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Role-Playing, Reader Response, and Play-Therapy in Fantasy Fiction: “You could hear the dice rolling” in Novels About Abuse and Recovery

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ROLE-PLAYING GAMES (RPGs) have an established use in play-therapy, particularly psychotherapy with children and teens as well as in social work with these groups. Likewise, reader response studies have long established the self-reflective and transformative nature of literary reading, as well as the therapeutic uses of writing. While these four areas are typically approached as distinct from each other—RPGs, therapy, reading, and writing—they find common ground in responses to and concerns with trauma and abuse. We know that RPG players may use their persona in gaming sessions as a avatar to work through issues of concern in their real lives. Similarly, readers consuming fiction may process and reflect on their own real-life experiences through the imaginary worlds inside. Authors, as a third group, also may use their writing as a way of processing their experiences in a sense akin to how a patient works with a therapist through dialogue, play-therapy, and journaling. There is, however, an overlapping point not yet recognized among these quasi-therapeutic possibilities. The crux of this article is a niche literary genre in which all four of these distinct areas coincide: fantasy fiction, and in particular popular fantasy of 1977 to 1990, in which “you could hear the dice rolling” (Lindskold, n.p.). This article considers where these topics overlap in the therapeutic components

of such novels for both readers and authors based on critical attention to affect and literary reading combined with the person-player-persona distinctions in sociological studies of RPGs. By doing so I argue for the value of an affect-based approach to genre fiction parallel with the ubiquity of critical cultural studies, taxonomies, and identity politics as approaches to popular media.¹

The phrase “you could hear the dice rolling” typifies a well-recognized sub-genre of “franchise fiction” (Robertson 130) as well as other general fantasy fiction for which some conventions of role-playing infiltrate the organization of the narrative, tropes, or action. While this is typically a pejorative description, its use here signals affinities rather than a value judgment. My interest is in the affective role-playing rather than the contingency-focused possibilities of this sub-genre and the notional “dice.” The broader sense of “dice rolling” novels began in earnest with Andre Norton’s 1978 novel *Quag Keep*, which is directly based on her gaming sessions with the founder of the RPG *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D), Gary Gygax. Her novel’s characters move from real life into the Greyhawk gaming world and back again, with their adventure along the way following the conventions of the RPG’s set of rules.² In other words, *Quag Keep* is essentially a novelization of an RPG session with role-playing shaping many parts of the narrative and even the traits of characters.³ An excerpt

1 As I have addressed at length in *A Modernist Fantasy*, much fantasy criticism is engaged in a taxonomical approach to the genre typified by W.R. Irwin’s foundational *The Game of the Impossible: A Rhetoric of Fantasy* where his disagreement with E.M. Forster’s preference to avoid definitions (ix) provides the origin point for Farah Mendlesohn’s *Rhetorics of Fantasy* that duplicates Irwin’s opening gesture and subtitle even while claiming not to be about definitions but rather taxonomies (xiii), or later the narrative shapes of the genre in C. Palmer-Patel’s *The Shape of Fantasy*. The other two dominant modes use fantasy as a reflection of conflicts in cultural norms as in Lewis Call’s *BDSM in American Science Fiction and Fantasy* or as models for a politics of representation as in Helen Young’s *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature* and Phyllis M. Betz’s *The Lesbian Fantastic*.

2 The focus here is on role-playing, but dice also signal the employment of chance via using a combination of seven multi-sided dice (the twenty-sided die is the most common for determining success or failure of an action). These conventions shape how narrative unfolds, how conflicts resolve, and what character-personas can notice or intuit.

3 For example, the creation of a persona-character in D&D will involve rolling dice to determine the character’s unique traits and abilities (that is, whether or not it has a “modifier” to rolls for charisma, dexterity, defense, etc.) as well as how combat occurs or even what elements of the game and planned gaming environment the persona is permitted to notice (the DM or GM is fully aware of all these potentialities but only reveals them to players based on dice-rolls,

from the novel was published as a preview in the RPG gaming magazine *The Dragon* in February 1978 prior to its full publication as a novel the next year for the purpose of enabling useful cross-promotion between the novel and the game module.⁴ But it also served another purpose related to affect: to model or even mentor new RPG players on how to self-narrate the experiences, decisions, and feelings of their persona-character in a gaming session. This element of affect and self-modifying reading is the issue at stake, as well as how the conventions of such novels shaped the genre more generally.

This innovation subsequently led to extensive use of fantasy novels in which “you could hear the dice rolling” to create novel-form narratives set in various RPG worlds for cross-promotion among experienced players, as well as to exemplify the narrative and self-narrating paradigms of RPGs for new players unfamiliar with these conventions. Such novels were more than entertainment: in a commercial frame they were cross-marketing for a franchise (Robertson 130), and for the concerns of this article they are also pedagogical tools for those learning RPG gaming conventions, especially self-narration as an element of play.⁵ In this, they are akin to the didactic role of sentimental fiction’s training of the sentiments. For authors, this convention also simplified worldbuilding and the organization of narrative by providing a pre-formed scaffold. For this reason, this subset of franchise fiction went on to shape fantasy in general, particularly in form, leading to the more general and non-franchise use of the “dice rolling” pejorative that is the focus here. However, such conventions are not limited to magic systems or combat sequences based on chance or contingency. The crux of the dice here is their function as a synecdoche for role-playing. The reader response concept of “becoming that which one beholds” through a process of empathy (Miall and Kuiken 222) is also a deliberate feature of such novels for RPG-playing readers and likewise for the broader set of “dice rolling” fantasy beyond franchises and fiction’s immersive experiences in general. It is also tantalizingly close to the

such as whether or not they notice the poor state of repair for a home they visit or if a non-player character is nervous and lying). In other words, hearing the dice rolling is an essential element of chance in game play that is extraordinarily useful for franchise authors planning a novel, characters, backstory, action, plot, and so forth.

4 Copyright is asserted for 1978 in the novel, but it only appeared in paperback in 1979.

5 This pedagogical function is more likely to be fulfilled by services such as YouTube today, where professional gamers film their game play sessions.

postcritique paradigm Rita Felski uses for immersive rather than suspicious reading (*Uses* 47). That is, the narrative invites not only a training of responses as in sentimental fiction and self-modifying feelings of empathy but also a model for how to engage in self-descriptions and self-narration for players in need of a schema or paradigm for speaking through their gaming persona. Such models emerge in the telling, not in a separate interpretative process. Hence, the immersion in the narrative and self-modifying exercises of empathy, as well as any subsequent expression of the self that is based on that narrative form, are themselves part of the reading process and akin to the emphasis on affect in postcritique paradigms. This is most obvious in fan-produced RPGs or modules built from non-franchise novels. These features of the sub-genre are particularly meaningful at the moments when fantasy novels in general engage with a quasi-therapeutic response to traumatic experiences of abuse, as in the two examples used below. Affect and this therapeutic element, as they appear in the structure of the fantasy fiction under analysis, are the focus here. Via literacy criticism on genre fiction, Michael Driscoll argues that “A therapy-centred ethics of reading relies heavily on the identification readers experience with literary characters” (100), and hence what I see as a form of *role-playing in reading* “values books for their contribution to personal growth, accentuating the personal and social effects of the act of reading” (101). What I seek here is the therapy-centred attention to affect and identification but without excising it from commercial concerns about class and economic disparities that Driscoll emphasizes in the middlebrow.

This article uses two distinct examples of how such narratives feature in quasi-therapeutic situations that displace a typical narrative organization of good versus evil and thereby mirror the displacement of gaming systems with affective processes of catharsis: (1) the novelist and game designer Katharine Kerr’s *Deverry Cycle* as illustrating how RPG players may engage in or learn to model play-therapy through an arm’s length persona-avatar of their experiences based on novels directly grown out from RPG systems (even while the series is independent of a franchise), and (2) the novelist David Eddings’s series *The Belgariad* in relation to his archives as an example of the therapeutic role of writing in Eddings’s authorial attempt to process and reconcile his personal history of abuse by modifying narrative conventions, again in non-franchise fantasy. Both of their works are structurally distinct from the dominant theme in commercial fantasy from 1977 through 1990: an oppositional narrative exhibiting a good versus evil dialectic. Both Kerr and Eddings replaced this conflict-based model of narrative structure with one based on restorative processes of recupera-

tion that parallel elements of role-playing. They are, in effect, commercial novels in which “you can hear the dice rolling” even though they are not “franchise fiction,” although both either grew from RPGs or gave rise to fan-made RPGs and Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) and hence align with the quasi-therapeutic elements of game-play. The narrative forms of both series are also deeply caught up in processes of recovery rather than overcoming, and by which they offer examples of self-modifying affect through reading and writing, respectively, that inform genre reading in general.

Background: RPGs in Fantasy, Therapy, and Reader Response

RPGs in the format of *Dungeons & Dragons* evolved from strategy and chance wargames that integrated role-playing among participants. These players would self-narrate the experiences and decisions of their own unique persona-avatar with the co-operative guidance of a Game Master (GM) or Dungeon Master (DM) who was responsible for the overall narrative, rules, and performance of non-player characters (NPCs). Both RPGs and fantasy as a genre experienced significant transformations around 1977. While no single year can mark a definitive change among general trends, this was the year in which J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Silmarillion* was posthumously published, and it is ostensibly when fantasy surpassed science fiction in sales as a measure of popular consciousness (Attebery 14; Gifford 1; Williamson 196). The year 1977 also marks the launch of several bestselling fantasy series with astonishing longevity: Piers Anthony’s *A Spell for Chameleon*, Stephen R. Donaldson’s *Lord Foul’s Bane*, and Terry Brooks’s *Sword of Shannara* were all bestselling starts to series that are still running more than forty years later. It is also the year that launched *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* and Ralph Bakshi’s film *Wizards*, presaging his *Lord of the Rings* and *Fire and Ice* that influenced the subsequent fantasy film genre, including the *Lord of the Rings* films and the *Game of Thrones* television series (both of which overtly echo Bakshi). The next year, Andre Norton inaugurated the genre of novelizations of RPG gaming sessions with the serial publication of an excerpt from *Quag Keep*. This quickly led to the *Endless Quest* choose-your-own-adventure format books from TSR, Inc. in 1982—these included a dice-rolling component to integrate the play structure of *D&D*, which relies on chance and odds as well as narrative and player/reader decisions via self-implicating role-playing. These novels, in which a reader would literally “hear the dice rolling,” fostered the cross-marketing phenomenon of more traditional novel series such as the launches of *Dragonlance* in 1984, the expansion of *Greyhawk* from Norton’s *Quag Keep* in 1985, and *Forgotten Realms* in 1987,

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all bound up in the immersive processes of role-playing and performing on a player-persona. Benjamin J. Robertson has outlined this as franchise writing and the privatization of genre while emphasizing “we must not understand ‘franchise’ only in terms of its economic and corporate connotations” but as also something more and distinct from genre (131).⁶ As he notes, *Dragonlance* alone accounts for more than two hundred novels (129), including many *New York Times* bestsellers.⁷ This provided a rich backdrop against which the less game-oriented forms of fantasy fiction developed more fully across the 1980s, at times adopting or rejecting traits of novels in which “you could hear the dice rolling.” Anthony, Donaldson, and Brooks all produced bestsellers in the genre in 1977 that benefited from a readership increasingly familiar with the conventions of RPGs as well as RPG-based fantasy novels. This is not to say all these texts are “franchise fiction” but, rather, that they emerged in this milieu and with a readership adept with such affective forms of engagement and familiar with an iterative relationship between games leading to novels and novels leading to games involving processes of reader identification with the characters via immersive role-playing. This general framework established the conventions of novels in which “you could hear the dice rolling,” whether within a franchise or not or tied to game play or not. Their conventions are fundamentally distinct from other forms of franchise fiction that are attached exclusively to film or television series rather than RPGs.

Only later did academics studying play therapy or conducting sociological studies of gaming subcultures also become familiar with RPGs, although Gary Fine began as early as 1983 to recognize that “The *character* identity is separate from the *player* identity” (186), which necessitates an active negotiation of dialogue between player, persona, and person as three distinct but related and contiguous categories of the self. At its heart, this is because RPGs “involve impromptu discursive acting in circumstances ... [that] create a unique set of social-psychological conditions” (Waskul and Lust 349) while at the same time offering players quasi-therapeutic and discourse-based (Liberoth and Trier-Knudson 46) “opportunities to work

6 Robertson’s work summarizes the scholarship on the *Dragonlance* franchise but follows on other works, relating it to MUDs and gaming (Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown 150).

7 Notably, these novels have a near certain probability on a twenty-sided dice roll of actually being read, in comparison to other bestsellers that may be purchased to mark status or to signal values and so forth. This makes their bestseller status a meaningful reflection of real-world reading habits, more so than titles likelier to be purchased as gifts or as part of movements such as the Oprah Winfrey Book Club, which may go unread.

on their self-concept and to further develop their personal identity” (Rosselet and Stauffer 173). Sarah Lynne Bowman has approached RPG-based gaming as a form of “drama therapy” (37–42) by exploring its “metaphor through action” (38). Raul Gutierrez remarks on the common use of board games in play-therapy with children and the later use of RPGs “mainly in the non-profit setting, to assist adolescent clients dealing with a variety of trauma and abuse” (2), or, as Waskul and Lust note, such gaming tends to occur in secluded and safe spaces that are spatially and symbolically separated from “outside” disruptions in order to bring the group to a ritualized practice (346). Gutierrez particularly notes that “More sensitive topics that must be approached with adolescents such as history of abuse or trauma are often more difficult to bring up and address in individual ‘talk therapy’ sessions.

The utilization of a character that is far enough detached from the client, yet still putting them in control, could prove to be an effective method” (3). This appears particularly suited to social work situations with group dynamics that can be worked through between gamers by tailoring narratives to the group’s specific dysfunctions or challenges (26). This is useful since “participants in role-playing games often find it difficult to play a fantasy persona that is purely fictional” (Waskul and Lust 350), much like authors of fiction, and in a therapeutic or social work context these personae encounter and negotiate the struggles of the player and person. Gutierrez builds this work based on Rubin’s (6) and Enfield’s (228) use of RPGs in psychotherapy. Much of such work is clinical in nature rather than theoretical. Adam McConaughy, also in a master’s level clinical study like Gutierrez, points to the clinical uses of play-therapy through RPGs for their combination of narrative, group dynamics, and exploration of triggering or traumatic scenarios through an avatar at a distance from the gamer (9–11), which is based on the boundaries and “unique interstices between persona, player, and person” (Waskul and Lust 337). Waskul and Lust describe how this necessitates an active form of “border work” (344) for players “because while some circumstances require participants to be in persona, others require a player who must control the non-game-related aspects of his person to prevent them from interfering with game-play” (344), a concept further expanded by Waskul (19). They also recognize the moral and personal complexities of role-playing’s demand that players “separate player-knowledge from persona-knowledge” (348), or, as above, that the interactions among persona, player, and person are continuously negotiated within the spatially and symbolically separated space of the

gaming group, which allows connections to the personal at a relatively safe and more comfortable degree of distance.

Lastly, reader response studies have pointed to the complex process of self-modifying feelings during literary reading in ways that emphasize affect akin to its role in postcritique. For instance, readers thinking aloud about self-selected passages in a short story may suddenly use “the pronoun you to speak inclusively, but still personally” (Kuiken, et al. 271)⁸ as a form of self-expression that maintains a safety of distance akin to that between the person, player, and persona. This is to say, readers in Kuiken et al.’s study may encounter and speak to self-identification with a character that provokes self-reflection and then modify this experience as subsequent passages provoke greater discomfort or too much self-reflection or self-awareness to remain acceptable. A reader’s commentary using the first-person pronoun to discuss a character’s situation may, when its topic or theme becomes uncomfortable, employ deictic shift to the second-person personal pronoun without altering the subject to whom they refer: that is, such a reader might shift pronouns to say: *I* like this story. It shows how *you* feel when *you* don’t know how to manage *your* sadness. The “I” and “you” clearly refer to the first person in both instances. Such shifts also occur between speak aloud responses. David Miall relates elements of this type of reading experience to empathy while retaining “an asymmetry between myself and a fictional character” (“Enacting” 286).

In short, reading offers possibilities for self-transformation akin to the therapeutic potential in RPGs as some readers “develop a coherent and self-modifying understanding” through their experiences of feeling with another through the text (Miall and Kuiken, “Feeling” 229). It is prescient of Felski’s innovations. Focused in a slightly different way, this also means that “the reader implicitly is taking on the embodied perspective of a figure in the text” (232). We are used to thinking of this transformative possibility within literary reading, but it is not confined to any specific genre, and readers may indeed engage in self-modifying experiences with almost any text. Novels in which you “can hear the dice rolling” as a pejorative description are certainly not excluded from such experiences, and the close kinship of such texts to RPGs with a complex system of engaging persona, player, and person only entangles the two further, as does Bowman’s quip that “a running joke exists in gaming communities that role-playing is a form of inexpensive therapy” (61). And so too is writing.

8 The author was the research assistant in this study.

Each of these three areas—RPGs as inspiration or models for narrative form and genre, RPGs and play-therapy, and the therapeutic elements of literary reading—already have a suggestive body of research, reader response being the most extensive and the others still developing or, for play therapy in RPGs, mainly rooted in clinical practice with “sparse empirical research” published on findings (Shen 84). What has so far been without comment is where the three topics overlap in novels in which “you can hear the dice” that indicate the immersive mode of role-playing. This disparaged body of texts excluded from most scholarly studies and the literature classroom may instead be read as particularly redolent in affective engagement with quasi-therapeutic catharsis, hence being read as literary texts, reflections of role-playing, and as therapy simultaneously. With these three frameworks in mind, the remainder of this article outlines two instances of such novels through Katharine Kerr and David Eddings, focusing on how themes and narrative structures of recovery or healing make their works differ from the preponderance of their contemporaries in the fantasy genre, widely conceived, revealing the affective and immersive functions of reader identification and the quasi-therapeutic processing of trauma.

Kerr’s *Deverry Cycle*

Katharine Kerr’s *Deverry Cycle* has included seventeen novels running from 1986 to 2020 and grew directly from Kerr’s playing RPGs beginning in 1979, her publications in⁹ and work as a contributing editor to *The Dragon* magazine beginning in 1980, and her co-writing the gaming module *Legacy of Blood* for TSR (*D&D*). She has recognized in several interviews how her RPG experiences as a DM or GM shaped her writing of the series, and *Legacy of Blood* includes acknowledgement of her play-testers, including her husband. Simply put, the organization of the novels follows the conventions of RPGs, and the narrative conventions of the novels echo those of her game modules and mini scenarios published in *The Dragon*. This includes, in particular, character motivations based on backstory or personal history, and it especially invites reader identification and immersion akin to and based on role-playing. For this reason, while the reader “can hear the dice” indicating role-playing in her novels, the *Deverry Cycle* also offers a particularly rich instance of the therapeutic elements of play-therapy in RPGs being developed into narrative. Fascinatingly, for a genre almost

9 Kerr’s first contribution “Money Talks” introduces her “As a woman DM [Dungeon Master]” (4) concerned with the sexist nature of the game’s cover art depictions of women and a demand that TSR do better. Shortly after, she became a regular contributor and then a contributing editor.

universally codified at the time by a narrative in which “The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily” in order to express a moralizing vision (Wilde 501),¹⁰ Kerr instead largely dispenses with clear culpability to focus on recovery and healing, as she acknowledges (“Redemption” n.p.). This emphasis on recovery in her novels reflects her early emphasis in her game design work on a “back story” for characters in role-playing, such that the narrative of gaming sessions is a way to work through the character-avatar’s troubles. This is a significant narrative innovation for the genre, and its affective function for readers directly mirrors that of role-playing, promoting reader identification, immersion, and self-exploration oriented toward reconciliation and recovery.

For the Deverry novels’ affective conventions, the central protagonist Nevyn (Nobody) recounts in the fourth novel the reason for his very long life and his DM-like role in the narrative that has him overseeing the lives of others. Across the first four novels, he repeatedly sets other characters on paths of reconciliation rather than simply the defeat of their antagonists, and this role extends to antagonists as well:

“when I was young... I loved a woman named Brangwen.... In the end I betrayed her. Because of me, Brangwen died, and her brother, and an innocent man who loved her, too. That part I’ll never forget. And it fell to me to dig her grave and bury her.... I swore a vow, that never would I rest until I’d put things right. And from that day to this, I’ve done my best to put them right, over and over, as Brangwen and the others were reborn and crossed my path, but I’ve failed every time, and so I’ve never gone to my rest.” (*Dragon* 8–9).

In effect, Nevyn plays the role of the “therapist” GM or DM who guides and nurtures the recovery of the various players as they repeat and resolve their prior traumas. His role is akin to that of a GM helping players through a quasi-therapeutic game-play session, either directly or through an avatar. He does so, as a mentor and guide, based on his own culpability for harm done to others when he was young and was named Galrion, the Prince of Deverry. This trauma, the guilt from it, and the political machinations it

¹⁰ Of course, this commonplace among literary critics, perhaps most notably Fredric Jameson, is not universally true. Grimdark fantasy and fantasy since the 1990s have moved away from this this good/evil binary, perhaps most famously now in George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* series and Marlon James’s *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*. Moreover, several early works fail to fit this mold as well, such as Poul Anderson’s *The Broken Sword* from the same year as Tolkien’s *Fellowship of the Ring*.

initiates then drive the action of the first three series (twelve books) before his own reincarnation and healing in the fourth series where he finally lives out the life he ought to have initially, no longer forestalled by his own feelings of guilt. The initial trauma is sibling incest between two characters and their deaths, for which Nevyn blames himself by having reneged on his pledge to marry Brangwen, who then fell under her brother's protection. Like the players in a gaming session, these original figures then later return as new character-personas that the players may use as avatars to explore their own concerns and real-life experiences. A gamer may reveal an experience of trauma in one gaming session and find ways to explore it, then later return as another character in future sessions, working through those personal feelings differently each time through the empathy of a supportive GM (much as authors may do through writing their characters, as discussed in the next section). The GM's quasi-therapeutic role is to foster that process until a form of healing or resolution can be achieved. The purpose here is not to speculate about the private lives of players who, with Kerr as DM, may have inspired elements of her fiction but, rather, to emphasize this narrative organization as distinct from the typical "good and evil" conflict that drives the preponderance of works in the fantasy genre at the time.

In this, we see how Kerr's work differs in meaningful respects from the critiques it has received from a number of mainstream readers for not meeting conventional expectations, most especially the punishment of antagonists rather than their recuperation. For instance, the antagonist in *Darkspell*, Alastyr, is described by some readers as embodying homophobic biases and stereotypes. However, he is presented as a child molester *not* as homosexual (he molests children regardless of gender), and Kerr later makes a point of protecting other characters from being negatively interpreted on the basis of homosexuality, as if to counteract any sense of the disingenuous anti-LGBTQ tactic of conflating homosexuality with child abuse. Her cross-dressing character Jill (the reincarnation of Brangwen and a principal protagonist of the first four series) is often mistaken for a man, and once she is assumed to be in a relationship with her male traveling companion Salamander. The assumption is made by a woman who unsuccessfully propositions Jill, and after being declined then says, "Oh well, no offense, mind. There's men like that, and they don't go bothering me, so it's up to their fancy, I always say'... She paused for a wicked little smile. 'But you so young and all. Don't you think you should try a slice off a different cut of meat, just once, like?'" (*Darkspell* 330). The problem is solved by Salamander's return and prompt adoption of the pose as Jill's

The GM's quasi-therapeutic role is to foster that process until a form of healing or resolution can be achieved.

homosexual lover. A similar trope repeats in Kerr's 2020 Deverry novel, *Sword of Fire* (the fifth series, distinct from the first sixteen novels that stand as a whole). The protagonist is told her betrothed in an arranged marriage is gay. While she is subsequently glad to learn he is not, she is also specifically and explicitly not troubled by and is respectful of the possibility. At other points, characters are also reborn in a new gender, as if to normalize RPG sessions in which players explore themselves through different genders or nascent sexual identities, as happens in gameplay, even among those who are otherwise averse to such ideas and with a more conservative ethos (Brown and Waterhouse-Watson 135–36; Osborne n.p.; Clinnin, n.p.). This is not to defend Kerr against a critique of the sexual mores in her books from the 1980s but, rather, to emphasize that the recurring narrative trope in the novels is how characters struggle to deal with prior trauma and “put them right,” rather than any moralizing about their actions in an ethical binary. Alastyr as villain sparks a crucial instance of this. Where some readers have raised questions about homophobia, the negative framing relates very specifically to molestation and (seemingly deliberately) not to homosexuality. That is, the problem the novels explore is trauma, while at the same time they leave open exploration of a persona-character's sexuality without imposing heteronormative presumption.

The instance of Alastyr's crimes reveals the extent of Kerr's rehabilitative intentions. This process of recovery includes those caught up in intergenerational abuse and avoids clear forms of blame even for abusers who are the product of abuse (again, as discussed in the next section). The emphasis is on the collective recovery and generally avoids moralizing over those who cause harm, a remarkably realist trait in a fantastical genre. In a retroactive explanation of this narrative form, the character Nevyn explains in the fourth book that the “dark dweomer” (fate/soul) that feeds on and provokes abuse is distinct from the abusers who are also its victims: “I hate the most ... [t]he way it takes men with real talent and spirit and breaks and warps them to its own foul purposes. I've met more than a few of these apprentices, and every one was as twisted and ugly as those pitiful Wildfolk [spirits] they keep around them” (*Dragon* 210–11). The response to these comments is again a focus on healing rather than victory: “The men are much worse off, I'd say. It's a long sight easier to heal the poor Wildfolk” (211). The abuser Alastyr dies, and more than dies, which gives a narrative condemnation of his molestation of others, but his victim, Sarcyn, who also went on to abuse and molest, instead enters a pathway to healing (*Darkspell* 321, 330) and realizes “No one would ever force him to go against his own will again; no one would ever hurt him again” (*Dark-*

spell 342). As a general trend, those who engage in harmful pathological behaviour as a consequence of their own trauma are narratively brought to a process of recovery rather than condemnation, with few exceptions.

Likewise, the character Perryn is a rapist and abuser in the third novel, *The Bristling Wood* (212, 228, 233, 238), but in the fourth Nevyn realizes “he’d done it by a muddled dweomer in circumstances so unusual that Nevyn had no idea whether or not he were a criminal or a victim” (*Dragon* 15). This was also anticipated in the previous novel when he is “ill” (*Bristling* 233), a “poor, weak, bumbling idiot” (241), and as the reader is specifically told that “somewhat’s wrong with Perryn” (241), which makes Jill’s “deranged mind ... cas[t] up images of Sarcyn and Alastyr” (240) as if to suggest the rapist Perryn is also, like Sarcyn, abusive due in part to his own experiences of inherited trauma. As Nevyn first works on Perryn, who is injured and ill, he seeks to “cleanse the stale humors” (*Dragon* 16), but this is a deception to have Perryn share and relive his earliest childhood memories and the harms done to his spirit (player) in a previous life (an earlier character-avatar in the RPG). The language about this memory, like recovering a trauma or regression therapy, is indicative as a feature of 1980s pop psychology and doubly emphasizes the modeling of therapeutic outcomes by the novels: “Mam looks so pale. She’s not going to die, is she?” and “I don’t want to go live with him” before another memory “cost the lad a good beating” and more memories that leave him “twisting in pain” (*Dragon* 17). Nevyn then explains that this feverish dream “isn’t a tale, but a memory” (*Dragon* 18) of “violen[ce], and ... anger and hatred” (*Dragon* 19). The implication is that Perryn can only resolve the trauma of his own abuse of others and his pathological behavior by confronting his own experiences of abuse and intergenerational trauma.¹¹ The narrative unfolding, which eventually gives him a “happy ending” (despite his being a sexual abuser as with Sarcyn) is oriented therapeutically toward “restitution” (*Dragon* 213) rather than toward punishment and justice or the “simplistic moralism” of “goodies” defeating the “baddies” (Le Guin 147). Some readers have expressed unhappiness with this outcome, but as a reflection or echo of play-therapy in an RPG it is very much the kind of confrontation and resolution of harm and trauma that would make sense in game play. For readers in a genre familiar with role-playing, immersion,

11 It is impossible not to speculate about Kerr’s RPG co-author Steve Perrin as a source for Perryn’s name, but this may be coincidental or could most plausibly be a comment on the controversial role of rape in the origin myth of orcs in Perrin’s *RuneQuest* gaming system.

and identification, the kind of depth that would characterize this reading is remarkable and is attested by the extent of fan responses.

The overall effect for Kerr's novels is that as characters are reborn, each new life acts like a RPG player returning to play-therapy with a new avatar-persona, through which he or she continues the process of exploration and recovery, with their own personal struggles or trauma at a distance from those embedded in the avatar persona or substitutionally transformed like Freudian dream work. How this is reflected in readers and their potential mimicking in game-play is speculative without the kind of empirical reader response work seen in Miall and Kuiken, but the extensive fan responses suggest it is deeply immersive for readers who identify with characters undergoing the processes of emotional recuperation. This recovery model is a unique organizing principle for narrative in the fantasy genre. Despite there being foundational critiques of the genre as inextricably invested in an essentially reactionary religious ideology of good versus evil (Jameson 141, 146) that renders fantasy as genre "theoretically illegitimate" (Freedman 17), Kerr's novels point to a process-oriented paradigm that instead focuses on recovery rather than symbolic victories and defeats. Jameson's reading of fantasy as a necessarily reactionary genre, echoing Darko Suvin's famous condemnation of fantasy (9), hence embodies what postcritique approaches to literature have characterized as a "hermeneutics of suspicion" (Felski, *Uses* 1; Felski, *Critique* 31) while Kerr's works instead prioritize affect and engagement that models a recuperative process of reading/gaming. For any reading theory of affect, the pejorative of hearing the dice roll might now become a metonym for especially rich immersive opportunities for identification and self-reflection.

Eddings's *Belgariad*

David Eddings's *The Belgariad* series was an enormous bestseller. While it is critiqued as farm boy fantasy and perhaps the pinnacle of that sub-genre, it has also been extraordinarily successful among readers. While the series did not develop directly from RPGs, it prompted fan-made RPG modules (Ransome 18–19), the MUD "Prophecy" that has run since 1993, its Cherek Bore seems to have inspired the maelstrom of the Blood Sea of Istar in Dragonlance novels and gaming modules (Weis and Hickman 41–44; Eddings, *Pawn* 164–65), and its affective influence on readers-turned-authors who identify with its alternate parenting is overt in later fantasy fiction like Jes Battis's O.S.I. and Parallel Parks's series (Battis 131;

Cunningham 246).¹² All of this activity gives evidence to the degree of affective response among its readers and their association of the work with RPG models.¹³ The connection here to Kerr and to the therapeutic possibilities of RPGs and self-modifying reading is the series' concentration on authorial therapeutic processes that drive its narrative as recuperatively cathartic. The series is a peculiar shift in Eddings's career—his first published novel *High Hunt* was for adults with themes of trauma, abuse, wife-swapping, alcoholism, and toxic forms of masculinity. His previous novels and his undergraduate and master's theses are realist in mode, as are the various drafts in his archives. What was not revealed until 2020 was that Eddings spent a year in jail (not prison) for physically abusing his adopted son, resulting in the end of his academic career as a tenured college professor and the termination of his parental rights.¹⁴ I allude to parts of this history in *A Modernist Fantasy* but argue here for a difficult interpretation that reflects the recuperative focus of Kerr's novels. I seek a reading akin to postcritique's sense of interpretation as a part of reading entangled with self-modifying feeling, empathy, and immersion. Immersive reading in Eddings's *Belgariad* may be read with empathy,

12 When Battis, writing as Cunningham, wrote his Parallel Parks series, the books are also modeled on the "dice rolling" subgenre with characters entering the game world via role-playing in a manner comparable to Norton's *Quag Keep*.

13 Eddings claimed not to read in the genre, but this is untrue. He included Tolkien's work on syllabuses while he was a professor (Gifford x), and it is difficult to not hear an echo of Stephen R. Donaldson's leprous Thomas Covenant in Eddings's character Relg's refrain "Don't touch me," or of Patricia A. McKillip's shape-shifting Riddle-master in the animal transformations of Eddings's characters. The timing of his familiarity with RPGs is speculative based on his archive, but he was clearly familiar with the genre's modes and writes encounters similar to RPG-inspired works; however, a record of his personal library has not survived.

14 The reactions of his fans have been strongly condemnatory. Some claimed this makes his works unreadable, akin to Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*, for which the accusations of her and her husband's apparent child molestation permanently transforms how her work would be read by an informed audience. Bradley's novel was, until these accusations, lauded as the first major voice for female emancipation in fantasy fiction, offering a reworking of the Arthurian love triangle that privileged female sexual desire and independence. However, in today's context, the young and hairless Lancelot is almost impossible not to read as the molested child in a sexual act between husband and wife (Bradley 481–85, 546–47, 630). Her by then ex-husband, Walter H. Breen, died in prison after his convictions for child molestation, and she was posthumously accused by her own son and daughter.

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operative
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and in doing so it emerges as his attempt in narrative at recovery by the therapeutic process of writing through his own traumatic childhood and then rebuilding an idealized fantasy world that corrects his own personal wrongs and confronts his failures and shame as an abuser, thereby inviting readers to experience the same cathartic recuperation of their own experiences. Readers, of course, respond in various ways to any text and need not have experienced a character's or author's failures or traumas in order to affectively experience catharsis, just as in Kerr. The operative element of catharsis here is identification and its recuperative function through emotional empathy. Importantly, as with Kerr, this makes visible the narrative's changes to form and resolution. The climax of Eddings's *Belgariad* shifts from single combat to a cathartic moment of choice paired with a biting self-recrimination, detailed below. Where Kerr's novels model a therapeutic process, Eddings's are the process itself, and hence their contrast here.

Eddings and his wife Judith Lee Eddings (née Schall) adopted two children in South Dakota while Eddings was a tenured English professor at Black Hills State College (now University). His lecture notes held in the Reed College Library's Special Collections & Archives show a scholar-teacher dedicated to social justice and labour rights (Gifford ix). His first novel, *High Hunt*, was written during this jail term and opens with a scene of his own childhood physical abuse (4) and closes the first chapter with the shooting of an elderly dog no longer able to work, which appears to reflect on Eddings's self-recrimination:

"But why'd he shoot him?" I finally protested.

"He just wasn't any good anymore," Dad said, "and when a dog wasn't any good in those days, they didn't want him around. Same way with people. If they're no good, why keep them around?" (14)

Eddings is, quite overtly, processing his childhood experiences and culpability as an abuser, which he makes explicit about the novel when later corresponding with his father (Eddings, Letter n.p.). The narrative continues to autobiographically recount Eddings's own inability to manage his emotions after his fiancée ended their engagement to marry another man while he was drafted (*High* 26, 36, 61) and shows his struggles with alcoholism (*High* 68–73).¹⁵

¹⁵ Eddings kept his fiancée's letter for the rest of his life and detailed his alcoholism, all of which is preserved in his archives donated to Reed College. Also, while fans attribute the book to both David and Leigh Eddings as authors at his encourage-

Eddings's family and his own letters depict his wife as violently tempered (Eddings, Letter), saying that like in the novel *High Hunt*, she would "knife" anyone who came after him, and that if his father could get past the fact she "yells a lot" like his own mother, they might agree with each other.¹⁶ He also appears to have planned to divorce her after their jail term (Gifford x–xi; Eddings, Notes). Eddings's notes and calendar countdown for his release include visiting his lawyers and filing suit for "alienation of marital affections," an expedited way to seek a divorce. He also sought independent legal representation and a separate trial from his wife during the criminal proceedings ("Couple" 1), suggesting that his lawyers saw differing degrees of culpability as a viable defense.¹⁷ Regardless of the conflicting reports, even at a minimum Eddings agreed to criminal culpability: "between the fall of 1966 and Jan. 22 1970, on dates other than those included ..., on regular or separate occasions as part of a general scheme, [they] did consistently willfully and unlawfully cruelly punish and neglect a child under the age of 14, namely Scott David" ("Eddings"

ment, and he published his late novels in both their names (some written after Leigh could no longer communicate due to a series of strokes), the reality is that he completed the first draft in March 1971, half-way through his one-year jail sentence after a plea-bargain on charges of child abuse (Eddings, Notes n.p.). He could not have co-authored with his wife because she was also sentenced to a year in jail in a different part of the state while he planned their divorce. As this suggests, co-authorship is implausible. While she gave feedback on his drafts, the archival holdings do not include any material substantiating co-authorship. The Finding Aid to the Eddings Papers is clear: "Although he wrote everything, his wife Leigh, born Judith Leigh [sic: Lee] Schall, was significantly helpful in discussing topics and ideas, pointing out things that didn't work, and proofing/editing. Referring to her as Super Girl, David added her name as co-author on the last eight titles from 1995 on. His papers include all steps of the publishing process and clearly show the author/editor relationship" (Walker 2).

- ¹⁶ In the same letter, he describes his father as meaner and tougher than him, while still showing him affection, and asks if he really wants to remember the past since there are things better not remembered. I am paraphrasing rather than quoting unpublished manuscript and correspondence materials.
- ¹⁷ He was granted separate counsel for himself after the judge ruled he must pay for the expense at \$50 per month to reimburse the county ("Couple"). The extensive and lurid newspaper reports of the trials recount witnesses to his wife Judith's (later Leigh) abuse of their son Scott David Eddings ("Witnesses" 1, 3; "Hearing" 10), her force-feeding the child ("Hearing" 10), and indicate Eddings's own witnessing of the abuse at a minimum. His participation in the physical abuse is not directly recounted by the newspaper reports, and Judith Lee (not David Carroll) was with their son in the enclosure in their basement when they were arrested on 22 January 1970, although newspaper reports conflict on this point, likely conflating it with testimony about a previous gas meter check.

1). After seeking and losing their appeal to retain custody of their son and daughter, both Eddinges accepted an agreed statement of fact that saw them sentenced to a year of jail for misdemeanor child abuse.¹⁸ While all evidence reflects their treatment as disturbingly abusive, the allegations of a torture chamber shift in the newspaper reports from initially a blacked out cage under the basement stairs with implements of torture to become simply the basement with curtained windows and a room-sized enclosure “about eight by 11 feet fenced off with window screen” (“Hearing” 10). This does not in any way dismiss their physical abuse of their son but, rather, points to the difficulty fifty years later of finding accurate information when the surviving accounts are conflicting, sensationalistic in intention, and generally mollified over time.

The planned divorce never happened. Judith Lee Eddings changed her name to Leigh Eddings (her mother continued to write to her as “Judy”), her husband referred to her with this new name in writing before her jail term ended, and David Eddings retained his own name. However, he did not disclose the reasons for which he left his tenured academic post later after achieving fame as an author, and he generally shunned public events, readings, interviews, and the media even after becoming an international bestseller. His employers, who terminated his position and were fully aware of his trial, subsequently wrote him strongly supportive letters of reference to seek future academic posts elsewhere after his dismissal, and they did so without mentioning his criminal trial or incarceration.¹⁹

¹⁸ Their separate defense attorneys argued during sentencing that the “press, radio and television had ‘blown the case far out of proportion’” (“Pair” 1) and that “a psychologist examining their adopted son had found him to be ‘a normal four-year old boy’ and that doctors in Denver had found that the couple were ‘not the malicious type’” (“Pair” 1). No allegations of physical abuse of their daughter were brought forward. Notably, the newspaper descriptions of the abuse and of the basement of the Eddings’s home vary considerably over time (virtually all front-page stories in regional newspapers).

¹⁹ They ascribed his departure to their inability to offer him a salary appropriate to his skills and teaching abilities, and they expressed regret at losing him (Eddings, “University”). These letters came from M.N. Freeman, the President of Black Hills State College, 20 March 1970, and the English department chair for the same date, two months after the Eddinges’s arrest and more than a month after hearings began, all prominently covered in the regional newspapers, television, and radio. President Freeman’s letter, dated 20 March 1970 (two months after their arrest) describes Eddings’s employment in the present tense despite his termination: “He is an Assistant Professor of English and has been tenured since 1968. His Division Chairman has consistently rated him as a good teacher, deeply interested in his subject and in students. Students also seem to enjoy his classes.... He is quietly conscientious in his work and cooperative with colleagues and administration” (Eddings, “University”). His chair, states more

While referees may offer positive letters to “get rid of” a problem, in this instance the letters were written *after* Eddings’s termination and therefore suggest some degree of empathy or charity for his circumstances, although it is impossible to know their rationale. Because the Eddingses agreed to a statement of fact, no final judge’s decision can tell researchers today what occurred or both partners’ degrees of culpability as determined by an expert. What we do know is that his counsel sought a defense for David Eddings with separate counsel, indicating an argument for differing degrees of culpability (a defense that would benefit him, so also not a form of proof), that the Eddingses had sought and failed to retain custody of their children (their adopted daughter was eighteen months old at the time of their arrest),²⁰ and that despite writing an apparent intention to divorce his wife and seeking legal counsel from the same lawyers to do so, the couple remained together after Leigh’s release. His writing, while in jail, focuses on what his personal papers held in Reed College show to be the defining traumas of his own life: alcoholism, a failed engagement to marry, physical abuse, and childhood poverty. Knowing this background, it is painfully difficult to read his first published novel, *High Hunt*, without engaging with it as an attempt to understand his traumatic experiences that presage his own abusive acts.

What happened next is the fantastical element bound up with a therapeutic revision of narrative form, effectively authorial role-playing that models cathartic responses to readers. In 1982, *The Belgariad* began with the novel *Pawn of Prophecy*. While it alludes to a range of complex modernist and utopian literary texts (Gifford x–xi), it also shows an adopted child raised in a locale not unlike Eddings’s own son Scott, a child also adopted. That childhood depicts endlessly perfect domestic love with no abuse and only kindness. A second child, Errand, whom the protagonists rescue, is described as having a “sweet innocence about him that caught at the heart. His eyes were blue, large, and trusting, and he was quite the most beautiful child” (*Magician’s* 297). Even more startlingly, the avatar of

energetically, “He is undoubtably one of the best English instructors we have had.... He is well regarded by both his students and fellow faculty members.... I recommend him highly without any reservations as a sound, effective English teacher. We hate to lose him here, but unfortunately, we cannot really pay him what he should be getting” (Eddings, “University”). Any sense of the reason for their charity and falsehoods, to Eddings’s benefit, is speculation.

²⁰ The author of this article was also an adopted child, and needless to say my sympathy falls with the children. I have tried to write through the emotions for this in creative work as well (“Terrace”).

his wife Leigh in his character Ce’Nedra experiences, despite being explosively tempered, her most profound happiness while holding a toddler who silences her anger with his innocence and gentleness while remaining perfectly happy (*Castle* 115). The seemingly maudlin moments of bliss with children and toddlers, in context, become astonishingly painful: the toddler “Errand pulled his hand free and climbed instead into Ce’Nedra’s lap. Quite seriously he kissed her, then nestled down in her arms and promptly fell asleep.... Without knowing why, she was happier than she had ever been in her life” (*Castle* 116), which silences her fury. How does one read such a passage knowing that Eddings’s wife also read it? This is a question for an affect-focused hermeneutics. The reader finds patient and loving families at every turn, and failed families healed by finding joy in their children, or rugged and bitter characters who share tenderness with their family. At the same time, there are dungeon scenes painfully close to the witnesses’ descriptions of the Eddings’s basement where they kept their son (“Spearfish” 1; Eddings, *Queen* 162–64),²¹ and also abusive characters in the narrative who mistreat children, are condemned, and ultimately unmade. This abuser, Ctuchik, is set in direct juxtaposition to the other avatar for Eddings himself in the novels, Belgarath, a surrogate father figure to the protagonist with an idyllic childhood. Belgarath struggles with alcoholism, as Eddings did through Alcoholics Anonymous;²² yet, despite

21 The earlier newspaper accounts describing the basement “cage” emphasize “the only light at all was the very little which came through about a one-half inch crack” that it “smelled strongly of cat litter from the three cats,” with repeated use of the word “torture” (“Spearfish” 1). The dungeon in *Queen of Sorcery* is retroactively striking after these newspaper accounts, even if they lost their sensationalistic tone over time (the dungeon cage becoming a large, room-sized enclosure made of window screens): “The cell to which Garion was taken was dank and clammy, and it smelled of sewage and rotting food. Worst of all was the darkness. He huddled beside the iron door with the blackness pressing in on him palpably” (162), and “Time in such a place was non-existent” (163).²³ For example, the antagonist Ctuchik remarks, “We’re very much alike, Belgarath. I’ve been looking forward to this meeting almost as much as you have. Yes, we’re very much alike. Under different circumstances, we might even have been friends” (*Magician’s* 299). This overt paralleling of Eddings’s alter-ego and surrogate father figure in the novel with a depraved abuser is difficult to see in a context other than self-recrimination and cathartic writing.

22 Eddings’s alcoholism is attested across his archives, most strikingly in his Alcoholics Anonymous journals during his time in rehab, in which he drafted *The Elder Gods* series, structurally inspired by his reading Lawrence Durrell’s *The Alexandria Quartet*.

being a patient and gentle father figure to the protagonist, he is still overtly linked to Ctuchik, the most horrific abuser in the novels.²³

A more biting version of this disguised self-chastisement comes at the conclusion of the novels where the protagonist Garion discovers that the climactic struggle of “good and evil” conflated with single combat is merely a veneer for the real struggle: rejection. The antagonist, Torak, does not need to be defeated—he must be rejected. Torak attempts to beguile Garion by offering him what he longs for most in life, a mother and father, by adopting Garion as his son and making his Aunt Polgara into his “real” mother (*Enchanters*’ 294). By prioritizing affect in reading and the recuperative component of catharsis in the process of writing, this narrative climax based in refutation takes on new meaning:

“Hear me, maimed and despised God,” [Garion] grated from between clenched teeth. “You are nothing. Your people fear you, but they do not love you. You tried to deceive me into loving you; you tried to force Aunt Pol to love you; but I refuse you even as she did. You’re a God, but you are nothing. In all the universe there is not one person—not one thing—that loves you. You are alone and empty, and even if you kill me, I will still win. Unloved and despised, you will howl out your miserable life to the end of days.” (*Enchanters*’ 326)

Lest there be any confusion about this moment’s self-recrimination and its displacement of the traditional conflict-based narrative form, the reader is told by the narrator “*This* was the EVENT for which the Universe had waited since the beginning of time. *This* was why Garion had come to this decaying ruin—not to fight Torak, but to reject him” (326).²⁴ That Eddings could write such a work, for a young adult audience, and without a trace

23 For example, the antagonist Ctuchik remarks, “‘We’re very much alike, Belgarath. I’ve been looking forward to this meeting almost as much as you have. Yes, we’re very much alike. Under different circumstances, we might even have been friends’” (*Magician’s* 299). This overt paralleling of Eddings’s alter-ego and surrogate father figure in the novel with a depraved abuser is difficult to see in a context other than self-recrimination and cathartic writing.

24 If this self-accusation as the rejected adoptive father and purgation were not clear, the continuation of the series in *The Mallorean* then opens with the couple, Garion and Ce’Nedra, suddenly bereft by the kidnapping of their young son for the remainder of the series, which culminates in his rescue and recovery, reversing the self-detestation through a symbolic act of restoration.

of its continuous repetition compulsion of his greatest shame, like the repeating lives of characters in Kerr, and without the central traumas of his own life ever appearing as such on the surface of the text is astonishing. For Eddings himself, the novels must have been a painfully confessional project of quasi-therapeutic catharsis that, as with Kerr, subverts the typical conflict-based narrative form of the genre among his contemporaries.

Likewise, the large folding life chart Eddings drew up as a graphic illustration of his experiences uses levels of “happiness” and “alcohol” as two lines rising and falling with the y-axis on his chart, with time as the x-axis and various life-events marked on it (Eddings, Life Chart 1). His year in jail is marked as comparatively high on happiness and low on alcohol, as is his time as a father before losing custody of his son and daughter, Scott and Kathy. His lowest moments of happiness include his failed engagement to marry Barbara Jean Wilson with a corresponding increase in alcohol consumption, likewise with his wife Leigh’s first major stroke, and with happiness collapsing and alcohol rising off the chart with her death. The early moment of loss, listed as among the greatest sadnesses of his life, is when his fiancée wrote him a “Dear John” letter to terminate their plans to marry and state her intentions to marry someone else while he was serving overseas in Germany. They had been college sweethearts before Eddings was drafted. The scenario recurs in his therapy-novel *High Hunt*: “I had a few wild daydreams about maybe looking up the guy Sue had told me about in her last letter and kicking out a few of his teeth, but I finally decided it wouldn’t be worth the effort. He was probably some poor creep her mother had picked out for her” (*High* 26–27). The problem returns like a repetition compulsion as the protagonist, Eddings’s alter-ego based closely on his own life, talks with a friend:

“You got a girl?” he asked.

“Had one,” I said. “She sent me one of those letters about six months ago.”

“Rough.”

I shrugged. “It wouldn’t have worked out anyway.” I got a little twinge when I said it. I thought I’d pretty well drowned that particular cat, but it still managed to get a claw in my guts now and then. I’d catch myself remembering things or wondering what she was doing. I took a quick blast of bourbon. (*High* 36)

Finally, the therapeutic element of the narrative occurs as he rewrites the personal experience of his “Dear John” letter to place his avatar in the

position of having abandoned another woman he took up with in Germany (where Eddings served) as a way of re-establishing his masculinity: "If it hadn't been for her, God knows how I'd have gotten through the first few months after that letter. Now I was treating her like she was a dirty joke. What makes a guy do that anyway?... I was still a little ashamed of myself" (*High* 61). This autobiographical scenario in *High Hunt* is revised from life to minimize Eddings's biographical depression and feelings of humiliation. It is further revised when the situation recurs for his persona-avatar in *The Belgariad*. Garion returns home from his time abroad on a quest to find his childhood sweetheart has become engaged to his best friend. However, rather than being humiliated at being replaced and experiencing rejection from his lover, Garion becomes the active agent in his life, declines Zubrette's affections, and deliberately directs her to the other lover:

"Have you come for Zubrette, too?" Rundorig asked in a numb, stricken sort of voice that tore at Garion's heart.... "I think she'd go with you if you asked her to, though.... I think she'd endure anything to be with you."

"But we won't let her, will we?"....

"I could never lie to her, Garion," the tall boy objected.

"I could," Garion said bluntly. (*Castle* 125)

Now, rather than being the abandoned partner, he is the *abandoning* partner actively taking up the end of the youthful relationship as a way of expressing not only control but generosity and care for others, and very notably without the shame over bad conduct based on toxic masculinity in the more autobiographical *High Hunt*. The novels do not fully abandon the typical narrative structure of the genre (good defeating evil), but the form of the much longer sequels do—*Belgarath the Sorcerer* in 1995 and *Polgara the Sorceress* in 1997 are far more akin to Kerr's *Deverry* series, fully centring healing and recuperation after trauma in a quasi-autobiographical format rather than victory over an opponent, with the conflict-based plot all but abandoned.²⁵

²⁵ While Eddings never disclosed his abusive history and criminal conviction, and the harm to his children is inestimable, he did recover sufficiently to lead a successful life and bequeathed an \$18-million gift to Reed College for students of limited financial means and, perhaps most tellingly, a \$10-million gift to the National Jewish Medical and Research Center in Denver for pediatric asthma treatment and research.

Conclusions

The titular gesture of this article to novels in which “you could hear the dice rolling” is normally understood as a pejorative description, even for those who read such works avidly and participate in RPGs. As a phrase, it stands in for “bad” literature or specifically “bad” fantasy fiction that can be readily reduced to a crass commercial motivation with no redeeming aesthetic or social value: the bad end of a bad genre. This bias only intensified where it overlaps with the commercial processes of franchise fiction. To hear the dice rolling is ostensibly to read not only pulp but bad pulp with a crass marketing motive and implicitly pulp that is bad *for* readers (Robertson 130). Add to this the prevalence of taxinomial and identity-based modes of analysis for fantasy criticism, and the genre’s affective nature becomes obscured from critical attention. However, reading across Kerr and then Eddings points to a very different possibility and an intensely affective mode in the subgenre with the “dice” standing in for processes of identification and immersion in role-playing. As readers experience empathy for character-personas and narrative forms that they may emulate or through whom they may mentally reimagine themselves (by using the framework of play-therapy within RPG worlds or simply as affective readers reading), a quasi-therapeutic and self-implicating process emerges. Reading, including in popular genres, is known to elicit forms of self-modifying feeling, and writing is also a regular component of therapeutic self-reflection. Hence, the play-therapy process of working through a persona-avatar is uniquely attached to the production and consumption of RPG-oriented fiction. Kerr outlines how RPG players may emulate a process of healing from fiction to a player’s persona, and Eddings shows a pathway for accepting one’s participation in intergenerational abuse and some partial recovery through writing. As a sub-genre, such novels may then offer a unique subject of study for readerly identification, empathy, affect, and as models for readers’ self-expression in other social situations such as during RPG play or popular pulp reading. Indeed, if “role-playing is a form of inexpensive therapy” (Bowman 61), then such novels are demonstrably built around a template for that quasi-therapeutic practice, and Kerr and Eddings show models of affective engagement that may be taken to other works in and beyond the genre. This would expand our sense of what reading in (and beyond) the classroom is for, how our “hermeneutics of suspicion” may foreclose other pedagogically useful purposes for denigrated texts, and gives persuasive motivation for approaching genre fiction and popular culture in criticism through theories of affect in addition to the more

prevalent formalist rhetorics of genre or the politics of representation that currently preponderate in fantasy scholarship.

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