

Why do Teens Gravitate to Fantasy?: Benefits of Reading Fantasy

By: Courtney Vienneau

The teen experience displayed on television and in movies isn't the experience for many teens. Teenagers are under a lot of stress to excel at school and in sports while maintaining friendships and staying on top of the latest trends. It is no wonder that some teens seek out ways to escape the reality of their everyday lives. This can manifest in a number of ways, from binge watching television shows to experimenting with drugs. Or perhaps, teens take to books to read about characters in very different situations than theirs. YA fantasy in particular appears to be the perfect escape for teenagers who wish to escape their reality. Escapism can be a coping mechanism with both positive and negative implications.

Teens and Fantasy: Implications

According to one writer, when your life sucks, it makes sense to escape into a book (Walton, 2013). Walton (2013) goes on to explain that escaping does not necessarily mean you avoid your reality, but rather, finding "an escape route to a better place" (para. 4). Using books as an escape can become a healthy coping mechanism for individuals. When they are feeling overwhelmed, taking the time to relax and read can help put them in a better mindset. Walton (2013) also suggests that reading fiction is one path to understanding human nature and different perspectives. Even when characters are in a fantastical setting, understanding how they deal with conflict can have an impact on the reader.

Looking at trends in publishing, Flanagan (2014) remarks that fantasy is popular as ever with millions of copies of Harry Potter, Twilight, and the Hunger Games being sold. Flanagan (2014) states that one of the benefits of reading fantasy is it "allows readers to experiment with different ways of seeing the world" (para 12). Additionally, fantasy operates through metaphors and thus allows books to explore complex social issues in a less confrontational manner than realistic fiction (Flanagan, 2014). Readers are exposed to heavy topics such as oppression and loss in fantasy in a way that is less in their face, allowing them to reflect upon the topics with low stakes. Fantasy offers a lot to its reader, as it "comments on social reality through indirections (metaphor, allegory, parable) and can therefore deal with complex moral questions

in a more playful and exaggerated manner” (Flanagan, 2014, para 24). As a genre, fantasy provides a lot to its readers beyond an escape.

On the flip side, escaping into fantasy has some negative implications. Its’ very definition describes it as, “...a way of avoiding an unpleasant or boring life, especially by thinking, reading, etc. about more exciting but impossible activities” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Avoidance can become a serious issue if teens do not deal with unpleasantness eventually, especially if it is schoolwork or a serious issue in their life.

Reading fantasy provides teens with an escape of the reality of their teen lives. It can be a healthy way for them to step back from the issue at hand or add some excitement to their life. There are, however, some concerns if teens are escaping into novels and avoiding dealing with issues at large. Despite this concern, there is a benefit of escaping into fantasy novels, as teens are exposed to different social realities and deal with complex life questions.

References

Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.) <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/escapism>

Flanagan, V. (March 4, 2014). Children’s fantasy literature: Why escaping reality is good for kids. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from <http://theconversation.com/childrens-fantasy-literature-why-escaping-reality-is-good-for-kids-22307>

Walton, J. (April 5, 2013). Fantasy, reading, and escapism. *Tor.Com*. Retrieved from <https://www.tor.com/2013/04/05/fantasy-reading-and-escapism/>