

A Brief History of Fantasy

The origins of Fantasy can be traced back to ancient mythology, which, as its basic purpose, explained the workings of nature. For example, there is the story of Prometheus, who felt pity for the mere mortals of earth and so he gifted them with fire. Zeus punished him by having him bound to Mount Causasus where for 30,000 years an eagle would swoop down on him daily and eat his liver. Another myth tells the story of the god Apollo who provided daylight by driving his chariot of fire across the sky every day. The supernatural quality of mythology would become one of the elements of fantasy.

Epics and legends came next. *Beowulf* (c.700), the oldest surviving English epic poem, contains fantasy elements – witches, monsters, and dragons. The legend of King Arthur, which surfaced around the same time has been told and re-told over the years. Sir Thomas Malory's rendition, *Mort d'Arthur* (c.1485) is seen as the earliest definitive telling of the tale, followed up by T.H. White's well known *The Once and Future King* (1939-1958).

William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c.1595) depicted an imaginary world of fairies. In 1726, Jonathan Swift wrote *Gulliver's Travels*, a vicious social satire consisting of four parts – each set in its own fantasy world. Although intended for an adult audience, the parts: "The Voyage of Lilliput" and "The Voyage to Brobdingnag" were seized upon by children. The Lilliputians and Brobdingnagians captured the imaginations of the young; "children were, after all, familiar with dwarves and giants." (Sheila A. Egoff)

Many children's fairy tales, particularly those published by the Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault influenced the development of the fantasy genre. The Brothers Grimm traveled the German countryside for thirteen years in the early 1800s, collecting fairy tales as told in the oral tradition of the village folk. These tales included Cinderella, Snow White, and Rumpelstiltskin.



Many stories from the realm of fantasy followed, including *The Nutcracker* (1816) by E.T.A. Hoffman, acknowledged as a groundbreaking piece of literature. The first pieces of fantasy literature for children and young adults appeared in the 1800s, with stories by Hans Christian Anderson and Lewis Carroll. Both were influenced by fairy tales such as those of the Brothers Grimm but also "departed from the cultural renditions by removing some of the levels of didacticism" (Pamela S. Gates). Anderson and Carroll brought the present time and place into their stories yet filled them with magic. This creation of enchantment distinguished fantasy literature from the classical fairy tale. As Pamela S. Gates states: "Literary fantasy, then, became a medium to sustain our need for heroes and our perpetual belief that good can overcome evil but without the level of moralizing found in earlier tales."

The twentieth century was ushered in by Edith Nesbit, who altered and refreshed the fantasy tradition with such titles as: *A Book of Dragons* (1900), *Five Children and It* (1902), *The Phoenix and the Carpet* (1904) and *The Story of the Amulet* (1906). Nesbit laid out the ground rules for the use of magic in fantasy literature. She wrote about childhood and the collision of magic and the ordinary, not about morals and lessons but about what would happen when magic popped up in a child's everyday life.

Early twentieth century fantasy came of age in 1937 with J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, which was followed by the 1954 trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*. The Golden Age of the fantasy genre occurred during the 1950s and 60s with Tolkien's addition along with C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, and Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea*. These titles helped forge a clear identity for the fantasy genre and are considered modern epics. During this time period, fantasy became more sophisticated, affected by the developments of science and technology, such as quantum physics, new theories regarding the origins of the universe, and experiments with atomic energy. This revised view of the world, a new attitude toward the laws of nature, opened the human mind to much of what fantasy offers: supernatural proceedings, time-shifts, and other worlds.

In 1977 the fantasy novel finally hit the bestseller lists with Terry Brook's *Sword of Shannara*. Young adult "sword and sorcery" books such as those by Robert Jordan and David Eddings became very popular, and more recently authors such as Diana Wynne Jones, Tamora Pierce and J.K. Rowling are keeping the fantasy genre well within the minds of young adult readers.

References

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