

Why fantasy?

I'm a member of an online writing group and was asked recently, why I write fantasy fiction.

My immediate reaction was 'Why not?' Is there something wrong with that? Also, it's not the only thing I've ever written – I spent much of my professional life writing and editing copy for one of the world's largest advertising agencies. I've also written poetry, had industry articles published in assorted learned magazines and written what would now be considered 'literary fiction'. After some consideration, however, I started to ask myself a similar question. How did I get into fantasy fiction, and in terms of writing, why is it the genre that appeals?

If you put aside a childish devotion to C.S. Lewis' 'Chronicles of Narnia', (who doesn't love Aslan?), fantasy fiction was not my first love. I studied English literature at school and at university, and the first book I remember reading and thinking, 'Wow,' was Joseph Conrad's 'The Secret Agent'. I wasn't necessarily blown away with the story, characters, or style, but the book was so clever - the non-linear narrative really opened my eyes to what great writing could achieve. Next was another Victorian novel, Charles Dickens' 'Great Expectations' – surely his greatest book - which was followed by a totally different novel in subject, substance, and style – Joseph Heller's 'Catch 22', which I still think is the greatest book ever written. So far, not a fantasy novel in sight.

It's complicated by the fact that it's not always easy to define what fantasy is. One of my early favourites, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's 'One Hundred Years of Solitude', is now more usually defined as magical realism, though it certainly has 'fantastical' elements. Some scholars believe fantasy stretches back to ancient epic poems such as 'Beowulf', 'The Iliad and the Odyssey' and the 'Epic of Gilgamesh'. Others cite the tales of love and romance in Middle English epics such as Chaucer's 'Canterbury Tales', whilst others place the birth of modern fantasy as late as the 1850's with George MacDonald's 'Phantastes'.

I went to university in the USA and promptly fell in love with William Faulkner. After filling my boots with Faulkner, Salinger, Updike and other great American novelists generally ignored by the UK education system, I did a course on contemporary science fiction and fantasy for no other reason than it fitted in with my timetable. The professor's definition of fantasy, which I still use today, is of a world that cannot be explained by technology, to differentiate it from science fiction. One of the books on the course was Ursula K. Le Guin's 'The Left Hand of Darkness', which I thought was a simply amazing book, covering themes such as trans and multiple genders that at the time could only be addressed in an otherworld environment. As it was the only fantasy book on the course, I asked the professor for some further recommendations. Three weeks later I had finished the first 'Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever' by Stephen Donaldson (Lord Foul's Bane, The Illearth War and The Power that Preserves). I still think The Illearth War is one of the best fantasy novels there is.

Next came Julian May's Saga of the Exiles (The Many Coloured Land, The Golden Torc, The Non-Born King). and by the time I came round to writing my dissertation about human evolution as depicted in several science fiction and fantasy novels, I was absolutely hooked. Typically, back in the UK, only one professor was prepared to mark my dissertation, and the interview panel did not go well.

Armed with my degree, I entered the world of work and started training as a copywriter at a major advertising group. Meeting new people opened me up to other authors and my knowledge and enjoyment of fantasy grew exponentially. I didn't get all of it, but each book was a journey into a different time and space, and so often rewarding in itself.

It wasn't until I was in my mid-twenties that I read 'The Lord of the Rings', J.R. R. Tolkien's fantasy masterpiece. I was so disappointed. Maybe my expectations were too high, but where was the compelling characterisation, where was the gritty reality and moral ambiguity that had so enthralled me. All the good guys were good. All the bad guys were bad. All the bad guys got killed, all the good guys didn't – simple! I know for many people, 'The Lord of the Rings' is the height of fantasy excellence – sorry, I just don't get it.

I haven't enjoyed the other bastions of hero-driven fantasy – David Eddings 'The Belgariad' for example – and I've never managed to finish Robert Jordan's 'Wheel of Time' series. No matter how grand the scope, the characters just don't work for me. The books are also somewhat formulaic and repetitious and surely just one of the good guys could occasionally get killed.

For complexity, strong characterisation, intrigue, and a fascinating moral nihilism, I think the first 3 books of George R. R. Martin's Song of Ice and Fire is the finest fantasy I've ever read. (A Game of Thrones, A Clash of Kings, A Storm of Swords). TV-only fans of the series will never appreciate the depth, breadth, complexity, and colour so prevalent in the books. Sad to say, Martin seemed to lose control of the world with his next 2 books, and the fact that it's now nearly 12 years since his last, makes me wonder if he'll ever get it back.

The best complete series I've read is Steven Erikson and Ian C. Esslemont's Malazan Book of the Fallen and its offshoots c17 books in total (and growing). But be warned – it is hard. I defy anyone to appreciate the ending of the first book 'Gardens of the Moon', until they are a significant way through the series. There are so many cross-references and back stories, that the entire tale is a mosaic that the reader has to painstakingly put together. Thankfully, online resources such as The Encyclopaedia Malazica exist to help us out. One of the main themes in the book is the influence of time on different races and civilisations – something dear to Steven Erikson's heart as both an archaeologist and anthropologist. I can't think of any genre of novel, that would allow such a comprehensive and detailed examination of this lengthy subject as fantasy. Sometimes, to explore and try to understand some of the forces that define our world, you need to be outside them. Only fantasy fiction gives you the scope for such discovery.