

Special Issue Book Review

Peterson, David J. *The Art of Language Invention: From Horse-Lords to Dark Elves to Sand Worms, the Words Behind World-Building*. Penguin Books, 2021.

David J. Peterson's *The Art of Language Invention* is an introduction to the world of conlanging, or created languages, of which he has created nearly 50. With the surging popularity of conlangs like Klingon (*Star Trek*), Na'vi (*Avatar*), and Peterson's own Dothraki (*Game of Thrones*), it's not surprising that more content creators than ever are interested in either constructing their own conlang or, as Peterson suggests, hiring a professional conlanger with which to collaborate. Often framed as a "fun introduction to linguistics," colleges like UC San Diego who offer classes in the topic are surging in popularity (Drozdowski). However, as the essays in this volume show, academic interest in conlangs has gone beyond departments of linguistics into the many roles that conlangs are playing in popular culture. While Peterson's book serves as a useful introduction to the topic from the how-to perspective, his vivid "case studies" and glimpses behind the scene offer compelling material for students of popular culture more broadly.

For Peterson, a conlang is "any language that has been *consciously* created by one or more individuals in its fullest form," with the caveat that "the intent or the result of the creation process is a fully functional linguistic system" (emphasis in original 16). Peterson distinguishes these languages from the more common "fictional languages" like the Ubese language of *Star Wars* (16), which from his perspective is only a "sketch" and not a "fully developed conlang" (19).

Peterson's stated purpose is to "help conlangers avoid expending mental energy on some of the nuts and bolts of language creation so they can focus on the more important question: What do I want to say with this new language that I can't say in my native language – or any other language that exists?" (16). To that end, Peterson provides extensive commentary and examples of linguistic principles useful for aspiring conlangers, such as phonetics, words, phrases, grammars, and evolution (language change), drawn mostly from his background in linguistics. Much of this "nuts and bolts" material is admittedly technical and assumes a fairly deep familiarity with linguistics. For example, his section on negation strategies

includes this observation: “And so we had our negation strategy: A full negative auxiliary that resulted in nominative-accusative alignment in negative clauses while retaining ergative-absolutive alignment in positive clauses” (233). Interpreting such text may be as challenging as deciphering a complex line of Dothraki, but it does demonstrate the challenge of creating a fully-functional conlang. Indeed, his advice in the book’s postscript is that many writers may simply want to collaborate with a professional conlanger already well-versed in linguistics. For those who are interested in learning more about linguistics, however, this book would serve as a useful textbook, particularly for a class in a university linguistics program (perhaps at the graduate level) on writing conlangs.

The fifth chapter of the book concerns writing systems and is perhaps the most engrossing for non-linguists. Peterson includes numerous examples of his own conscripts (Irathient, Castithan, and Indojisnen) as well as alphabets, abjads, and syllabaries from other conlangers, many of which, like Trent Pehrson’s Kstalai or Sylvia Sotomayr’s Ceremonial Interlace Alphabet, are simply stunning. Peterson develops conscripting as an iterative process, starting from a proto-system that evolves over (fictional) time as writing technology and media evolve. As with other chapters, Peterson provides examples from real languages as well as rather imaginative conscripts, and even includes instructions for creating fonts to accommodate the conscript. Due to the highly visual nature of this chapter, Peterson’s discussion and examples are cogent and fascinating. Perhaps a future edition of this book might include a sound library so that the preceding chapters could also be more accessible to non-linguists – or at least those who are less comfortable with International Auxiliary Language (IAL), which Peterson uses in the bulk of his other examples.

While Peterson focuses on the linguistics of conlanging, he does provide a series of “case studies” and behind-the-scenes anecdotes that are sure to be of interest to scholars researching Dothraki and other conlangs. For example, in “The Sound of Dothraki,” Peterson reveals that he was instructed to make the language sound “foreign and ‘harsh’” (89). One of Peterson’s techniques (guided by the few words and phrases supplied to him by George R. R. Martin) was to use non-English consonants and overemphasize words with sounds like [x], or the *kh* in words like “*khal*, *khaleesi*, and *arakh*” (93). Knowing which words would more frequently appear in the script was helpful in this process, as he could prioritize these particular sounds in words that the audience would hear in many episodes.

More importantly, the idea that any language may sound “harsh” and that a “harsh” language is fitting for any group of people, whether historical or fictional, is at the very least problematic. Peterson acknowledges that what sounds “harsh” or “guttural” is relative; “German may sound harsh to an American speaker, but might not to a Dutch speaker from the Netherlands” (25). Peterson argues that while “the history of cultural stereotyping” certainly plays a role in conlanging, “It’s the comparison of entire sound systems that produces a phonaesthetic character in the mind of the listener,” which includes “a number of sociological factors” (25). Peterson does not enumerate these factors, but undoubtedly one must be the tendency of cultural appropriation. For example, Adams argues that Okrand’s Klingon language contains “phonological or grammatical features of some Native American languages or Southeast Asian languages – the languages with which Okrand was most familiar [...] but, for the most part, not by design” (Adams 118). Even if such borrowing is respectful, mindful, and ethical, more problematic possibilities could arise. What if a conlanger’s cultural bias led them to incorporate sounds or other features from natural languages spoken by vulnerable cultures in order to make their fictional people seem more warlike or barbaric? Even if the borrowing was done unconsciously and without ill intent, as Adams and Peterson suggest, such a conlang could reinforce negative stereotypes about those languages and speakers in the real world. How can conlangers guard against inadvertently reinforcing cultural stereotypes as they create their languages?

Peterson suggests somewhat paradoxically that while a careful study of historical (natural) languages is essential for any conlanger, conlangs nevertheless fall into two distinct categories: *a priori* and *a posteriori*. The key difference is that the former is “not based on an existing language,” whereas the latter is “drawn from an existing language” (19). Despite Peterson’s demarcation, it seems precarious to assume that even the most deliberately “alien” conlang could truly be bereft of any and all influence from the creator’s own language(s). This point is seemingly reinforced by the many examples where Peterson notes that English speakers may tend to apply one rule or principle simply because they are unaware of common alternatives in other languages. More to the point, Marc Okrand, who developed Klingon into a fully-fledged conlang (and whose work Peterson mentions throughout the book), “Cribbed from natural languages, borrowing sounds and sentence-building rules...[to produce] an ugly combination of Hindi, Arabic, Tlingit, and Yiddish” (Okrent, 2009), and others have noted how Klingon

“resembles agglutinative languages,¹ among which are many Native American and Southeast Asian languages familiar to Okrand” (Okrand et al., 122). The versions of Elvish are also well known for having been developed from existing rules in a number of existing languages.

It is not clear if Peterson would classify Klingon as an *a priori* or *a posteriori* language given these facts, but it would seem more a matter of degree than absolutes. It would be revealing on this question to study and compare conlangs created by speakers of many different languages. Would conlangs created by Dutch speakers from the Netherlands differ in any predictable fashion from those by Peterson or Okrand?

If conlangers should be aware of unconscious appropriation and bias when creating their conlangs, are there any aspects where they might make a positive contribution to a more equitable society? One intriguing (if brief) glimpse Peterson provides concerns “feminine pejoration” (182). After noting the “specific and frustrating” way that the “female-referring word” in pairs like bull and cow reveal a “pattern of misogyny” inherent in historical languages, Peterson reminds us that conlangers are not required to adhere to it. He writes, “As a language creator, it’s often a difficult thing to balance realism and ethics,” and notes that even though speakers of a conlang may well be patriarchal in their thinking, “creating a language means creating the vocabularies of *all* speakers. A language’s lexicon contains words used by the privileged and the disenfranchised...There’s always room for representation of all aspects of a culture” (emphasis in original 182). These seeds of discussion and analysis seem quite fruitful for conlangers seeking to apply their art for ends beyond the page or screen. What would a conlang that was purged of all such unfortunate vestiges look like? Would learning such a language help reveal unconscious biases inherent in natural languages?

All in all, Peterson’s *The Art of Language Invention* is a useful text for scholars and advanced students of popular culture interested in the art and business of conlanging. Beyond the linguistic material and practical advice for practitioners of the art, Peterson provides copious anecdotes and examples from his rich experience on many of the most successful shows and movies ever to feature a conlang or conscript.

Matthew Barton

¹ Agglutinative languages allow “many more prefixes, infixes, or suffixes” to words than isolating languages like English, which rely more on word order to convey meaning (Okrand et al, 122).

St. Cloud State University

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Book Reviews

Blondell, Ruby. *Helen of Troy in Hollywood*. Princeton UP, 2023.

Helen of Troy, whose abduction by the Trojan prince Paris according to Greek myth initiated the decade-long Trojan War, remains an object of fantasy, ever present in the public imagination yet continually out of our grasp. Women including Elizabeth Taylor, who was well-established at the time as a legendary Hollywood beauty, but most often newcomers such as Diane Kruger, the German model-turned-actor, have taken on this role and the attempt to realize Helen with varying degrees of success. How does any woman, even those who are disarmingly, conventionally attractive, live up to Christopher Marlow's oft-quoted description of "the face that launched a thousand ships?" How could one woman ever confidently embody this mythical being for which the beauty standards are unachievably, superhumanly high? Stepping into the role of Helen is an invitation for intense criticism from all sides, and the scrutiny is nothing short of personal as it is so often directed towards the

actor's body. In her latest book *Helen of Troy in Hollywood*, Classics professor Ruby Blondell discusses these challenges – the casting and reception of Helen in film and television – and more.

Helen of Troy in Hollywood provides an enlightening and accessible overview of the pervasive presence of Zeus's daughter in American popular culture, ranging from silent Hollywood cinema to televised speculative fiction. A must read for scholars of both classical reception and popular culture, this book is notable for the way Blondell unpacks how popular culture democratizes and adapts ancient narratives in ways that reveal as much, if not more, about ourselves as producers and consumers of myth as they do about the woman whose beauty has, for centuries, inspired countless artworks. Though there have been and will continue to be many adaptations and performances of Helen across media, Blondell narrows her scope by only considering productions in which Helen is a named and therefore unmistakably identifiable character. Crucially, Blondell invites readers to consider how the adaptation, casting, and performance of Helen on screen is intimately tied not just to questions of beauty and gender, but also of race and sexual violence.

One of the greatest strengths of this volume lies in its first chapter, "Olympus Moves to Hollywood," which tasks readers with thinking critically about the relationship between film, antiquity, and femininity. Perhaps most exciting, however, is the way Blondell contextualizes how and why Hollywood historically took great pains to associate the burgeoning industry with antiquity and, even more specifically, its classical beauty standards that push the boundaries of how sexuality and the body could be displayed on screen, while also presenting film as a means of disseminating high culture to all classes. Further, Blondell cites Greek myth's "provision of material that is not of this world – the supernatural, the monstrous, the unreal – as fodder for the new medium's illusionistic power" (23). An additional thread that emerges in these discussions is that, though Helen dominates Blondell's narrative, the author also provides us mechanisms through which to reconsider other performances by antiquity's most dangerous women, including the vamp roles of Cleopatra and Salome.

In chapter two, Blondell centralizes the First National silent film *The Private Life of Helen of Troy* (1927), starring European movie star Maria Corda and directed by her husband Alexander Korda, loosely adapted from the 1925 John Erskine novel of the same name. In it, Blondell considers how the film presents Helen's various identities, born out of Corda's pairing of classical beauty and European exoticism, as well her Helen's insistence upon being identified as both a

modern woman and an immortal. In doing so, Blondell illuminates how Helen was presented and received as an unruly vamp and how the film, therefore, was positioned as a “variation on the flapper film” (53).

Blondell begins “Part II: Big Screen Epic” with a study of *Helen of Troy*, the 1956 Warner Brothers film starring the Italian Rossana Podestà in the titular role, within the context of “Hollywood’s second wave of big budget epics” (85). In addition to a fascinating overview of the studio’s casting of Helen and the film’s anti-vulgar insistence, she usefully clarifies how the film reflects Christian “American Cold War ideals, with the beautiful Helen embodying virtuous 1950s femininity” (100). Chapter four shifts the discussion to *Troy* (2004), as a case study for the ancient epic’s third wave, one that was intent upon “glorifying the male action hero” at the cost of its female characters, including not just a deglamorized, static Helen but also Thetis, the divine mother of the great Greek warrior Achilles, and the Trojan women Andromache, Hecuba, and Cassandra (132). Blondell ultimately argues that *Troy*’s Helen is deglamorized and decentered from the narrative by Brad Pitt, whose performance as Achilles allows him to become “a male Helen for the turn of the twenty-first century” (160).

Finally, in the third section of the volume, Blondell shifts her attention to Helen’s presence on television. Chapter five considers the Helens of the telefantasies *Star Trek: The Original Series* and *Xena: Warrior Princess*. In the case of *Star Trek* and through the exotic character Elaan of Troyius, Blondell homes in on the series’ racial politics and the “threat of the feminine Other” (181). In her discussion of *Xena: Warrior Princess*, Blondell once again considers race and the series’ “dethroning [of] ‘Greek’ beauty and its oppressive baggage,” while also considering *Xena* as a series predicated upon female identification (216).

Though the book possesses pedagogical value, for those interested in teaching classical retellings in popular media, the preface to *Helen of Troy in Hollywood*, which contextualizes the relationship between antiquity and pop culture, makes for accessible and engaging introductory reading. Teachers of mythological retellings may also take interest in Blondell’s reception case study of USA’s *Helen of Troy* (2003) miniseries in chapter six. Throughout the volume’s presentation of these productions’ reception histories, Blondell delineates between professional criticism and amateur blogging, and she criticizes the amateur trend of chastising “inaccuracies” introduced by the taking of any creative liberties (especially feminist ones) in the adaptation of classical source texts. The most intriguing reception study, however, comes from her citation of teenaged Filipina students’ IMDb

reviews of *Helen of Troy*, submitted as an assignment for an English class. Her analysis of these reviews reveals how, instead of faulting the series' inaccuracies, the students responded enthusiastically to the way its "emotional impact... enable[d] them to understand the *Iliad* better by making it 'real' in their terms" (260-1). This audience study allows Blondell to discuss the pedagogical necessity of studying such texts that encourage a "sophisticated understanding of mythology, canonicity, and tradition" (263).

Many of us come to appreciate and enter the world of classics through popular films; Blondell presents herself as no exception. Yet what she ultimately does is provide a toolkit for us to reexamine our relationship with these stories, their sexual and racial politics, as well as their accuracy and realism, and to imagine the future of what further woman-centric myth retellings – across all forms of media – may bring.

Gabrielle Stecher
Indiana University Bloomington

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Marlow, Christopher. *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*. Project Gutenberg, 28 Aug. 2023, www.gutenberg.org/files/779/779-h/779-h.htm.

Leorke, Dale and Daneille Wyatt. *The Library as Playground: How Games and Play Are Reshaping Public Culture*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2022.

Media formats are often pitted against one other with some viewed as superior or more artistic than others. While books and cinema have often been afforded the highest praises for their aesthetic merits, other media formats – such as video games – have long been denigrated as childish, immature, commercial, or crass. Some might be surprised to learn that public libraries, often considered storehouses of knowledge that collect historical and contemporary literary works for the intellectual benefit of society, are increasingly turning their attention to games in all their formats. In *The Library as Playground*, the authors argue that libraries are "[n]o longer only 'cathedrals of knowledge,' detached from their surroundings and

devoted to silent study” but rather have embraced “games and play in all their forms” (xi). In this short, compact book, Dale Leorke and Danielle Wyatt showcase how libraries support games and video games through dedicated children’s zones, collections of physical and digital media, installations of escape rooms and other interactive exhibits, and more. Utilizing ethnographic research, the authors’ observations span the globe, from Australia to Finland to Singapore and more, to uncover how modern public libraries are reaching new audiences through games.

Chapter 1 begins with an introduction to play and gamification, concepts familiar to anybody immersed in game studies research. They connect the idea of play to public institutions, and how modern cities are increasingly reimagining and incorporating into the fabric of the urban environment. They discuss how digitalization and technology, rather than making libraries obsolete, have allowed libraries to adapt and serve their publics in new and interesting ways. Relying extensively on Huizinga’s theory that play is constitutive of culture, the authors argue that play, rather than being antithetical to the image of a peaceful space people often attribute to libraries, is central to how libraries operate. As the book unfolds, play is defined not just in terms of board games or video games that libraries loan to patrons, but that play is imbued throughout a library’s structure, from the physical building to the sense of discovery that happens whenever one explores a library’s collections and uncovers new bits of knowledge.

Chapter 2, subtitled “The Early History of Games in Public Libraries,” argues that gaming collections are not a new development, but rather have existed in various forms for decades. From a world-renowned collection of chess books, magazines, and reports donated to the State Library Victoria between 1959-1966, to billiard parlors in British libraries, to early examples of children’s spaces in American libraries, this chapter argues that gaming, while obviously not the focus of libraries, has nevertheless been a component of libraries worldwide long before video games were invented. While the examples included in this chapter are compelling, the scantness of the proceedings (nine pages, including pictures) leaves this reader wanting more.

Chapter 3 contains the primary meat of the book, detailing the numerous ways contemporary public libraries position gaming as part of their mission. While video games and board games constitute the bulk of the discussion here, the authors also detail less-common forms of gaming, including immersive experiences, escape rooms, and live-action roleplaying (or LARPs), which are more common in Nordic countries. The authors argue that “games rarely supplant books in libraries” (56).

Instead, they invite new people into the library who might never have engaged with the libraries' physical collections without gaming.

Chapter 4 changes the focus to the built environment, showcasing how libraries reimagine their physical spaces, and even the building itself and its connection to the outside environment. In effect, this chapter considers how libraries themselves are in a state of play. From children and teen zones dedicated to play, video game and media rooms, computer labs, and even makerspaces containing 3D printers and other design tools, today's libraries are often a far cry from the dark, quiet, musty spaces of decades' past. Contemporary libraries hold numerous gatherings for various publics, from children's programs to hackerspaces to science programs and more, which expands the notion of play in libraries "temporally, spatially, and socially" (90).

Chapter 5 focuses more on social gatherings, specifically the support public libraries offer the games industry by providing spaces for groups, independent developers, and hobbyists to come together to create new games, digital or otherwise. The book ends with a short chapter 6, which meditates on the state of public libraries and gaming. The authors return to Huizinga, arguing that libraries can fit the definition of his "magic circle," a space set apart from the world for the purposes of play. This is linked to Foucault's idea of libraries as a heterotopia, "a meta-space that is separate from everyday or lived space but which reflects upon or re-orders lived space in crucial ways" (111). The authors end with a discussion of whether libraries function as a "third space," that is, a gathering place that is neither work nor home. While some researchers argue that libraries can indeed offer such social space to their communities, the authors also caution that this "third place" idea is challenged by the advent of digital technology. While libraries can function as a play separate from home or work, they also become places to work, through free Wi-Fi and computer centers, or through the hosting of game developers and entrepreneurs.

For anybody interested in game studies, this book is a worthwhile read, highlighting a facet of gaming culture often overlooked – the humble public library. While the book features many pertinent examples of play and gaming in libraries, the research is only a starting point. When notes, references, appendices, and pictures are removed, the book contains less than 100 pages of content. Considering that most chapters reuse the same examples of play and gaming, the amount of unique content in each chapter is even lower, making this a breezy read. Fortunately, any reader can easily confirm or expand on the observations in this

book simply by visiting their own public libraries. As a parent with a toddler myself, we frequent several public libraries in our county, and I have been amazed at the transformation of libraries compared to my youth. Even in the rural setting in which I live, where the libraries pale in size to the ones discussed in this book, the incorporation of play is alive and strong.

Dennis Owen Frohlich
Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania

Weinstock, Jeffrey Andrew. *Monstrous Things: Essays on Ghosts, Vampires, and Things That Go Bump in the Night*. McFarland, 2023.

Ghosts, vampires, and monsters become the subject of inquiry in Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock's collection of writings, *Monstrous Things: Essays on Ghosts, Vampires, and Things That Go Bump in the Night*. The volume gathers a selection of Weinstock's work across the years, creating a recollection of his scholarly development on supernatural creatures, which is brought together by exploring what these monsters have to say about American culture. Across the different arguments of his writings, Weinstock's main considerations focus on how monsters expose American culture's desires and anxieties. Thus, as Weinstock frames it, "To consider our current monsters is to reflect on how we think about ourselves and our relation to the world" (190). His collection argues for a reconceptualization of the existence of monsters in film, literature, and academic research that includes the ability of these monsters to take form depending on their time and place (189). American culture becomes something that, over time, has engaged with ghosts, vampires, and monsters with continuous and shifting uses to address their perceptions of race, class, gender, technology, sexuality, and fears over life and death.

Monstrous Things starts with ghosts and their portrayals in American culture focusing mainly on literature, such as Herman Melville's *Bartleby* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Weinstock's research on phantoms, ghosts, and hauntings aims to start a conversation about phantasmagorical phenomena in the constitution of the American national identity and imagination, particularly expressions of justice and mourning. Furthermore, Weinstock describes the disruptions ghosts have to the linearity of history and ideas of absolute truth. In this regard, ghosts are

evidence of a missing piece of knowledge, something that must be addressed and brought to light, creating spectral beings that address justice. Weinstock makes a point by highlighting how areas of research outside monster studies such as American studies, literary studies, and cultural studies all lack a substantial approach to phantoms and ghosts, those beings that hold within their spectral form hints on the constitution of an American national imaginary. Thus, hauntings become a social phenomenon across their depictions in literature and film that actively engage with American culture and society.

On the other hand, Weinstock approaches vampires and their disruptions to the dichotomy of good and evil. As *Monstrous Things* portrays across its section on vampires, these bloodsucking beings have substantially evolved from undead beings representing antisemitism and religious beliefs into complex creatures loved and who are subject to romantic or tragic story plots. By framing the evolution of vampire narratives across cinema, Weinstock exposes the motifs and themes associated with these vampires – antisemitism, suicide, and sexuality, among others – and their strong presence across American culture. What is particularly significant in this section is the illustration of the use vampires had between the colonial period of the U.S. and the twenty-first century. Vampires, once upon a time, disrupted human nature, which stated that the dead should stay dead. However, in recent decades, a shift in understanding and use of vampires has led to their representation as tragic creatures, lovers, heroes, or simply as beings with as much humanity as humans possess.

Monstrous Things finishes its recollection of things that go bump in the night by addressing, in a more general and broad approach, the diverse academic and theoretical inquiries monsters have had throughout human history and their connections to social developments of otherness (global pandemics, terrorism, and mass shootings among others). Weinstock addresses how monsters have been categorized, understood, and labeled to thereby make sense of their purposes, aims, and significance within cultural and social development. This final section of *Monstrous Things* revolves around the more traditional exploration of monsters by addressing the intersections between the human psyche, history, folklore, and cultures, contributing to the increasing scholarship on monster theory. Furthermore, by addressing the shifts in theorizations of monsters and evolution, *Monstrous Things* illustrates the new kinds of monsters appearing out of the inheritance of old fears and contemporary anxieties. Weinstock calls this a mindset related to 21st-century American culture that marks monsters with invisibility, and he makes his

case by analyzing the horror films that form part of contemporary American popular culture, *It* (2017), *It Follows* (2014), and *It Comes at Night* (2017).

Monstrous Things aims to share an overview of these monsters in American culture and then provide specific case studies to provide evidence of the monster's presence in American culture and its effect on the people. Furthermore, Weinstock's research is supported by addressing both scholars in monster theory, such as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Stacy Abbott, as well as scholars from literary theories, such as Jacques Derrida, Sigmund Freud, and Hélène Cixous. To complement his scholarly sources, Weinstock creates connections across a wide range of film and literary works that serve to further inquire about the depictions and portrayals of monsters in American culture and literature.

While not fully encompassing all monsters and monster theory discussion, *Monstrous Things* provides a strong and invigorating overview of American culture through the eyes of monsters. By addressing how literature and film portends the human experiences of past, present, and future, Weinstock reveals how the invisible, undead, and wispy bodies of these monsters showcase the social fears and failures of American culture. As such, *Monstrous Things* will undoubtedly appeal to audiences from academic spaces across various fields as well as to monster aficionados outside academia.

Adrielys Calderon Ortiz
The Ohio State University