

That's Fantastic!

Exploring Fantasy Themes

Fantasy is a very diverse and expansive genre. There are so many subgenres within it that no one can seem to agree on how many different ones there are. The boundaries are so faded that any given book could be placed in several different categories. To add to the confusion, fantasy is often grouped with other genres such as science fiction and horror, which only blurs the boundaries even further. The problem with this is that it is possible for a reader to like one type of fantasy and not another; therefore, it is important that librarians know about the various kinds of fantasy and how they differ. This article will attempt to give an explanation of these themes. In the interest of simplicity I have chosen to use the categories of fantasy as they are outlined in *Fantasy Literature for Children and Young Adults*.

Fairytales and Folktales

These are two of the oldest forms of stories on earth, and have their roots in oral tradition. They are usually short narratives that follow a predictable path, lack ornamentation or excessive description and employ a great deal of repetition. Their prime purpose is to teach a moral or impart some nugget of wisdom, so more importance is placed upon action than character development. Details of time and place mean very little. Stories are often set "once upon a time," in a "land far, far away." Magic and miracles are commonplace, and even expected. The protagonists come from all social classes and both sexes and the plot usually involves them falling from

high to low status and returning again, or rising from a low situation to a high one. Teens enjoy reading the original versions of these tales by authors such as Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm, but fairytale retellings are especially popular. Three of the notable authors in this field include Gail Carson Levine (*Ella Enchanted*), Robin McKinley (*Beauty*), and Donna Jo Napoli (*Zel*).

Heroic/Ethical Fantasy

This category of fantasy can be one of the most challenging and rewarding categories for both reader and writer. The hard work that is needed in order to make the subject matter exciting and thought-provoking for the reader can be challenging. If successful, however, the high literary quality that is attained as a result of that hard work can be very rewarding. Whether a book is more heroic or ethical depends on the angle from which one looks at it. If one concentrates on the form and format - elements such as characterization, setting and plot - then a label of heroic or "high" fantasy is most appropriate. If, however, one chooses to focus on the author's intentions, the subject matter or the potential effect upon the reader, then calling the book ethical fantasy is more accurate. Books in this category usually feature young protagonists, and show them dealing with issues of coming of age. There is always a battle of good versus evil, and as part of the battle the heroes or heroines learn the importance of making choices and the consequences that accompany them. The author imparts these lessons in an almost subversive manner, though. To that end, "heroic/ethical fantasy is didactic in the best sense of the word and not moralistic or proselytizing: It teaches,

it challenges, and never to be overlooked, it entertains” (Pamela S. Gates). Most of the classic fantasy books such as J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, C.S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia*, Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Earthsea* trilogy and Madeleine L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time* fall into this category. Some modern authors that have patterned their books in the same manner include J.K. Rowling (Harry Potter series) and Philip Pullman (*The Golden Compass*).

Mixed fantasy

This is somewhat of a catch-all category, but the essential element in all of these books is that fantasy and reality are mixed in some way. For example, instead of being set in a completely separate universe (as is the case in *The Lord of the Rings*), some condition will exist that allows characters to move back and forth between our real-world Earth and a fantastic one. Subgenres of this category include journey fantasy (involving either time travel or a quest that the characters must undertake), transformation fantasy (in either shape or attitude), animal and toy fantasy (in which non-human characters act like humans), and magical fantasy (involving witches, ghosts and other magical entities). Often, several of these elements will be present in one book, which is the reason why fantasy is so hard to categorize. Some of the authors who write in this style include Lewis Carroll (*Alice in Wonderland*), Frank L. Baum (*The Wizard of Oz*), Roald Dahl (*The Witches*) and Jane Yolen (*The Devil’s Arithmetic*).



Most fantasy novels can be grouped into one of these three broad categories, but Derek Buker has some suggestions for narrower groupings in his book, *The Science Fiction & Fantasy Readers’ Advisory: A Librarian’s Guide to Cyborgs, Aliens and Sorcerers* (2002). A sample of these groupings includes: larger than life fantasy (mythical stories of

gods and heroes from ancient folklore), historical fantasy, dark fantasy, sword and sorcery (the “blood and guts” of fantasy), mystery fantasy, and fantasy romance. It is obvious from this list that there is much more to fantasy than meets the eye, but the categories do not really matter. The main thing to remember is that there is something in fantasy to suit just about every taste.

A knowledgeable librarian can lead readers to fantasy novels that match their particular interests, and open their eyes to worlds they might never have explored on their own.

References

- Buker, Derek M. *The Science Fiction & Fantasy Readers’ Advisory: A Librarian’s Guide to Cyborgs, Aliens and Sorcerers*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2002.
- Gates, Pamela S., Susan B. Steffel and Francis J. Molson. *Fantasy Literature for Children and young Adults*. Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2003.