SAMPLE PAGES FROM

CALL AND RESPONSE

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Introduction: What is literary criticism for?

On Friday 19th November 2004, as part of its 25th Anniversary celebrations, the *London Review of Books* staged a debate on the topic: 'What is literary criticism for?' The panellists represented four generations of literary critics. Frank Kermode, who has since died but who was then sharp and with a waspish sense of humour, handicapped, for me, by the fact that I worked for several years with his son, Mark (not the film critic of the same name), who does not, so far as I know, read anything but whose mannerisms and features I kept seeing in Frank. Terry Eagleton, the aging enfant terrible of left-wing criticism with a gift for comedy and possibly the most acute critical brain in Britain today. James Wood, younger than I thought (and younger than he looks), who is not part of academe but who seems to make his living through writing criticism and, more recently, novels. Zadie Smith, smart, chic and razor-like, I went in expecting the over-acclaimed new literary darling and left respecting a very acute literary critic. All this was moderated by Andrew O'Hagan, who, to be fair, did a good job of keeping the panel discussion focussed and moving forward, but who seemed nonetheless out of his depth on that stage.

That describes the event, what follows is not a report on their discussions so much as a series of meditations on my own criticism which emerged tangentially from what was said.

At one point, fairly late in the discussion, James Wood and Zadie Smith went off on a private discussion about the intended audience for criticism. Kermode and Eagleton took no part in this digression; for them, I suspect, it wasn't an issue. They know who they are writing for: primarily their students and their fellow academics; what they are doing is taking part in the ongoing discussion of literature that has been part and parcel of university studies for over a century. But for Wood and Smith, and for any of us not part of academe, this is a more problematic issue. Both considered, for a moment, that criticism is aimed at the author, but then drew back from that position. Smith remarked that although many authors announce that they never read reviews, she couldn't imagine any of them being able to resist the temptation to open a paper and find out what people were saying about them. This is probably true, but irrelevant. Wood finally concluded that they were writing above the heads of the authors at the eventual readers of the books. For a while I was prepared to agree with him, then I had second thoughts.

For a start we need to go back to that ancient debate about the difference between reviewing and criticism. I was relieved to notice that, while Kermode and Eagleton returned to this issue more than once during the debate, even they were unable to resolve it. My feeling is that it is unresolvable, that reviewing and criticism both occupy a broad band on a spectrum of responses to art, so that it is impossible to point to one defining characteristic and say: that is a review, or that is criticism. And I suspect that those broad bands actually overlap to a considerable extent, muddying the waters even further.

Let us say, therefore, that some types of reviewing provide an immediate response to newly-published works. It is possible that such reviews address the author; but unless the review discusses systemic faults in the author's basic approach to writing, it is unlikely that someone who has moved on already to another book, another subject, another idea, is necessarily going to be greatly affected by the dialogue. Let us say, also, that certain types of criticism discuss works by long-dead authors. In other words, if the addressee of criticism (using the term in its broadest sense) is the author it is at best a sterile discussion, and probably a pointless one.

It is, therefore, very tempting to go along with Wood and assume that the audience for criticism is the reader. Certainly the reader is anticipating some form of communication when they read a review, even if it is no more than an injunction to buy, or not to buy, a particular book. And the reader is also anticipating some form of communication in a work of extended literary criticism, be it the provision of context, the analysis of themes, the evaluation of artistry. We have, in other words, at least one side of the dialogue in place. But I am less and less convinced that we have the other side.

A piece of literary criticism, whatever else it might be, is a piece of creative writing. It is an imaginative and analytical response to another piece of writing, true, but it involves the working out of themes and ideas and the expression of them in a way that is sufficiently aesthetically pleasing for a reader to spend the necessary time reading. I have certainly read criticism that is dull, turgid, unspeakably badly written; but then, I have read fiction that is the same. The very fact that we are prepared to recognise in criticism the faults of dullness, turgidity, bad writing suggests that we are applying to it the standards we apply to any piece of prose. And there are undoubtedly works of criticism that are, indeed, vivacious and exciting; Terry Eagleton, a case in point, is often wonderfully, scabrously funny. So, if we measure criticism as creative writing, then we must also acknowledge that any interpretation of criticism is subject to the same caveats and uncertainties as our interpretations of prose fiction.

One such caveat which came up several times during the course of the panel discussion was intentionality. This is the issue of deciding what an author meant to say. Unless you are privy to the workings of the author's mind at the precise point of writing — and Zadie Smith was quick to point out that even the author isn't always fully cognisant of their own intentions — you cannot do this. You can analyse what was said, and close reading lies at the heart of all criticism (as Eagleton noted, even the deconstruction of Jacques Derrida was based on incredibly close reading); you can query what was meant ('did the author really mean to say X?'); but you cannot judge a book based on your assumption of the author's intentions. Therefore, you cannot judge criticism based on an assumption of the critic's intentions (one corollary of this is that it is incumbent upon the critic to make sure that her views of the work under discussion are absolutely clear; can you imagine the blurb: 'John Clute meant to say …'?).

In the case of criticism, one of those unknowable intentions is the intended audience. This is not an issue that affects our readings of fiction greatly (except, sometimes, in such broad terms as whether a book was written for children or for adults), we don't in the main question who Dickens or James or Asimov saw as their audience because it does not affect how we read the book (there are exceptions to this, I know, but not enough to affect the general point). But it is a question that fundamentally affects our considerations of criticism because it goes to the heart of the question: what is literary criticism for? I think this is because we see the process of

communication differently. Fiction is largely a one-way communication: we are told a story, and though we might respond to it, we don't normally expect to reply to it. Criticism, on the other hand, is (at least perceived to be) a multi-way communication: because it is already responding to something else, it is instantly part of a dialogue. Identifying the intended audience, therefore, is an essential part of understanding the nature of the dialogue. But identifying the intended audience involves that old bugbear intentionality, and we're right back where we started.

The closest I can come to this (and with Zadie Smith's warning firmly in mind) is some glimpse of my own intentions in writing criticism. This is not totally satisfactory, of course, you the reader cannot know my intentions in writing about intentionality, and therefore cannot make any assumptions about whether my thoughts on intentionality can actually be used in reading the intentions behind any of my criticism. There are times when exploring the philosophical underpinnings of criticism and of theory seems to lead us ever closer to solipsism. Nevertheless, let us make a Wittgensteinian assumption that my private language has some public understanding.

Most of the criticism I write is commissioned. That is, some editor has asked me to write it. Therefore, what I write is initially for that editor, in the hope that it might appear in their publication and therefore earn me money, or respect, or at least the egotistical pleasure of seeing my name in print. Does that mean that my intended audience is the editor, since I am primarily writing to please him or her? In a very simplistic sense, yes; but in a more meaningful way, no. It explains why I write, but it does not explain who I write to.

I write for a number of different books and journals and, of late, web sites, and I tend to write differently for each one. Does that imply that I am addressing different audiences? To be honest, I don't see them as different audiences. Sometimes the difference in how I write is traceable to the fine print of the commission: I will address an author or a work one particular way because that is what I have been asked to do. More often the difference is more straightforwardly down to word length. A 500-word review and a 5,000-word essay necessarily require different approaches, different focus, different modes of analysis. A piece on science fiction for a journal whose readership is likely to be unfamiliar with the genre is likely to require rather more explanation, more provision of context, than the same piece written for *Extrapolation* or *Vector*. But these are contingent differences, they say nothing about the nature of the dialogue in which I am engaged as a critic.

If I say of M. John Harrison, as I do in one of the reviews that follows: 'I am sure that Harrison was inspired by the mad genius of William Blake, but his aesthetic is entirely other, his refrain is the glory of decay, defeat and failure, the petty achievements that mark our going down, the mordant compromises we laud as victory' it is irrelevant whether it was written for *Vector* (as it was) or for the *Times Literary Supplement*. The audience as some definable group of individuals played absolutely no part in the analytical and aesthetic process that produced that statement. Similarly, it is irrelevant that Harrison is not only alive but active as a writer and those words were written in response to his then most recent book. The thoughts so expressed were not addressed to Harrison, and whether that most self-conscious of writers reacts to the ideas in a way that impinges upon his subsequent work can have nothing to do with either the formulation or the expression of those ideas.

In a world where more books are published than any of us could possibly hope to read, then a review which says read this book or don't read this book is clearly addressed to the potential reader (or, at least, the potential book buyer). But other than

in some exceptionally short or exceptionally badly written reviews, that is not all they do. To some extent the meat of a review is the offering of an argument that supports the final read/don't read judgement, and hence offers a mechanism by which the reader might be able to make her own mind up about whether to accept that judgement or not. But I'm not sure that's all it is, and I'm not sure that the supporting argument is all addressed to the hypothetical reader.

In the case of extended criticism, which often has no read/don't read function, even that level of address to the reader is absent. The whole piece then becomes the construction of an argument about how to read the work, or how to read various aspects of the work, or how to read certain things into the work. I think the supporting argument in a review is often doing exactly the same thing, though usually on a smaller scale. Remember, reviewing and criticism occupy overlapping places on a spectrum of responses to art.

The question, therefore, the axis about which this ramble continues to turn, is who is being argued with? When I am writing a piece about how and why I read a certain work in a certain way, who am I trying to convince?

The answer, I think, is me.

That seems pathetic, and I come to the conclusion reluctantly. After all, am I suggesting that all those thousands of books, those millions of words, by the likes of F.R. Leavis and William Empson and Harold Bloom and Roland Barthes and Brian Stableford and me are all just masturbation? We are back in that solipsistic universe. But yes, in an important sense that is precisely what I am saying.

Every time you read a book you enter upon a journey of exploration. If you have never read the book before, regardless of whether you have read about it, you are in a trackless waste attempting to cut a trail through to find out what the book has to offer. If you are reading a book for a second or third or thirtieth time, no matter how familiar it may be to you, you will find freshness in it. The very best books repay repeated re-readings because of the new worlds they disclose every time you embark upon that journey. Criticism is the record of that exploration, it is the account of what you found there and, more importantly, how you found it. If all things are equal and you have done a good job with your exploration and your account, it might open the book up to other explorers, it might help them see things in it from a different perspective to how they originally saw it. That is a by-product of criticism, if you like that is its commercial value, the reason there is still a market place for criticism. But that is not necessarily what the criticism was written for.

I think criticism is written for the reader, but it is written to the critic. The process of analysis involved in the creation of criticism is a way of discovering why you responded to the book the way you did. If you put the plot of a novel into a review it is not simply to tell the story, you could not do so without reproducing the whole book. When you put the plot into a review it involves abstraction, you pick those key elements which seem to you to explicate the book, and in so doing you are identifying those bits of the story that you responded to. When you devote an essay to examining themes of good or evil that recur throughout a writer's work, you are not engaged in cataloguing every instance where the theme is used. You are abstracting those instances which seem to build into something to which you respond. You may not even be aware of it the first time you encounter it, but sometime while reading a later work you might recognise something you've come across in that author's work before. That, in turn, might help you identify patterns which are themselves things you've been

responding to, perhaps unconsciously, as you read the books. The process of criticism often involves a moment of recognition, and then an exploration of how far that insight might extend.

The response to the work might be positive or negative, it might hinge on a big theme or a small issue, but the criticism is the argument with yourself about why your particular exploration of the work generates that particular response.

So, in the end, I come to the conclusion that when I write criticism I am addressing myself before anybody else. I am explaining or more often discovering why I responded to a work the way I did, and I am thereafter exploring what that might say for the work (and indeed what it might say about me and my relationship to the author, the rest of her books, the genre, literature in general, and so forth). If that exploration results in insights for the author or for other readers that is good, I always hope that that happens and clearly so do the editors who commission the reviews, but they are still not the people I am primarily addressing in my criticism.

What is literary criticism for, the panel asked. My answer: the reason is the same both as reader and as critic, it is to help me explore the books I read.

The word ‘essay’ now most often applies to a short piece of writing, but its broader meaning is to try, to attempt. The writings that follow, whether produced as reviews, as critical articles, as columns or as blog posts, are all therefore essays in that broad sense. They are attempts to understand, to explore, the works I read. I make no pretence that all the attempts are successful, if only because I have no objective standard by which I might judge success. Certainly there are some reviews where the position I have taken on the work in question is directly counter to every other critic; that is, I have hated books that everyone else loves, and loved books that everyone else hates. If the standard is critical uniformity, then I suppose those pieces fail. But I am no believer in, or supporter of, critical uniformity. I am, I suppose, a critical relativist (though the term makes me uneasy, and I would take no absolutist stance even on relativism), I like the fact that we all respond differently to the same work. I find it interesting and indeed valuable to encounter contrary readings to my own, to learn what has struck someone else as important about a work. There are also reviews here that have attracted praise, but again that does not betoken success. It means only that my review conformed with someone else’s opinion, or at best that I articulated something about the book in question that they hadn’t really noticed until I put it into words. And there are reviews here that have been controversial, which some might see as success and others as failure, though I’m not sure I see it either way. I never seek controversy, but nor will I moderate my views (or my language) simply because they arouse some else’s ire. Controversy means only that someone feels passionately about a book, and I don’t happen to share their opinion; it doesn’t mean that either of us is right, nor does it actually say anything of value about the book. I would as soon avoid controversy entirely, it is an irritant and generally a waste of time; but every time you express an opinion you court controversy, and since reviews are basically the expression of an opinion, I suppose the curious fact is that more of them have not been controversial.

In exploring my own response to literature, it seems useful to consider those instances where I have come back again and again to the same author, the same topic. It is not that the return to a topic necessarily generates any greater depth, it may but more likely it will not; but it does generate what we might call a feedback loop, a

chance to nag away at some particular issue, or to find out why some writer or idea will not let you go. If criticism is, as I have suggested, a dialogue with yourself, then such return allows the conversation to develop beyond an initial statement. That is why I have given this collection the title Call and Response, it is made up of reviews and articles that have allowed me to return more than once to the same author or the same subject. It gives me a chance to see how, or even whether, my views have developed. I hope and trust that such explorations are of interest.

Robert Holdstock

[By way of introduction to this section I offer something I wrote on my blog immediately after Rob's death, it was also used as the introduction to *Into the Woods: Robert Holdstock Remembered* (BSFA 2011).]

I interviewed Rob Holdstock several times over the years, enough so that we had a running joke going. He would accuse me of always asking the same question, so I replied if he'd just answer it one time I wouldn't need to ask it again. But, of course, he didn't answer it. I'm not altogether sure he could.

The question was: why did you give up science fiction for fantasy?

There are slick answers to this. The success of *Mythago Wood* and its immediate sequels made it commercially stupid to go back to sf. Or you might argue that he never wholeheartedly wrote science fiction, considering the earthy, myth-laden character of his first two novels. But these are cheap, superficial answers to a deeper and more complex question, and both Rob and I recognised that such answers would have been unsatisfactory.

I realised, belatedly, that the essay I had in Vector (see below) was an attempt on my part to answer the question. The essay argued that there is a particular view of time, a sinuous, riverine view, that runs through all his work. I think it is this conception of time that lies at the heart of his shift from sf to fantasy.

His first two novels, *Eye Among the Blind* (1976) and *Earthwind* (1977), were rich, complex, a little self-indulgent, and full of sometimes clumsy attempts to layer a long view of ancient time and mythology onto fairly standard science fictional tropes of alien worlds and far futures. Pretty much the same can be said about *Necromancer* (1978), his third novel, with horror substituting for sf. They were good journeyman novels (I particularly liked *Necromancer*), though I think the short stories he was writing at the time (collected in *In the Valley of the Statues* (1982)) were rather better, even if these stories did rather too often live up to another running joke, that he always wrote about men fucking the earth.

There were twists and turns in time evident, if only as asides, in those early novels and in a few of the stories. But then came his fourth novel, *Where Time Winds Blow* (1981), and time stopped being a device in his fiction and became the subject of it. This was, to my mind, the breakthrough novel, a work of genuine, paradigm-shifting science fiction, as breathtakingly original in its conception and as taut in its execution as, say, Christopher Priest's *Inverted World*. It would, I am sure, have been the novel for which he is best remembered, if he hadn't followed it with *Mythago Wood* (1984), but I'll come to that in a moment. Science fiction has often written about time as a dimension, through which one can move forwards, backwards or sideways; but *Where Time Winds Blow* imagines time as a medium in which one is immersed, a flood sweeping through and around and across you, buffeting you in different directions at once. 'Later,' I wrote in that essay, 'time would flow so sinuously that it affected the

very landscape through which it passed, changing the ecology along its banks, leaving behind curious abandoned ox-bow lakes.' Though characters move in time, they do not control it, they cannot determine direction or destination.

Where Time Winds Blow was far and away the best work of science fiction that Holdstock produced, it was also just about the last. He had written a novel that was audacious in its imagination and successful in its execution, and immediately turned away from the genre. Hence my question.

It surely wasn't coincidence that in the same year he published *Where Time Winds Blow*, he also produced 'Mythago Wood', the original story from which the entire sequence grew. He had found a subject, and was exploring it in two works that are, in key ways, the same.

It may seem counter-intuitive, if not downright controversial, to aver that a novel set on an alien planet in the future and a novel set in rural England immediately after the Second World War are the same, but they are. Both equate time and identity. In both novels time has sculpted its own unique landscape (and landscape was always important in Holdstock's work). In both novels, time is wild, non-linear, disordered and disordering, identified with all that is primitive and threatening: time is an object of primal fear. In both novels a man with psychic scars from the past must plunge into time, not to heal the scars but to accept them. In both novels the past that haunts the protagonist and the wilderness of time in which he must seek healing are separate: the past is as much outside the raging sweep of time as is the present (let me explain: the present is coherent, we understand it as part of a linear sequence from yesterday into tomorrow; the past is part of that same coherent, understandable sequence; but time as represented by the rift valley or Ryhope Wood is not coherent, is not susceptible to being understood. The journey in both novels takes us from a place where we think we know ourselves because we are established within a familiar, comforting sequence of linear time, into a place where time is not familiar but wild, is not comforting but raw, is not linear but disordered, and hence where that self-knowledge must be undermined.)

In that essay I suggested that this notion of time as a sinuous river which twists and turns upon itself through every single one of the novels Holdstock wrote after *Where Time Winds Blow*, was an extravagantly science fictional idea, which explains the dramatic impact that Holdstock's work had upon fantasy. This was a way of perceiving the shape of the world that the genre had not known before. This is, I still believe, true; but it is only part of the story. Or rather, it only goes part of the way towards answering my question.

Science fiction is remarkably profuse in the way it uses time: time machines, future settings, parallel times, people coming unstuck in time or killing their own grandfather. Yet for all these tropes, sf is remarkably conservative about the nature of time. Whichever of these tropes you might pick, the master-plan of time is still strictly linear, there is still a steady flow from yesterday to tomorrow, from past to future, from beginning to end. The difference lies in where or how you access the line, not in the nature of the line itself. Were Holdstock to continue to explore his sinuous, non-linear time in science fiction, there would be nowhere else to go. *Where Time Winds Blow* is a one-off, it could be repeated but not advanced.

But the structure of time plays no part in the conception of fantasy. Most fantasy, in fact, is static in time. Each story has its conventional chronology, but with very rare exceptions (Merlin living backwards in *The Once and Future King*) the shape of time

itself is not affected by the story. And this absence paradoxically opens up fantasy for Holdstock's explorations of non-linear time. Which is exactly what he did in novel after novel. We remember the forests in his stories, we remember the crude mythic archetypes, we remember the conflation of different myths in the Merlin Codex, but look at what is happening to time in these stories. Not one of them has a conventional chronological structure, a conventional line of time. Different times, sometimes centuries apart, juxtapose each other, rub against each other, intertwine with each other.

So I think I know why Holdstock moved from science fiction into fantasy: because he found a perfect science fictional idea that could be most satisfactorily explored through the medium of fantasy.

Celtika: Book One of the Merlin Codex [2001]

First published in *Foundation* 81, Spring 2001

It is now just 20 years since Robert Holdstock first ventured into Ryhope Wood. That labyrinthine forest whose ever more convoluted pathways revealed ever more simplified 'myth imagoes', the coarse, crude, brutal archetypes from which the familiar figures of myth have grown, was a liberation for Holdstock. *Mythago Wood* and its sequels didn't just provide a seemingly endless source of inspiration, but also prompted, particularly in *Lavondyss* and *The Hollowing*, writing of a very high quality indeed. This was stunning stuff: rich, daring, challenging, it stood as a vicious yet haunting retort to the vacuous prettiness of so much modern fantasy. Here, we were told, our imagination sprang from the darkest corners of our being, and from a primal age where life was indeed nasty, brutish and short.

Yet for all it freed Holdstock, Ryhope Wood was also a trap. Every time he turned around and tried to write anything outside the sequence, as with *Ancient Echoes* or *Merlin's Wood*, he seemed to produce something that was strangely unconvincing or something that was *Mythago Wood* in all but name. Now, at last, it seems he has managed to escape from Ryhope and its environs. Not completely, I suspect he is now doomed to carry avatars of mythago wood with him as much as the sanitised figures of myth carry within them the rough original who survives in the wood, but enough to give this new sequence a tough and original feel.

The result is fantasy that is as intelligent and as muscular as anything Holdstock has written, though I have yet to be convinced that it is completely successful. What he has done is take an event of historical record, the Celtic invasion of Greece and the sacking of the temple at Delphi in 278BC, and woven into this story mythic figures from different times and different cultures. There is a dissonance in this set up that Holdstock never quite overcomes, though individual characters are vividly drawn and the story is tightly constructed and unfailingly involving.

The narrator, as the overall sequence title suggests, is Merlin, though the milieu is hardly the one with which he is normally associated. These events, for instance, take place 700 years or more before Arthur (though many of the familiar aspects of the Merlin story have their avatars here, including a bewitching Nimue – here called Niiv, who may be

Merlin's descendent to complicate matters still further – and another character who seems to be rather obviously filling the role of Uther Pendragon). But then, this Merlin is one of the last of a strange family of immortals who have ceaselessly tramped the pathways of the world since before the dawn of time. In one incarnation, for instance, he was Antiokus who sailed with Jason in the Argo – and that event is precisely placed in time, 700 years before the events of the novel. In the primal neverland of Ryhope Wood it is quite conceivable that Jason and Merlin, or at least some original versions of them stripped of the sophistications of later retellings, might meet and interact, but that is a world in which history has no grip. Here, the hold of history is carefully spelled out, as if Holdstock is thus delineating the difference between the two worlds.

Yet here, too, we are asked to accept that Merlin and Jason might meet and interact within the realistic progress of history, and not just in the distant past but now. For while Jason is not immortal like Merlin, neither is he dead. For the last 700 years he has lain interred within Argo beneath the frozen waters of a Finnish lake. What a Greek hero, and one from the solidity of history not the ambiguity of myth, is doing in a lake in Finland is never explained and, coming right at the beginning of the novel, is one of the things most likely to overthrow our suspension of disbelief in this extraordinary concoction.

In the dead of winter Merlin travels through primal Finnish woodland where primitive gods and spirits are very much alive. In this first section of the novel Holdstock seems to be deliberately evoking memories of Ryhope Wood, but here, except perhaps in Merlin himself, there is none of the rawness of the mythagos, nor, again with the possible exception of Merlin, is there the knowing modern viewpoint. One of the genuine strengths of this book is the way Holdstock has succeeded in thinking himself into the mindset of his Celtic characters with their beliefs and rituals, notions of manhood and honour, shaping their every act. This wood is a sacred landscape, and at its heart is a lake where people from all over the Celtic world gather to enact rituals of their own. Merlin's own ritualistic reason for being here is to resurrect Jason and the Argo, for he has information which will help Jason complete the quest for whose purpose he has resisted the peace of death: Merlin knows that Jason's children are alive.

When Merlin, as Antiokus, travelled with Jason on the Argo they witnessed the witch, Medea, sacrifice the two sons she had had by Jason. Now Merlin has learnt that Medea did not actually kill the boys, but sent them through time to a place that happens to be Britain at this moment. And now he must wake Jason and help to reunite him with his sons. What Merlin does not know is that Medea is his sister, another of his family of travellers through time. So she, too, is here casting her baleful spell upon proceedings.

Thus Holdstock has found a new way to distort the conventions of myth, bringing figures from one mythological landscape into another. Jason is revived, the Argo is rebuilt, and a new crew of Argonauts is recruited from among the various Celtic peoples at the lake (including among their number the shamaness Niiv and the British war leader Urtha). They sail first to Britain, a land half of which is literally given over to the shadow realm of the dead. One of Jason's sons may be in exile in this realm, but before they might seek him out they have to deal first with the fact that Urtha's realm has been devastated, his family murdered, his loyal lieutenants have apparently turned traitor and fled. The complex Celtic web of honour and obligation means that their own quest now takes second place to helping Urtha exact the revenge he perforce must seek. This entails a magical voyage up the Rhine and down the Danube, joining, unintentionally, the Celtic invasion force that has been gathered to sack Delphi. And it is in the landscape of Greece, within a lifetime of Alexander, that Merlin rather than Jason must come face to face with his past.

This is but Book One of a sequence of unknown length. There is a dramatic climax to the novel, but nothing is resolved. Subsequent volumes will presumably take Merlin into the land of the dead, recount his entrapment by Niiv and probably his involvement with the progeny of Urtha; whether they will also bring the story as far forward as Arthur, as this might imply (for if not, why identify the central figure as Merlin?), is impossible to tell. There is clearly a lot of mythological ground that might be covered, therefore. If the Mythago Wood sequence did nothing else it showed what a wide open playing field Holdstock had to work with if he stripped myth down to its bare essentials; in this new sequence he seems to be out to demonstrate that the same is true if he brings myths together in unlikely conjunctions with history. Certainly he has a good story to tell and fascinating characters with which to tell it — the uneasy mix of loyalty and distrust that exists between Merlin and Jason is one of the convincing human details that makes this novel work as well as it does. Yet the one thing I feel he still must do is make this strange collision of history and myth cohere, and only if he does that will what looks like a very good fantasy sequence turn into a really successful one.