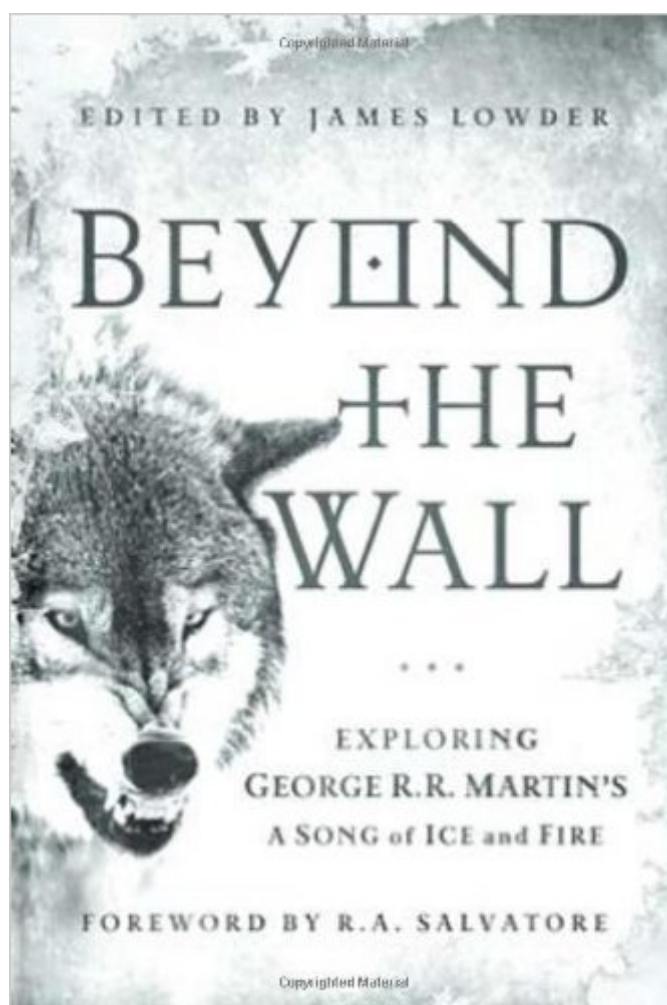


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Beyond The Wall: Exploring George R. R. Martin's A Song Of Ice And Fire, From A Game Of Thrones To A Dance With Dragons



Synopsis

"There were a number of books about A Game of Thrones (the HBO series) and A Song of Ice and Fire (the books) published last year . . . the one that impressed me most was James Lowder's Beyond the Wall." —George R.R. Martin Foreword by New York Times bestselling author R.A. Salvatore Go beyond the Wall and across the narrow sea with this collection about George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire, from A Game of Thrones to A Dance with Dragons. The epic game of thrones chronicled in George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire series has captured the imaginations of millions of readers. In Beyond the Wall, bestselling authors and acclaimed critics offer up thought-provoking essays and compelling insights: Daniel Abraham reveals the unique challenges of adapting the original books into graphic novels. Westeros.org founders Linda Antonsson and Elio M. García, Jr., explore the series' complex heroes and villains, and their roots in the Romantic movement. Wild Cards contributor Caroline Spector delves into the books' controversial depictions of power and gender. Plus much more, from military science fiction writer Myke Cole on the way Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder shapes many of the leading characters to author and television writer Ned Vizzini on the biases against genre fiction that color critical reactions to the series. Contributors: R.A. Salvatore (foreword) Daniel Abraham Linda Antonsson Myke Cole Elio M. García, Jr. Brent Hartinger John Jos. Miller Alyssa Rosenberg Jesse Scoble Caroline Spector Matt Staggs Susan Vaught Ned Vizzini Gary Westfahl Adam Whitehead Andrew Zimmerman Jones

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Customer Reviews

My take on this book is considerably more positive than most of those posted here. On the other hand, I was expecting a book that looked at the work critically, as opposed to being "support material" created by fans. The contributors to this volume all come from different areas of expertise and I found it considerably better than the web-page superficiality I was expecting. That being said, here is my summary.

Robert A. Salvatore's "Foreword" to *Beyond the Wall: Exploring George R. R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire, From A Game of Thrones to A Dance with Dragons* sets a near-perfect tone for this entire book of criticism on George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*. He says all of those things we'd like to say to those who demean the fantasy genre in specific (and fiction, in general) and he says it all with his particular flair. I must take slight issue with his description of Martin's work as the "tapestry of Westeros, filled with resonating characters who see the world through a different and sometimes magical prism." (p. xi) Rather, I would suggest that Martin's work is a mural of Westeros, carved brutally out of stone and violently defaced as the story progresses by the artist's own and deliberate hand in accordance with the tragic ebb and flow of various factions. I don't dispute the foreword's observation about resonating characters and the truth of the human condition, I merely have trouble with a metaphor about needlework when Martin is so much more effective when wielding an axe (or, at least, a chisel). But even my contention about this one elegant line in a foreword should communicate something of the strong, visceral reaction to be experienced when reading, contemplating, or dissecting Martin's magnum opus.

Bookending this introduction was a concluding essay regarding the establishment of Martin's work as "authentically" literary as opposed to "mere" genre (albeit the author of the essay offers significant evidence that "genre" is merely a retail conceit). I loved the Rousseau quotation resurrected by Ned Vizzini in this essay to demonstrate the denigration of imaginative fiction: "The real world has its limits, the imaginary world is infinite. Unable to enlarge the one, let us restrict the other." (p. 207) Citing a caustic comment on the work of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* by Henry James (*Portrait of a Lady*, *Turn of the Screw*, *Daisy Miller*, etc.) to the effect that such work was juvenile, Vizzini notes that the "...persistence of cliché in fantasy allows critics in the Jamesian tradition to continue to dismiss it as writing for children." (p. 207) Vizzini contends that Martin "fights the genre wars by sidestepping them" (p. 216) and, "In doing so, he elevates other fantasy with his own." (p. 217). For a work of such magnitude, it is surprising that it took so long for a work of criticism to appear.

Fortunately for fans of the work, Ben Bella's "Smart Pop" imprint was willing to take the risk--even though it does not have the marketing machine of the European parent to Martin's publisher to blaze the trail of awareness and expectation. So, fellow pilgrim in the shared semiotic construct known as

Westeros, it is up to reviews from unknown admirers and critics to inform you as to whether plumbing further depths in Martin's tomes is a fruitful exercise. Frankly, if you're looking for consensus as to this challenging corpus of literature (yes, literature!), I doubt this is the anthology of critical essays you want. If you are looking for intellectual stimulus to help you extrapolate the feelings engendered by the story (history?) and cogitate upon, *Beyond the Wall* makes an excellent beginning to an overdue dialogue between fans of different stripes and sensibilities. For example, I personally don't buy the arguments in the essay on Romanticism. The authors, Ms. Antonsson and Mr. Garcia, are gifted academics and are quite right to consign human nature's tendency to idealize the past (p. 2), revere the individual spirit (p. 6), and expect great things from "great persons." (p. 11). However, I cannot resonate with their confidence in Martin's "belief in the indomitable human spirit." (p. 2) To the contrary, it seems to me that Martin offers a cynical and cautionary view toward human nature. One case in point is the evidence presented about the idealizations of the "Watch" on p. 3. Yet, they quickly offer counter-examples to their own point. Do these not arise as representative of Martin's own view that there is an entropic decay in every organization and organism? They cite Robert's idealization of Lyanne (p. 4) but since they immediately mitigate their evidence with Eddard's view (p. 5) and their own observation of Robert's superficial adoration of Lyanne compared to his actual behavior (p.5), do they not suggest that Martin clearly wants the reader to know that the "golden age" (from any perspective) is not nearly "golden" from any perspective? They do a marvelous job of presenting Ser Jaime, the Kingslayer, as a Byronic hero (p. 9) but one wonders if Jaime wouldn't have created some sense of social stability and been perceived with some level of respect if he were, indeed, a hero? After all, he had saved the kingdom from Aerys' idea that he could let everything be destroyed and think he could rise from the ashes like some draconic phoenix. More troubling was the effort to present Tyrion as a Byronic hero (p. 10). Weren't certain aesthetics of beauty considered a vital part of the whole Byronic milieu? Frankly, while Tyrion is often able to make fertilizer out of manure, he sure spends a rather inordinate amount of time in the latter to be a Byronic figure. As for Martin being heavily influenced by the "Great Man Theory" (p. 11), this hardly seems plausible when every individual (whether Daenerys' social engineering to free slaves, Jon Snow's reforms designed to replenish the ranks for the Watch, Cersei's machinations on behalf of her son(s) to keep the throne, and Quentyn Martell getting roasted rather ironically after appealing to his ancestral blood ("The hero never dies, though. I must be the hero." Ironically, he is burned but does not rise from the ashes as his ancestor expected to be.) in *A Dance with Dragons*. Indeed, perhaps the most damaging argument against seeing Martin as a romanticist is Antonsson's and Garcia's own comment on p. 13 of this anthology:

"Martin has a way of undermining idealizations." I found myself resonating more with culture blogger and contributor to The Atlantic, Allyssa Rosenberg. Rosenberg took issue with superficial criticism of the amount of torture and violence in general and sexual violence in particular in Martin's work. In fact, I believe she defends the nature of the work better than Martin himself (as quoted on p. 16). As a male, I thought for many years that rape was about sexuality and, specifically, about sexual frustration and perversion. In reality, it is an expression of violence and a statement of power. If you ever doubted this, Martin's work makes it clear. In these novels, rape is primarily understood as "...a weapon of war." (p. 19) In speaking of Daenerys' focus as sexual assault, Rosenberg notes that the program ends up marking "...Daenerys as a vulnerable ruler, someone who is unable to practice the kind of total war favored by other successful warlords on the continent." (p. 20) After citing numerous examples of murder and social atrocities precipitated by rape and marital rape, she notes: "Even when rape isn't being used as an excuse to start a war or a way to manipulate court politics, a tolerance for rape and the failure to provide justice to its victim's deforms Westeros and its enemies alike." (p. 26) What really would have been interesting in this collection would have been some type of response by Caroline Spector concerning Rosenberg's essay and Rosenberg's reaction to Spector's essay. Both come to the same basic conclusion. After Spector (yes, the wife of famous game designer, Warren Spector, and a novelist in her own right) delineated the important female characters from a feminist perspective, she concluded, "Martin has created a subversively feminist tale." (p. 187) Spector described the female cast as follows: 1) Sansa equals the passive pawn and traditional fantasy princess who demonstrates through her victimization "...how fanciful myths hide--and perpetuate--a fundamentally oppressive social structure" (p. 176); 2) Arya's willingness to throw off her gender "...demonstrates her understanding of the workings of power in her world." (p. 177); 3) Brienne shows how women who dare to take power are judged and treated in conventionally patriarchal societies (p. 180); 4) Cersei sleeps with her brother to usurp the line of succession and use the tools of patriarchy against itself, yet is judged negatively (p. 182); 5) Daenerys learns ways to manipulate Drogo sexually but becomes less compassionate as she gains power (p. 185). If you are a fan of graphic novels and you are fascinated by the creative process, Daniel Abraham's notes on adapting the series to graphic novel format is fascinating. Did you know that they had to "age" Daenerys for the graphic novel due to the strictures of the PROTECT Act of 2003 because the presentation of Khal Drogo's marital rape of his child bride would have been considered promoting child pornography? Did you ever consider how dialogue that worked well in prose form would come off very boring if presented with talking heads and word balloons? (p. 35) My other favorite essay (among the many) was Adam Whitehead's essay about considering the work

as history. He notes that "accounts of time and history in the book are not to be trusted, with doubts raised over when events happened, or even if they happened at all." (p. 44) Really? And that's different from the problem of history in the real world, how? Whitehead cites a disparity in the commander list discovered in *Feast of Crows* where Jon believes he is supposed to be the 998th commander and Sam can only find 674 listed commanders (p. 45). This reminds me of problems in genealogies and king lists (including the ones in the Bible) where unimportant figures are sometimes excised in order to shape a better narrative or more symmetrical list. I liked the idea that Whitehead suggested that the technological problem (that is, if Westeros is so old, why is it still in the medieval period when our world is where it is?) is partially answered by the idea that magic retards technological development. However, he wonders why it plods along in Martin's relatively low magic world (p. 48). He concludes that "...nothing is certain, not the world's history and not the history of any individual in it." (p. 50) Isn't he simply suggesting that Martin is postmodern in his approach to the history of Westeros? Another essay considers Martin's prequels to the series in the light of Northrup Frye's idea of four seasonal mythoi (spring = comedy, summer = romance, autumn = tragedy, and winter = satire and irony) and suggests that, since the epic is clearly moving toward "winter," Martin wished to deal with a lighter era in the world he had created (p. 57). Gary Westfall has provided some nice interpretive charts of this (pp. 58-59), but argues his way to a delightfully different conclusion (p. 70). Myke Cole looks at Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome in *A Song of Ice and Fire* by observing what happens when (according to the Cooper Color Code) people in relatively safe and peaceful conditions (p. 75) known as Condition White are forced into sudden exposure to trauma. Some go to complete panic or denial (Condition Black--p. 78) and some go to a vigilant state with continual conditional awareness (Condition Yellow--p. 78). He pictures Arya as living in Condition Yellow and this seems particularly true in her street life depicted in *A Dance with Dragons*. Her life fits the description of, "hyper-vigilance, coldhearted decision-making, rapid reactions to dangerous situations, extreme attention to personal safety, commitment to training and lifestyle decisions that ensure readiness for future traumatic events." (p. 78) He sees Arya as being empowered by her traumatic experience while Theon Greyjoy went to Condition Black. Those undergoing Condition Black are, "Detached from a world that has come to terrify them, they may engage in suicidal levels of risk-taking or push away loved ones who try to help." (p. 82) Seen in this manner, his seizure of Winterfall is classic Condition Black--highly risky behavior where one flails out in reaction to the traumas one cannot handle. (p. 84) Susan Vaught's idea of morality in the books as being tied completely to the idea that Winter is coming and anyone who isn't preparing to stave off those negative effects is evil or immoral (p. 92) works on several levels. I did have a

question about her assertions about "sin" in other behaviors in Westeros, however. She asserts that "...incest itself likely does not constitute grievous sin in the cosmology of Westeros..." (p. 101). If so, why do Jaime and Cersei so assiduously try to guard the secret parentage of Joffrey? Why is Cersei stripped and humiliated in the latest book? I just think there is a slight overstatement there. In addition, contributors like Andrew Zimmerman Jones argue that both magic and religion in Martin's work have very postmodern perspectives: "Characters believe or disbelieve in the gods based on their own temperaments, not because they typically have any real reason to think that one has more validity than others." (p. 114) The bulk of the narrative attempts to use Martin's work as a means to suggest that all religious perspective is "confirmation bias." (p. 107) Religion is simply humanity's excuse for creating a narrative that makes sense--whether or not it is true. I'd like to explore this further, but I doubt this is the place. I will simply suggest that it would have been nice if he had been able to read Caroline Spector's essay to discover at least one more valid symbolism to the direwolves that he devalues in his discussion. Spector sees the death of Sansa's wolf as significant; Jones does not. Matt Stagg's essay on Littlefinger as a psychopath with no feelings for others (p. 145), a tendency toward manipulation (p. 146), and a sense of entitlement (p. 148) seemed quite convincing. I also enjoyed Jesse Scoble's essay on magic, though I didn't find any particular new insights. I relished Brent Hartinger's analysis of the number of "outsiders" in Martin's story. He noted that at least half of the major point of view characters violate gender or social norms (p. 154). Most importantly, he argues that the insiders tend to be easily manipulated fools, manipulated of course, by the "outsiders." (p. 165) If these summaries of most of the essays in *Beyond the Wall* don't pique your interest, this isn't a book you need. If, however, you believe in the value of thoughtful consideration of so-called genre works which do not get sufficient respect, this volume is a must-read. Perhaps, just as the success of *A Song of Ice and Fire* is helping many other fantasy novels out of the genre ghetto, *Beyond the Wall* can spawn a methodology of criticism for fantasy and science-fiction that will take these works out of the "stepchild" category. My enjoyment of Martin's work was significantly enhanced by reading these essays. I suspect I won't be the only one. Johnny L. Wilson

Beyond the Wall is a collection of essays delving into George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* books and also touches on the television series and the graphic novel adaptation. It comes from Smart Pop books, which over the last few years has been publishing a line of books that in their words offers "fresh, engaging nonfiction titles on the best of pop culture TV, books, and film, with a particular focus on science fiction and fantasy television and literature." This book tackles Martin's

fantasy series, and does an excellent job of going beneath the surface of his rich, multi-layered epic tale. It offers fourteen essays (not including the forward and introduction) that cover topics including the use of magic in the series, the moral ambiguity running rampant throughout the tale, the signs of post-traumatic stress disorder in several of the characters, and more. The essays are all well written and I eagerly devoured each one for their eye-opening scrutiny of Martin's complex tale, only to find myself wanting more when I reached the end (and hopefully *Beyond the Wall 2* is currently in the works). Among the most enlightening were: "Men and Monsters" - which looks at rape and violence in the story and how these are more than just gratuitous elements thrown in, but an essential part of the harsh world Martin has created. "The Brutal Cost of Redemption in Westeros" - which looks at the rampant moral ambiguity we see in many of the characters in the tale. "Of Direwolves and Gods" - and interesting exploration of the gods and mythology and their place in Westeros. "A Sword Without a Hilt" - which looks at the sparse magic present in the tale that still plays an integral part of the overall story. "Petyr Baelish and the Mask of Sanity" - a spot on character study of Littlefinger. "Power and Feminism in Westeros" - an interesting look at how the women of the tale are more than just the objects of the brutal whims of the more dominant male characters. These are among the ones that stood out to me most and stuck with me after reading them, but really it is hard to single out just a few of the essays because each one adds its own perspective on Martin's vast, accomplished work. Now some readers may cry foul on a few essays, believing that the author is not the one best suited to address that particular topic. For example, the essay on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder ("Art Imitates War"), is not written by a member of the psychology or psychiatry professions. Yet the author did serve in the military and in the Iraq War, so he had first-hand experience with PTSD. And the author of "Of Direwolves and Gods" is more a student of math and science and less of mythology. Yet he, like all of the other authors of these essays, manages to speak authoritatively on his subject and presents well thought out arguments and analyses. One very important thing to note about this collection for those with spoiler phobia, this book has plenty of reveals for what is coming, especially for those who have only watched the television series. If you hate spoilers, you may want to save this book until you have caught up to the most recent book (it covers through *A Dance With Dragons*). But no matter what, definitely get it on your reading list because I consider it an essential companion to Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series and I look forward to more editions that will hopefully delve even further into his masterpiece of fantasy. -John J. Joex

I bought this thinking it was "everything you ever wanted to know how north of the wall and how the

wall came to be". Instead it was an in depth look at what the underlying story is and why the characters act like they do. As it explains in great detail where the novels 1-5 had led us, it is certainly worth reading to understand the characters. If you are looking for a prehistory before Game of thrones this is not the main endeavor of the book. As I read each person's take on the series, aspects that I had missed or glossed over became clear. It is probably better to read this after you read at least some of the books or little will make sense. When there is no new book on the near horizon and maybe two to go, this at least keeps you up on events without reading the series again (I have read it twice)...shu

The different views of the many different authors gave me a more in depth view of Martin's works. Never did I pick apart Mr. Martin's books for a meaning or subconscious "this meant that". I enjoyed Mr. Martin's books because it was a story. The story took me away from the realities of every day life. They assisted me during my deployments. Gave me someplace to go.

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