donohue) of urban fantasy are pointed out as characteristic for the genre by Donahue, Holmes, and Mandelo. Ringel observes the presence of female questors but indicates that this has to do with feminist authors ("Bright" 177). McLennon describes how the female monster-hunter or investigator with supernatural abilities is among the prominent generic elements in the combined urban fantasy/paranormal romance genre.

The investigator, detective, monster-hunter or supernatural problem-solver is described as a typical character for the genre. Mandelo combines character types and plot structures when she suggests that "[s]ome of these books are about heroines running around with dashing vampires and broody werewolves stomping evil and having romances. Some of them are police procedurals, some of them are humorous detective stories, and some of them are dark twisty emotional dramas." While Mandelo only implies the presence of investigator characters by noting the crime-story plots, Young observes that the "detective" figure is common to urban fantasy. She adds it to Irvine's list of prominent character types—artists, musicians, and scholars (Irvine 200)—observing how they all "create meaning from chaos and disorder" and participate in making the unknown known (Young 142).

Mandelo's "dashing vampires and broody werewolves" raises another issue: the appearance of the non-human in urban fantasy. Particular types of non-human or parahuman beings populate the worlds of urban fantasy. They appear as protagonist and antagonist, as allies, threats, or general citizens.

Often, urban fantasy is subdivided by whether these fantastic characters have stepped out of (predominantly British) folktales or (Gothic) horror stories, and they are considered important in determining urban fantasy's lineage and generic nature.

Two particular kinds of parahuman characters have entered urban fantasy from dark fantasy and horror fiction. Mendlesohn and James parenthetically (and facetiously) remark that the constantly changing definition of urban fantasy "currently seems to require werewolves" (26). Holmes emphasizes dark fantasy and horror as literary precursors or early forms, mentioning not only works by Rice, Stoker, and Poe but also Laurell K. Hamilton's first Anita Blake book (*Guilty Pleasures* [1993]). Donohue's *contemporary urban fantasy* "plays on themes drawn from popular culture, including horror movies, TV shows like cult classic *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), and lore about such paranormal creatures as vampires and werewolves." Waller and Ormes similarly observe how common such beings are, and although monsters rarely appear on the book covers, those that do appear include a few wolves and werewolves (along with one or two scaly creatures and occasional winged characters). There is no denying that vampires and werewolves have taken up an important place among the urban-fantasy *dramatis personae*.

Other non-human characters are borrowed from more traditional fantasy matter with particular focus on European folklore. Donohue describes what she calls *traditional urban fantasy*, which she sees as influenced by folklore and fairy tales, as does Irvine in his discussion of the urban fantasy strain "in which *urban* is a descriptor applied to *fantasy*" (200–201). Windling's *Borderland* (1986), Bull's *War for the Oaks* (1987), and de Lint's Newford stories ("That Explains Poland" [1988] is among the first of these) are cited as early examples by both as well as by Waller and Ormes. Denizens of Faerie are apparently common in at least some areas of the genre.

Fantastic Elements

A final major area in the eleven accounts concerns how the fantastic elements are portrayed and from where they originate. In her "basic narrative paradigm" of urban fantasy, McLennon claims that the story "occurs in a world in which the boundaries between reality and the supernatural fantastic have been destabilized or re-ordered entirely." This combination of mundane and fantastic appears to be central to most if not all of the accounts I have examined, although most express it in more concrete terms.

To Clute, the relation between mundane and fantastic is a crucial factor in deciding whether a text is urban fantasy or not. He proposes that the "intersecting and interweaving" of the supernatural and the mundane is a hallmark of the form ("Urban Fantasy" *Encyclopedia* 975) and explicitly excludes "stories merely about irruptions of supernatural forces within a city" ("Urban Fantasy" *Greenwood* 852).

In this regard, Clute is at one extreme of a spectrum which has Mendlesohn and James representing the other. They suggest that the genre "can be understood as magic entering into and disrupting the urban environment" (26), a description that suggests that urban fantasy could best be understood as a metropolitan version of Mendlesohn's *intrusion fantasy* (Mendlesohn 115ff.). They share this "irruptive" position with many of the other accounts, although some, like Irvine and Young, acknowledge the entire spectrum. According to Irvine, one end of the urban-fantasy spectrum is more irruptive while the other features stories in which the fantastic elements "derive from the nature and history of the city" (201).

A more common concern than *how* the fantastic elements enter the environment is *where* these elements come from. Ringel considers the fantastic elements to be the "trappings of medievalism—magic, elves, swords, quests, folk ballads" ("Bright" 175). Irvine sets tropes taken from "older fairytales and folklore" against fantastic elements created in conjunction with "the nature and history of the city" (201). Donohue opposes urban fantasy that is "highly influenced by folklore and fairy tales" to urban fantasy "which plays on themes drawn from popular culture, including horror movies", including "such paranormal creatures as vampires and werewolves." Several accounts even exclude narratives where the fantastic elements derive from the city rather than from existing sources, particularly if the city is part of a secondary world (Waller and Ormes are quite explicit about this). The preponderance of vampires and werewolves in the accounts could be an indication that horror is currently the dominant source of fantastic elements, as suggested by Holmes's emphasis on dark-fantasy and horror precursors. The cover art points in the same direction: the overall atmosphere, in terms of color scheme, subject, and environment, is generally one of (Gothic) horror story rather than fairy tales; the women are ready to deal with whatever unseen threat there may be in the dark, shadowy, or moonlit environments, whose very vagueness is threatening—anything can lurk in the darkness.

Other possible sources of fantastic elements are also suggested or implied. Like McLennon and Mandelo, Holmes underscores the genre's hybridity, explaining how the urban-fantasy story "can have elements pulled from other genres such as science fiction, mystery, horror, and romance [...] with varying degrees of emphasis placed on each of these genre elements." It is clearly possible to combine urban fantasy with fantastic elements from a great many genres, though fairy tales, horror, and the urban environment itself appear to offer the most prevalent sources.

The way the supernatural and mundane in urban fantasy relate to each other is addressed by two accounts in particular. Although these are similar in how they subdivide urban fantasy, they differ in that Mandelo bases her categories in the fictive worlds while Waller and Ormes mainly look at the

characters' relation to the supernatural. Mandelo subdivides the genre into stories set in a modern, recognizable world, and stories set in a world which is aware of the supernatural. Waller and Ormes are more nuanced in their categorizing. They address what they see as common ways protagonists relate to the supernatural: there are protagonists to whom the supernatural comes as a surprise; protagonists who are familiar with the supernatural from popular culture, even if they do not necessarily believe in it; and protagonists who know about the supernatural, either because they are part of a hidden supernatural domain or because the world as a whole is aware of the supernatural. A parallel to this last way is the magical secondary-world setting—Irvine includes China Miéville's New Crobuzon and Jeff VanderMeer's Ambergris as two of several examples—but such stories are not considered urban fantasy by Waller and Ormes and therefore not included their categories.

The world which has become aware of the supernatural calls into question the idea that urban fantasy should take place in our modern, identifiable world, although no account explores this. The urban-fantasy story could be set in an alternative history or in the near future; supernatural forces have always been around, or the world has gone through some form of revelation, awakening, or reintroduction of them. Examples include Charlaine Harris's Southern Vampire Mysteries (2001–13), in which vampires have gone public after the invention of artificial blood; Kim Harrison's Hollows series (2004–13), in which the near-extinction of humans in a pandemic prompts parahuman beings to step in and keep society running; and Liz Williams's Detective Inspector Chen series (2005–15), in which contact between Earth, Heaven, and Hell is possible for everyone and celestial and demonic interventions are everyday occurrences. The world aware of the supernatural, for all that it may resemble the actual world, is a different place—it is a world which, at its extreme, could be considered a secondary world. In this secondary world, the fantastic elements are not an irruption but a commonplace. Here, the mundane is not intersected by and interwoven with the supernatural but is supplanted by it.

Urban fantasy, in other words, can be a great many things. Aggregated, these eleven accounts offer a broad view of what urban fantasy is. It can be set in a secondary world metropolis which is itself a central feature of the story, a setting integral to the goings-on that can be considered a main character; or in a modern primary world which may or may not have become aware of the supernatural or mythological beings and events that dwell in it. This latter kind of setting is not necessarily urban, but it is modern and its environment is thus defined by the presence, somewhere, of cities.

The protagonist can be a social outsider; or can belong to a group that in some way creates order out of chaos or makes the unknown known (artists, musicians, scholars, investigators); or has the physical, mental, or magical

skills to take on supernatural threats (this describes most tough female protagonists). The protagonists and their allies can belong to the fantastic domain or not, be born into it or recently have discovered their powers.

The fantastic can derive from existing myths and folklore, as well as from beings well-established in Gothic horror stories, or it can arise from the urban environment itself. The existence of the fantastic can be known to the entire world or to the protagonist, or can be a shocking discovery that becomes familiar over the course of the story or series. It can combine elements from a wide range of literary genres, among which fantasy, horror, and romance are most frequently mentioned but other genres include science fiction, crime fiction, and adventure stories.

A Literature of the Unseen

Regardless of what urban-fantasy type or formula is described, however, a number of strands—tropes, character types, settings, and genre elements—interweave, indicating a thematic concern of the genre. Dark, labyrinthine, or subterranean settings that obscure our view; social outcasts we consciously look away from; and fantastical beings that hide out of sight combine to produce a strong focus on that which in some sense or other is not seen: the Unseen. The variation among the eleven accounts suggests that no strand is ubiquitous, but each attempt at pinning down urban fantasy includes at least a few examples of the Unseen, which interact with and amplify each other in the stories. My aggregation of the eleven accounts indicates three major threads, each consisting of some minor strands, that contribute to urban fantasy's concern with the Unseen. One thread involves the juxtaposition of the fantastic and urbanity or modernity in a primary-world setting or in a setting that emphasizes notions of the urban and modern in a secondary world. The use of generic elements from Gothic horror in combination with milieus that are hidden from mundane society constitutes a second thread. In a third are found protagonists who belong to or can move among marginalized social groups. These three threads will be analyzed further in the paragraphs below.

The thread in which modern urbanity is in some way confronted with the fantastic highlights the genre's most noticeable characteristics. A recurring assumption in the accounts is that urban fantasy should or can be set in the primary world, a literary approximation of our own contemporary, modern world. And although the fantastic elements may be familiar to the point-of-view characters, they are largely unfamiliar to society at large. By introducing the supernatural into accounts of modern settings, the text becomes suffused with ideas of keeping something hidden, out of sight, Unseen. Gutter wizards, urban vampires, subway cults, and city fairies keep out of sight of the general population. The protagonists who become aware of them perceive them as disruptive to their world view; or, if they are part of the magical reality, do

their best to keep hidden and secret. The combination of primary-world setting and intrusion fantasy structure requires a measure of secrecy and keeping out of sight unless the writer specifically wishes to deal with the disruptive effects of supernatural intrusion on a society at large. None of the accounts I have examined suggests that explorations of such supernatural intrusion on a social scale are particularly common to the genre, although settings in which this change has already taken place are mentioned by some. Explorations of what happens when modernity is confronted with magic are kept on a personal level, the Unseen revealed only to a few. To a large extent the accounts suggest that urban fantasy introduces the fantastic as part of a "secret history" (Ringel, "Secret"), an undertow of supernatural events unknown to society's mainstream. Keeping the Unseen in its various forms out of sight is a ubiquitous theme, partly because of the genre's juxtaposition of modernity and the fantastic.

The second thread stitches physical manifestations of the Unseen into urban fantasy settings, drawing on the Gothic tradition of darkness, winding corridors, and an architecture of concealment. In her description of "Suburban Fantasy," Young stresses the subterranean locales frequent in urban fantasy (142). The intrusion comes from underground, resides in the tunnels under a city, or hides in forgotten or abandoned places. Such settings, out of the public eye, are also part of the genre's Gothic heritage. The dark labyrinths of Gothic literature have been explored by numerous scholars and their transformation into urban environments has been described by Robert Mighall (ch. 2). These environments do not simply happen to be out of sight; they are *designed* to keep things out of view, to be places that hide rather than places to hide in. This Gothic obscurity can be found in many of the covers yielded by Google, where a distinct atmosphere is created by features such as decaying buildings, graveyards, gargoyles, and nighttime mists. The prominent Gothic component of urban fantasy thus emphasizes the thematic concern with the Unseen, by creating a milieu dominated by concealment, obscurity, and places where things can hide.

This thread has among its strands a number of creatures drawn from supernatural horror fiction, beings that have their roots in a literary tradition more closely related to Gothic fiction than fairy tales. A creature particularly mentioned in many accounts of the genre is the vampire—as protagonist, ally, or antagonist. A long literary tradition treats the vampire as outsider, hiding among humans but never fitting in, and in contemporary vampire fiction, this is one of the most important motifs (Höglund 75, 398). In her thorough exploration of the vampire's literary history, Anna Höglund pays considerable attention to this motif, in particular in relation to what she refers to as the "human vampire" (*humanvampyren*), as opposed to the "monstrous vampire" (*monstervampyren*). This kind of vampire, which began its development with

authors such as Fred Saberhagen and Rice in the 1970s, straddles the divide between the human world and the world of the vampire or monster, not fully belonging to either (337). Höglund describes how (male) human vampires create a haven not only for their own kind but for other social outsiders (397–98). Moreover, Martin Wood claims that the image of the vampire as part of a community rather than as a loner also began with Rice (60), and I would suggest that the idea of a hidden vampire "society" has become increasingly common since then. In the White Wolf role-playing game setting *The World of Darkness* (1991–2004), vampires are social creatures, but their societies are concealed within those of humanity, protected by a conspiracy that has provided this trope with a fitting name: the Masquerade. The notion that vampires would hide among their prey in plain sight is widespread in urban fantasy and reinforces the theme of something that walks Unseen in our midst. Nor are vampires the only fantastic beings that Masquerade as humans; shapeshifters and fairy creatures also move Unseen among the mundane citizens of urban-fantasy stories. In urban fantasy the Unseen is not just staying out of sight, it is hiding right in front of people's eyes.

The third thread involves that which is Unseen because it is ignored rather than concealed. Not only magical creatures are unseen by the general population—the truly marginalized members of society are also portrayed as unseeable, or even invisible. Unlike stories that focus on the Masquerade and thus show us something mainstream society is not *allowed* to see, these stories focus on the outcast and marginalized, showing us what we do not *want* to see. The cast, often including the protagonists, of urban fantasy can be drawn from people beyond or on the margins of society. Supernatural domains are constructed from social spaces with which the reader is unfamiliar: the metaphorical invisibility bestowed upon the homeless by ignoring them in the actual world is turned into magical invisibility in, for instance, Megan Lindholm's *Wizard of the Pigeons* (1986) and Gaiman's *Neverwhere* (1996) (Ekman, "Down, Out and Invisible"). De Lint terms this edited version of reality "consensus reality," including the way people refuse to see the incomprehensible (supernatural) as well as the socially undesirable.[3] Neither fantastical nor social marginalization belongs to consensual reality in de Lint's stories, but both are placed in a world out of both sight and mind (Ekman, *Here Be Dragons* 141–54). Ringel describes the homeless in particular as "the custodians of magic, saviors of the cities in which they dwell as outcasts" ("Bright" 178). Street people from society's margins and counter-cultures often populate urban fantasy, along with characters who have license to move between margin and center: liminal characters such as the artists, musicians, writers, and, above all, investigators mentioned by Irvine and Young.

The investigator character, along with a crime-fiction type plot and other elements from the crime genre, offers a way to show the Unseen. Whether pri-

vate eyes, police officers, or journalists, the investigators who are confronted with the intrusive fantastic have their reasons to move in the hidden environments, talk to unseeable social outsiders, and thus discover the Masquerading beings. Their search for the truth and a way to neutralize the intrusion becomes the driving force in the plot in the same way that the quest drives the quest narrative. In a modern landscape, the investigator provides an obvious eye through which the reader can see the Unseen.

These are not the only threads used to create a thematic concern with the Unseen in urban fantasy, but they are the most prominent ones in the accounts that I examined, and in my fractured compound-eye view of the genre they stand out clearly. Together, they reveal a genre concerned with displaying the Unseen in a way that epic fantasy, with its long journeys, majestic settings, and cast of heroes, wizards, and kings, is not. Regardless of what corner of the urban-fantasy genre is described, the Unseen is present—and presented—in some way, shape, or form; and this Unseen is largely related to a social Other, to the less savory aspects of modern/urban life: criminality, homelessness, addiction, prostitution, and physical and sexual abuse are rife in urban fantasy, either at the center of the story or as prominent parts of its milieu. Herein lies the soul of urban fantasy, whether the intrusion is dealt with by male scholars or tough females; whether the setting is London or New York, Ambergris or New Crobuzon; and whether urban vampires, modern fairies, or mysteries from the depth of history and topology arise to disrupt mundane normality. Urban fantasy is a genre of the Unseen, and it offers a way for us to discover—and discuss—it.

Acknowledgment

Notes

1. N-gram results should always be taken with a grain of salt, but the steady increase in relative frequency over the past four decades is noticeably different from frequency changes for other similar genre designations: epic fantasy has two clear spikes around

1980 and 2005 with a deep trough in-between, and paranormal romance climbs dramatically from about 2000 (to give but two examples).

2. Holmes strongly encourages a departure from the formula that she outlines. Having listed "the Rules," she points out ways in which a selection of them can be, and have been, broken. To her, urban fantasy is only a publishing label, and her argument, although very concrete, fits well with the idea of a genre as a group of works held together by similarities to some prototypal work, as suggested by Attebery, or, in Gary K. Wolfe's words, to a "central ideological lynchpin" (Attebery *Strategies* 12–14; Wolfe 24–25). Her position raises the question at what point a work of fiction ceases to fall under the urban-fantasy label, however; can a text remain urban fantasy even if all rules are broken?

3. The term has been used by many before him, but not necessarily including the editing of reality in the concept. Perhaps most pertinent to fantasy scholarship is Kathryn Hume's definition of fantasy as "any departure from consensus reality" (21).

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Abstract

This article analyzes the nature of urban fantasy by aggregating the claims, suggestions, and observations made by several different accounts of what urban fantasy is. These accounts comprise six scholarly sources and four sources written by people who are producers and purveyors of urban fantasy. An eleventh "account" is made up of the impressions conveyed by a vast number of book covers identified through Google Image Search. These eleven accounts are analyzed with regard to their views on worlds and settings, cities and urbanity, central characters, and the sources of fantastic elements. Finally, the article presents how three major threads in the accounts reveal that urban fantasy has a central, thematic concern with the Unseen. This Unseen is largely related to a social Other that portrays unpleasant aspects of urban life, such as criminality, homelessness, addiction, prostitution, and physical and sexual abuse.