“Were an ark’s power only to hold, still, containerize, and convey, its destination would always be grim, a disappointment and a violence. The ark is a broken frame, and therein lies its vitality” (p. 58). In *Noah’s Arkive*, environmental literature scholars Jeffrey J. Cohen and Julian Yates approach the ark narrative as a “structure to think with and through” (p. 21). Along with the biblical narrative, the authors analyze texts as wide-ranging as museums, medieval prayer books, After Action Reports, children’s toys, and contemporary eco-fiction. *Noah’s Arkive* is an archive of the stories we have and the stories we need to endure planetary catastrophe. In eight chapters, Cohen and Yates offer careful readings of flood narratives from the Epic of Gilgamesh and Genesis to medieval and early modern texts to twenty-first-century speculative fiction by Kim Stanley Robinson and N. K. Jemisin. They draw on secondary literature both ancient and new, including Augustine of Hippo on the ark as an allegory for the cross and Christina Sharpe on Black life “in the wake” of the slave ship.[1] Along the way, they return to this refrain, printed in italics throughout the book: “*The worst thing you can ever believe is that you are no longer on an ark*” (pp. 15, 329, multiple points in between).

This idea of being forever on an ark, never in an imagined space of safety, calls to mind the work of Donna Haraway, whose concept of “staying with the trouble” has informed wide-ranging scholarship in the environmental humanities over the last decade.[2] Invoking Haraway, the authors attempt to account for what gets left out of most ark narratives: almost everyone. Cohen and Yates are “interested in arks less because of what is stored within them than because of what they discard or exclude, the stories left to rising water so that an ark’s dimensions can appear to close” (p. 12). The authors resist this closure by returning, again and again, to the ark.

Cohen and Yates inhabit the story of Noah, spending time both inside and outside the ship, with Noah’s family, the animals, and the countless souls denied entry. Their chapter titles are more suggestive than descriptive: “No More Rainbows,” “Stow Away!,” “Abandon Ark?” Each provides a prism through which to view the book’s overarching question: “Can we offer an ark more humane than many of those that have set sail over the centuries?” (p. 14). In chapter 1, “How to Think Like an Ark,” Cohen and Yates describe a visit to Frostburg, Maryland, where the unfinished “Ark of Safety” offers an alternative to the totalizing perspective of Ken Ham’s Ark Encounter in Kentucky, a museum experience proudly built on an attempt at biblical literalism and social exclusion. After all, one of the museum’s “self-proclaimed imperat-
“Take Back the Rainbow” from the queer community (p. 9). Preferring a forever-in-process ark to a finished one, Cohen and Yates invite their reader not only to question the inclusions and exclusions of the flood narrative but also to scan the horizons of narrative itself, which are also “structured around omission” (p. 181). In place of a totalizing narrative, they seek “open narratives and capacious refuges that may accommodate a more expansive sense of ‘us’” (p. 54).

In much the same way that the flood narrative has appeared in unexpected places over the centuries, Cohen and Yates return to the same texts across multiple chapters. A close reading of one text—for example, Timothy Findley’s Not Wanted on the Voyage (1984)—appears in chapter 2 only to reappear in multiple others. In chapter 5, “Stow Away!,” the authors offer a close reading of Kim Stanley Robinson’s generation ship novel, Aurora (2015), which powerfully returns in the final chapter, to consider how narratives both sustain and limit the imagination, particularly when we are met with a crisis as large as a failed mission to an uninhabitable planet. In the final, unpunctuated thoughts of the novel’s sentient Ship, “And yet,” Cohen and Yates locate an opening that might spiral outward into other stories.

Cohen and Yates were trained in medieval and Renaissance studies, and this is apparent in many of their textual selections, but the book is incredibly accessible and instructive to the nonspecialist, and this is one of its great strengths. Because the authors’ scope is grand and encompasses not only the biblical narrative and its various iterations across time but also the concept of archives and narratives, it is immensely useful to scholars interested in the role of story in surviving the end of a world. The authors ask, “What happens when we resist the lure and the price of landfall, the arc of the ark?” (p. 28). They answer: “Rejecting a future built on severe and divisive promises enables lingering on survival together in a catastrophe-limned now, in a climate-changed world, within a community that welcomes difference and disunion, despite or because of the weather” (p. 28).

This book is not like any other academic treatment of climate change narratives in recent memory, which is both a strength and a source of potential difficulty. It is hard to compare Noah’s Arkive to other books. The texts it tackles range widely across time periods and genres. Cohen and Yates provide evidence of an astonishing amount of research. The writing style, at times lyrical, rewards the kind of careful reading the authors extend to their texts. This caveat is offered less as a warning and more as an invitation to give this book the time and attention it deserves.

Cohen and Yates read the ark narrative as a cautionary tale for our current moment of global pandemic and climate change. When faced with planetary destruction, what does Noah do? He builds an ark. But the ark can, by design, only fit so many bodies. In its very structure, the ark excludes most while saving a few. The authors argue through their constellation of textual and visual analyses that this is not the narrative we need to weather our current and future storms. As bleak as the forecast may be for our planet, Cohen and Yates are cautiously hopeful that we might move beyond the ark’s story of “salvage and refuge at cost” (p. 22), which is too great a cost to those excluded from the rainbow’s promise of dry land.

Notes

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