

**Sarah Tindal Kareem, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Reinvention of Wonder*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. 228. £55. ISBN 9780199689101.**

In recent years, there has been growing interest in re-examining the relationship between secularized modernity in the wake of the Enlightenment and the ‘disenchantment of the world’, most famously formulated by Max Weber. Countering the disenchantment thesis, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Reinvention of Wonder* contends that Enlightenment scientific and philosophical discourse mobilizes a secularized form of wonder, which is not dissolved by scepticism but is dependent upon it: ‘Wonder’s allure reside in its promise that one might consume marvels while maintaining one’s critical faculties’ (9). Drawing a strong analogy between wonder as a state of cognitive suspension and the rise of fictionality, Sarah Tindal Kareem argues that ‘fiction accommodates readers’ skepticism while also asking that readers allow the possibility of the strange and surprising to infiltrate everyday life’ (3).

The opening chapter explores what ‘wonder and wonders mean to eighteenth-century writers and readers’ (35). Wonder was valued in the discourse of natural philosophy as a mode of attentiveness that maintains the mind ‘at the perfect tipping point between dullness and stupor’ (41). The chapter traces the cultural history of wonder in travel and devotional literature, and focuses on the emerging conceptual category of fiction as providing ‘the reader with a safe space in which to experience wonder’s intense effects without falling into delusion’ (53). The ‘twofoldness’ of fictionality (simultaneously engaging and disclosing its own artifice) enacts a shift in wonder from being merely a ‘conduit of knowledge’ to ‘laying bare its own *modus operandi* as itself an object of wonder’ (58).

Kareem’s second chapter persuasively links some unlikely bedfellows: David Hume’s critique of induction, miracles in Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, and the Protestant doctrine of special providence that ‘blurs the line between coincidence and miracle’ (94). Kareem places particular emphasis on the techniques of defamiliarization that each produces, which ‘[jolt] awake’ a ‘jaded readership’ (91). The resulting bewilderment at radical contingency is rescued by the sceptic’s sense of wonder at everyday life, which is now viewed *as if* it were miraculous without necessitating belief in supernatural intervention: ‘wonder is what happens on the way back to reality from estrangement’ (85).

Chapter 3 uses Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* and Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* to explore mid-century fictionality, which can ‘no longer play on the indeterminacy of its truth status’ (110). Drawing on a heterocosmic model developed by Alexander Baumgarten, Kareem argues that a formal standard of referentiality is replaced by one of internal consistency—‘the work of fiction answerable only to its own laws’ (122)—in which the work generates ‘wonder and recognition simultaneously’ (113). Rather than reflecting the lessons of the text back upon reality, ‘fiction’s internal intricacy of form as well as the skill of its creator come into focus’ (117).

The penultimate chapter turns to *Baron Munchausen’s Narrative of his Marvellous Travels*, written (in English) by Rudolph Raspe. Whereas the first version (published in 1785) was didactic, teaching its audience how to engage ‘a provisional belief that is the baron’s prescription for remedying credulity’ (166), later installments of the *Narrative* shift ‘its satiric target from readers, as the consumers of lies, to Munchausen, the producer’ (173). Whereas the first lesson offers a ‘method’ to be applied and then reapplied in other situations (revealing the illusionism at work in credit economies and political rhetoric), the baron’s subsequent telling of

tall tales ‘empowers his readers as autonomous thinkers and sows the seeds of his own destruction’ (173).

The last chapter reads Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* alongside Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* to suggest that both texts critique rational disenchantment (personified respectively in Henry Tilney and the Genevan magistrate) alongside their more widely recognized critiques of quixotic enthusiasm. Kareem’s close readings deftly demonstrate the ‘parallels between philosophical and romantic devotion’ and suggest that the rational thinker who dismisses ‘claims inconsistent with his own abstract principles as mere flights of romantic fancy’ is actually vulnerable ‘to a visceral, involuntary belief masquerading as rational, autonomous thought’ (197, 198). Instead, both novels advocate ‘a more thoroughgoing skepticism that is a source of, rather than the undoing of, wonder’ (188).

Meticulously researched and cited, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Reinvention of Wonder* will reward the scholar interested in any of the broad disciplines that it engages. It moves quickly (at times vertiginously) between different fields as well as different methodologies, drawing from recent work in narratology, cognitive science, discussions of fictionality, and affect theory. The delightful ambitiousness of its scope, however, also means that difficult questions of the compatibility of vastly different methodologies are elided, as the study focuses on the uncanny ways in which eighteenth century fiction pre-empted the conclusions reached by twentieth and twenty-first century disciplines. Kareem’s characterization of wonder as positioning us on the cusp between recognition and estrangement serves as an apt summary of the experience of reading her book: ‘at once destabilizing and exhilarating,’ fostering ‘a pleasure in the sensation of not knowing – of wondering – itself’ (15-16).

*Katherine Ding*  
*University of California, Berkeley*