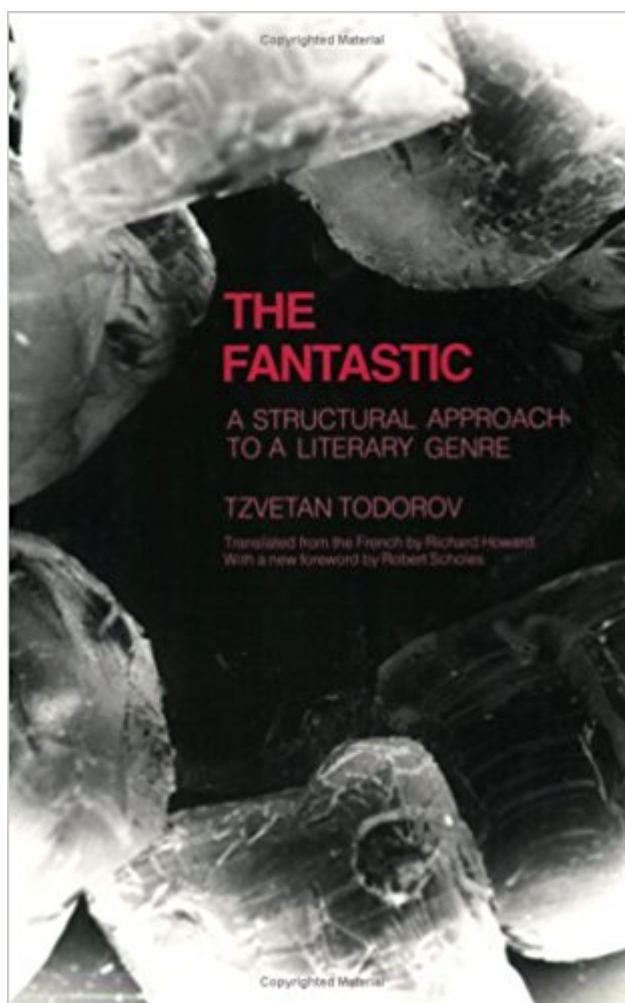


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The Fantastic: A Structural Approach To A Literary Genre



Synopsis

In *The Fantastic*, Tzvetan Todorov seeks to examine both generic theory and a particular genre, moving back and forth between a poetics of the fantastic itself and a metapoetics or theory of theorizing, even as he suggest that one must, as a critic, move back and forth between theory and history, between idea and fact. His work on the fantastic is indeed about a historical phenomenon that we recognize, about specific works that we may read, but it is also about the use and abuse of generic theory. As an essay in fictional poetics, *The Fantastic* is consciously structuralist in its approach to the generic subject. Todorov seeks linguistic bases for the structural features he notes in a variety of fantastic texts, including Potocki's *The Sargasso Manuscript*, Nerval's *Aurélia*, Balzac's *The Magic Skin*, the *Arabian Nights*, Cazotte's *Le Diable Amoureux*, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, and tales by E. T. A. Hoffman, Charles Perrault, Guy de Maupassant, Nicolai Gogol, and Edgar A. Poe.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"This work is much more than what its title might imply to an American reader. It is not simply another 'formalist' categorizing of a particular literary genre. Todorov involves himself in a consideration of the concept of literary genre (with a perceptive critique of Northrop Frye), a detailed and perceptive discourse on 'the fantastic,' . . . and finally a philosophical-historical discussion of the relation of 'the fantastic' to literature itself. . . . This is an important work for anyone interested in criticism in general or in the criticism of fiction in particular." [Choice](#)"This, the first of

Todorov's books to be translated into English (it was originally published in French in 1970), is brilliant. . . . Todorov's attempt to formulate a general theory for studying themes without subordinating literary theory to the social sciences makes this book indispensable to serious students of literature." — Library Journal

Text: English, French (translation)

This review forced me describe the plot of this book before I could write an actual review--um, since it's nonfiction and literary theory, that's completely irrelevant. However, I really enjoyed Todorov's perspective on the fantastic because it helps to consider the conventions of fantasy and science fiction in terms of structure instead of tropes. The idea helped me to do some rhetorical analysis of arguments made through these genres--so very useful (tropes can't do that). I'm not sure I fully buy his spectrum of the uncanny to the fantastic, but I haven't considered much the uncanny side of the spectrum. I should note that scholar Rosemary Jackson built off of this theory in "Fantasy, the literature of subversion," and I think her discussion is far more useful, but Todorov's work is a good place to start when generating ideas about the structures of fantasy and science fictions.

It provides a didactic systematization of the fantastic, by dividing it into the marvelous and the uncanny. This system of definition is of much help for researchers of literature, like myself, who sometimes get lost amidst so many prolix approaches. Definitely a must-have to gothic literature aficionados interested in a deeper understanding of authors such Lovecraft and Poe.

Those interested in the structuralist criticism of the 1960s-70s will find the most joy here, with Todorov applying the rigorous structuralist stance to one of literature's most fascinating genres. His demolition of Northrop Frye's approach to 'genre' in Chapter 1 is still cogent after thirty years (and an amusing read in its own right), but it's Todorov's chapters on the 'themes of the fantastic', and his conclusion on its role in literature generally, which are most compelling. This is not, however, an easy read. As Robert Scholes notes in his foreword, "neither structuralism itself nor poetics in general is noted for its ability to charm readers." You don't say. Fortunately, Todorov uses many examples from well known fantastic texts - such as 'The Arabian Nights' and the works of Edgar Allan Poe - and also from lesser known French works which will have you rushing out to the antiquarian bookstore to hunt them down. You can accept or reject the structuralist position - but if nothing else, this book will open up a whole new world of 'fantastic' novels for you to enjoy.

This book is a great achievement in criticism, but one should be warned that Todorov is not talking about elves and dragons when he uses the term "Fantastic." In this book Todorov advances his definition of the fantastic as a "hesitation" or inability to decide whether events in a narrative are natural or supernatural. Thus, the book deals more with straight supernatural fiction, than with what we usually think of as "fantasy" fiction. All in all, Todorov is insightful and his book is a great companion to anyone who enjoys French, English, or American supernatural fiction.

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