

Where it All Began: The beginnings of High Fantasy
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Abstract: This article provides a brief history of the high fantasy sub-genre.

As a literary element, fantasy can be traced back to the Bronze Age and beyond to the first stories of legend and myth that early humans would share beside the fire (Dozois 2014, p. i). Ancient Greek epics such as Homer's *Iliad*, the poetry of Jonathan Swift, and the first recorded Old English poem *Beowulf*, were some of the many stories that told of magic, mythical creatures, and unfamiliar worlds (Nikolajeva, 2003). Indeed, the history of fantasy as the genre that it is known today involves a millennium-long culmination of earlier, often unwritten, fairy tales, epics, and folk stories from various cultures.

By the late eighteenth century, the customs and trends found in these traditional folk stories would pave the way to some of the first works of the modern genre of fantasy, including stories by William Morris and George MacDonald (2014, p. ii). In contrast to earlier stories of myth, fantasy as a literary genre is founded on the knowledge, from both the author and the readers, that such stories are merely fictional (Masterclass 2020). As Nikolajeva discusses, "fantasy literature owes its origins mostly to Romanticism with its interest in folk tradition, its rejection of the previous, rational-age view of the world, and its idealization of the child" (2003, p. 139). This interest in folk tradition and rejection of contemporary worldviews is also evidenced in how many works of fantasy incorporate Mediaeval-inspired elements into their stories (2014, p. ix). Think about the knights in shining armour in the *Sword and the Stone* or the pastoralist aesthetic of the Shire in *The Hobbit*.

High fantasy became a distinct sub-genre of Fantasy in the 20th century with the mainstream success of stories by such authors as J.R.R. Tolkien (*Lord of the Rings*), C.S. Lewis (*Chronicles of Narnia*), and Ursula K Le Guin (*Earthsea*) (Dozois 2014, p. ix). Such authors helped to popularize the high fantasy sub-genre and shape it into what we understand it to be in the present day. Nowadays, with titles like *A Game of Thrones* (George R.R. Martin), *Eragon* (Christopher Paolini), and *The Wheel of Time* (Robert Jordan), the selection of tales of distant lands and fantastical beasts seems endless. This sub-genre is called *high fantasy* due to the high “level of traditional fantasy implicated in the narrative” (Carmody, para. 13), which, in contrast to *low fantasy*, separates it greatly from all that is familiar in the real-world. High fantasy separates itself from our world by setting its stories in a secondary universe. As Tolkien’s brainchild Middle Earth or George R.R. Martin’s Westeros show us, these worlds can be very elaborate, their inhabitants strange yet intriguing, and their lore vast.

References

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