



The Elfin Ship

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This is a whimsical story of a cheesemaker, Jonathan Bing, who sets out on a quest to discover why trade to his river town has halted inconveniently right before the Winter holiday season. He and his friend, the Professor Wurzle, seek answers to the mystery, and they transport cheeses themselves to use in trade for dwarven cakes and children's toys to take back to their village. Along the way, they run afoul of goblins masterminded by a nefarious dwarf, and they find surprising allies in the carefree Linkmen and elves.

The Elfin Ship Details

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tENTATIVELY, cONVENIENCE says

review of

James P. Blaylock's The Elfin Ship

by tENTATIVELY, a cONVENIENCE - February 20, 2017

Blaylock's name was vaguely familiar when I picked up this bk & its successor. As it turns out, I've read one other bk by him, The Last Coin, 9 yrs ago. People often comment on how-time-flies when you get older but it's forever weird to me that in the 9 yrs from 1977, when I published my 1st bk, & 1986, when I went on the "6 Fingers Crossed Country T.Ore/Tour" my life changed dramatically but in the 9 yrs since I read The Last Coin it doesn't seem like much time has gone by at all.

Anyway, one thing that's changed is that the reviews I was writing then were just capsule reviews & now they're often veritable monsters of cross-referencing or what-not. The review I wrote then is basically this:

"Blaylock is in that minority of SF writers who're also clearly comical. I like that combination. Other writers that spring to mind are the team of G. C. Edmondson & C. M. Kotlan, Ron Goulart, & Rudy Rucker. I'd read more by him if I ever ran across anything again. There's something about absurdist SF that's dear to my parallel dimension baboon heart."

Not much, write? [sic] I really don't remember The Last Coin & that review isn't going to help much. As far as my recent reading goes, I'd put The Elfin Ship more in the company of Esther Friesner's Majyk: something that I enjoyed but don't necessarily recommend.

The front cover of The Elfin Ship has a quote from Philip K. Dick on it that says: "A magical world, magically presented... having journeyed there, you will not wish to leave, nor ever to forget," The front cover of The Last Coin has a quote on it from William Gibson: "Blaylock is a singular American fabulist!". That's pretty powerful promotion-speak. Blaylock must be a popular guy. Dick died on March 2, 1982. The 1st edition of The Elfin Ship was published in August 1982. Was Dick's praise sd on his deathbed?!

When I was a kid & every yr was a thousand yrs apart, I read Tolkein's The Hobbit followed in probably quick succession by his The Lord of the Rings trilogy. I'm pretty sure I read the latter at least twice & the former I may've even read 3 times. I don't usually do that so, obviously, I loved it.

The Elfin Ship seems to be exploring similar territory. There's the peaceful small village that the reluctant humble hero hails from. There's the magician & the elves & the dwarves n'at. The evil creeping over the land. The epigraph is a quote from Kenneth Grahame's The Wind in the Willows. Even tho that was a famous bk in my childhood &, apparently, still is, I can't remember reading it. Here's what Wikipedia has to say about it:

" *The Wind in the Willows* is a children's novel by Kenneth Grahame, first published in 1908. Alternately slow moving and fast paced, it focuses on four anthropomorphised animals in a pastoral version of Edwardian England. The novel is notable for its mixture of mysticism, adventure, morality and camaraderie, and celebrated for its evocation of the nature of the Thames Valley." -

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Win...

It seems like a precursor to Tolkein then. That folksy pastoral thing is established in The Elfin Ship right away:

"Jonathan waved him in and shut the door against the cold wind. First it was airships, then Gilroy Bastable, all out under peculiar circumstances. "H'lo there, Gilroy! Quite a night out, wouldn't you say? Could be described as a wet one if it came to descriptions, don't you think?" - p 6

""Filthy night out; that's what I call it. Full of mud holes and hurricanes. Blew my hat into the river. I saw it with my own eyes right here in my head. Hat sails off spinning like the widow's windmill, turns round the church steeple twice, then lands smack and was gone in the river. Brand new hat. Hideous night."" - p 7

& then there's fun w/ dream (il)logic:

""But I was thinking, Professor, that if a dog had a dream about a man, mightn't that man say a few words now and again, like men do? And so, if a dog were to talk in his sleep it mightn't all be dog talk; perhaps the people in his dreams might get a word in now and again."" - p 35

In addition to the afore-mentioned standard fare of elves n'at there're also trolls:

"The two trolls waiting on the riverside, however, were anything but laughable. As Jonathan stood watching the trolls which were watching him, the one atop the roots reached down in among them. came up with a tone, and began to gnaw at it." - p 44

Apparently the secrets of strong teeth are known to trolls. They must not use US dentists. & then there's that "evil creeping over the land" that I mentioned earlier:

""Who is this Selznak?" asked Jonathan, gazing into his glass of ale and wondering what sort of a fiendish thing Gosset had encountered. He offered some of his ale to the Professor, who looked at it then shook his head. "He's not an altogether nice chap, I gather."

""Nice chap!" Gosset almost shouted. "A curse is what. A dwarf of some sort from the Forest. Came upriver six months back through Willowood. You heard about Willowood?"

""Yes," said the Professor.

""And Stooton-on-River?"

""No."

""All gone by the boards. Empty! Things are . . . abroad in the land," Gosset said darkly." - p 60

The Goblins were probably my favorites. They're like indestructible party animals:

"Jonathan was certain it was intent upon firing the ship. Instead, the creature set fire to its own hair and leaped blazing to and fro about the deck. Wild laughter issued from between its pointed teeth, and the fire seemed to melt the skin from its face and it ran down and left only a grinning skull with flaming hair." - p 71

Now, there's an instance where "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" gets a little tricky. Then there're axolotls:

""All we need are axolotls. A man can't keep live axolotls with him all the time, you know. What we have to do is find an axolotl den and borrow a few. They don't mind. Not a bit. Glad to do it, in fact, as long as they're returned to their den afterward and given a bit of salt."" - p 84

Now, here's where Blaylock starts to get on rocky turf. I seriously doubt that a Mexican salamander aka a

Mexican walking fish, a neotenic salamander, wd take kindly to being taken away & borrowed, salt or no salt so any aspiring magicians out there had better come up with a vegan substitute - & I don't mean platypodes either.

"Dooly went back to looking for shallows. He shouted and pointed at an odd creature near the shore, and the Professor and Jonathan at first feared that it was the little rope-chewing beast. But it turned out to be nothing more than a normal unremarkable platypus that blinked at them in a friendly way as they drifted past." - p 134

Now, given that Blaylock is an American author & that the platypus is native to Eastern Australia & Tasmania it wd appear that The Elfin Ship's setting is not the US@ or necessarily any existing Earth continent. What saves Blaylock from being reported thru time travel to HUAC as a result of this suspicious activity is that he frequently mentions bookstores in a positive light:

"They passed two interesting-looking bookstores, filled to overflowing with a likely hodgepodge. It looked like G. Smithers country to Jonathan, and he noted the cross streets, intent upon stopping in for some browsing on their return." - p 149

Goblins & trolls wdn't stop me from used bookstore browsing either.

""Well how much is it worth, do you suppose, six pence?"

""Easily," said Jonathan.

""Then half that. Everything here is half price. Didn't I tell you that already? Seems like I did. The almanacs are free, but you'll have have to wrestle the mice for them."

""Fine," Jonathan said, picking up an empty wooden crate and putting the pirate book in the bottom with a few others by the same author. Then he ran across a shelf of books by Glub Boomp, the elf author from the White Mountains who wrote about lands way off in space and about the Wonderful Isles and a country beneath the sea called Balumnia that was peopled by mermen. Needless to say, Jonathan stacked these away in his crate too.

"But he really struck paydirt when he stumbled upon the collected works of G. Smithers of Brompton Village. At home Jonathan had a dozen or so volumes, most of them dog-eared and falling to bits after having been read and re-read and loaned out and so on. But there was a complete set of G. Smithers, one hundred-twenty-nine volumes in all and every one as good as the other." - pp 175-176

[It's a little-known fact that the merman of Bulemia camouflage their undersea village w/ vomit to keep away the unwelcome]

In short, our hero has the right priorities.

"The Moon Man—for that's how Jonathan thought of him—was a peculiar-looking person, there was little doubt about that, but it was very easy to see that he might well be a king of some nature. Behind his spectacles his eyes were very jolly, but Jonathan could see that there was some nature of seriousness on his mind. As with the Squire, however, Jonathan would find that the Moon Man liked the right sort of things: eating apple pie and cream for breakfast, capering with platypi on the riverbanks, strolling along between hedgerows, admiring marbles with the Squire and, it turned out in time, investigating the mysteries of kaleidoscopes and paperweights." - p 156

Along w/ all the rest of the usual fare there're rings-of-power too. A fantasy bk that didn't have any of these

standard tropes might be hard to write but it might make a nice change.

""Show friend Dooly your ring, Squire, like a good fellow," Twickenham said.

"The Squire put his bag of marbles away and winked at Dooly. Then he very slowly said, "Twicky Twicky Twicky Twickenham—ham sandwich," and waved the ring on the middle finger of his left hand in Dooly's direction." - p 161

""Of the rings, three have been found. Miles the Magician has one, Squire Myrkle another, and you, Dooly, the third. Where the fourth is is unimportant. It's likely that your grandfather traded it finally also. Rumors came along several years ago that he was spending a good deal of time of late beneath the sea in a submarine contraption and that he had as a companion a pig of exceptional intelligence dressed as a clown. It was kept previously in a teakwood cabinet above Seaside by a bunjo man, or so the story goes. I'm beginning to suspect, however, that something is amiss in the tale.["]" - p 165

The pig's tail is screwy, that's what's amiss. But that's ok. The descriptions of how the towns have changed now that something's a foot in this tail struck me as ferally appealing:

["]"The houses are inhabited now by things from the swamp. Goblins and hobgoblins and animals behaving in odd ways go about freely in the town and even carry on trade with two or three of the merchants who have elected not to give up their shops."" - p 180

Even the hobgoblins are upwardly-mobile in a prosperous society.

"The whole quiet vista was something close to awesome; it silenced all of them. But perhaps most awesome of all was the weird ship that floated at anchor off a sandy spit halfway around the lagoon and at the end of the path across the rocks. It was an astonishing craft, obviously built either by elves or by one of the tribes of marvel men in the Wonderful Isles—built by someone, anyway, who knew what such devices ought to look like. It was a spiraly affair, with odd, seemingly senseless crenelations and spires and a series of what might be taken for arced shark fins down the center of its back. On a foggy night the thing would certainly resemble a sea monster more closely than a ship, for it had several round portholes at the front, two of which on either side of its pointed nose, glowed from some inner light and looked for all the world like eyes. On the sides were protruding fins, shaped like the fins of an enormous tide pool sculpin. Seawater to the rear of the vessel seemed to be churning and bubbling, and a *whoosh* of water shot out of the end every minute or so." - p 200

A part of why the above passage 'works' for me is that it evokes Jules Verne's character Captain Nemo from [Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea](#) & [Mysterious Island](#) - 2 novels that've made a positive impression on my fantasy life. Blaylock is far from wholly original but he's good at keeping a literary tradition of comradeship & adventure going.

"Escargot dug around in his bag and came up with a bottle of cream sherry and a bag of walnuts. In the light of one of the lanterns the four of them sat about on deck chairs cracking walnuts and sipping the sherry which was very good—made across the sea in the sunny Oceanic Isles." - p 229

Sounds good to me.

""And two nights ago. In this very room. I opened up that wardrobe and there was a ghastly sight. There was moths. A dozen of 'em, and they had my sweater on the floor. Knives and forks they had. The whole lot of 'em, and they were sawing the bloody sleeve off. Moths the size of golf with little arms and hands. It was ghastly. A positive horror."" - p 269

The thing is, they didn't have napkins, the barbarians. Now, I admit, the goblins don't seem to consistently use napkins either.

"A figure appeared shortly thereafter, outlined in the lamplit window. Jonathan could see that it sported one of Lonny Gosset's caps, sidewise on its head. The thing cackled with laughter and dumped what must have been the contents of a silverware drawer out onto the roadway, for there was the clatter and clang of cutlery as the contents of the drawer fell together below. The sound, apparently, pleased the marauding goblins somehow, for something like a cheer rose from a number of goblins within the cabin. One of them stumbled out and down and retrieved the spilled silverware, then clambered back into the cabin and dumped the boxful out the window again." - p 286

Sigh.. the goblin kids w/ their sideways caps & their dumped cutlery music these days.

"About the Author" informs us that "His favorite author is Robert Louis Stevenson: his favorite book is *Tristram Shandy*." (p 339) I can relate.

Ted M says

I never really understood why the Elfin Ship trilogy didn't get as big as, say, Lord of the Rings or Harry Potter- it has all the qualities one could want in a fantasy/steampunk series, great descriptions of places and people, a lot of humor (sometimes dark humor) and some insane and often unbelievable adventures.

Emily says

This is not the greatest book ever. The writing is uneven and even awkward at times. But it obviously appeals to me enough to drag it off the shelf every few years to reread it.

2019 reread: Listened to the audiobook narrated by Malk Williams.

I have changed my rating from three stars to four stars. I'm not sure if it's the marvelous audiobook performance (such a pleasure to listen to a *good* performance by someone who doesn't butcher the language) or just that hearing the words rather than reading them made me appreciate the writing so much more. I am looking forward to listening to the other books in the series.

David Katzman says

I decided to revisit a series that I read in childhood when I discovered randomly that there is a third book in this series, and I had only read the first two. I recall it to be one of the most likable charming stories I had ever read, so we'll see if it holds up.

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After re-reading, I have confirmed my opinion that this was one of the most charming, lighthearted fantasy reads ever. There is no better word than "charming" for the style here. It's rich with very dry, silly British humor. Not absurdist like Python but more along the tone of P.G. Wodehouse minus the social class commentary. The names alone are worth the price of admission. Master Cheeser Jonathan Bing and his dog Ahab, Professor Wurzel, and Dooly from Twombly Town. And don't forget the scallywag Theophile

Escargot. Someone asked if this was considered a “Young Adult” book. I’d say...it probably is, but I’m not sure it was intended to be. I think he just had a humorous style in mind, some characters and a general plot...that precludes violence, sex or complexity. It’s like asking if *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* is Young Adult. No, but it’s kid friendly. The only negative here from a youth perspective is the repetitive action of pipe-smoking.

The story itself follows Bing, Wurzel, the dim-witted Dooly and loyal Ahab on a river float trip, determined to discover why the Elfin trader’s station up river has been abandoned. Bing needs to trade his cheeses for goods and the town is worried about what happened. Dangerously mad goblins have been seen about the forests as well. Suffice it to say that they must confront the nefarious Selznak the Dwarf to lift the darkness affecting the towns.

The subsequent books in this series develop rather darker, spookier and more violently, but the follow-up at least, *The Disappearing Dwarf* retains the same humorous tone and likable characters. I’m glad I re-read these first two and discovered the third book in the series, *The Stone Giant*. Nostalgic, yes, but not bad writing at all.

Mark says

Blaylock's fantasy is about as far as you can get from the typical elves, dwarves and dragons fare. Quirky and original.

Jessica says

From the first time I read it at 10 years old (in a tent, on a camping trip) until the last time I read it at 41 and 1/2 (on my Kindle, last month)I have adored this book (yikes! 30+years!). I've read the criticisms, too cute, too Tolkien-ish, but I don't care and I don't agree.

Blaylock has crafted a wonderful tale full of humour and good will. The characters are as well-rounded as this type of tale can allow. They each have their own flaws but retain their humour and wit throughout. His world building is intriguing and if I could go visit the City of the Five Monoliths I would in a heartbeat. The main plot is rather simple, but the background is rich in details and small side-tales that many other fantasy works fall short on.

With the reissue of Mr Blaylock's books in electronic format I no longer have to worry about the fate of my tattered original paperback. Don't forget to hunt up *The Stone Giants* and *The Disappearing Dwarf*, the rest of the series.

Nev Percy says

Blaylock offers a very whimsical and domestic approach to fantasy, with a regular guy central character accompanied by a pretentious but mostly clueless professor, an excitable village idiot, and a dog whose eating and sleeping Blaylock finds endlessly interesting. Goblins and trolls are horrific but can actually be vanquished with a blow from a stout tree limb. There's some original inventive thought here, but the tone is

as unheroic as it could be; it's like all Pratchett's silliness without any real laughs.

Kat Hooper says

Originally posted at Fantasy Literature: <http://www.fantasyliterature.com/revi...>

Audible has recently put several of James P. Blaylock's novels in audio format, so I'm giving a few of them a try. The Elfin Ship, first published in 1982, is the first book in Blaylock's BALUMNIA trilogy about a whimsical fantasy world filled with elves, goblins, dwarves, wizards, and (because it's Blaylock), a few steampunk elements such as submarines and airships.

In The Elfin Ship we meet Jonathan Bing, a cheesemaker who lives in a quaint little village with his dog Ahab. It's just before Christmas, a time when Bing should be selling his famous cheeses to neighboring towns. However, something is afoot in the outside world and trade is drying up. Not only is Bing's business in danger, but all of the villagers will have a dreary holiday if they are unable to buy their traditional toys and treats. Somebody must be sent to investigate what's happening outside the village and it's obvious that Master Cheeser Bing is just the right person to go. Bing is reluctant — he's just an ordinary stay-at-home kind of guy — but he's single and his lifestyle depends on successful trade relations. So, accompanied by his dog Ahab, Professor Wurzle, and a simple boy named Dooly, Bing sets out on a quest that he hopes will uncover the mystery and save his village's Christmas. Along the way they meet strange folks, have frightening adventures, encounter magical items, and discover secrets.

The Elfin Ship has an appealing setting. Twombly Town, Bing's comfy village, feels like the shire — it's a warm friendly place where everyone knows each other and life is sweet. When Bing and his friends leave for their quest, I was eager and ready for an adventure, but by the time the characters have been hazarding the wilds for a while, I found myself understanding why they were anxious to return to their friends and the comforts of Twombly Town. I liked this homey feel.

The characters are also likable. The Master Cheeser and the Professor are good people who are clever and witty. Dooly is sweet and there's more to him than meets the eye. And, of course, there's Ahab — who doesn't love a loyal and friendly dog? There are no women in the story, unfortunately.

Many readers, including children and teens, will absolutely adore The Elfin Ship. There are a few dark moments, but mostly the novel is charming, light-hearted and funny, and there are bits of wisdom and important life lessons included. Its wholesome hominess feels a little like The Hobbit or The Wind in the Willows. The Elfin Ship stands alone, but there are two more BALUMNIA novels set in the same world with overlapping characters: The Disappearing Dwarf and The Stone Giant.

Malk Williams did a great job with the narration of Audible's version (sample). He has a British accent and his warm voice fit perfectly with the cozy feel. I could imagine him sitting in a quaint inn, drinking a beer, smoking a pipe, and telling us this story.

Margaret says

This is an old favorite which I read first when I was nine or ten. When trouble downriver from Twombly Town seems set to prevent holiday trading, Master Cheeser Jonathan Bing sets out on a raft, accompanied by the learned Professor Wurzle, the simple Dooly, and his faithful dog Ahab, to take his cheeses to the elves.

Jonathan finds far more trouble than he bargained for, though, getting mixed up with trolls, goblins, skeletons, and a mysterious dwarf with a magical watch.

Blaylock is very good at juxtaposing the everyday (even in a fantasy world) with the bizarre. In this book and its sequel, *The Disappearing Dwarf*, I particularly like the contrast between scenes of comfort and coziness, with cheeses, pipes, coffee, and brandy, against creepy, weird encounters with all sorts of monsters and beasts.

Lydia says

There are no words for how happy this books makes me. My life is better because this book exists and I have read it -- that's not something I can say about many books, and I don't give praise like this lightly.

Betty says

This book was very odd. I kept feeling like something was going to break loose and happen all the way through the story, and yet...it didn't. There were no women in this story anywhere, not even mentioned. I suppose all the people in this world are hatched in a lab somewhere. And the men all bumbled around doing very stupid things, except for one Elf named Twickenham. He needs to break lose from these losers.

For the first 4 chapters of this book, the most interesting character was the dog. And the author obviously thought that the silly, brainless things these guys did were supposed to be funny, or that the way he phrased things were witty. But they weren't.

My friend tells me she tried to read another book by this guy and found it quite misogynistic, so I'll pass on reading any more of this author's work. :p

Rich U says

I liked this book mainly for it's ability to make the imagery of a single troll on the shore line seem scary. That and making plans to storm a castle always go better after lunch. It's a good natured story that builds to a suspenseful conclusion then goes on its merry way.

Riana says

I bought this book in a second-hand bookstore in Hope, British Columbia, mainly because I am a sucker for cute cartoonish book covers. I have never heard of the author before and decided to give it a try. The biggest part of the book I read on a train journey between Toronto and Vancouver. I want to say that it was a pleasant read for a pleasant jouney, although that might make it sound like a mild story.

Perhaps the first thing that made me so fond of this tale is how much I could relate to the main character, Jonathing Bing. Just and average guy, liking his cheese and wine and peaceful lifestyle next to the river. However, when opportunity for adventure came, it tugged at his heart nonetheless, despite all his doubts

about himself ever doing anything that could be considered exciting.

So, there the cheesemaker goes on an "adventure" with some weird, annoying people and at first, he wishes he was anywhere but on a raft going down a chilly river.

This story is sweet and captivating, without having a childish feel about it. Although there were a few places where the action became a bit vague and confusing, this story has an enchanting quality to it and the characters are easy to envision.

I loved the way that Blaylock puts a new twist on the man-in-the-moon theme, turning it into something almost mystical.

I am still sad that I left my 1st edition copy behind in the hostel library in Vancouver!

David says

Delightful. A very British sort of fantasy world and something of a fairy-tale story, with large stakes which never become quite clear to the protagonist. LoTR without any of the angst or proto-religion.

Graylark says

Read this book a long time ago (lost my copy now). All I remember is it was fun to read and that reading about all the special cheeses they made (studded with dates and raisins and stuff) made my mouth water.
