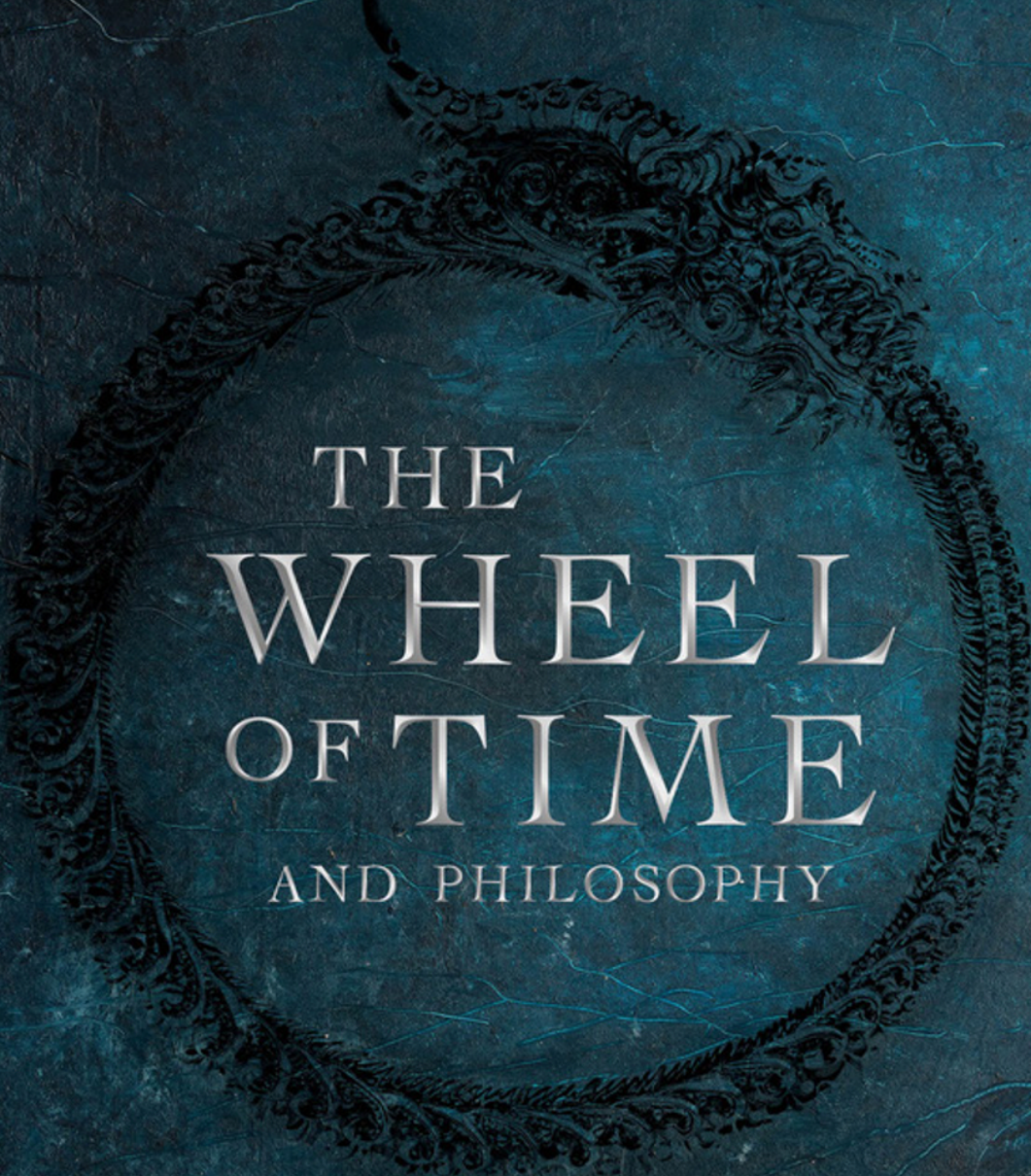


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THE
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TIME AND
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Jacob M. Held is Professor of Philosophy and Assistant Provost for Academic Assessment and General Education at the University of Central Arkansas in Conway, Arkansas. He’s a philosophical generalist who works primarily at the intersection of philosophy and popular culture. He has published over fifty articles or essays and edited or coedited ten books, including *Wonder Woman and Philosophy: The Amazonian Mystique* (2017), *Stephen King and Philosophy* (2016), and *Dr. Seuss and Philosophy: Oh, the Things You Can Think!* (2011). When he began his career as a philosophy professor, he envisioned a life resembling that of an Aes Sedai joyfully laboring in the White Tower. Most days, however, he feels more like one of the Forsaken.

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Steven Michels is a Professor of Political Science at Sacred Heart University and the author of *Sinclair Lewis and American Democracy* (2017) and the editor of *Scenes from the American Working Class: This Hard Land* (2025). Like Thom Merrill, he enjoys performing songs, but unlike the gleeman, he does not do much traveling or have much in the way of talent.

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Kenneth R. Pike is Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Law at the Florida Institute of Technology. His research applies moral and political theory to technology, family, and law. Among his publications are “The Doctrine of Sufficiency as a Contractualist Principle” (in *Moral Philosophy and Politics*, 2024) and “*Secher Nbiw* and the Child’s Right to an Open Future” (in *Dune and Philosophy*, 2023). As a teenager he memorized poetry from *Lord of Chaos*; in college he studied creative writing with Brandon Sanderson. Today Kenneth spends most of his time imagining ways to prevent *gholam* from slipping under his office door.

Kenneth Silver is an Associate Professor at Trinity College Dublin. He works within the philosophy of action and business ethics, and his central focus is on corporate moral responsibility and corporate personhood. Though an American possessing a doctorate in philosophy, Dr. Silver finds himself employed by a business school abroad because the Wheel weaves as the Wheel wills.

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Michel-Antoine Xhignesse is an Instructor of Philosophy at Capilano University. He specializes in the aesthetics/philosophy of art and the philosophy of literature, and is the author of *Aesthetics: 50 Puzzles, Paradoxes, and Thought Experiments* (2023), the translator of *On the Ideal in the Pictorial Arts*, by Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy (2024) and, with James O. Young, of *the Causes of the Corruption of Taste*, by Anne Le Fèvre Dacier (2025). He’d really, really like to get his hands on a copy of *Mirrors of the Wheel*, so he can read more about the Portal Stones and the dinosaurs lurking behind them.

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank series editor Bill Irwin. Since the beginning of my professional career—with my chapter in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy* (edited by James B. South)—he has been a constant in my academic life, and I have benefitted greatly from our relationship. He has also been incredibly patient with the production of this volume.

I'd also like to thank all the contributors. They produced wonderful essays that will hopefully broaden the reader's appreciation for both Robert Jordan's work and the history of philosophy.

Introduction “A Part of What We Know”

The *Wheel of Time* series is vast. My first complete read-through took approximately five years, but I had kids and a job so free time was a rare commodity. But that’s about the same amount of time it took me to finish my PhD program. Maybe someone should grant me an honorary degree in Robert Jordan studies. (Such a program probably exists in the recesses of some well-funded liberal arts college out east.)

I abandoned my reread of the series as I was developing this book when I realized that every page of *The Wheel of Time* I reread foreclosed the possibility of reading a page of some other work new to me. No offense to Robert Jordan, but when you write a series whose word count is equivalent to that of five-and-a-half Bibles, the opportunity cost of a reread, calculated in terms of missed opportunities to read new content, quickly outweighs the modicum of additional enjoyment generated by revisiting *The Wheel of Time*. There is just so much out there to read, and although I am sure I’d have enjoyed *The Wheel of Time* another time round, as do many fans, I just couldn’t justify it.

But the *Wheel of Time* series is incredibly rich. It’s hard to imagine a trope, theme, idea, or concept not introduced at some point in the series. These themes cover far-ranging ideas, from metaphysics and religion to ethics and politics. One can scarcely scratch the surface of *The Wheel of Time*, or the history of philosophy for that matter, even after years of study. So, I can imagine that some who revisit Jordan’s *oeuvre* time and time again do wrest new insights from it. I am sure for these readers this book will omit things they perceive as essential to the series. And I am sure at some point we got a detail wrong, or interpreted an example or scenario inaccurately or inadequately, from their point of view. Given the vastness of the series there are bound to be many things left unsaid. For example, there are no mentions, to my chagrin, of the Aelfinn and Eelfinn. The idea of luck, whether as metaphysical chance or moral luck, is left mostly unmentioned. We failed to include a chapter on madness and mental health. These are just a few omissions I’d expect any fan of the series to notice, if not lament.

But what we did include, what my fantastic collaborators have provided for you, are engaging introductions to some foundational concepts, traditions, and major thinkers throughout the history of philosophy with reference to, and in appreciation of, the rich world of *The Wheel of Time*, both Jordan's series and the Amazon Prime show. From Arad Doman to the Aiel Waste you'll travel with these authors as they discuss just-war theory, existentialism, the philosophy of literature, and the nature of free will. You'll do so while pondering the Aes Sedai and the nature of truth telling, the Dark One, Darkfriends and nihilism, and Rand's love life. Although there are bound to be lacunae the devoted fan will notice, the richness of what is present should delight not only the casual reader or viewer, but even the most devoted fan. Lan is wise to note: "You can never know everything, and part of what you know is always wrong. Perhaps even the most important part. A portion of wisdom lies in knowing that. A portion of courage lies in going on anyway."¹ You hold in your hands a portion of our collected wisdom, a part of what we know. Is the opportunity cost of vesting time in this volume worth it? ... Read and find out.

Jacob M. Held

Note

1. From Robert Jordan, *Winter's Heart*, chap. 32, at https://wot.fandom.com/wiki/Winter%27s_Heart/Chapter_32 (accessed November 24, 2024).

STORIES HAVE POWER

Tolkien's Influence and the World of *The Wheel of Time*

Michel-Antoine Xhignesse

Some people complain that *The Wheel of Time* (*WoT*) is similar to Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (*LotR*). The implication is that *WoT* is somehow *derivative* of *LotR*. But while this is a popular criticism, it reflects fundamental misunderstandings about (i) the nature of *WoT*'s worldbuilding, (ii) the function of influence, and (iii) the formation and development of genre conventions. My hope, in this chapter, is to go some way toward rectifying all three of these misunderstandings.

It is certainly true that the two series have a lot in common, especially structurally (and especially where *WoT*'s first three books are concerned). And that is not to mention *WoT*'s many thinly disguised allusions, ranging from Trollocs (Troll-Orc hybrids), Ogier (Elves with a hint of Ent), Myrddraal and The Forsaken (each inspired by different aspects of the Nazgûl), Padan Fain (Gollum), and Ba'alzamon (Sauron¹). Or, indeed, its penchant for *LotR*-related placenames like Andor or the Mountains of Mist, or the similarity between The Blight and Gorgoroth, Thakan'dar and Mordor, or Shayol Ghul and Mount Doom (indeed, *WoT* even has the Mountains of Dhoom!).

All these parallels, and many, many more, are there to be found. Indeed, Robert Jordan himself made no bones about Tolkien's influence:

In the first chapters of *The Eye of the World*, I tried for a Tolkienesque feel without trying to copy Tolkien's style, but that was by way of saying to the reader, okay, this is familiar, this is something you recognize, now let's go where you haven't been before.²

This helps to explain why Jordan's allusions to Tolkien are thinly veiled: readers are *meant* to catch them, so that they can feel at ease with the story. Astute readers will also spot many more allusions to other familiar stories: vampires (Draghkar), werewolves (wolfbrothers), Norse mythology (particularly Mat, who is a clear analogue of Odin), Arthurian legend (especially Rand, who is an analogue of Arthur), contemporary(ish) science

fiction (Loial reading *To Sail Beyond the Sunset* in *The Great Hunt*), and even the Cold War (the tale of the giants Mosk and Merk), among many, many others. Here again, Jordan was crystal clear about his intentions. Concerning his plans for the series, Jordan wrote, in a note to his publisher sent with the typescript for *The Eye of the World*, that

The story will take in parts not only of the most obvious myths (Arthur and Thor) but others, as well. Parts of the Arthurian legend will be blended with Norse myth, Greek myth and others. These will not be taken whole, however. What will be done is to show occurrences [sic] which could, over thousands of years, be distorted into the sources of these myths.³

And here, we come to the crux of the matter: *The Wheel of Time* is deliberately chock full of stories we know and love. Not accidentally, and not as the result of incidental borrowing, but because Jordan wanted to use his novels to tell the story behind these other stories, the founding myth for all human cultures. And for that reason, something very philosophically interesting is going on in *WoT*. But to see just what that is, we first need to establish the basic building blocks of modern philosophy of literature. So: RAFO!⁴

A Gleeman's Tales, the *So'feia's* Words

The first thing we need to remember is that authors are gleemen—storytellers. But *how* do they tell their stories? By writing them down, of course—but *what*, exactly, do they write down? At a first pass, it is tempting to say that authors write everything that they want us to imagine is true in their stories. Jordan wanted us to imagine that five young men and women from a rural backwater will grow up to save the world from evil, and so that's what he wrote down; he wanted us to imagine that Rand has red hair, so he said so; and so on. But although this much is clearly right, it does not get us as far as we might like, because there are lots of other things which must be true in the story if it is to make any sense. Rand, Nynaeve, Thom, Logain, Lanfear, and all of the other characters, for example, are obviously human beings—but we are never explicitly told as much. If they are human beings, then they must have a certain genetic profile, but we never hear about that, either. Perhaps more importantly, the law of gravity is clearly true in the story, otherwise its most basic physics would not make much sense—but again, we are never told as much. These are just some of the many pieces of information that we take for granted.

For philosophers of literature, this just shows that stories are necessarily incomplete: there are lots of details which must be true, but which the author was simply unable to tell us about.⁵ Sometimes this may be because of author error (e.g. is Bela alive or dead?), because they neglected to tie up a loose end (e.g. what is up with the portal stones, the Mad Lands, and Shara?), or

because they deliberately left it ambiguous (e.g. who is Nakomi? What happened to the pipe?). Speaking more broadly, no author can hope to tell us everything that happens in their story—at least, not in finite time. There are simply too many details—How many hairs are on Perrin's left forearm? How many times has Nynaeve tugged her braid?—most of which are too boring and irrelevant to include. There is an obvious reason we are not told every time Rand has to void his bowels: doing so would not be of much interest to most readers. Conversely, if we *did* have a scene in which he poops, we would expect it to be important to the story in some way (e.g. by contributing to the horror of the atmosphere inside Sevanna's box). Good storytelling requires authors to tell us what they think we need to know, or what will enhance our experience of the story, and to trust us to fill in the rest when and where appropriate while ignoring what is irrelevant or uninteresting.

One important consequence of this is that more is true in a story than just what we are explicitly told: a lot goes unsaid—including things of which there is no doubt that they must be true—if the story is to make sense. Similarly, often what we are explicitly told in a story is unreliable evidence for the story's content: we are often told, for example, that Stilling cannot be Healed. So if we want to know what is true in a story, we need to look at more than just what we are explicitly told; we need to also consider how reliable what has been said really is, and what has gone unsaid. With that in mind, philosophers of literature commonly draw a distinction between what stories *explicitly* tell us (“primary” story truth), and what they *implicitly* tell us (“secondary” story truth). Some things implicit in a story are just the consequences of other things that are true in the story. For example, the last we hear of Aldieb has her stabled at the Sun Palace in Cairhien after Moiraine disappears, so presumably she is still there in *Winter's Heart*. And some of what is implicit is what philosophers of literature call the story's *background*.⁶ Background is just the set of beliefs we have about the real world that inform our understanding of the story world; think of it as the baggage you take with you on your journey into the story world, things like the law of gravity, English grammar, and so on. Background helps to fill in some (but not all) of the gaps left by an author, especially when we are talking about facts whose presentation would detract from the story in some way.

Not all background comes from the real world, although plenty of it does; sometimes, it comes from other stories. So, for example, we can be confident that the events of *New Spring* are part of the past in *The Eye of the World* and *A Memory of Light*, even if they're not explicitly mentioned or alluded to. Even genre conventions can inform a story's background: a story might be about a dragon, for example, but say nothing about whether it breathes fire; if it's appropriately situated in the Western tradition of fantasy tales about dragons, then we can rest assured that this dragon also breathes fire. (*WoT*, of course, has only one Dragon, and he is human—though he does weave balefire. Here again, we see the potential historical

inspiration for a piece of real-world mythology.) This kind of background is called carry-over content, because it is carried over from other stories.⁷

The best way to think of background content is just as the set of facts (from the real world, or from other stories) that we take with us into a story world. As we read on, some of our background assumptions will be challenged by the facts on the ground; once we discover that is the case, we let go of that assumption and carry on reading. Most of the time, we do not even notice we are bringing these assumptions into the story until it becomes clear that the story is inconsistent with some assumption we were making. So, for example, you probably assumed that Randland was a fantasy realm distinct from the real world until you encountered the reference to the Apollo space program (the story of Lenn and Salya) in *The Eye of the World* (chapter 4), Mosk and Merk in *The Shadow Rising* (chapter 20), or the artifacts in the Panarch's Palace in Tanchico. Ultimately, what is true in a story is a function of both the story's explicit content and its background content, along with whatever additional facts these might entail.

Although philosophers have suggested several different ways of determining a story's secondary content given its primary content (so-called *principles of generation*⁸), we do not have the space to explore them in this chapter. Instead, I want to direct your attention to an assumption that lurks behind all of these principles. It has been called many things in the past, but most recently it has been articulated as the *Reality Assumption*:

Reality Assumption

Everything that is true in the real world is also fictionally true, unless excluded by the work.⁹

Straightforwardly, the Reality Assumption has us assuming that whatever is true in the real world is also true in the story, unless we are told otherwise. It is a defeasible *assumption* about story-content, and it is easily defeated: it can be defeated by explicit content (e.g. *WoT* is a world containing the One Power), or by genre conventions (e.g. satire is not to be taken literally), by carry-over content, or any number of other factors. What is important is just to notice that this is a commonly assumed starting point for determining story truth.

These are the basic building blocks of contemporary philosophy of literature, and they are necessary in order for us to see and understand Robert Jordan's uniquely ambitious creative achievement in writing *The Wheel of Time*, and to appreciate just why it is so philosophically rich.

The World of *WoT*: *Tia mi aven Moridin isande vadin*

We saw, earlier, that Jordan explicitly conceived of the series as a kind of crucible in which the myths and legends of the real world were forged: that is why we can recognize in it so many elements of these stories from around