

Recommended fantasy novels

I was asked to recommend 3 fantasy novels to someone keen to explore the genre.

It's a difficult decision – so many great fantasy novels are part of a series, and rarely the opening book, so are thus difficult to understand/appreciate without at least a working knowledge of their predecessors.

Similarly, the line between science fiction and fantasy is at best blurred and has hence given rise to the catch-all science fantasy genre. Possibly the finest series I have ever read is Stephen Donaldson's 'Gap Cycle', but as that takes place largely in space, I have gone with the conventional definition of this as a science fiction series, even though Donaldson is one of the world's pre-eminent fantasy authors with his 'Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever' and 'Mordant's Need'.

I also think it's important to stress that there is no value judgement here, I do not think these are necessarily the best fantasy novels, something I am ill-equipped to judge, but they are certainly a great introduction to the genre. I have cheated tho', in compiling two lists – one for one-off novels and another for part works – but even with the part-works, it's normally the first book in the series, or one where prior knowledge is not a pre-requisite for thinking what an amazing story this is.

Individual novels

The Left Hand of Darkness – Ursula K. Le Guin

The Night Circus – Erin Morgenstern

Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell – Susanna Clarke

Part works

The Fifth Season – N.K. Jemisin (Book 1 of the Broken Earth trilogy)

The Grace of Kings – Ken Liu (Book 1 of the Dandelion Dynasty)

Deadhouse Gates – Steven Erikson (Book 2 of the Malazan Books of the Fallen – but nothing even vaguely comprehensible happens in Book 1)