

## Literary Criticism and Fantasy Literature: Is Anyone Taking This Seriously?

Although traditionally derided within the hallowed halls of Anglo-American academia, fantasy literature has a long history, stretching back to the cloudy past of European memory, being rooted in traditions of fairy-tales, myths, and Arthurian epic. Historically, it was these literary predecessors that have received the lion's share of scholarly interest, being as they are wrapped up in then-prominent 19<sup>th</sup> century ideals of ethnicity and nationalism.

Even considering its pedigree, fantasy literature only began to be studied seriously in the 1960's, gaining academic interest during the counter-cultural movements, especially after the publication of J.R.R. Tolkien's massive *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. The amount of study Tolkien poured into his work and his esteemed professional background (as a professor of Germanic philology and mediaeval literature at Oxford) also helped to legitimize fantasy's reputation within the profession of literary study. The visibility of the genre within academic circles was also heightened after authors began to tackle serious socio-political and religious issues within their works, even before Tolkien's rise to fame. For example, C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters* was originally published in *The Guardian* (a major British nationally-distributed newspaper) in installments, in 1941. Later famous for the seven-volume *Chronicles of Narnia*, his books were interwoven with Christian symbolism and often trenchant social commentary. Since these beginnings,

the creation of secondary literature relating to the fantasy genre has abounded. Much like other genre studies, there are conferences (e.g. the "20th Century Fantasy Literature: From Beatrix to Harry" International Literary Conference, held at Kent State University in 2002), many journals (e.g. *Studies in Fantasy Literature*, *Marvels and Tales: A Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies*, the *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, and *Tolkien Studies*), handbooks (e.g. the *Survey of Modern Fantasy Literature* and the *Guide to Supernatural Fiction*), and encyclopedias (e.g. the *Dictionary of Imaginary Places*, the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, and *Fantasy Literature of England*). There is even an electronic citation index devoted to science fiction and fantasy literature, the *Science Fiction and Fantasy Research Database* developed by a team of researchers at Texas A&M University. Outside of specialist literature, many scholars have published on the fantasy genre and fantastic literature within other journals, ranging from generalist titles such as *The Modern Language Journal* to more topical publications like *The Slavic and East European Journal* and *Celtic Culture Studies*. Due to the popularity of fantasy within the genre-paperpack industry, there are also a number of guidebooks and handbooks for would-be authors, the most notable being *The Complete Guide to Writing Fantasy* (Dragon Moon Press, 2003) and *The Writers Complete Fantasy Reference* (Writers Digest Books, 2000). Fans of the genre also enjoy a wide array of supplementary literature, mainly encyclopedias and guidebooks: everything from the *Encyclopedia of Things that Never Were* to *The Book of Dragons & Other Mythical Beasts*.

Perhaps owing to its shared pan-european symbolism and stylistic elasticity, many authors of more 'literary' fiction began to publish within and around the edges of the genre, beginning in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Some notable figures include Italo Calvino, (the Italian author and essayist most well-known for his postmodern fiction), Umberto Eco (another Italian, a professor of semiotics who is famous for his novels and essays), and Jorge Luis Borges (an Argentine librarian, known for his mind-twisting poetry and short stories). These three authors share an inexhaustible curiosity about the nature of reality, and like to play with the boundaries of narrative and genre. Although quite dense at times (Borges especially so), many of their works can be read by an enterprising and interested young adult, particularly those of Calvino, whose works are engaging and often very accessible.

In conclusion, the development of acceptance of pop-culture subjects for academics has intersected with the deepening of themes in the development of fantasy literature. This *milieu* has led to a fertile industry and test-tube for literary criticism within the genre, as more academics are studying it (and writing it) than ever before. Although culturally conservative commentators often deride fantasy (as they do with most other genre fiction as well), this attention and inter-disciplinary study suggests that fantasy literature will be relevant for some time to come.

