

OTHER VOICES, OTHER WORLDS

by F. Brett Cox

Warren Rochelle. *The Called*.
Urbana, IL: Golden Gryphon, 2009.

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WARREN ROCHELLE contributed a bibliographic essay on North Carolina science fiction and fantasy writers for the special feature section of NCLR's 2001 issue. A short story by Rochelle was also included in that issue. In that story, "Interviews in Cold Springs, North Carolina," he poses another alternative history for the backstory: in that case, the Confederacy won the Civil War and has survived into the twenty-first century.

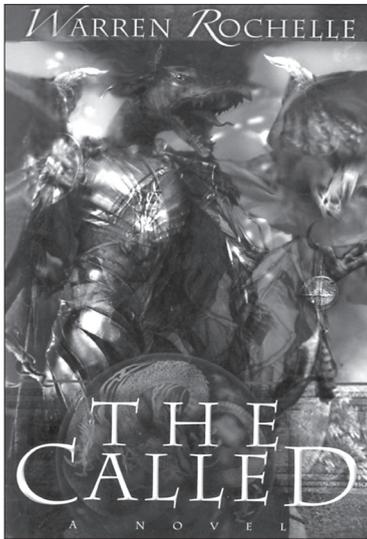
One of the most compelling aspects of science fiction and fantasy literature is its ability to dramatize, indeed to make literal, the Other: the unfamiliar, the strange, the unsettling, the frightening. When confronted with genuine difference, how do we respond? Do we retreat, do we embrace, or – more likely – do we attack? And no matter how fascinating the portrayal of the Other, the ultimate power of such a scenario lies not in the creation of the aliens or the fairies or the vampires or the world that is not ours, but in what our responses to such Otherness tell us about ourselves.

Such an exploration is the heart of Warren Rochelle's new novel, *The Called*, and its predecessor, *Harvest of Changelings* (2007). In the earlier novel, Rochelle posits a fundamental change in our world in 1991 with the revelation of the existence of a land of Faerie, a reality parallel to our own. Travel between the two realities is possible and has been going on for centuries, including – inevitably – interbreeding between human and fey. The residents of Faerie organize themselves into "tetrads," intensely-bonded units whose members each represent one of the four classic elements: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water. But for those on Earth who are part fey – the "changelings" – finding and joining with one's natural tetrad is a daunting task. *Harvest of Changelings* details the journey of Malachi, born to a fairy mother and human father, as he learns his true origin and finds the other members of his tetrad: Hazel, a precocious orphan being raised by kind but emotionally distant grandparents; Russell, the rebellious and embittered product of a violent and intolerant human family; and Jeff, the survivor of sexual abuse at the

hands of his father. In forming their tetrad, Malachi, Hazel, Russell, and Jeff discover their special mission to fight the Fomorii, monstrous residents of a land of empty darkness who are a threat to both Earth and Faerie.

In the Prologue to *The Called*, we learn that, having pushed back the Fomorii, Malachi and the rest of the tetrad cross over to Faerie, where they live happily while growing and learning their powers and natures. However, back on Earth, the "Change" has given rise to a severe backlash against "magicals," leading to Malachi and Hazel's returning to Earth to help other magicals deal with their own unique status as well as the increasingly violent bigotry of the mundanes. In the novel's first chapter, it is 2012, two decades after the Change, and Malachi, by now a famous public advocate for magical rights, is kidnapped by members of the Ordinary Union, the most violent of the anti-magical forces.

Sensing that a member of their tetrad is in danger, Jeff and Russell return to Earth to help Hazel find Malachi, only to find themselves embroiled in nothing less than a second American Civil War. Here Rochelle makes a very interesting choice: the revelation of the magicals in 1991 led to a different history than our own. George H.W. Bush was re-elected President in 1992; Dan Quayle followed, only to be assassinated early in his second term; in 2012, Al Gore is completing his second term when a military coup forces him from office. However, the ultimate force behind the coup is not the Ordinary Union, but the Fomorii, who have returned, determined to overwhelm both Earth and Faerie. As in Rochelle's previous novel, North



Carolina is Ground Zero for the passage between Earth and Faerie, and the leader of the Fomorii assumes human shape as Magon, the military leader of the state.

The Called is a novel of almost continuous action and conflict, as Hazel, Jeff, and Russell ally themselves with the forces of resistance to the Ordinary Union, forces concentrated in Western North Carolina and calling on a different but related set of magical capabilities from the traditions of the Cherokee. Like *Harvest of Changelings*, *The Called* spends most of its time with the four members of the tetrad, although the primary focus shifts from Malachi (who spends most of the novel languishing in a cell in Gimghoul Castle in Chapel Hill) to Russell, whose childhood bitterness and distrust have never fully left him and who is on the verge of being overcome by doubts about their mission and fears for the safety of Jeff, his lover within the tetrad. However, Rochelle introduces a very large cast of supporting characters,

all of whom are at one time or another represented from their own point of view, and all of whom have their roles to play in the nonstop sequence of kidnappings, skirmishes, betrayals, and, by the second half of the novel, apocalyptic violence. (Magon's strategies for subduing the population include a massacre in "the Pit," the common area on the campus of UNC-Chapel Hill, and the firebombing of Winston-Salem.) Late in the game, a second tetrad crosses over from Faerie to assist Russell and company, and the inevitable final confrontation with the Fomorii yields triumph, tragedy, and the promise of even more radical change as the novel concludes on December 21, 2012: the "reconvergence" famously forecast by Mayan tradition.

In an era when both publishers and audiences seem to crave multi-volume fantasy sagas that never end, Rochelle has gone in the opposite direction, producing a novel that, despite its 366 pages, feels almost short. (The events of the Prologue alone could have formed the basis for a separate novel.) There is a lot going on here, and the less attentive reader may struggle to keep both characters and events straight in this narrative of continual incident embedded in an intricate mix of varying mythological traditions. However, despite the often frenetic level of action, Rochelle modulates the overwhelming events of the story through the emotional responses of the tetrad and a few of the many supporting characters: Ed, Jeff's abusive father, who has aligned himself with Magon and the forces of darkness; Father Jamey, a changeling priest who serves as

mentor and guide to the tetrad; and, perhaps most memorably, the young human Reese, whose initial service to the tetrad is undercut by his own thwarted desires, forcing the tetrad, Russell in particular, to face the inescapable fact of human frailty, and the equally inescapable need for forgiveness. The elaborate interweaving of Native American and European mythological traditions is worked out in careful, intriguing detail. Rochelle vividly and concretely renders the diverse landscapes of his native state: although most of the action takes place in the mountains and piedmont, the final battle to close off from the Fomorii the main gateway to Faerie takes place on Roanoke Island. (And yes, we are given an explanation for the Lost Colony.)

But beyond issues of narrative strategy or mythological exploration, *The Called*, like all seriously-intended works of the fantastic, is relative to our own time and place, leading back to the fundamental problem of the Other. It is surely no accident that several of the main characters in this story are gay, just as it is surely no accident that the bigoted rhetoric of the Ordinary Union is disturbingly familiar to anyone living in early twenty-first century America. Rochelle watches and reads the same news as the rest of us, news that often seems to record nothing but a continual abandonment of common sense and common decency. *The Called* tells us that difference is not a threat, that difference can safely be embraced, that things can, indeed, be different – concepts that are never easy to convey or accept. We should be grateful to Warren Rochelle, and to any author, who insists on telling such a story, and who gets us to listen. ■