

**Visions of New London:  
Review of Tiffany Trent, *The Unnaturalists***

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**Tiffany Trent, *The Unnaturalists***

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Over the past few years, both young adult (YA) novels and steampunk novels have experienced a surge in popularity. Due to the success of series such as Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* (2008-2010) and the rise of mainstream attention to the Steampunk aesthetic – even Richard Castle on the ABC TV show gets to visit a Steampunk club – it seems only expected that the two genres would come together eventually. Novels such as Kady Cross's *Girl in the Steel Corset* (2011), Lia Habel's *Dearly, Departed* (2011), and Cassandra Clare's *Clockwork Angel* (2011), itself a prequel to her incredibly popular and successful *Mortal Instruments* series (2008-present), have offered interesting and successful visions of the youth populating an alternative Victorian or neo-Victorian London. These presentations of London have a decidedly brass and steam bent and often focus on a supernatural and magical presence as well as a technologically advanced scientific community. What ties them all together, however, is their focus on a plucky heroine who endeavours to find a place for herself in a world that, despite its technological advances, still desires to protect its children from the dangers of the city beyond the home. When YA Steampunk heroines escape, or are taken hostage, or leave positions of employment risky because of lecherous employers, they enter a world

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infinitely more exciting, but perhaps even more physically dangerous than the mannered, socially restrictive world they wished for so long to abandon.

What makes novels such as Tiffany Trent's *The Unnaturalists* (2012) particularly resonant for a twenty-first-century teenage female reading audience is its heroine's desire for scientific and technological pursuits that even now still tend to be marked as masculine.<sup>1</sup> That is, what is fascinating about *The Unnaturalists* is not only its focus on the traditional concerns of Steampunk YA – the clocks and brass, the corsets and gowns, the supernatural and the mythological – but also the focus on the *science* of the Steampunk world. In Trent's vision of New London, magical beings are stuffed or, as is more often the case, immobilised, imprisoned, and put on display in the Museum of Unnatural History. Darwin is canonised as a saint and his "Litany of Evolution" (p. 5) is recited as prayer. And, in a move that would be certain to make any stereotypically stuffy Victorian crack a smile, church windows depicts scenes in which science triumphs over irrational concepts, like the one on which "Saint Pasteur smites the Demon Byron for his licentious poetry" (p. 255). The nineteenth-century intellectual's insistence on the death of God and the Victorians' obsession with scientific advancements and astonishing technological achievements are in Trent's novel revered, canonised, and deified. What was in the nineteenth century an appreciation of the scientific in all of us is, in Trent's New London, the newly divine.

Details such as these distinguish Trent's novel in a genre sometimes overpacked with minute details and lovingly rendered world building. To the novel's credit – and to the reader's enjoyment – the Steampunk aspects are never slapdash; the infernal 'just slap some gears on it and call it Steampunk' accusation can never be levied against *The Unnaturalists*. The success of the novel is dependent on how these details are interwoven within the text and presented as matter-of-fact, part and parcel with this New London. The seamlessness of Trent's references serves her well during the descriptive scenes, which are never apologetic or overwrought. From the opening line that sets up the reader for the supernatural inherent in this novel – "The Sphinx stares at me from her plinth" (p. 3) – to the references to "Saint Tesla and the experiment that brought [the New Londoners] here to found New London" (pp. 45-46) to the descriptive wedding feast in which the heroine watches as "one eager lady whip[s] the napkin off, and the stricken form of the flambéed fairy under the glass makes [the heroine]

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gag” (p. 262), the mythical, the magical, and the technological are all integrated together under the compelling YA trope of a young woman coming of age and coming to terms with her self, her family, and her society.

I employ ‘YA trope’ not as a criticism but rather as a critical point of reference; at the core of every YA novel exists, if not a pedagogical, then surely an identifiable storyline of a young man or woman struggling to overcome adversity. Central to every successful YA fiction is such a presentation that is instantly relatable to both its YA and its older audiences, teenagers because they identify with personal struggles, and adults because their nostalgia for youth is often tangled with such painful memories. While not every YA novel historically has had an automatic adult audience, recent trends in YA fiction lend themselves to audiences both young and old alike. Trent’s novel balances two storylines, that of Vespa Nyx, the educated, well-bred young woman whose dream is to be a Pedant of the Church of Science and Technology, and that of Syrus Reed, a young boy of the Tinker clan, the nomadic peoples who live on the outskirts of New London and have connections to the magic declared heretical by the Empress and New Londoners. As is often the case with the Haves and the Have-Nots, their paths collide and continue to collide throughout the text until the two must rely on each other to save themselves and the entirety of New London.

If Vespa were to become a Pedant, she would be only the second such female Pedant in the over 500-year history of New London; even in this advanced time and place, women remain excluded from the higher scientific pursuits. Vespa works at the Museum for her father, himself the Head of the Museum of Unnatural History. She works at stuffing, preserving, and mounting the smaller magical and mythical beasts – small fairies or “sylphids” – as specimens, while the larger ones such as dragons or the Sphinx with which the novel opens are contained behind energy fields that keep them in stasis. While Vespa hopes that her efforts at categorising and preserving will earn her a coveted spot as a Pedant, she instead finds that her father wishes her to align with a higher-class family, and marry well. When she unintentionally exposes her forbidden and heretofore unused magic to save Mistress Virulen, the daughter of a Lord, she is pushed into a glittering social world that abuses magical beings and *myth*, the coal-like substance that runs nearly everything in New London,<sup>2</sup> until she is forced to confront her true identity and all of its dangerous, forbidden

implications: that of witch. Coincidentally, the last female Pedant turns out to have been a witch as well, and the painting that depicts her execution hangs in “[p]ractically every household with a daughter” (p. 45) as a warning to wayward young women to contain their (uncontainable) selves.

Vespa is not the only person in New London to have access to the forbidden magic, however. Tinkers, who are akin to the Romany tribes of Old London but, as the author’s note informs us, are in fact modelled more on the Baima people in China (see p. 308), are racially separated from the New Londoners, who accuse them of spreading superstitious peasant beliefs and disease. In the first of Syrus’s narratives, he describes how

[t]he New Londoners abandoned any child who resembled a Tinker or had been born under odd circumstances – children whose laughter moved toys through the air or whose cries caused little rain clouds to form inside the City-dwellers’ lush townhouses before their talents could be squelched by nullwards. Anything that stank of illegal magic was left outside the City gates. (p. 12)

While the Tinkers are distinguished physically by racial characteristics – Vespa is often told she looks to be of “Tinker descent because of [her] pig cheeks and cat eyes” (p. 26) – they are also comprised of the unwanted, the people of New London who have any vestige of the old ways and of magic. A connection to the Elementals, those Unnatural things housed in Museums or, even worse, destroyed, is considered enough to be expelled from New London to scrounge on the outskirts of town for an existence. Or, as Syrus explains of his own parents who were taken as workers for the Refineries, “[t]hey had been victims, like every Tinker, of the Cityfolks’ fear and greed” (p. 13). Trent is careful to separate the Tinkers’ acquisitive philosophy, indicated by their lack of compunctions about living off of stolen or scavenged goods, from the New Londoners’ greedy lifestyles, and Syrus is presented very much as the highwayman (or, rather, boy) with the heart of gold.

Vespa meets Syrus on the road when he and his Tinker clan rob her carriage, and thus, these two disparate persons find their lives irrevocably intertwined. Syrus steals a small jade frog from Vespa on that road and unknowingly, she begins to change; her magical powers are given free rein

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and she begins the long process of coming into her own, both as a witch and as a young woman. It is given to Syrus, by the mythical beings of the Forest,<sup>3</sup> to help guide her to her true destiny. As one of the Tinkers, Syrus has a deep, physical connection to the Forest and to the forbidden magic, but more importantly, he can communicate with the Elementals and read the old language, seemingly lost to New Londoners. Syrus has the deepest bond with the Elementals who once populated New London before Tesla's experiment opened the door between worlds for what they term the "New Creation" (p. 46).

In this new vision of a scientific and futuristic London, Trent creates likeable, believable characters who compel the reader to care for them and to appreciate their struggles. While Syrus and Vespa feel appropriately young, and while their trials of adventure, of romance, and even of social niceties are at times comedic, they are never buffoonish. There is real work taking place in *The Unnaturalists* as it tackles concerns familiar to Victorian audiences as well as twenty-first century ones over natural resources and environmental depletion, corporate abuse of impoverished and desperate peoples, and the desire to please one's family being overridden by one's desire to please one's self. The larger issues at stake in Trent's novel are played out through characters who attempt to discover themselves and come to terms with the disappointing and questionable morality of the adults who surround them. As these teenaged characters act with questionable agency – they are, after all, children in our world and in theirs – their stark moral dilemmas are contrasted with the adults with whom they struggle. Syrus and Vespa attempt to make sense of the problematic decisions of their elders, their society, and their leaders, and when they decide to rebel against the structures in which they exist, they do so with the certainty that they are doing what is *right*. What is realistic in this novel is both this struggle and the certainty of youth; the black and white morality of childhood must give way to the murkier ethics of adulthood. This struggle exists regardless of time period or gender, and *The Unnaturalists* allows its younger characters to lead their society toward a better, brighter future. While set against a darkened, magical backdrop of a mythical London, and while its characters wear the corsets and silks of the nineteenth century, this novel and its concerns are decidedly and importantly modern.

**Notes**

1. Caitlin Kittredge's *The Iron Codex* series (2011-present) also features a female heroine enamoured of science and technology, even with a biological pre-disposition for controlling it, but is set in the alternative nineteenth-century American town of Lovecraft rather than an alternative London.
2. The term '*myth*' is italicised throughout the novel and seems to be a substance analogous to, and possibly inspired by, the 'dust' in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995-2000).
3. 'Forest' is capitalised throughout the text, functioning as a proper noun.