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Valente, Catherynne. The Habitation of the Blessed

In 1165, a letter purportedly written by the Christian priest-king Prester John caught the imagination of medieval Europe. Prester John?s distant kingdom, placed by some in India or ?the Orient,? was described in the letter as a place of great wonder, populated by myriad strange and beautiful creatures and cultures. Though Prester John himself was Christian and had converted his subjects, he was ringed on all sides by Muslims and pagans. In Valente?s novel, she takes this medieval wonder-tale as truth, but truth told slant. In 1699, a group of monks lead by Brother Hiob search out the land of Prester John. All they discover is a small group of strange, taciturn people who guard a tree. From this tree, books sprout like fruit and Hiob is allowed to pluck three volumes which, like fruit, decay almost faster than he can read them. One volume is the journal of Prester John himself; the second is the journal of his wife, the beautiful blemmye Hagia?a woman with her face in her torso instead of a head; and the third is the memoir of the elephant-eared panoti once named Imtithal. The stories interweave, revealing that nothing about the truth of Prester John?s fabled kingdom was quite as fabulous as anyone in Europe had imagined.

Compelling, layered, dark, and intense, Valente?s fable captures some of the richness of myth and retains the power of allegory.

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