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Book Review

Eliot Borenstein: The Politics of Fantasy: Magic, Children's Literature, and Fandom in Putin's Russia

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The cover of Eliot Borenstein's *The Politics of Fantasy*—a fiery Phoenix merging with the domes of St. Basil's Cathedral—captures what the book is about: the rebirth, transformation, and appropriation of a Western cultural phenomenon on Russian soil. After the Soviet collapse, the Russian media market was flooded with Western products. Fantasy is largely a genre of Western origin, but it was the arrival of global mega-franchises, above all *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003) and *Harry Potter* (2001-2011), that catalyzed the genre's development and reception in the country.

Borenstein's insights arrive during a key period of transition. It uses *Harry Potter* not as a subject of literary analysis alone, but as a cultural and political litmus test. As the Russian state leans harder on anti-Western rhetorics, tracing how a quintessential British fairytale embedded itself in Russian political discourse, propaganda, and opposition movements opens a window onto the socio-political realities of Putin's Russia.

Borenstein frames his work as a case study, making *Harry Potter* the core text and leitmotif throughout. His central argument is that the reception of *Harry Potter* in Russia exceeded standard global Pottermania and became a cultural battleground. He shows how the collision between the moral legacy of the Soviet era and the post-Soviet media influx produced a distinctive environment—one where *Harry Potter* acted as a foil, clarifying the nuances of the Russian political and cultural landscape. This ultimately resulted in a massive practice of 'Russification,' prominent even as an overlooked localization in a piracy niche mentioned by the author: a process of cultural appropriation in which foreign characters and aesthetics were repurposed for local ends.

The book's structure follows the franchise's evolution in Russia. It opens with the preconditions of the 1990s—a book market dominated by crime fiction, fairytales and Soviet scientific fantasy's legacy—then moves through the chaotic era of piracy, amateur translations (including the polarizing work of Maria Spivak), and publishing oddities. From there, Borenstein examines the wave of parodies and knock-offs, paying close attention to Dmitry Yemets's *Tanya Grotter* series (2002-2024), which began as a quick-and-dirty parody and grew into an independent franchise (cf. 56ff.).

The later chapters turn to fan creativity, mapping *Potter* onto Russian realities. The book closes with an analysis of how the franchise has been weaponized in official state narratives and opposition politics. This includes the cheaply produced, state-and-church-sponsored patriotic cartoon *Kids vs. Wizards* (2016) (cf. 120ff.), the enduring 'Dobby is Putin' memes (cf. 136), and the use of Voldemort and Death Eater metaphors in the contexts of Alexei Navalny and the war in Ukraine (cf. 142ff.). He also addresses the situation from both Russian and Ukrainian perspectives.

Methodologically, Borenstein combines textual analysis, media studies, and sociological observations while immersing the reader in Russia's 'wild 1990s' and 'well-fed 2000s.' He approaches the case from generic, cultural, and political angles. He also handles the dynamics of anti-fandom well, showing how the Russian state and the Orthodox Church perceived Western fantasy as a threat to traditional values, giving rise to a kind of conceptual unrequited love in which Russia consumes and adapts Western culture while officially repudiating it. Borenstein identifies the foundational tension underlying this conflict: Soviet cultural production was vast, but it was never built to compete in an open market, an environment antithetical to Soviet ideals.

Borenstein provides an encyclopedic survey backed by academic sources and media artifacts. He draws striking parallels between the franchise's development and Russian political history, and his global comparison sharpens what is specific about Russian reception. His analysis of how *The Lord of the Rings* prepared the ground for fantasy in Russia is strong, as is his identification of the student film *Magic First* (2018) as a rare, high-quality Russian fan response to the magical boarding school trope (cf. 99-101). He also notes, with precision, that conspiracy theories about 'evil elites' and 'Western influence' are spread not only by ordinary citizens but from the top of the political hierarchy.

While covering *Harry Potter*, the author also highlights original subgenres characteristic of the Russian-speaking space, such as Slavic or Orthodox fantasy. This discussion would have benefited from a brief note on how these genres frequently rely on fabricated systems of belief—such as *Rodnovery* (quasi 'native faith') and their invented Slavic pantheon—which would have added texture to the analysis of Russian nationalistic world-building and religion. In addition, a discussion of the popularity of the Polish book, TV series, and subsequent game *The Witcher* (1986-) as well as the attempt to create the historical game *Smuta* (2024), based on the latter, is missing.

To illustrate borrowing and the evolution of 'clone' characters, the author compares a classic comics case—the Superman vs. Captain Marvel rivalry, which is an intra-American example within a single legal and cultural system. By contrast, *Tanya Grotter* and *Harry Potter* involve an international clash between different jurisdictions and copyright traditions, so a similar comparison across two fundamentally different legal systems would be especially illuminating.

Borenstein explores the "Our Answer to Harry Potter" (51) phenomenon and outlines three facets of the 'Russian Harry Potter': the post-Soviet kind of expropriation of the character in the spirit of Alexander Volkov (cf. 50f.), a parodic knockoff, and a letter to *Harry Potter* asking him to come and help. This last type reflects the broader range of Russifying fan fiction genres in which a character enters another culture's world—the *isekai*-like "*popadanets* story" (97) the author mentions, the newer 'rusreal,' and the now-mainstream crossover.

The author manages to touch on the full range of children's and Young Adult fantasy genres and explains how they relate to *Harry Potter*, whether closely or more loosely. The scope is broad, encompassing projects, memes, and comics, as well as relevant figures such as BadComedian Evgeny Bazhenov and Navalny—that is, essentially everything tied to a YA audience. Borenstein rightly notes that fan fiction tends to replicate Western trends, and that *Harry Potter* fan texts don't produce anything fundamentally new. At the same time, in the West, individual works—such as the *Draco Trilogy* (2000-2006) by Cassandra Clare or *Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality* (2010-2015)—have gained popularity. However, Borenstein skillfully fills this gap by citing fan-made videos with distinctive political commentary on Russia.



The Politics of Fantasy contributes to multiple academic fields, bridging fan, media, and post-Soviet cultural research. By combining academic rigor with personal, engaged insight, Borenstein identifies what is particular about Russian cultural consumption. He offers a pointed assessment of modern Russia's cultural situation: the country has both a vibrant, organic fan culture and an institutionalized, official anti-fandom directed at Western products, driven by the state and the Church in tandem.

Thus, Borenstein's work is an indispensable, crisply written resource. *Harry Potter* turns out to be far more than a boy wizard—he is a lens through which the complex, manipulative, and often contradictory life of a nation comes into focus.