

REFLECTIONS

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REREADING FLETCHER PRATT

Fletcher Pratt is one of the few important science fiction writers I never had a chance to meet. I began going to SF conventions in my teens, back in the early 1950s, when I lived in New York, then the center of the science fiction world, and very soon after that I precociously began my writing career, so it was my good luck to be able to meet just about everybody who had done anything important in science fiction since Hugo Gernsback started the pioneering magazine *Amazing Stories* in 1926. Nearly the whole crowd was still alive—Doc Smith, Ray Cummings, Edmond Hamilton, Jack Williamson, all the founding fathers—and I encountered them and even came to regard some of them as friends.

But not Fletcher Pratt. By all accounts he was witty, charming, erudite, and much beloved by his colleagues (when he died, James Blish, a writer now pretty much forgotten himself, wrote a memorial poem that began, “The one dull thing you did, Fletcher, was to die”). He began writing science fiction in the early Hugo Gernsback era, did a famous series of light-hearted fantasies in collaboration with L. Sprague de Camp, and later published two major fantasy novels, *The Blue Star* and *The Well of the Unicorn*, that I read with admiration and delight when I was in my teens. But he died too soon, only fifty-nine years old, just as I was showing up on the scene as a professional writer, and though it’s quite possible that he and I were in the same place at the same time now and then, I have no recollection of ever having met him. My great loss, I have always thought. And now, some sixty years later, I have just reread *Well of the Unicorn* with the same admiration and delight as before, and find myself regretting that this great fantasy writer is now just about completely unknown to today’s readers.

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Pratt was born in 1897 on an Indian reservation near Buffalo, New York, where his father was a farmer. He hoped to attend college, but could manage no more than a single year at Hobart, a school in Geneva, New York, before his family fell on hard times and he had to leave. He became a formidably self-educated man, though, mastering French and Danish and several other languages, reading widely in history and literature, and fixing every nugget of information that came his way in his extraordinarily retentive memory. Pratt supported himself during these early years in various odd jobs, mainly journalistic, but by the 1930s he had established himself as a military historian with books about the War of 1812, the Civil War, Napoleon, and the medieval Danish warrior-king Waldemar IV, among many others. And for amusement’s sake he wrote science fiction and fantasy on the side.

My first acquaintance with Pratt’s work came in 1950, when a short-lived science fiction magazine called *Wonder Story Annual* reprinted his 1932 Gernsback novel, *The Onslaught from Rigel*. At fifteen, I thought it was wonderful, though looking at it now (it was republished in book form in 1960 as *Invaders from Rigel*) I see that I would probably think a good deal less of it. Next I discovered the Pratt-De Camp comic fantasies, “The Castle of Iron,” “The Mathematics of Magic,” and “The Roaring Trumpet.” These, written in 1940 and 1941 for John Campbell’s fantasy magazine *Unknown*, dealt with the adventures of the feckless amateur magician Harold Shea, who accidentally projects himself into the world of the Norse myths (“Trumpet”) and, later, that of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* (“Mathematics”) and Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*

("Trumpet"). Pratt and the much younger but just as erudite De Camp had a great deal of fun with this series, as did I, and so have readers ever since (the stories have been assembled, along with much later material, in an omnibus collection called *The Complete Compleat Enchanter*).

Though everyone loves the Harold Shea stories, Pratt's reputation as a writer of fantasy will stand or fall, I think, on two long and very serious novels that he wrote fairly late in his all-too-short life (he died of cancer in 1956), *Well of the Unicorn*, published in 1948, and *The Blue Star*, 1952. I particularly enjoyed *Well* when I first read it when I was about fifteen, and, as is my wont these days, I've just reread it to see if I agreed with the high opinion of it that I've held for more than sixty years. And I did. I loved it just as much the second time around.

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Well of the Unicorn takes place in the medieval era of a Europe that is not quite this world's Europe, though the tone and texture of the setting are clearly Scandinavian. (Pratt was an expert on Danish history, remember.) It is a Scandinavia in which magic works, more or less, though not always with the intended results, and the practice of it is terribly exhausting to the practitioners, who therefore are hesitant to use it very frequently. There are also various demons and monsters in the background, though they only occasionally figure in the story, which is mainly that of the revolt of oppressed people against tyranny.

The scene seems to be a composite of Sweden and Denmark, although the protagonist, Airar Alvarson, comes from a place called Dalarna, which in our world is an actual region of Sweden, and its people are called Dalecarles, as they are in our world. Dalarna has come under the rule of hard-bitten conquerors, the Vulkings, whose military methods display Roman-style discipline (Pratt had written a biography of Julius Caesar some years earlier), and the surrounding region is divided into an assortment of earldoms, dukedoms, and principalities, which will remind modern readers of the complex world of George R.R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* books—some willing to live under Vulking rule and some in sullen rebellion against it, and most hostile to one another.

Somewhere to the south is the Empire, a vast realm, patterned perhaps after the Byzantine Empire or the Holy Roman Empire, to which almost everyone, even the Vulkings, owes at least nominal allegiance. Within Imperial territory is the all-important Well of the Unicorn, the location and nature of which Pratt carefully leaves vague. Its waters bring "peace" to those who drink from it, though that seems to be a peace verging on total loss of will. (Again, Pratt does not go into details.)

We meet young Airar just as he is being expelled from his family's property by a Vulking official for non-payment of taxes, and follow him through a series of adventures in which he affiliates himself with one of the many anti-Vulking rebel groups, demonstrates an unusual aptitude for military strategy, and eventually rises, step by step, to an unexpectedly high position. Pratt tells the story in a prose that is subtly archaic in tone—not as difficult of access as is, say, the prose of that great heroic fantasy, E.R. Eddison's *The Worm Ouroboros*, but with idiosyncratic mannerisms (the occasional use of a verb without its noun, or of mildly contorted syntax) that some modern readers, I see, have complained about in Internet reviews. I found the style, both in my adolescent reading of the book and in my recent one, magnetic, incantatory, a perfect match of manner and content. As for the world Pratt creates here, it is a fully inhabited one, rich in detail and color: as we travel with Airar through Dalarna and the surrounding territories, we live entirely in that world, and is that not one of the essential requirements of this kind of fantasy?

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Pratt's primary reputation as a writer of historical works carried the book into disaster from the first moment of publication. Instead of taking it to one of the small publishing companies specializing then in fantasy and science fiction, which might not have been receptive to anything so esoteric in manner, he brought it to the mainstream house of William Sloane Associates, a short-lived company with strong literary predilections. They made the catastrophic decision to publish the book not under Pratt's name (which was associated mainly with his works of military history), but under a new byline entirely, "George U. Fletcher," a pseudonym used for the one and only time here. Thus, at a single stroke, the novel was cut off from the readers of Pratt's previous fiction, particularly the well-beloved Harold Shea stories, and from those readers of his books of history who might have been attracted to a work of fantasy that reflected his knowledge of warfare. Bookstores and reviewers thus had no idea of how to deal with the book, and although Sloane put it out in an elegant edition with a handsome jacket and many internal maps, it sank out of sight instantly and not long after publication day arrived at the remainder tables, where I, a high-school student at the time, happily bought a copy for fifty-nine cents. (I knew about the book, despite the opacity of the "Fletcher" byline, because Sprague de Camp had done his old collaborator a favor by reviewing it in *Astounding Science Fiction*, calling it "a colorful and fast-moving adventure fantasy" that any connoisseur of fantasy would want to have, and hinting broadly and unmistakably at the identity of its author.

So I laid out my fifty-nine cents (not all that inconsiderable a sum back then) and bought the book, and read it immediately, and loved it, though I was not really a "connoisseur of fantasy" and indeed rather preferred science fiction. I thought it was just grand. And have cherished it ever since.

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The Well of the Unicorn, I see now, is not just a tale of heroic derring-do with swords and crossbows constantly at work, but also a model of world-building (we see the various earldoms and principalities of Pratt's imaginary world in very real conflict) and a novel that deals, not incidentally, with questions of free will versus determination, of the obligations of citizens to governmental authority, of good and evil, and many another high theme, not pasted on but emerging as inherent aspects of the plot. The depiction of character is commendable also: Pratt's medieval folk are not the stick figures so usual in heroic fantasy, but strong and realistic individuals. He is particularly good with female characters, notably the earthy fisher-maiden Gythion, whom Airar loves in vain (he is not very comfortable with women) and the ferocious Amazonian warrior-maid Evadne, who yearns for Airar but does not strike his fancy. (He does finally make a surprising and successful match with a woman of the Empire.) There are even two gay characters, something almost unknown in fantasy fiction in that day, and they are each, in their very different ways, anything but stereotypical ones.

Though *Well of the Unicorn* was an utter failure commercially at the outset, it has managed to achieve several reprints along the way, and is, I think, still in print even now. It still remains fairly obscure, though. Which is to be lamented: reading it again after all this time, I can only echo Sprague de Camp's verdict of seventy years ago: "If you are at all a connoisseur of fantasy, get it."