Epic Fantasy and the Hero's Journey

Science Fiction and Philosophy | Brendan Shea, PhD (Brendan.Shea@rtc.edu)

The passage of the mythological hero may be overground, incidentally; fundamentally it is inward—into depths where obscure resistances are overcome, and long lost, forgotten powers are revivified, to be made available for the transfiguration of the world. ...Something of the light that blazes invisible within the abysses of its normally opaque materiality breaks forth, with an increasing uproar. The dreadful mutilations are then seen as shadows, only, of an immanent, imperishable eternity; time yields to glory; and the world sings with the prodigious, angelic, but perhaps finally monotonous, siren music of the spheres. Like happy families, the myths and the worlds redeemed are all alike. (Joseph Campbell, The Hero With a Thousand Faces)

Epic Fantasy is a (modern) genre of speculative fiction that focuses on telling large-scale "mythic" stories of who inhabit worlds where magic works and God (or the gods) actively intervene in human events. Much of

the early work in the genre (by authors such as CS Tolkien and JRR Tolkien) was based on medieval (and predominantly Christian) myths and stories. However, the genre has expanded to include literature based on the myths of a variety of cultures. Many of the most popular books and series of the last 100 years—the *Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, Discworld, Hunger Games, Game of Thrones, Wheel of Time*—can be characterized as "epic fantasy" in this sense. Moreover, many other genres/works (from Star Wars to modern DC/Marvel Movies to the Twilight books) borrow heavily from ideas/themes from epic fantasy (especially in comparison to "older" science fiction or horror novels).

In one sense, the genre's popularity shouldn't be surprising—the stories/themes of epic fantasy have ALWAYS been popular. They closely resemble those in the earliest known literature we have. For example, works such as *Gilgamesh,* the *Illiad,* the *Odyssey,* the Hebrew Tanakh (the Christian "Old Testament"), and the Hindu Mahabharata all fit the general structure of epic fantasy. Some big evil force threatens the world, and the hero confronts and defeats it (often with the help of a god or two).

In another sense, it's worth reflecting on *why* we humans are drawn to stories of this form. In this (short) introductory section, we'll use the model of the **Hero's Journey** proposed by the literature and mythology scholar **Joseph Campbell.** This model can provide a helpful (though imperfect) way of thinking about how the stories of heroes, both ancient (Gilgamesh, Achilles, Moses) and modern (Frodo, Luke Skywalker, Buffy the Vampire Slayer) are arranged. Campbell posits that this reflects a universal truth of human psychology and the way we humans understand and organize the world. However, one need not accept these claims to find the model to be a useful one.

1.1 EPIC FANTASY: SUPER-SHORT SUMMARIES

Before exploring the "Hero's Journey" model, here are a few examples of the sorts of epic fantasy that it might apply to:

- Harry Potter. The orphaned Harry and his friends Ron and Hermione attend the Hogwarts School of Wizardry, led by their mentor Dumbledor. They battle the evil wizard Voldemort, who wants to take over the world and enslave non-magic users. In the end, they defeat him, though not before Dumbledore dies.
- The Hobbit. Bilbo Baggins, a hobbit, joins a group of dwarves on a quest to reclaim their stolen treasure from the dragon Smaug. Along the way, they battle orcs, goblins, and spiders, and Bilbo finds a magic ring that allows him to turn invisible. In the end, they defeat the dragon and Bilbo returns home with his share of the treasure.
- The Lord of the Rings. Bilbo's heir, Frodo Baggins, inherits the magical "One Ring." He sets out on a quest to destroy it, as it is too powerful and could be used for evil. He is joined by his friends Sam, Merry, and Pippin, as well as the wizard Gandalf and the elf Legolas. They battle orcs, trolls, the evil wizard Sauron, and their leader Sauraman (who seeks to subjugate all life). In the end, Frodo destroys the ring but is wounded in the process and must leave "Middle Earth."
- Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe. The Pevensie siblings - Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy - find a magic wardrobe that transports them to the land of Narnia. There, they meet the talking lion Aslan and help him overthrow the evil White Witch, who has cast Narnia into perpetual winter. In the end, they return to England, but are later transported back to Narnia to rule as kings and queens.
- The Wheel of Time. Rand al'Thor is the Dragon Reborn, a prophesied savior who must battle the Dark One, an evil being who wants to enslave humanity. He is joined by his friends Mat Cauthon and Perrin Aybara, as well as the Aes Sedai, a group of magical women who can channel the One

Power. They battle Darkfriends, followers of the Dark One, as well as the Seanchan, an invading force from across the sea. In the end, Rand defeats the Dark One, but at the cost of his own life.

- Game of Thrones. The Seven Kingdoms of Westeros are at war, with each lord vying for the Iron Throne. The Starks, led by Lord Eddard Stark, are loyal to the king, but when the king is murdered, Eddard is accused of the crime and executed. His children - Robb, Sansa, Arya, Bran, and Rickon - scatter to safety. Jon Snow, Eddard's bastard son, joins the Night's Watch, a group of soldiers who guard the Wall that protects Westeros from the Wildlings, who live beyond the Wall. Meanwhile, Daenerys Targaryen, the last surviving heir to the throne, is married off to a Dothraki khal and bears him three dragons. She eventually kills him and takes control of the Dothraki. In the end, she defeats the Lannisters, who have been ruling Westeros in her absence, and takes the Iron Throne as (yet another) brutal tyrant. Jon kills her, and Brandon becomes king.
- Hunger Games Series. In a post-apocalyptic world, the Capitol controls the twelve districts of Panem. Each year, two tributes from each district are chosen by lottery to compete in the Hunger Games, a televised event in which the participants must fight to the death. Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist, is chosen as a tribute from her district. She is joined by Peeta Mellark, the male tribute. They form an uneasy alliance and manage to survive the Games. Eventually, Katniss becomes the symbol of the rebellion and leads the charge against the Capitol.

1.2 STAGES IN THE HERO'S JOURNEY

"Centuries of husbandry, decades of diligent culling, the work of numerous hearts and hands, have gone into the hackling, sorting, and spinning of this tightly twisted yarn. Furthermore, we have not even to risk the adventure alone; for the heroes of all time have gone before us; the labyrinth is thoroughly known; we have only to follow the thread of the hero-path. And where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god; where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves; where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the center of our own existence; and where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world." (Campbell, Hero With a Thousand Faces)

Campbell posits that mythic heroes generally go through number of different stages on their quests, which usually (though not always) occur in a particular order. Some stories will spend much longer on certain stages than others. Not every story will feature every stage.

Stage	Description	The Hobbit
The Ordinary World	This is the original world of the hero, which "suffers from a symbolic deficiency." The hero is lacking something, or something is taken from him.	Bilbo Baggins lives in the Shire, a small village of Hobbits. He's somewhat bored.
The Call to Adventure	The hero is given a challenge, problem, or adventure. Often it appears as a blunder, or chance. This stage establishes the goal of the hero.	The wizard Gandalf "volunteers" Bilbo to serve as a master thief to a group of dwarves aiming to recover their ancestral treasure from the Dragon Smaug.
The Refusal of the Call	The (often) reluctant hero has to be set along the correct path. He must weigh the consequences and be excited by a stronger motivation to proceed further.	Bilbo is still pretty nervous about all of this, and tries to ignore the dwarves in the hopes they'll forget about him. Gandalf has to push/encourage him.
Meeting with the Mentor	The hero encounters a wise figure who prepares him for the journey. This figure (or item) gives advice, guidance,	Gandalf meets with the dwarves and Bilbo and gives them advice on their journey.

	or an item, but cannot go with the hero.	
Crossing the Threshold	The hero has committed to his task, and enters the special world. Often he is met by a threshold guardian.	Bilbo tries to sneak up on a group of trolls, and is captured (along with the rest of the dwarves). Gandalf rescues them.
Tests, Allies, and Enemies	In the special world, the hero learns the new rules by meeting people and obtaining new information. There is often a "local watering hole" component. This is where the true characteristics of the hero are revealed.	Bilbo and the dwarves meet with elves, humans, and giant eagles to get help on their quest. Bilbo starts to prove his worth in his interactions with all of these beings. He proves to be both brave and clever.
Approach to the Inmost Cave	Now our hero, and often his allies, have come to the edge of the dangerous place where the "object of the quest" is hidden. This stage often is the land of the dead.	Bilbo is lost and must confront "Gollum" on his own, without the aid of the dwarves or Gandalf. He tricks Gollum and retrieves a magical ring that will help him later in the quest. He
The Supreme Ordeal	The hero faces danger, often a life-or-death moment that is either physical or psychological.	Bilbo sneaks into Smaug's lair and discovers a weakness that allows humans to kill him. At great threat to himself, he attempts to achieve peace between elves, dwarves, and humans, who battle over the treasure.
Reward, or Seizing the Sword	After surviving, our hero takes possession of the object, typically a treasure, weapon, knowledge, token, or reconciliation.	Bilbo reconciles with everyone and takes a small amount of the treasure home (along with his magical ring and sword).
The Road Back	The hero must now deal with the consequences of their actions. They may be pursued by remaining forces. They now face the decision to return to the ordinary world.	Bilbo returns to the Shire to write his memoirs. In the "Lord of the Rings," he must accept he is no longer the "hero."
Resurrection	One final test is required for the purification and rebirth of the hero. Alternatively, it may be a miraculous transformation.	At the beginning of the "Lord of the Rings", Bilbo must relinquish the "One Ring" to his nephew Frodo. He is the only person ever to do so willingly.
Return With the Elixir	The triumphant hero returns to the ordinary world bearing the elixir. Common elixirs are treasure, love, freedom, wisdom, or knowledge. A defeated hero is doomed to repeat the lesson.	Bilbo has achieved a level of self-knowledge and self-respect. He is reconciled to his own eventual departure from Middle Earth and death.

1.3 ACTIVITY: MODERN HEROES

"It has always been the prime function of mythology and rite to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those that tend to tie it back. In fact, it may very well be that the very high incidence of neuroticism among ourselves follows the decline among us of such effective spiritual aid." (Campell, The Hero With a Thousand Faces)

For this activity, I'd like you to choose an example of a MODERN book or film about a "heroic" journey, and apply the 12 stages to it. Some advice:

1. You don't need to include all 12 stages, but please include at least 7.

2. Try to focus on ONE character. (This will make the exercise a lot easier).
3. Try to write at 1-2 sentences for each stage, explaining your reasoning in a bit of detail (enough detail so that someone who hasn't read the book or seen the movie will know what you are talking about).

Here are the stages:

1. The Ordinary World
2. The Call to Adventure
3. The Refusal of the Call
4. Meeting with the Mentor
5. Crossing the Threshold
6. Tests, Allies, and Enemies
7. Approach to the Inmost Cave
8. The Supreme Ordeal
9. Reward, or Seizing the Sword
10. The Road Back
11. Resurrection
12. Return With the Elixir

2 STORY: A WITCH'S GUIDE TO ESCAPE: A PRACTICAL COMPENDIUM OF PORTAL FANTASIES (ALIX E. HARROW)[1]

***About the Author**: Alix E. Harrow is a Hugo Award-winning American science fiction and fantasy writer. Her short fiction has been nominated for the Nebula Award, World Fantasy Award, and Locus Award, and in 2019 she won a Hugo Award for her story "A Witch's Guide to Escape: A Practical Compendium of Portal Fantasies".*

You'd think it would make us happy when a kid checks out the same book a zillion times in a row, but actually it just keeps us up at night.

The Runaway Prince is one of those low-budget young adult fantasies from the mid-nineties, before J.K. Rowling arrived to tell everyone that magic was cool, printed on brittle yellow paper. It's about a lonely boy who runs away and discovers a Magical Portal into another world where he has Medieval Adventures, but honestly there are so many typos most people give up before he even finds the portal.

Not this kid, though. He pulled it off the shelf and sat cross-legged in the juvenile fiction section with his grimy red backpack clutched to his chest. He didn't move for hours. Other patrons were forced to double-back in the aisle, shooting suspicious, you-don't-belong-here looks behind them as if wondering what a skinny black teenager was *really* up to while pretending to read a fantasy book. He ignored them.

The books above him rustled and quivered; that kind of attention flatters them.

He took *The Runaway Prince* home and renewed it twice online, at which point a gray pop-up box that looks like an emissary from 1995 tells you, "the renewal limit for this item has been reached." You can almost feel the disapproving eyes of a librarian glaring at you through the screen.

[1] Alix E. Harrow, "A Witch's Guide to Escape: A Practical Compendium of Portal Fantasies," Apex Magazine, February 6, 2018, https://apex-magazine.com/short-fiction/a-witchs-guide-to-escape-a-practical-compendium-of-portal-fantasies/.

(There have only ever been two kinds of librarians in the history of the world: the prudish, bitter ones with lipstick running into the cracks around their lips who believe the books are their personal property and patrons are dangerous delinquents come to steal them; and witches).

Our late fee is twenty-five cents per day or a can of non-perishable food during the summer food drive. By the time the boy finally slid *The Runaway Prince* into the return slot, he owed $4.75. I didn't have to swipe his card to know; any good librarian (of the second kind) ought to be able to tell you the exact dollar amount of a patron's bill just by the angle of their shoulders.

"What'd you think?" I used my this-is-a-secret-between-us-pals voice, which works on teenagers about sixteen percent of the time.

He shrugged. It has a lower success rate with black teenagers, because this is the rural South and they aren't stupid enough to trust thirty-something white ladies no matter how many tattoos we have.

"Didn't finish it, huh?" I knew he'd finished it at least four times by the warm, well-oiled feel of the pages.

"Yeah, I did." His eyes flicked up. They were smoke-colored and long-lashed, with an achy, faraway expression, as if he knew there was something gleaming and forbidden just beneath the dull surfaces of things that he could never quite touch. They were the kinds of eyes that had belonged to sorcerers or soothsayers, in different times. "The ending sucked."

In the end, the Runaway Prince leaves Medieval Adventureland and closes the portal behind him before returning home to his family. It was supposed to be a happy ending.

Which kind of tells you all you need to know about this kid's life, doesn't it?

He left without checking anything else out.

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GARRISON, ALLEN B—THE TAVALARRIAN CHRONICLES—v. I-XVI—F GAR 1976

LE GUIN, URSULA K—A WIZARD OF EARTHSEA—J FIC LEG 1968

He returned four days later, sloping past a bright blue display titled THIS SUMMER, DIVE INTO READING! (who knows where they were supposed to swim; Ulysses County's lone public pool had been filled with cement in the sixties rather than desegregate).

Because I am a librarian of the second sort, I almost always know what kind of book a person wants. It's like a very particular smell rising off them which is instantly recognizable as *Murder mystery* or *Political biography* or *Something kind of trashy but ultimately life-affirming, preferably with lesbians*.

I do my best to give people the books they need most. In grad school, they called it "ensuring readers have access to texts/materials that are engaging and emotionally rewarding," and in my other kind of schooling, they called it "divining the unfilled spaces in their souls and filling them with stories and starshine," but it comes to the same thing.

I don't bother with the people who have call numbers scribbled on their palms and titles rattling around in their skulls like bingo cards. They don't need me. And you really can't do anything for the people who only read Award-Winning Literature, who wear elbow patches and equate the popularity of *Twilight* with the death of the American intellect; their hearts are too closed-up for the new or secret or undiscovered.

So, it's only a certain kind of patron I pay attention to. The kind that let their eyes feather across the titles like trailing fingertips, heads cocked, with book-hunger rising off them like heatwaves from July pavement. The

books bask in it, of course, even the really hopeless cases that haven't been checked out since 1958 (there aren't many of these; me and Agnes take turns carting home outdated astronomy textbooks that still think Pluto is a planet and cookbooks that call for lard, just to keep their spirits up). I choose one or two books and let their spines gleam and glimmer in the twilit stacks. People reach towards them without quite knowing why.

The boy with the red backpack wasn't an experienced aisle-wanderer. He prowled, moving too quickly to read the titles, hands hanging empty and uncertain at his sides. The sewing and pattern books (646.2) noted that his jeans were unlaundered and too small, and the neck of his t-shirt was stained grayish-yellow. The cookbooks (641.5) diagnosed a diet of frozen waffles and gas-station pizza. They *tssked* to themselves.

I sat at the circulation desk, running returns beneath the blinky red scanner light, and breathed him in. I was expecting something like *generic Arthurian retelling* or maybe *teen romance with sword-fighting*, but instead I found a howling, clamoring mess of need.

He smelled of a thousand secret worlds, of rabbit-holes and hidden doorways and platforms nine-and-three-quarters, of Wonderland and Oz and Narnia, of anyplace-but-here. He smelled of *yearning*.

God save me from the yearners. The insatiable, the inconsolable, the ones who chafe and claw against the edges of the world. No book can save them.

(That's a lie. There are Books potent enough to save any mortal soul: books of witchery, augury, alchemy; books with wand-wood in their spines and moon-dust on their pages; books older than stones and wily as dragons. We give people the books they need most, except when we don't.)

I sent him a '70s sword-and-sorcery series because it was total junk food and he needed fattening up, and because I hoped sixteen volumes might act as a sort of ballast and keep his keening soul from rising away into the ether. I let Le Guin shimmer at him, too, because he reminded me a bit of Ged (feral; full of longing).

I ignored *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, jostling importantly on its shelf; this was a kid who wanted to go through the wardrobe and never, ever come back.

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GRAYSON, DR BERNARD—WHEN NOTHING MATTERS ANYMORE: A SURVIVAL GUIDE FOR DEPRESSED TEENS—616.84 GRA 2002

Once you make it past book four of the *Tavalarrian Chronicles*, you're committed at least through book fourteen when the true Sword of Tavalar is revealed and the young farm-boy ascends to his rightful throne. The boy with the red backpack showed up every week or so all summer for the next installment.

I snuck in a few others (all pretty old, all pretty white; our branch director is one of those pinch-lipped Baptists who thinks fantasy books teach kids about Devil worship, so roughly 90% of my collection requests are mysteriously denied): *A Wrinkle in Time* came back with the furtive, jammed-in-a-backpack scent that meant he liked it but thought it was too young for him; *Watership Down* was offended because he never got past the first ten pages, but I guess footnotes about rabbit-math aren't for everyone; and *The Golden Compass* had the flashlight-smell of 3:00 a.m. on its final chapter and was unbearably smug about it. I'd just gotten an inter-library-loaned copy of *Akata Witch*—when he stopped coming.

Our display (GET READ-Y FOR SCHOOL!) was filled with SAT prep kits and over-sized yellow *For Dummies* books. Agnes had cut out blobby construction-paper leaves and taped them to the front doors. Lots of kids stop hanging around the library when school starts up, with all its clubs and teams.

I worried anyway. I could feel the Book I hadn't given him like a wrong note or a missing tooth, a magnetic absence. Just when I was seriously considering calling Ulysses County High School with a made-up story about an un-returned CD, he came back.

For the first time, there was someone else with him: A squat white woman with a plastic name-tag and the kind of squarish perm you can only get in Southern beauty salons with faded glamor-shots in the windows. The boy trailed behind her looking thin and pressed, like a flower crushed between dictionary pages. I wondered how badly you had to fuck up to get assigned a school counselor after hours, until I read her name-tag: Department of Community-Based Services, Division of Protection and Permanency, Child Caseworker (II).

Oh. A foster kid.

The woman marched him through the nonfiction stacks (the travel guides sighed as she passed, muttering about overwork and recommending vacations to sunny, faraway beaches) and stopped in the 616s. "Here, why don't we have a look at these?"

Predictable, sullen silence from the boy.

A person who works with foster kids sixty hours a week is unfazed by sullenness. She slid titles off the shelf and stacked them in the boy's arms. "We talked about this, remember? We decided you might like to read something practical, something helpful?"

Dealing with Depression (616.81 WHI 1998). *Beating the Blues: Five Steps to Feeling Normal Again!* (616.822 TRE 2011). *Chicken Soup for the Depressed Soul* (616.9 CAN). The books greeted him in soothing, syrupy voices.

The boy stayed silent. "Look. I know you'd rather read about dragons and, uh, elves," oh, Tolkien, you have so much to account for, "but sometimes we've got to face our problems head-on, rather than running away from them."

What *bullshit*. I was in the back room running scratched DVDs through the disc repair machine, so the only person to hear me swear was Agnes. She gave me her patented over-the-glasses shame-on-you look which, when properly deployed, can reduce noisy patrons to piles of ash or pillars of salt (Agnes is a librarian of the second kind, too).

But seriously. Anyone could see that kid needed to run and keep running until he shed his own skin, until he clawed out of the choking darkness and unfurled his wings, precious and prisming in the light of some other world.

His caseworker was one of those people who say the word "escapism" as if it's a moral failing, a regrettable hobby, a mental-health diagnosis. As if escape is not, in itself, one of the highest order of magics they'll ever see in their miserable mortal lives, right up there with true love and prophetic dreams and fireflies blinking in synchrony on a June evening.

The boy and his keeper were winding back through the aisles toward the front desk. The boy's shoulders were curled inward, as if he chafed against invisible walls on either side.

As he passed the juvenile fiction section, a cheap paperback flung itself off the return cart and thudded into his kneecap. He picked it up and rubbed his thumb softly over the title. *The Runaway Prince* purred at him.

He smiled. I thanked the library cart, silently.

There was a long, familiar sigh behind me. I turned to see Agnes watching me from the circulation desk, aquamarine nails tapping the cover of a Grisham novel, eyes crimped with pity. *Oh honey, not another one*, they said.

I turned back to my stack of DVDs, unsmiling, thinking things like *what do you know about it* and *this one is different* and *oh shit*.

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DUMAS, ALEXANDRE—THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO—F DUM 1974

The boy returned at ten-thirty on a Tuesday morning. It's official library policy to report truants to the high school, because the school board felt we were becoming "a haven for unsupervised and illicit teenage activity." I happen to think that's exactly what libraries should aspire to be, and suggested we get it engraved on a plaque for the front door, but then I was asked to be serious or leave the proceedings, and anyway we're supposed to report kids who skip school to play *League of Legends* on our computers or skulk in the graphic novel section.

I watched the boy prowling the shelves—muscles strung wire-tight over his bones, soul writhing and clawing like a caged creature—and did not reach for the phone. Agnes, still wearing her *oh honey* expression, declined to reprimand me.

I sent him home with *The Count of Monte Cristo*, partly because it requires your full attention and a flow chart to keep track of the plot and the kid needed distracting, but mostly because of what Edmund says on the second-to-last page: "… all human wisdom is summed up in these two words,—'Wait and hope.'"

But people can't keep waiting and hoping forever.

They fracture, they unravel, they crack open; they do something desperate and stupid and then you see their high school senior photo printed in the *Ulysses Gazette*, grainy and oversized, and you spend the next five years thinking: *if only I'd given her the right book*.

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ROWLING, JK—HARRY POTTER AND THE SORCERER'S STONE—J FIC ROW 1998

ROWLING, JK—HARRY POTTER AND THE CHAMBER OF SECRETS—J FIC ROW 1999

ROWLING, JK—HARRY POTTER AND THE PRISONER OF AZKABAN—J FIC ROW 1999

Every librarian has Books she never lends to anyone.

I'm not talking about first editions of *Alice in Wonderland* or Dutch translations of *Winnie-the-Pooh*; I'm talking about Books so powerful and potent, so full of susurrating seduction, that only librarians of the second sort even know they exist.

Each of us has her own system for keeping them hidden. The most venerable libraries (the ones with oak paneling and vaulted ceilings and *Beauty and the Beast*-style ladders) have secret rooms behind fireplaces or bookcases, which you can only enter by tugging on a certain title on the shelf. Sainte-Geneviève in Paris is supposed to have vast catacombs beneath it guarded by librarians so ancient and desiccated they've become human-shaped books, paper-skinned and ink-blooded. In Timbuktu, I heard they hired wizard-smiths to make great wrought-iron gates that only permit passage to the pure of heart.

In the Maysville branch of the Ulysses County Library system, we have a locked roll-top desk in the Special Collections room with a sign on it that says, "This is an Antique! Please Ask for Assistance."

We only have a dozen or so Books, anyhow, and god knows where they came from or how they ended up here. *A Witch's Guide to Seeking Righteous Vengeance*, with its slender steel pages and arsenic ink. *A Witch's Guide to Falling in Love for the First Time, for Readers at Every Stage of Life!*, which smells like starlight and the summer you were seventeen. *A Witch's Guide to Uncanny Baking* contains over thirty full-color photographs to ensorcell your friends and afflict your adversaries. *A Witch's Guide to Escape: A Practical Compendium of Portal Fantasies* has no words in it at all, but only pages and pages of maps: hand-drawn Middle Earth knock-offs with unpronounceable names; medieval tapestry-maps showing tiny ships sailing off the edge of the world; topographical maps of Machu Picchu; 1970s Rand McNally street maps of Istanbul.

It's my job to keep Books like this out of the hands of desperate high-school kids with red backpacks. Our school-mistresses called it "preserving the hallowed and hidden arts of our foremothers from mundane eyes." Our professors called it "conserving rare/historic texts."

Both of them mean the same thing: We give people the books they need, except when we don't. Except when they need them most.

He racked up $1.50 on *The Count of Monte Cristo* and returned it with saltwater splotches on the final pages. They weren't my-favorite-character-died tears or the-book-is-over tears. They were bitter, acidic, anise-scented: tears of jealousy. He was jealous that the Count and Haydée sailed away from their world and out into the blue unknown. That they escaped.

I panicked and weighed him down with the first three *Harry Potters*, because they don't really get good until Sirius and Lupin show up, and because they're about a neglected, lonely kid who gets a letter from another world and disappears.

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GEORGE, JC—THE RUNAWAY PRINCE—J FIC GEO 1994

Agnes always does the "we will be closing in ten minutes" announcement because something in her voice implies that anybody still in the library in nine minutes and fifty seconds will be harvested for organ donations, and even the most stationary patrons amble towards the exit.

The kid with the red backpack was hovering in the oversize print section (gossipy, aging books, bored since the advent of e-readers with changeable font sizes) when Agnes's voice came through the speakers. He went very still, teetering the way a person does when they're about to do something really dumb, then dove beneath a reading desk and pulled his dark hoodie over his head. The oversize books gave scintillated squeals.

It was my turn to close, so Agnes left right at nine. By 9:15 I was standing at the door with my NPR tote on my shoulder and my keys in my hand. Hesitating.

It is very, extremely, absolutely against the rules to lock up for the night with a patron still inside, especially when that patron is a minor of questionable emotional health. It's big trouble both in the conventional sense (phone calls from panicked guardians, police searches, charges of criminal neglect) and in the other sense (libraries at night are noisier places than they are during the daylight hours).

I'm not a natural rule-follower. I roll through stop signs, I swear in public, I lie on online personality tests so I get the answers I want (Hermione, Arya Stark, Jo March). But I'm a very good librarian of either kind, and good librarians follow the rules. Even when they don't want to.

That's what Agnes told me five years ago, when I first started at Maysville.

This girl had started showing up on Sunday afternoons: ponytailed, cute, but wearing one of those knee-length denim skirts that scream "mandatory virginity pledge." I'd been feeding her a steady diet of subversion (Orwell, Bradbury, Butler), and was about to hit her with *A Handmaid's Tale* when she suddenly lost interest in fiction. She drifted through the stacks, face gone white and empty as a blank page, navy skirt swishing against her knees.

It wasn't until she reached the 618s that I understood. The maternity and childbirth section trilled saccharine congratulations. She touched one finger to the spine of *What to Expect When You're Expecting* (618.2 EIS) with an expression of dawning, swallowing horror, and left without checking anything out.

For the next nine weeks, I sent her stories of bravery and boldness, defying-your-parents stories and empowered-women-resisting-authority stories. I abandoned subtlety entirely and slid Planned Parenthood pamphlets into her book bag, even though the nearest clinic is six hours away and only open twice a week, but found them jammed frantically in the bathroom trash.

But I never gave her what she really needed: *A Witch's Guide to Undoing What Has Been Done: A Guilt-Free Approach to Life's Inevitable Accidents*. A leather-bound tome filled with delicate mechanical drawings of clocks, which smelled of regret and yesterday mornings. I'd left it locked in the roll-top desk, whispering and tick-tocking to itself.

Look, there are good reasons we don't lend out Books like that. Our mistresses used to scare us with stories of mortals run amok: people who used Books to steal or kill or break hearts; who performed miracles and founded religions; who hated us, afterward, and spent a tiresome few centuries burning us at stakes.

If I were caught handing out Books, I'd be renounced, reviled, stripped of my title. They'd burn my library card in the eternal mauve flames of our sisterhood and write my crimes in ash and blood in *The Book of Perfidy*. They'd ban me from every library for eternity, and what's a librarian without her books? What would I be, cut off from the orderly world of words and their readers, from the peaceful Ouroboran cycle of story-telling and story-eating? There were rumors of rogue librarians—madwomen who chose to live outside the library system in the howling chaos of unwritten words and untold stories—but none of us envied them.

The last time I'd seen the ponytailed girl her denim skirt was fastened with a rubber band looped through the buttonhole. She'd smelled of desperation, like someone whose wait-and-hoping had run dry.

Four days later, her picture was in the paper and the article was blurring and un-blurring in my vision (*accidental poisoning, viewing from 2:00-3:30 at Zimmerman & Holmes, direct your donations to Maysville Baptist Ministries*). Agnes had patted my hand and said, "I know, honey, I know. Sometimes there's nothing you can do." It was a kind lie.

I still have the newspaper clipping in my desk drawer, as a memorial or reminder or warning.

The boy with the red backpack was sweating beneath the reading desk. He smelled of desperation, just like she had.

Should I call the Child Protective Services hotline? Make awkward small-talk until his crummy caseworker collected him? *Hey, kid, I was once a lonely teenager in a backwater shithole, too!* Or should I let him run away, even if running away was only hiding in the library overnight?

I teetered, the way you do when you're about to do something really dumb.

The locked thunked into place. I walked across the parking lot breathing the caramel-and-frost smell of October, hoping—almost praying, if witches were into that—that it would be enough.

§

I opened half an hour early, angling to beat Agnes to the phone and delete the "Have you seen this unaccompanied minor?" voicemails before she could hear them. There was an automated message from somebody trying to sell us a security system, three calls from community members asking when we open because apparently it's physically impossible to Google it, and a volunteer calling in sick.

There were no messages about the boy. Fucking Ulysses County foster system.

He emerged at 9:45, when he could blend in with the growing numbers of other patrons. He looked rumpled and ill-fitting, like a visitor from another planet who hadn't quite figured out human body language. Or like a kid who's spent a night in the stacks, listening to furtive missives from a thousand different worlds and wishing he could disappear into any one of them.

I was so busy trying not to cry and ignoring the Book now calling to the boy from the roll-top desk that I scanned his card and handed him back his book without realizing what it was: *The Runaway Prince*.

§

MAYSVILLE PUBLIC LIBRARY NOTICE: YOU HAVE (1) OVERDUE ITEMS. PLEASE RETURN YOUR ITEM(S) AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

Shit.

The overdue notices go out on the fifteenth day an item has been checked out. On the sixteenth day, I pulled up the boy's account and glared at the terse red font (OVERDUE ITEM: J FIC GEO 1994) until the screen began to crackle and smoke faintly and Agnes gave me a *hold-it-together-woman* look.

He hadn't even bothered to renew it.

My sense of *The Runaway Prince* had grown faint and blurred with distance, as if I were looking at it through an unfocused telescope, but it was still a book from my library and thus still in my domain. (All you people who never returned books to their high school libraries, or who bought stolen books off Amazon with call numbers taped to their spines? We see you). It reported only the faintest second-hand scent of the boy: futility, resignation, and a tarry, oozing smell like yearning that had died and begun to fossilize.

He was alive, but probably not for much longer. I don't just mean physical suicide; those of us who can see soulstuff know there are lots of ways to die without anybody noticing. Have you ever seen those stupid TV specials where they rescue animals from some third-rate horror show of a circus in Las Vegas, and when they finally open the cages the lions just sit there, dead-eyed, because they've forgotten what it is to want anything? To desire, to yearn, to be filled with the terrible, golden hunger of being alive?

But there was nothing I could do. Except wait and hope.

Our volunteers were doing the weekly movie showing in Media Room #2, so I was stuck re-shelving. It wasn't until I was actually in the F DAC-FEN aisle, holding our dog-eared copy of *The Count of Monte Cristo* in my hand, that I realized Edmund Dantès was absolutely, one-hundred-percent full of shit.

If Edmund had taken his own advice, he would've sat in his jail cell waiting and hoping for forty years while the Count de Morcerf and Villefort and the rest of them stayed rich and happy. The real moral of *The Count of Monte Cristo* was surely something more like: If you screw someone over, be prepared for a vengeful mastermind to fuck up your life twenty years later. Or maybe it was: If you want justice and goodness to prevail in this world, you have to fight for it tooth and nail. And it will be hard, and costly, and probably illegal. You will have to break the rules.

I pressed my head to the cold metal of the shelf and closed my eyes. *If that boy ever comes back into my library, I swear to Clio and Calliope I will do my most holy duty.*

I will give him the book he needs most.

§

ARADIA, MORGAN—A WITCH'S GUIDE TO ESCAPE: A PRACTICAL COMPENDIUM OF PORTAL FANTASIES—WRITTEN IN THE YEAR OF OUR SISTERHOOD TWO THOUSAND AND TWO AND SUBMITTED TO THE CARE OF THE ULYSSES COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY SYSTEM.

He came back to say goodbye, I think. He slid *The Runaway Prince* into the return slot then drifted through the aisles with his red backpack hanging off one shoulder, fingertips not-quite brushing the shelves, eyes on the floor. They hardly seemed sorcerous at all, now; merely sad and old and smoke-colored.

He was passing through the travel and tourism section when he saw it: A heavy, clothbound book jammed right between *The Practical Nomad* (910.4 HAS) and *By Plane, Train, or Foot: A Guide for the Aspiring Globe-Trotter* (910.51). It had no call number, but the title was stamped in swirly gold lettering on the spine: *A Witch's Guide to Escape.*

I felt the hollow thud-thudding of his heart, the pain of resurrected hope. He reached towards the book and the book reached back towards him, because books need to be read quite as much as we need to read them, and it had been a very long time since this particular book had been out of the roll-top desk in the Special Collections room.

Dark fingers touched green-dyed cloth, and it was like two sundered halves of some broken thing finally reuniting, like a lost key finally turning in its lock. Every book in the library rustled in unison, sighing at the sacred wholeness of reader and book.

Agnes was in the rows of computers, explaining our thirty-minute policy to a new patron. She broke off mid-sentence and looked up towards the 900s, nostrils flared. Then, with an expression halfway between accusation and disbelief, she turned to look at me.

I met her eyes—and it isn't easy to meet Agnes's eyes when she's angry, believe me—and smiled.

When they drag me before the mistresses and burn my card and demand to know, in tones of mournful recrimination, how I could have abandoned the vows of our order, I'll say: *Hey, you abandoned them first, ladies. Somewhere along the line, you forgot our first and purest purpose: to give patrons the books they need most. And oh, how they need. How they will always need.*

I wondered, with a kind of detached trepidation, how rogue librarians spent their time, and whether they had clubs or societies, and what it was like to encounter feral stories untamed by narrative and unbound by books. And then I wondered where our Books came from in the first place, and who wrote them.

§

There was a sudden, imperceptible rushing, as if a wild wind had whipped through the stacks without disturbing a single page. Several people looked up uneasily from their screens.

A Witch's Guide to Escape lay abandoned on the carpet, open to a map of some foreign fey country drawn in sepia ink. A red backpack sat beside it.

2.1 REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Do you agree with the librarian's choice in the end, to help a troubled teenager leave this world for a different one? Although she wants to help him, she enables the disappearance of a boy. Was it the right decision? What were some alternatives?
2. More generally, what do you think about the idea that literature (and specifically epic fantasy) is an "escape"?
3. Why do you think the librarian broke the rules to help the boy, even though she may lose everything — her sisterhood of witches, libraries, and stories themselves? Do you really think she will be punished so harshly?
4. Where do you think the boy went? Did you like the ending? Was it too abrupt, just right?
5. What would you have changed about the story if YOU were writing it (for example, which books might you have included?)? Do you think a short story was the right length for this tale, or could it have been well-developed as a novel?
6. What do you think of the title of the story?
7. What are your impressions of libraries? What have your experiences with libraries been like? Do you think libraries are magical places?
8. What do you think about the idea librarians as witches? (Note: Harrow is a librarian!)
9. The boy's social worker tells him that he needs to stop reading so much fantasy and instead face his problems head-on, "rather than running away from them." The librarian disagrees, saying, "Anyone could see that kid needed to run and keep running until he shed his own skin, until he clawed out of the choking darkness and unfurled his wings, precious and prisming in the light of some other world." Who is correct?
10. A Witch's Guide to Escape: A Practical Compendium of Portal Fantasies has no words in it at all, but only pages and pages of maps: hand-drawn Middle Earth knock-offs with unpronounceable names; medieval tapestry-maps showing tiny ships sailing off the edge of the world; topographical maps of Machu Picchu; 1970s Rand McNally street maps of Istanbul." What's the connection between maps and stories?
11. The librarian says, "We give people the books they need, except when we don't. Except when they need them most." What do you make of this idea?

3 READING: EMPIRES OF FANTASY (BY MARIA SACHIKO CECIRE)[2]

Much has changed in the fantasy genre in recent decades, but the word 'fantasy' still conjures images of dragons, castles, sword-wielding heroes and premodern wildernesses brimming with magic. Major media phenomena such as *Harry Potter* and *Game of Thrones* have helped to make medievalist fantasy mainstream, and if you look in the kids' section of nearly any kind of store today you'll see sanitised versions of the magical Middle Ages packaged for youth of every age. How did fantasy set in pseudo-medieval, roughly British worlds achieve such a cultural status? Ironically, the modern form of this wildly popular genre, so often associated with escapism and childishness, took root in one of the most elite spaces in the academic world.

The heart of fantasy literature grows out of the fiction and scholarly legacy of two University of Oxford medievalists: J R R Tolkien and C S Lewis. It is well known that Tolkien and Lewis were friends and colleagues who belonged to a writing group called the Inklings where they shared drafts of their poetry and

[2] Maria Sachiko Cecire, "The Rise and Fall of the Oxford School of Fantasy Literature | Aeon Essays," Aeon, 2020, https://aeon.co/essays/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-oxford-school-of-fantasy-literature.

fiction at Oxford. There they workshopped what would become Tolkien's Middle-earth books, beginning with the children's novel *The Hobbit* (1937), and followed in the 1950s with *The Lord of the Rings* and Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* series, which was explicitly aimed at children. Tolkien's influence on fantasy is so important that in the 1990s the American scholar Brian Attebery defined the genre 'not by boundaries but by a centre': Tolkien's Middle-earth. 'Tolkien's form of fantasy, for readers in English, is our mental template' for all fantasy, he suggests in *Strategies of Fantasy* (1992). Lewis's books, meanwhile, are iconic as both children's literature *and* fantasy. Their recurring plot structure of modern-day children slipping out of this world to save a magical, medieval otherworld has become one of the most common approaches to the genre, identified in Farah Mendlesohn's taxonomy of fantasy as the 'portal-quest'.

[Brendan: Have you read any books by Tolkien and/or Lewis? How do you feel about them?]

What is less known is that Tolkien and Lewis also designed and established the curriculum for Oxford's developing English School, and through it educated a second generation of important children's fantasy authors in their own intellectual image. Put in place in 1931, this curriculum focused on the medieval period to the near-exclusion of other eras; it guided students' reading and examinations until 1970, and some aspects of it remain today. Though there has been relatively little attention paid to the connection until now, these activities – fantasy-writing, often for children, and curricular design in England's oldest and most prestigious university – were intimately related. Tolkien and Lewis's fiction regularly alludes to works in the syllabus that they created, and their Oxford-educated successors likewise draw upon these medieval sources when they set out to write their own children's fantasy in later decades. In this way, Tolkien and Lewis were able to make a two-pronged attack, both within and outside the academy, on the disenchantment, relativism, ambiguity and progressivism that they saw and detested in 20th-century modernity.

Tolkien articulated his anxieties about the cultural changes sweeping across Britain in terms of 'American sanitation, morale-pep, feminism, and mass-production', calling 'this Americo-cosmopolitanism very terrifying' and suggesting in a 1943 letter to his son Christopher that, if this was to be the outcome of an Allied Second World War win, he wasn't sure that victory would be better for the 'mind and spirit' – and for England – than a loss to Nazi forces.

Lewis shared this abhorrence for 'modern' technologisation, secularisation and the swiftly dismantling hierarchies of race, gender and class. He and Tolkien saw such broader shifts reflected in changing (and in their estimation dangerously faddish) literary norms. Writing in the 1930s, Tolkien skewered 'the critics' for disregarding the fantastical dragon and ogres in *Beowulf* as 'unfashionable creatures' in a widely read essay about that Old English poem. Lewis disparaged modernist literati in his *Experiment in Criticism* (1961), mocking devotees of contemporary darlings such as T S Eliot and claiming that 'while this goes on downstairs, the only real literary experience in such a family may be occurring in a back bedroom where a small boy is reading *Treasure Island* under the bed-clothes by the light of an electric torch.' If the new literary culture was accelerating the slide to moral decay, Tolkien and Lewis identified salvation in the authentic, childlike enjoyment of adventure and fairy stories, especially ones set in medieval lands. And so, armed with the unlikely weapons of medievalism and childhood, they waged a campaign that hinged on spreading the fantastic in both popular and scholarly spheres. Improbably, they were extraordinarily successful in leaving far-reaching marks on the global imagination by launching an alternative strand of writing that first circulated amongst child readers.

[Brendan: Debates about the "politics" or "cultural impact" of epic fantasy and related literature—in Tolkien, Lewis, Harry Potter, Dungeons and Dragons, and many other places—have always been a big deal, for both conservatives and liberals. And its not just the critics! The authors themselves often have strong views about such things. Why do you think this is? Is it possible for this sort of literature to be "politically neutral"?]

These readers devoured *The Hobbit* and, later, *The Lord of the Rings*, as well as *The Chronicles of Narnia* series. But they also read fantasy by later authors who began to write in this vein – including several major British children's writers who studied the English curriculum that Tolkien and Lewis established at Oxford as undergraduates. This curriculum flew in the face of the directions that other universities were taking in the early years of the field. As modernism became canon and critical theory was on the rise, Oxford instead required undergraduates to read and comment on fantastical early English works such as *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Sir Orfeo*, *Le Morte d'Arthur* and John Mandeville's *Travels* in their original medieval languages.

Students had to analyse these texts *as literature* rather than only as linguistic extracts, a notable difference from the more common approach to medieval literature at the time. Tolkien and Lewis identified concrete moral lessons and 'patriotic' insights into the national character in these magical tales of long ago. The past they depicted was not, of course, England as it actually was in the Middle Ages, but England as poets had imagined it to be: the enchanted realm of heroism, righteousness and romance where 19th-century nationalists had identified the moral and racial heart of the nation. (The Oxford curriculum was, in this sense, a throwback to English studies' roots in colonial education, which – as the literary scholar Gauri Viswanathan has shown in *Masks of Conquest* (2014) – often looked to prove English right to rule through the glory of its national literature.

The unique educational programme that dominated English at Oxford for nearly 40 years officially sanctioned magic-filled medieval works as exemplars of English literature for generations of students that passed through the university's power-filled halls. And a number of these students went on to write their own popular children's fantasy, some to great acclaim. Diana Wynne Jones, Susan Cooper, Kevin Crossley-Holland and Philip Pullman in particular, who each received their English degrees between 1956 and 1968, draw on medieval and early modern literary sources, many directly taken from the Oxford syllabus, to create new, self-reflectively serious fantasy for young readers. Together with Tolkien and Lewis, this group forms the Oxford School of children's fantasy literature. Cooper's *The Dark Is Rising* quintet (1965-77) and Crossley-Holland's *Arthur* trilogy (2000-03) give King Arthur's story fresh context and resonance for understanding contemporary Britain in their times; meanwhile, the works of Jones and Pullman delight in subverting fantasy expectations while introducing early English literature to new generations of readers. They all celebrate the purported wisdom of old stories, and follow the central tenet that Tolkien set out for fairy-stories: 'one thing must not be made fun of, the magic itself. That must in the story be taken seriously, neither laughed at nor explained away.'

[Brendan: Have you read any of these (somewhat more recent) authors, or seen movies/shows based on their works?]

The Oxford School's reimagining of medieval tales for modern audiences injected these fantastical narratives into the public consciousness, largely eluding elite and scholarly notice because their works were branded as children's literature. At the same time, taking ancient, canonical texts as the foundations for new stories helped to give their fantasy the historical depth and cultural weight to resist derisive laughter and make claims about the present. For instance, the dragon episode at the end of *The Hobbit* is full of parallels to the one in *Beowulf*, from the cup-theft that wakes the worm to its destructive expressions of rage. But *The Hobbit* uses this narrative to pit a traditionalist and noble-born hero (Bard, whose name means 'poet', 'storyteller') against an untrustworthy elected official, hammering home the significance of conservative traditions over the whims of easily swayed masses. Tolkien's novel ends with the protagonist Bilbo's delighted discovery of this barely veiled moral: 'the prophecies of the old songs have turned out to be true, after a fashion!'

The Oxford School's medievalist approach radiated outward, influencing many more children's fantasy authors and readers, and helping to turn Anglophilic fascination with early Britain and its medieval legends

into a globally recognisable setting for children's adventures, world-saving deeds and magical possibility. While Tolkien resisted being categorised as a children's author, he and Lewis's turn towards children's literature as a vehicle for cultural change came at the ideal moment for such a project. As Seth Lerer notes in his history of children's literature, the child is now 'a metaphor for much that later periods considered "medieval" in itself'.

Following the spread of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theories of development in the early 20th century, childhood took on new significance as the formative seed of adult identity. This concept – combined with the 'discovery' by 19th-century thinkers of distinct national roots in early, ambiguously medieval folklore and myth across Northern Europe – had formidable effects. In his essay collection *Faith in Fakes* (1986), the Italian novelist Umberto Eco claimed that 'looking at the Middle Ages means looking at our infancy', an assessment that explains why medieval worlds imbued with the magic associated with Romantic childhood came to be seen as especially appropriate for young people in Western Europe and former colonies.

[Brendan: Umberto Eco's "The Name of the Rose" is a famous example of a modern novel set in medieval times which doesn't fit the usual structure of epic fantasy. I'd recommend it!]

Children's literature and the modern conception of childhood, both of which date only to the mid-18th century, have also always been implicitly bourgeois and raced white – making children's culture particularly fertile ground for nostalgic returns to an enchanted, whitewashed past that celebrates long-held social hierarchies. Meanwhile, Lerer points out, 'the forms of children's literature are distinctively pre-modern'; he cites 'allegory, moral fable, romance, and symbolism' as narrative devices that dominated medieval literature but gave way to the 'realism, history, social critique, and psychological depth' associated with literature for adults following the rise of modernism. However, these forms didn't disappear; Tolkien argued that they were 'relegated to the "nursery"' when they became unfashionable, but remained as valuable as ever for audiences of both children and adults.

The widespread popularity of Tolkien, Lewis and their successors' medievalist fantasy demonstrated just how receptive 20th-century children's and pop culture was to writing in this mode. Tolkien and Lewis were in this way able to preserve a dedicated literary space for the magical medievalisms that they valued so highly, even if it didn't catch on in the ivory tower or adult literary fiction as they'd hoped it would. The Oxford English curriculum seems to have worked most effectively, in that respect, as a training ground for future children's fantasy writers who carried Tolkien and Lewis's mission forward in a variety of ways. Indeed, all four of the second-generation Oxford School authors have addressed the role that their fairy-touched undergraduate educations had on their careers: in a talk given in 1997, Jones called the medieval literature she read at Oxford what 'inspired' her writing, especially 'the way writers from the Middle Ages handled narratives. They were all so different, that was the amazing thing, and all so good at it.'

Jones's numerous novels, which include the *Chrestomanci* series (1977-2006), the *Dalemark* quartet (1975-93) and the *Derkholm* series (1998-2000), show how she also played with old stories, putting them into new contexts to unearth their wisdom for the modern day. Her *Howl's Moving Castle* (1986), for example, draws on the 'loathly lady' tradition of magical transformation – most famously expressed in 'The Wife of Bath's Tale' by Geoffrey Chaucer – to consider how beauty and age affect women's freedom and capacity for heroic action. Jones found children's literature to be the natural outlet for such a project, suggesting that 'children do, by nature, status, and instinct, live more in the heroic mode than the rest of humanity. They naturally have the right naive, straightforward approach.' Adult fiction, especially literary fiction following the rise of modernism, seemed to have no such space for such writing.

Pullman has agreed with Jones's position, claiming in 1996 that in adult literary fiction 'stories are there on sufferance', secondary to 'technique, style, literary knowingness'. He argued that readers **'still need joy and delight, the promise of connection with something beyond ourselves', and it might be that**

'children's literature is the last forum left for such a project.' Pullman's conviction echoes Lewis's *Treasure Island* claim, even though *His Dark Materials* – the trilogy that made him famous – counters many of the values that Tolkien and Lewis held dear.

[Brendan: What do you think of Pullman's claim here?]

Part of the break with Pullman's forerunners can be seen in the way that *His Dark Materials* (1995-2000) and its companion, *The Book of Dust* trilogy (2017-19), take early modern, not medieval, literature as their primary sources of inspiration – John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, on which the original trilogy builds, and Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, which hovers behind the first *Book of Dust* instalment. Pullman has positioned himself as a Miltonian 'Satan' figure in relation to mainstream fantasy in general and Lewis's *Narnia* books in particular, out to overturn norms, from the reliance on medieval settings and the privileging of boy characters to the reverence for Christian sentiments that underlie so much of the genre. But while not medieval, *Paradise Lost* and *The Faerie Queene* appeared centrally in the Oxford English syllabus. And though Pullman uses them in fantasy that contests Tolkien and Lewis's conservatism, the Oxford School seriousness about magic and faith in the evergreen wisdom of early English literature remain in his books. So, too, does the Anglocentrism that helped to make the adventures of white youth in magical realms into the globally recognisable bread-and-butter of 20th-century children's culture.

The legacy of the Oxford School continues into the 21st century with real force. It was on display at the London 2012 Olympic Games' opening ceremony, which began with a medievalist origin story and dedicated a central section of the multipart show to the magic of British children's literature. That segment, which featured the author J K Rowling reading from J M Barrie's *Peter Pan*, culminates in a battle between a 100ft-tall inflatable Voldemort from her *Harry Potter* series and a fleet of flying Mary Poppinses from P L Travers's novels: a magical war over the safety and wellbeing of the pyjama-clad children clustered below. The show repeatedly used magic, medievalism and childhood – the same elements that Tolkien and Lewis brought together to combat encroaching modernity – to claim the enchanted timelessness, international significance and exciting futurity of Britain.

Notably, that opening ceremony leaves empire out of its abridged history of Great Britain, replacing that violent legacy with more benign exports such as children's fantasy, British pop music and the world wide web. But the stench of empire lingers around much medievalist fantasy; and its gaping absence could still be discerned in the Olympic show's vision of the nation's story. It is no coincidence that Oxford School-style fantasy – shaped by two men born in colonial settings (Tolkien in South Africa, Lewis in Ireland) who chose to live in England as adults – took root just as the British empire was coming to an end and Britain confronted a newly reduced role on the global stage. Such works unfold in a magical Middle Ages of youthful English power, bursting with globe-conquering potential. This earlier, fantastical setting allows most fantasy to avoid mentioning histories associated with settler colonisation and transatlantic slavery. But the genre regularly reinforces ideas of racial and moral white supremacy: we see this in Tolkien's obsession with magical races and dismissal of the dark-skinned, southern-born human Haradrim as evil 'half-trolls' in *The Lord of the Rings*, as well as in Lewis's orientalist characterisations of the Calormene people in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. And even in less obviously racist contexts, fantasy often celebrates colonial and xenophobic activities as heroic, with 'exploring' and claiming foreign lands abroad and expelling or exterminating unwanted races at home figured as natural parts of innocent, even righteous adventuring.

[Brendan: There has been a LOT of debate about whether Tolkien's (very influential!) depiction of certain imaginary races (especially orcs) as being "inherently" evil/stupid is a problem. Do you think reading/consuming this sort of fiction (especially at a young age) might lead people to think of REAL groups of people in this way?]

The spread of fantasy during the 20th century contributed to new 'empires of the mind', to repurpose Winston Churchill's term, a reassertion of British significance displaced into the unthreatening but profoundly influential space of children's culture. The 2012 Olympics opening ceremony suggests the lasting effects of this move; while colonialism remained an unmentionable chapter, the show could count on global television audiences to join in celebrating the defeat of an undead wizard based on their own investment in a universe of British castles, premodern landscapes, elite boarding-school students, magical creatures and idealised childhood.

The Anglocentrism and whiteness of fantasy literature has gained popular attention in recent years, partially due to the commercial success of the genre and thanks to essential critical works such as Ebony Elizabeth Thomas's *The Dark Fantastic* (2019) and Helen Young's *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature* (2016). While the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* and other medievalist fantasy on white supremacist websites went largely ignored for years, the use of medieval symbols in alt-Right protests has pushed modern-day uses of medievalism into headlines and made the critiques raised by fans, authors and scholars seem more urgent. Publishers, meanwhile, have begun to promote more fantasy inspired by histories and cultures beyond northern Europe – pushed by such conversations and lured by the promise of increased market share as 'diverse' fantasy proves lucrative after all. Today, studies of fantasy seem increasingly incomplete unless they address the groundbreaking work of Afrofuturism, Indigenous futurism and their predecessors, as well as other interventions into speculative fiction that break away from European norms and hierarchies in the genre.

Such shifts in attention are long overdue. And yet, at the same time as they are making enormous departures from the foundations of the genre, a great deal of 21st-century fantasy revives and buoys some of the key tenets of the Oxford School. Authors such as Saladin Ahmed, Cherie Dimaline, Zetta Elliott, N K Jemisin, Nnedi Okorafor, Daniel José Older, Sofia Samatar and others rightfully critique the long exclusion of nonwhite voices and diverse ethnic heritages in fantasy, refuse to structure their own works according to medieval English narratives, and decline to set their works in lands that look like Britain. Yet their writing agrees with the Oxford School's message that how we depict the past for young people is crucially important to present experience, and that profound, world-changing knowledge can be found in popular writing that uses magic to explore the outer reaches of the imagination. In this sense, Tolkien and Lewis's quest to transform the world by reintroducing old tales has been startlingly successful – and is now being revised, with an equally stunning measure of success, into alternative visions of fantasy that continue to spread, evolve and re-enchant everyday life around the globe.

[Brendan: What contemporary fantasy authors/novels would you recommend?]