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You're an Orphan When Science Fiction Raises You

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Abstract

In *Among Others*, Jo Walton's fairy story about a science-fiction fan, science fiction as a genre and archive serves as an adoptive parent for Morwenna Markova as much as the extended family who provide the more conventional parenting in the absence of the father who deserted her as an infant and the presence of the mother whose unacknowledged psychiatric condition prevented appropriate caregiving. Laden with allusions to science fictional texts of the nineteen-seventies and earlier, this epistolary novel defines and redefines both family and community, challenging the groups in which we live through the fairies who taught Mor about magic and the texts which offer speculations on alternative mores. This article argues that Mor's approach to the magical world she inhabits is productively informed and futuristically oriented by her reading in science fiction. *Among Others* demonstrates a restorative power of agency in the formation of all social and familial groupings, engaging in what Donna J. Haraway has described as a transformation into a Chthulucene period which supports the continuation of kin-communities through a transformation of the outcast. In *Among Others*, the free play between fantasy and science fiction makes kin-formation an ordinary process thereby radically transforming the social possibilities for orphans and others.

Keywords: adoption, Chthulucene, community, fairy tales, fantasy, genre, intertextuality, kin-formation, orphans, science fiction

Morwenna Markova, raised by her reading at least as much as by her extended Welsh family, is the epistolary protagonist of Jo Walton's *Among Others* (2010), a fantasy novel built on the intellectual underpinnings of the science fiction and fantasy literature Mor so passionately reads. The action of this coming-of-age narrative occurs chiefly throughout an academic year, as Mor journals and reads herself

into terms with her difficult past and a found family. Through Mor's reliance on science fiction, *Among Others* extensively defines and redefines both family and community, arguing for the restorative power of agency in the formation of all such groupings.

Following warnings to the reader and a prefatory flashback to an incident from several years previous, fifteen-year-old Mor's journal begins in September 1979, recounting the day before her newly-met father would drive her off to boarding school. Daniel Markova had abandoned Mor and the rest of her family when she was still an infant. Having had no contact with the family in the intervening years between his departure and the novel's opening, Daniel has effectively orphaned his children and is a complete stranger to Mor until she meets him in 1979.

Worse, Liz, mother to Mor and her twin sister, is a magician but not entirely sane. Mor thinks of her mother as a "dark queen," such as J.R.R. Tolkien's Galadriel forecasts she would become were she to take for herself the power of the ruling ring (Walton 60; Tolkien 473). Less fantastical descriptions of Liz Markova note her general inability to engage with the *soi disant* real world, including a numerological approach to deciding her daily attire, leading to "wear[ing] her wedding dress to go shopping [or] a winter coat in July" (73). For much of their childhood the girls would be raised by the extended Phelps family, chiefly their mother's sister and their maternal grandparents. This taking in left Liz's inability to parent un-discussed and un-addressed; instead, the family continued a precedent of multiple generations' standing; taking in nieces and nephews to supplement absent, dead, or inattentive parents.

As is common in urban fantasy, being able to see magical beings or to use magic oneself is not available to everyone; in this novel, children, with their malleable beliefs, are more likely to recognize the magic around them. This and the family's reluctance to address Liz's psychological and moral unsuitability as a mother keeps the family from helping Mor and her sister protect themselves effectively against Liz's use of magic: Mor and her sister are the only ones who recognized Liz's magic alongside her madness. The girls rely instead on guidance from the fairies living in the ruins of industrialization on the hills around their town.¹ This guidance had been substantial. By the November before the novel begins, Mor and her

sister had successfully been able to use the fairies' guidance to stop their mother from working to bind significant magical power to herself; in doing so, Mor's sister was killed and Mor was lamed.

Following Mor's recovery from her injuries, she runs away, completing her orphaning as she has been abandoned by her father, has lost her sister, and hopes to escape her mother. Her family has ceased to be family for her: "when I needed someone, somehow that net of family that I counted on to be there for me, the way you might bounce down on a trampoline, disappeared, and instead of bouncing back I hit the ground hard" (46). Instead, she is taken into state care during the summer and ultimately delivered to a father she has never known, whose wealthy half-sisters now expect Mor to embrace the boarding school experience they had enjoyed in an English countryside that feels utterly alien to a girl raised in Wales. None of Daniel Markova's family acknowledges that Mor has now also lost her country. Nor do they substantively step in to raise Mor but rather throw her to the responsibility of the school.

In school she becomes Morwenna Markova, losing all of the names she had used, no longer being known by her grandfather's surname (Phelps) or called by the nicknames (Mo and Mor) she had shared interchangeably with her sister. Despite attempts to distinguish them, like colour coding their clothes or, more sadistically, setting dogs at them to watch for Mor's sister to show fear, Walton's narrator clearly treats both herself and her sister as having been an interchangeable set, while both lived (14, 256). Now as the surviving half, she partly erases her sister and partly reinscribes her by assuming her name. Thus, Mor participates in the picaresque disguise tradition on which the eighteenth-century orphan novels build strategies for self-definition. Nina Auerbach ascribes to these orphans' schemings and to their changing social statuses a "capacity for perpetual rebirth, [a] continual ability to shuck off the past and begin life anew, a lonely freedom appropriate to a being who is without a past to begin with" (398). However, for Mor, keeping her sister alive turns out to complicate the final disposition of her sister's soul. Summoned back to the Welsh valleys for Halloween by the fairies, Mor is taught to gather oak leaves to help the past year's departed cross over; she clings too long to her sister that night and her sister misses the window despite having one

of the oak leaves that served as passes through the darkness (87-90). Much later, Mor will instead help her sister to become one of the fairies, assisting her into a new kinship group (297).

Cast into the care of a school rather than the fairies, Mor places science fiction, as a growing literary archive and as a community of readers and writers, in the parental role. As Maria Holmgren Troy, Elizabeth Kella, and Helena Wahlström observe, in literature female orphans frequently “aim [...] to form bonds with people around [them] and to find, or perhaps create, a home” (16). In Mor’s case, she looks to her reading in the genre, the wisdom and creativity of its authors, and the analyses of fellow fans to support and develop her maturing worldviews. It is this kin-community, along with the fairies, that establishes for Mor a family against which her mother stands as a dangerous outside opponent, reaching in to strike against Mor.

Because Mor’s past and present are marked by the instructions she has taken from both science fiction and fairies, *Among Others* puts the line – however blurry – between fantasy and science fiction in play. One frame through which to consider this is Arthur C. Clarke’s “laws” about predicting what will become scientifically possible, laws that run up against what he characterizes as a “failure of imagination” (20). While affirming that these failures often happen because “breakthroughs” by “their very nature [...] can never be anticipated,” Clarke’s backhanded comparison of the science of the future to magic points to how few people understand the inner workings of their technological tools and toys (20, 24). Turned around, Clarke’s laws would seem to think of magic as the kind of thing that works – in narrative – by natural laws.ⁱⁱ Mor treats her magic as potential technology, and her method in a somewhat systematic investigation of magic as she has experienced it is twofold: she not only practices experimental magic (by extrapolating from what she has learned in interactions with the fairies back in Wales) to attempt spells that accomplish her own ends, but also considers how her magic might conform to rules, either those of the physical universe or those of the books she has read. In this experimentation and consideration, she discovers “why people don’t write real magic books. It’s just too difficult to put words around it” (126). Here she finds herself in a dilemma similar

to that of quantum physicists working to articulate real circumstances in terms of counterintuitive behaviours and probabilistic realities. Quantum mechanics sounds increasingly like fantastical smoke and mirrors, especially in its claims that causality works differently at the quantum scale.

Mor knows any effort to persuade people who have not seen the fairies that magic is real would founder on the indirect and disproportionate relationship between the little gestures of magical invocation and the significant effects arising from spell work. Mor and her sister shut down a factory by casting flowers into a pool of water there; all her other magical effects have, likewise, worked not by clearly transferring linear cause and effect but by building “chains of coincidence” (40). How the magic works to cause its effects is something Mor cannot explain in terms of physical causality because our language around causality does not include things like a knife that wants another taste of her grandmother’s blood (56). Part of Mor’s struggle to present her understanding of magic in words is that when she does so she knows she sounds like she is in a fairy tale, undermining the goal of communicating her conclusions and risking alienating herself explicitly from her audience. Another component is that she is not sure magic should be written down. Her partial explanations, developing principles of connection arising through shared purpose, extended proximity, or metaphorical representation, struggle against an awareness that these natural connections are used to do seemingly unnatural things, with magic reaching backwards through time to set small causes in motion towards large effects, changing reality itself in the future as well as in the past.

Despite the difficulties of framing magic’s natural operations in ordinary causal language, Mor comes to understand its strongly associative logic well enough both to work out what she did that showed her mother where she was shortly after the start of the school year and to develop a spell of her own for protection from Liz’s renewed attentions. In Mor’s systematic efforts to discover whether fairies lived in England as well as Wales, she made the connection that enabled her to have an interaction with a fairy and inadvertently made it possible for other connections to be made, such as her mother’s with her (39). When Mor

decides her mother's awareness is an urgent danger, she wards herself from Liz's influence and at the same time works to place herself more successfully in her chosen community. The spell she develops (working for the first time on her own understanding of magic rather than under the specific instruction of a fairy) is equally to establish protection from Liz and to develop a true kin-community. The components she uses are a ring of stones, a pair of apples, and her own blood: a boundary, a connection, and a symbol attached to both (125-7). She rejects her dangerous and unchosen relative precisely as she seeks to produce a healthy kin-community.

Although Mor exhausts her ability to explain magic, she manages to set this fantastic element of her world onto the beginnings of a scientific footing, conjoining two related genres as her actions move forward through the protection and kin-forming strategies of a cognitive magical practice. The day after her spell, she is told that the town library she has been using weekly for two months has a science-fiction reading group about which she had never heard (128). The sudden appearance of a group of likeminded readers strikes Mor immediately as an effect of her spell, one which she delightedly recognizes as the beginning of what she calls, after Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*, her *karass*: her true community, organized around "genuine[] connect[ion]" rather than around accidental commonalities such as nation, genetics, or school affiliations (265). Mor never questions an interest in science fiction as a legitimate basis for a *karass*, and as she fits herself into the book club it seems she is building the truest example of community since the death of her twin. However, the intellectual disciplines and philosophical contexts of her reading in science fiction not only help Mor devise her spell but also awaken a moral standard by which she recognizes that she had endangered the independent agency of her *karass* by doing the spell, as the magic had potentially retroactively assembled the reading group in obedience to her *karass*-seeking spell. Mor's initial response to this moral dilemma is to swear off self-serving magic, but she struggles with the implications of interfering with others' lives, though she desperately wants her *karass* to be true.

As Auerbach has claimed for orphans in the broader history of the English novel, “the loneliness and the license of [Mor’s] point of view shake[s] the solid foundations” of *Among Others*’ parent genres: science fiction as an outcast genre and fantasy as escapism (395). *Among Others* not only features an orphan but is itself an orphaned text not exactly claimed by either fantasy or science fiction. It clearly demonstrates Mor’s preference for science fiction in her estranged, readerly life as an inroad to sociality, not primarily as an out-casting. Crippled by the accident in which she and her sister last thwarted their mother’s efforts to seize power, Mor cannot join in the sports-oriented life of her new boarding school. As a Welsh girl, she is a solitary other at the English school, like the Jewish Sharon and Irish Dierdre, a token before the jargon existed. Mor manages these double exclusions, and the further barrier of being the new girl among long-established boarding-school relationships, by telling frightening stories inspired by Tiberius, whom she knows primarily from the *I, Claudius* novels, on the principle “Let them hate me as long as they fear me” (Walton 35) and by retreating to the library to read (again, mostly science fiction) instead of participating in sport. As Troy et al., drawing on Barbara A. Myszal’s work, note, “Literary criticism and literature are sites of memory construction and memory maintenance that contribute to a collective memory” in the nation (83). Mor’s kin grouping (not a nation, but a people) is made in the collective literary-critical imagination of science fiction and fantasy fans. It is also created in part through her legibility as a science fiction reader. Her marked tastes guide both the school’s librarian and one of the public library’s librarians to facilitate Mor’s joining of the science fiction book group at the public library, which entrée also allows Mor to make friends with a wider range of people than afforded by the school.

In her exploration of magic, Mor is making her own “literature of cognitive estrangement,” as Darko Suvin characterizes science fiction (4). In this way, her fairy story is built upon the differences between who she is and who she (based on her reading and her fairies) believes that she can be, but it is built also on the deferral of this becoming: to become Mor will be predicated on *différance*. Troy et al. are again relevant, despite their focus on American orphan narratives, noting the ‘inclusion and exclusion’

of orphans: the orphan's "doubleness [...] endows the orphan with unique signifying capabilities, serving to advance both critiques of family and new visions of kinship" (214). The doubled movement, away from weak and harmful genetic ties and toward a science fiction kin-community, creates a delay in which Mor will become just what her nickname suggests: more than. More than half a twin, than a sometime runaway, than her own adolescent self. More also is what science fiction will have to be. Mor shows herself to be a rigorous critic, acknowledging nuances in her own response and comparing her assessments to those of others, with some openness to the idea that she might have the lesser analysis. Ultimately, though she is thinking pretty rigorously about how magic works, she is unable to consistently theorize the fantastic elements of her life. The fairies, even with their magic, are not going to be enough to help Mor in her becoming. Instead, Mor needs to find her way into a community formed by thinking differently, one that allows for the rigour of science fiction and the freedom of individuality. Like most boarding school stories, *Among Others* is a coming-of-age story, this one explicitly focused on when Mor will be not only old enough for legal independence but also adequately prepared to support herself without the family who so manipulatively and poorly support her.

Mor's reading includes Robert A. Heinlein's work, a pervasive position of which is that one's education should be broad and deep. Heinlein's juvenile novels, in particular, regularly feature successful characters – with obvious similarities to Heinlein – who express shock over the novels' protagonists' lack of wide-ranging knowledge or who offer encouragement for them to become proficient, especially in mathematics, languages, and the physical sciences.ⁱⁱⁱ Thus Mor also struggles against her school's established curriculum to draw together an education in both science and languages. She has learned multidisciplinary from science fiction, citing Heinlein's *Have Spacesuit, Will Travel* as an endorsement for her educational programme even as she somewhat warps its recommendations, backhandedly dismissing the boarding school she is about to begin by comparing it to the infantilizing education on offer at the high school attended by Kip, Heinlein's protagonist. As Kip's father asserts, most of the classes Kip is expected to

take would be worthless, and, worse, the few worthwhile ones, such as “history, languages, [...] science [...] and] maths” are not offered at advanced levels (Walton 29). Mor’s school at least has options in the fields Kip’s father approves; what she has to argue for is not being limited to studying either science or language. She may not have absorbed the larger lesson (why these four broad areas of study are important), but she will, once she has discarded maths out of her own stubborn insistence on inability, fight to stay in the other three. Backed up by her father and already disrupting the games-heavy school schedule by her inability to participate in sports, Mor attains a partial victory: in addition to Latin and French, Mor is allowed to take chemistry with the wrong class and to spend much of her day in the library rather than on the playing fields (30). Granting her father some of the credit for her success, Mor nonetheless focuses on this having been an argument of ‘Heinlein over a headmistress’ and expresses more interest in her upcoming schedule than in her father’s departure (30).

Later in the novel, Mor reads *Doorways in the Sand* by Roger Zelazny, in which the protagonist is given, under the terms of a will, a significant stipend for as long as he is pursuing his first degree. This novel’s discussion of Fred’s efforts to avoid graduating while remaining a full-time student informs Mor fairly accurately about the usual American university scheme, with its broad affordance of general education and elective coursework alongside a major concentration; not long thereafter, she encounters a new Heinlein novel with several characters who have also made liberal use of American general education offerings, and she is at first shocked to think that Heinlein has plagiarized the school system from Zelazny, not realizing that both are drawing on reality (248). Upon learning that such schooling really exists, it becomes her aspiration, despite the considerably greater expense attending an American university would entail in the 1980s. Science fiction provides Mor not only with ideals to which she aspires but also with advice on how to become the person she will grow to be.

Mor’s start at school draws a picture of isolation made worse by her reluctance to explain how much she needs a kin-community. Each lack – that the father she has is a man she has just met, that her mother is both

mad and a witch, that she herself had been a runaway in state care during the summer, and that prior to running away she had lost her twin sister – carries social stigma which would tend to either alienate her new schoolmates or provoke in them a performance of shocked sympathy rather than a development of kinship. This doubled edge of exclusion, casting her out and cutting off her way back, “work[s] as a prism, refracting and reflecting ideas about national identity and belonging” (Troy et al. 83). Frustrated in her efforts to be known, as she finds value in radically different components of identity than the conventional markers that also cut her off from her legal family, Mor’s four-step orphaning has thrown her more and more onto the resources of science fiction and the fairies, as each orphaning underscores the unacceptability of not belonging, casting Mor as a traitor for having been abandoned, and preventing acceptance by schoolmates who already hold her at arms’ length for her foreignness, disability, and irregular academic plan.

The strangest community this orphaned character begins to build is with her blood relations, an entirely “fake kind of connection” determined by the state after she had run away from her Welsh relatives (265). Having never known her father’s side of the family, within a short time of meeting Daniel Markova, Mor meets his father, Sam, who boards in a room in London filled with books heaped in piles, through which he has to shift his way to find the English translation of Plato’s *Symposium* he wishes to lend Mor, when he learns she is interested in Plato (an interest again formed by her science fiction reading: she had encountered Plato in *The Last of the Wine*) (76-7). As he searches, Mor observes, “he was an educated man” and realizes how much, despite not being particularly demonstrative, he cares about his son; she sees by his relation to his books who he is (78). She is able to recognize a kinship to Sam not because he is her father’s father but because he is formed, as Mor is, in reading. From this recognition of connection, Mor forms a desire for kinship with Sam, one which supersedes genetics and opens Mor’s community of texts more directly to the philosophy that dominates Sam’s library.

Daniel, in contrast, merely has a massive collection of science fiction that Mor treats as a lending library, though she also sees its casual scruffiness as a pleasant retreat from the stuffy atmosphere of wealth in

the rest of his half-sisters' home (23). He sends her money to buy books and lends his own as well, but at first their letters to one another are chiefly a set of book reports issued under the school's mandate of a weekly letter. In her newly forming relationships with both of these men, their libraries are one of the first indices Mor uses to understand them, and their commonalities of reading provide a context for the conversations that make kinship a possibility with these two onetime strangers. This foundation is no guarantee. These conversations require the participation of potential kin who "formulate an understanding of kinship as a process" rather than as "a static, finished unit defined by blood or law" (Troy et al. 215). As Mor and her father first speak of books, that is all they do: "We both looked at the books, not at each other" (23). Despite having been cut off from her father and his relatives since before she could remember, Mor has learned enough about making kinship connections to see in shared reading interests a potential basis for the kinds of connections she relies on in magic. Daniel and his library are at first important to Mor only as a replacement for the beloved books left behind when she ran away. Only as they share conversations about ideas Mor encounters in science fiction do these relatives become kin for her.

Making clear that it is the kinship of readers and not any blood relation that creates connection, Mor experiences her father's half-sisters as witches actively seeking to curb her magic and rewrite her identity so as to help her fit in. Mor can recognize that they may consider their intentions good, but she nonetheless replicates her escape from her mother. She evaluates her situation with regard to the continuing usefulness of being able to do magic and recognizes that her aunts, like her mother, are aiming to interfere magically with her. She continues to reject others' plans for her future, intending methodically to trace her own way to the future she wants, trusting only those who come into the *karass* she recognizes (rather than the legal family defined by the state). She considers "run[ning] away again" except that she has less experience of her aunts and is less sure what would stop them (176). Instead, she puts them off and continues to lead Daniel off the trail of magic by talking about science fiction and then about his father, Sam, who "is a stable point for Daniel, a sane point" (180). Evading her aunts' designs requires

opposing their influence on Daniel, whom they have effectively kept captive through their magic as well as by the sheer economic coercion of their wealth and by his own unsuitedness to any profession. For Mor, both the rationality of science fiction and the degree to which Sam has the kind of connections to his environment that magic requires are possible supports for independence for Daniel. As she increasingly recognizes the possibility of kinship with Daniel, she finds it important that he, too, be allowed a path of freedom from his legal kin.

In her efforts to blaze her own path, Mor is, like the originary literary orphans, something of a “visionary, artist, and silent schemer” (Auerbach 395). Her visions are of magic and her artistic goals are largely for the future, but much of her year is spent in solitary planning how to defeat her mother once and for all. Mor is as much a threat to the ordinary world as any of the unsettlingly fluid world-conquerors Auerbach instances – Moll Flanders, Jane Eyre, Becky Sharp – from more realistic novels. With her critical and observational skills honed in her science fiction reading and her interactions with fairies, Mor is poised to be the last defence against her mother and also to open the truth of magic to the view of her newly forming karass. Unsettled in her parentlessness, waiting for the legal recognition of her ability to care for herself (and increasingly aware that proper independence requires not merely attaining a legal age but also mustering financial means of support), Mor envisions futurity in the short and long term. She draws on the “if this goes on” warnings of social-science fiction and the implicit cultural critiques levied by far-future societies’ differences from our own. These ideas together shape Mor’s hopes not only for her personal future but also for that of her society. Mor’s slowly building kin-community is too new to significantly support her magical efforts against Liz, as she has only begun to convince some of them of such a radical truth. Furthermore, her own isolation leaves her present-action possibilities limited. Nevertheless, Mor’s ability to engage in science fiction’s speculative futurity also positions her to change the world, disrupting expectations.

Put at its simplest, Mor’s dangerousness is her quest for engaged independence. The kin-community Mor wants to make is one of mutually committed free agents, who have been connected through the strong

forces of common goals, shared environments, and figurative language. She sees herself needing to lay her sister's ghost and impede her mother's plans for world-domination-through-magic. She recognizes the limits of British academic tracking and wants to be allowed to become the polymath she sees Heinlein advocating rather than being bound by her boarding school's rigid structure or by the focused degree programs offered in Britain without side-lines into other interests (electives and general education modules). She wants to have a kin-group (which she understands chiefly in terms of the karass), and she wants to eventually become independently successful as a writer.

The role Mor wants to fit herself for requires that she undergo the transformation at the heart of Donna J. Haraway's *Chthulucene*; that is, a conversion of waste (a lamed orphan on the outskirts of a boarding school culture) to sustenance (a defender of her karass and a maker of more kin-making literature). For Haraway, such a conversion enables a transition from the Anthropocene and Capitalocene to what comes next, by taking the by-products of the former "and chipping and shredding and layering like a mad gardener [to] make a much hotter compost pile for still possible pasts, presents, and futures" (57).^{iv} This optimistic view of the transformability of the past and its consequences is embedded in Mor's understanding of how magic works. Her examples are laden with distant causes and backward reaching violations of causality; as she struggles to establish moral principles for using magic, the possibility that she created her karass haunts her. In doing the spell to bring her people to her, she fears she has called them into their very being, making them exist, making them be as they are, and most obviously making them have been gathering for quite some time as the library's science fiction reading group: a ready-made site for finding her people (140-141). At the same time, having found them, she tries to move forward despite the possibly faulty foundation. Just as she integrates her need for a walking stick into her magical preparations, Mor consistently works for a future arising from the broken realities of her present, repurposing walking sticks, fears of betrayal, and even the temptation to be together again with her twin as two ghosts transformed into fairies in order to promote the connections she is forming with her karass.

In *Among Others*, the free play given between fantasy and science fiction subverts the ruined traces of the industrial revolution as a means of the production of Mor's own future. From the beginning, Mor joins trees and ruins together in distinction from houses and civilization. She discovers deep connections between human activity shaping a landscape and fairies accessing that space: they do not occupy natural lands but rather industrial ruins, suggesting a way of re-involving and reconstruing human industry as part of the natural world rather than purely inimical to it. Mor's Welsh valleys are riddled with abandoned mining infrastructure, such that the wooded areas through which she had virtually run wild with her sister are spaces reclaimed from development, "abandoned and grown over and ignored" (33). She further reflects,

We thought we were living in a fantasy landscape when actually we were living in a science fictional one. In ignorance, we played our way through what the elves and giants had left us, taking the fairies' possession for ownership. I named the dramroads for places in *The Lord of the Rings* when I should have recognized that they were from *The Chrysalids*. (34)

To misrecognize the post-industrial as fantastic is to be ignorant, in Mor's categorization. Fairies are masters of repurposing the leftover and ruined no-longer-human sites; they take over the orphaned places and cycle them forwards, not back to nature but in an adoptive process giving new direction for these abandoned human developments. Recasting the so-called natural sites in which one finds fairies (woods and fields and the stones of ancient castles) in relation to post-industrial sites, *Among Others* presents magic and science as mutually constitutive systems.

There is a unity emerging from the fairy lifestyle:

The fairies hadn't built [the ruins]. They'd moved in with the green things after people had abandoned them. The fairies couldn't make anything, not anything real. They couldn't do anything. That's why they needed us. [...] Before the people came I suppose the fairies would have lived in the trees and not had houses. (32)

The waning of technology makes room for advances in magic: fairies get houses when people abandon buildings. They transform these buildings, taking up their 'reality' from what people had made and thereby making

possible a livelier interpretation of the ruins. Haraway asserts that “One way to live and die well as mortal critters in the Chthulucene is to join forces to reconstitute refuges, to make possible partial and robust biological-cultural-political-technological recuperation and recomposition, which must include mourning irreversible losses” (101). The fairies alone cannot accomplish this. They do not make, and their mourning is only to recognize that Mor does mourn.

It is left to Mor to accomplish the joining of forces. She does so, in the doing of magic and in the creation of a kin group which includes humans, fairies, and vast libraries of science fiction. She presses further even than Haraway’s vision of more-than-human communities, including the very plant-like fairies and books as physical objects in the ambit of her kin-making. Ultimately Mor’s orphaning, and especially the death of the sister whose identity she has claimed, presses her to form this new kin-community. It is more than a ‘refuge’; it is a creative force making a multi-faceted set of connections not only among people and books but also including people who choose to re-conceive their relation to Mor on terms that embrace speculative futurity in part by rejecting the arbitrary links of genetics. Ultimately Mor’s magic, in all its subtlety and with its disorderly but persistent causality, is the kind of down-to-earth work that makes connections. What Mor figures out, writes, and draws into magical being effectively turns Mor and her karass away from narrow, plodding paths of inevitability and social constraint. Walton builds Mor’s persistent reaching out to build connections with the others like her toward a heroic last battle in which Mor deploys the very trees of her beloved books against her mother, standing, she believes, on her own lest others be endangered. Mor’s strategies in this conflict can be said to be creating multiplicity of narrative, which Haraway argues allows stories to “be ongoing [which] is so mundane, so earth-bound [and thus] precisely the point” (130). Making kin-formation an ordinary practice radically transforms the social possibilities for orphans and others. Writing new “versions,” as Haraway calls it, increases potentials without introducing a zero-sum competition for the right iteration or the proper way to be kin. And making kin is, ultimately, a strategy for continuation. Liz turns the pages of *The Lord of the Rings* into deadly spears, working on the

commonality that both are made from trees (299). Mor transforms them more fundamentally, remembering her sister's hope that casting flowers into a pool to end the factory's pollution of the landscape would have been spectacular rather than subtle, like huorns (Tolkien's animate trees) tearing it apart (15). Battling her mother on the grounds of the abandoned factory, Mor makes the pages into trees that reforest the area (300). The story in its most material form, the codex of a physical book having become a metonym for narrative, is open to terrible and wonderful reinterpretation. Liz's vision is so much less connected than Mor's, though. Liz sees only her immediate conflict with Mor. Mor sees a larger strategy for connection to one of the earliest spells the fairies had asked her to do, when her sister had hoped the factory would be destroyed by Tolkien's animate trees. Mor works the book into a forest, both the spears her mother has transformed and the pages remaining in the book; it overgrows the now long defunct factory and overwrites its "desolation" to continue both Mor's story of how magic closed the factory and her larger endeavour in making kin (300).

Finally, Walton shows Mor her own arrogance here, as she had learned her hubris in daring to rework the world to force into being some members belonging to her karass: coming to join her, believing in her after all, are her father, her grandfather, and her boyfriend, Wim. As Mor reflects, having won: "I didn't need them in the least, but it was lovely to see them" (301). She may be right, that she had defeated her mother without their violent assistance. But Mor is also wrong. Her final journal entry, recording briefly a return to her Welsh home with Sam, Daniel, and Wim, turns to a summary paragraph looking to the future because "here I am, still alive, still in the world," which was accomplished in large part not only by her surviving the battle with Liz but also by the kinship arising to connect her (301). Where there is life-giving potential is in the kin-making practices inherent in the subtlety of the magic of Walton's world.

Notes:

ⁱ The fairies might also be said to play a role in raising Mor and her sister, but Mor underscores to her imagined reader the fundamental otherness of these

fairies, comparing them, at one point, as “more ... like plants than anything else”; this othering opposes a similar embrace of fairies as parental figures in contrast to the readiness of her consideration of science fictional characters as life-examples (38).

ⁱⁱ Mor’s approach to the distinction arises most directly in considering books for their “ideas” and “style,” reporting in her journal a conversation about whether the works of Roger Zelazny are fantasy or science fiction and finally failing to agree that style is the chief determinant of genre (259).

ⁱⁱⁱ *Have Spacesuit, Will Travel* is referenced in *Among Others*. Other examples from Heinlein’s juvenile novels include *The Rolling Stones*, in which Castor and Pollux are roundly criticized for thinking themselves competent in mathematics when they had only scratched the surface but excused for playing fast and loose with their history classes, and *Rocketship Galileo*, in which Dr. Cargraves delightfully recruits a group of high school boys to be his engineering team and crew for an independently produced rocket journey to the moon, pleased to find that his nephew and friends have delivered to themselves an appropriate mathematical and scientific education for these undertakings.

^{iv} Haraway explains her nomenclature, writing, “we need a name for the dynamic ongoing symchthonic forces and powers of which people are a part, within which ongoingness is at stake. Maybe, but only maybe, and only with intense commitment and collaborative work and play with other terrans, flourishing for rich multispecies assemblages that include people will be possible. I am calling all this the Chthulucene” (101).

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