



THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

Allegory and Enigma: Fantasy's Enduring Appeal

By *MIKITA BROTTMAN and DAVID STERRITT* | DECEMBER 21, 2001 ✓ PREMIUM

Harry Potter's enormous popularity and moviegoers' keen anticipation of *The Lord of the Rings* reconfirm the enduring desire of both children and adults to immerse themselves in fantasy worlds -- a desire that might have swelled further since the events of September 11, given the time-proven power of escapist art in troubled times. In the age of the Internet and MTV, why do these old-fashioned fantasy realms of wizards, goblins, hobbits, and orcs still manage to pull in such eager crowds?

In an interview with *Newsweek's* Malcolm Jones, J.K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter books, claims she regularly gets letters from youngsters addressed to Professor Dumbledore -- headmaster at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, the books' main setting -- begging to be let into the school, convinced that it really exists. Children of all ages are clearly entranced by this world of dragons, trolls, flying broomsticks, and a three-headed dog monster named Fluffy. But if, as seems to be the case, the Harry Potter stories appeal to countless adults as well as children -- adults who supposedly know truth from fiction -- their spellbinding enchantment takes on more interest.

Part of the explanation clearly has to do with the deep-seated human compulsion to immerse ourselves in the lives of others, especially when those others -- like Harry Potter -- are unlikely underdogs faced with the challenge of overcoming phenomenal obstacles. If the unlikely underdog turns out to be gifted, with special, supernatural powers, then all the better: At the heart of every dream, Freud tells us, lies a wish. Also appealing is the escape such fantasies offer from the routine contemporary world and the often mind-numbing details of our everyday lives. Harry's battles on behalf of the noble house

of Gryffindor against the dubious denizens of Slytherin seem a million miles from planning mortgage payments, keeping track of taxes, and the other mundane problems most of us have to deal with.

Equally compelling is that the fantasy world has its own ontological framework -- its own history, rules, and ways of life, baffling to outsiders but second nature to regular readers, who become self-taught cognoscenti of the mythological domain. Like avid followers of soap operas and sports teams, fantasy readers are a special group with their own sense of history, their own understanding of the make-believe world, their own knowledge of characters' limitations and vocabularies, all of which inspire a disdainful clannishness at times. That elitism reinforces the arcane, hieratic character of a fantasy world whose particular nature readily excludes unimaginative outsiders, who are regularly cast into the roles of worldly earthlings or stupid, gluttonous Muggles who can't tell an orc from a handsaw.

In short, magic must have rules, as fantasists from G.K. Chesterton to J.R.R. Tolkien have pointed out. But this is more easily preached than practiced. Many fantasy novels are weakened by internal tensions between the yearning for flights of fancy and the well-defined rule systems that authors impose on their imaginary realms. Most bookstores have a section full of third-rate sword-and-sorcery novels like Laraine Anne Barker's *Quest for Earthlight* series and N.M. Browne's *Warriors of Alavna*, in which the characters' lives are so uninterestingly bound up with centaurs and unicorns that empathic engagement is precluded for most of us, making real narrative suspense or excitement almost impossible. It's hard to enter the lives of creatures who don't share human experiences or emotions.

In the best fantasies, however -- the short stories of Ursula LeGuin, say, or magic-realist works like Carlos Fuentes's *Aura* and Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* -- that tension between flights of fancy and magic's rules is a primary source of power and surprise. One of the best things about the Harry Potter series is how it locates cracks in the ordinary, everyday human world familiar to us all (a certain brick in a wall, a pillar between two train platforms) that provide secret portals to the fantasy otherworld. The most memorable of these cracks, perhaps, is the piece of prosaic furniture that leads to Narnia in C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

While every successful fantasy film and novel has cadres of devoted and sometimes

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competitive followers, all fantasies are not created equal. It's worthwhile to make distinctions between fantasy that's pertinent and instructive, on one hand, and the banality of unmitigated escapism, on the other. Critics may come to widely differing conclusions when assessing particular works, but it seems clear that the best fantasy novels function on multiple levels, often in subtle and intricate ways. Just as Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* addresses painful issues related to personal loyalty, social conflict, and divine justice, Lewis's visionary works -- whether child-centered fantasies like *The Chronicles of Narnia* or adult books like his space-fiction trilogy -- explore sociological and theological issues including the nature of religious conversion, the challenges of moral struggle, and the rewards of spiritual growth. The most powerful fantasies operate at an allegorical as well as a literal level, exploring recognizably human conflicts and crises by recontextualizing them in imaginative frameworks that have resonated with readers since storytellers first elaborated them in ancient legends and myths.

Other fantasies are less thematically and aesthetically substantial. While the Harry Potter stories are full of captivating vignettes, Rowling's prose style has little of the fluid charm found in Lewis, the mythopoetic complexity conjured by Tolkien, or the magical depth found in George MacDonald's phantasmic fairy tales. Anthony Holden, a judge of the Whitbread Book Awards for which *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* was a contender, drubbed Rowling for deploying a "pedestrian, ungrammatical prose style which has left me with a headache and a sense of a wasted opportunity." Equally important, the world of Harry Potter -- like the realms of the weaker sword-and-sorcery novels -- tends to be inoffensive and benevolent, if a tad more daring (references to death, occasional disobedience toward adults) than the most conservative children's literature. This innocuousness is appropriate insofar as the tales are aimed at youngsters presumed unready for the untrammelled complexities of adult life; but it precludes genuine insight into the daunting and haunting aspects of human experience -- the very aspects that give weight and power to endlessly seductive fantasies like *Le Morte d'Arthur* or the inexhaustibly suggestive tales of Norse, Greek, and Roman mythology. Think of Lancelot's passion for the wife of his lord, or Galahad's sin-thwarted Grail quest in Arthur, for instance. Compared with those earlier works, modern fantasies tend to be

cleaner, more calculating, less impulsive and unforeseen

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That said, book publishers and movie studios have reaped huge rewards by recognizing that the most one-dimensional sword-and-sorcery saga may have a surprisingly strong impact on a remarkably wide audience. Scoff as we might at uninspired specimens of the breed, it is clear that fantasy's age-old tradition is deeply anchored in the inescapable human proclivity for magical thinking, itself rooted in the mazes and mysteries of early-childhood experience. Whatever the limits of Harry Potter on page and screen, his stories share a primal significance with all deep-reaching flights of fancy, from fairy tales to Star Wars to Dynasty. Narrative elements like the family secret, the search for identity, the fear of abandonment, and the dread of defeat are as archetypal as characters like the wise old man, the powerful gatekeeper, and the evil stepmother, as explicated by Carl Jung and brilliantly applied by Bruno Bettelheim in *The Uses of Enchantment*, his classic study of fairy tales.

However circumscribed their scope or clichéd their language, fantasies are meaningful in how they embody the difficulties, limits, and struggles of human understanding, especially as these are experienced by children. Imagine flipping a wall switch to light a ceiling lamp before the eyes of a baby who has no conception of electricity or wires. It's magic! The impressions we gather from an abundance of such mysteries every day persist long beyond infancy, affecting our ideas and inflecting our emotions throughout our grown-up lives.

Fantasy, then, is not just the domain of childhood. The desire to escape the limited confines of our mental and physical routines and explore other dimensions of existence fuels much of human life, propelling a boundless range of activity and thought from the faux idealism of advertising scenarios to the transcendent hopefulness of spiritual quests. Even our language is rooted in the idea that the visible world is not all there is (think of a concept like inner beauty), and that to understand the world fully we must allow our imaginations to stretch beyond the things we ordinarily see, hear, and touch. Fantasy literature is appealing because it gives shape and form to our strong intuition that there's more to life than the reality that surrounds us.

Perhaps that explains the alarms sounded against such seemingly unobjectionable

works as the Rowling tales and fantasy role-playing games like Dungeons & Dragons by finger-wagging Americans from the right (e.g., Christian conservatives) and left (e.g., defenders of rationality over religion). One might expect critics with theological or philosophical interests to embrace books and movies that lift thought beyond its lazy quotidian habits; yet many oppose such fantasies, asserting that claims of expanding the imagination are disguises for encouraging morbid inclinations toward paganism and the occult.

The fascination with another, special realm -- a realm attained by only a select few, with its own rules and rulers -- is the same impulse that motivates religious and secular zealots, who naturally see alternative systems as competitors to be discredited and discarded. Fantasy and fundamentalism alike are driven by the narrative powers of allegory and enigma, and by the tantalizing hope that life-illuminating wisdom lies couched in cryptic lore. Fantasy regards these as mind-teasing entertainment. Fundamentalism sees them as gospel truth.

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