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Add a little MAGIC

Understanding the world of
fantasy and its subgenres.

BY KERRIE FLANAGAN



Fantasy stories dwell deep inside the imagination of the author who creates them. This unique genre often features mythology, supernatural elements, and magic. Unlike genres steeped in reality, fantasy broadens the scope to allow for a vast array of possibilities limited only by the author's creativity.

What is fantasy?

At their most basic, fantasy stories generally include magical and/or supernatural elements. (Sci-fi, its equally popular partner on the other side of the speculative fiction genre, tends to be more based in science and technology.) Modern-day witches and wizards, another realm that lies beyond a magical wardrobe, and modern cities protected by dragons are popular premises that already fall under this genre. Modern fantasy dates to the late 19th century, but when J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis came on the scene decades later, the genre took off. The *Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* set a strong precedent for good fantasy and are still referenced today by many looking to venture into this area of writing.

UNDERSTANDING FANTASY SUBGENRES

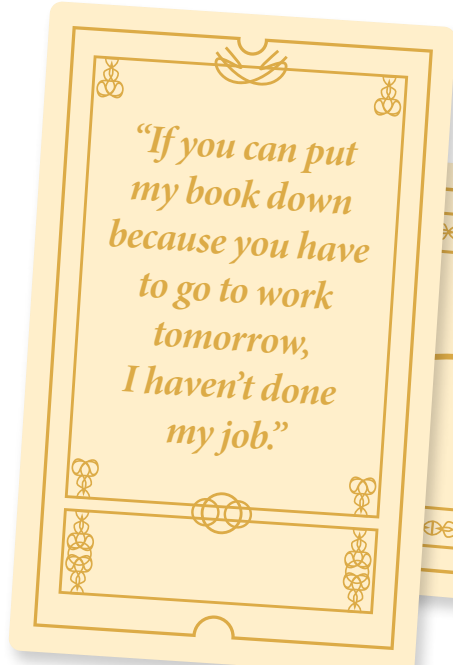
Within the larger umbrella of fantasy are subgenres that each have their own specific nuances. Here's a list of some of the common ones you'll see on bookshelves.

Epic fantasy

As the name implies, epic fantasy relates to the size and scope of their stories. They are long narratives told on a grand scale that typically involve a quest and a large cast of characters. One author who inspired and paved the wave for many young epic fantasy writers is Terry Brooks. The *Sword of Shannara*, his first book in the Shannara series, was published in 1977 and became the first fantasy novel to make the *New York Times* trade paperback bestseller list. Since then, Brooks has added 29 more books to that series, wrapping it up in October of 2020.

When asked what makes a good epic fantasy story, Brooks said it often draws on legends and Greek and Roman mythology, and it harkens back to an earlier time. "There is an examination of moral character, of people, and of moral codes. When do you cross a line by deciding not to act or not to enforce a moral code?" Fantasy, he says, observes the human condition through a conflict experienced by the heroes/protagonists of the story. "Every good story I know in epic fantasy has the character overcoming. It's the hero's journey, and the hero's journey requires they prove themselves and discover who they are and what their strengths are."

Brooks learned early in his career that an author's first obligation is to tell a good story. "Forget about everything else. Don't try to be different and wonderful and cool. That's not going to work for most writers. You figure out what your story is and then tell it in a compelling fashion. If you can put my book down because you have to go to work tomorrow, I haven't done my job. I want you so caught up in my story that it hurts you physically to put the story down."



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Examples of epic fantasy series

The Lord of the Rings by J.R.R. Tolkien

Earthsea by Ursula Le Guin

The Shannara Chronicles by Terry Brooks

The Chronicles of Narnia by C.S. Lewis

The Broken Earth by N. K. Jemisin

Legacy of Orisha by Tomi Odeyemi

Examples of urban fantasy series

Dresden Files by Jim Butcher

DFZ by Rachel Aaron

The Mortal Instruments by Cassandra Clare

The Nightmare-Verse by L.L. McKinney

Urban fantasy

This subgenre is fairly new, coming into its own around the late 1980s with series like *Borderland* and *War for the Oaks*. An urban fantasy fuses modern, real-world locations and events with supernatural or magical elements. It encompasses a wide range of possibilities.

Rachel Aaron's DFZ series that takes place in Detroit in the near future and includes gods, dragons, and self-driving cars is a great example. For Aaron, there are two main components in good urban fantasy.

First is the juxtaposition of the fantastical with the normal, like dragons in Detroit, vampires running a coffee shop in Seattle, a demon hunter complaining to his prey about rent in Chicago. Aaron says it goes beyond just adding magic to the modern world. "It's exploring how magic/dragons/vampires would change our normal lives. It's making our normal, boring world mysterious and magical again."

Your characters are the next important element to consider, says Aaron.

"Unlike traditional or epic fantasy, where the characters are typically great figures chosen by destiny, urban fantasy heroes and heroines tend to be pretty normal. Even the badass demon hunters and half-fae princesses still have

mundane concerns like rent and work and annoying relatives that they never really get away from no matter how powerful they become, and that constant connection back to our reality makes them super relatable,” she notes.

She says this relatability of characters makes this subgenre so popular: Our protagonists aren’t distant noble heroes, but rather flawed people trying to make it work – and we love them for it. “They live in cities, just like us! They get excited about coffee and make irresponsible food choices late at night, just like us!” Aaron says. They’re very human, even if they’re not human at all. “So long as you’ve got fantastical stuff in the real world and people who have to deal with it in ordinary, relatable ways, you’ve got everything you need for a great urban fantasy.”

Paranormal romance

Paranormal romance (PNR) is interesting because it’s a subgenre of both romance and fantasy. Similar to urban fantasy, it adds magical and supernatural elements into the real world, but romance also drives the main plot, featuring characters overcoming obstacles to find their happily ever after (or their happily for now).

Ice Age Shifters is a paranormal romance series written by science fiction and fantasy author Carol Van Natta. She says that just like fantasy in general, PNR needs three-dimensional characters, world-building, and consistent rules. Because PNR is partly set in the real world, writers must decide how the magical elements fit in. In her experience, Van Natta says, most PNR stories assume the true magical part of the world is hidden from most of humanity.

“PNR readers enjoy the fun of uncovering the world of magic, but [also] like the familiar details in the real world, plus compelling characters and comfort of romance’s inherent hope and upbeat ending. To me, the best PNR stories weave the two elements together so seamlessly that the story would fall apart without both,” she says.

**Examples of
paranormal
romance series**

Ice Age Shifters®
by Carol Van Natta

Psy-Changeling
Trinity by Nalini
Singh

Shifters Unbound
by Jennifer Ashley

**Examples of
superhero
fantasy series**

Reckoners by
Brandon Sanderson

Super Powered
by Drew Hayes

Renegades by
Marissa Meyer

The Pantheon Saga
by C. C. Ekeke

The Sidekick
Squad by C. B. Lee

Because PNR includes these magical elements, it allows authors to create unlikely heroes with roots in fairytales, myths, and legends. Van Natta says, “Vampires and shifters (which have expanded way beyond werewolves) are no longer monsters; they’re sympathetic characters who deserve love as much as everyone else. This leaves tremendous latitude for telling fresh stories while still keeping the touchstones that PNR readers love about the genre.”

Romance is also at the core of a PNR, so readers have certain expectations when it comes to romance genre conventions and sex scenes. First, Van Natta says, “Don’t break the romance genre rules and call your story a ‘romance.’ PNR readers get really testy about it.” There should always be a happily ever after or happily for now, and the characters do not cheat on one another. When it comes to sex scenes, Van Natta believes that the sex is on the page rather than behind closed doors in most PNR. “Poetic rather than graphic language works,” she says, “but most PNR readers are looking for some heat. Can your series succeed without it? Sure – check out R.J. Blain’s bestselling and hilariously snarky Magical Romantic Comedy (with a body count) series. But it’s the exception, not the rule.”

Superhero fantasy

This action-filled subgenre combines sci-fi and fantasy elements to create humans with super-powers who live in the modern world. Founded in the 1930s, DC Comics and Marvel Comics created iconic superheroes and supervillains like Superman, Wonder Woman, Captain America, and The Joker for comic books and movies. In addition, some authors write superhero fantasy novels. Similar to urban fantasy, superhero stories take place in the modern world, but the origin story may begin on another planet, like in Superman, or include something more scientific, like Peter Parker getting bit by a radioactive spider to become Spider-Man.

Drew Hayes is the author of the Super

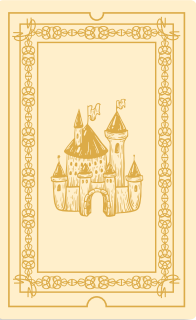
Powered series, and for him, all good superhero stories boil down to the people, the powers, and the fun. By “people,” he means the characters under the masks and capes, the beings who exist both inside and outside of the action. “A superhero story isn’t just about flying through the sky,” he says. “The characters dealing with the self-imposed limitations of their mundane persona is a big part of the experience.”

When it comes to powers, explore their limitations and how they fit, or don’t, into the character’s world. “The challenges, threats, and moments of growth they experience are all part of it, offering the action and tension one expects in this genre,” he says.

As for the fun, Hayes says that’s just what it sounds like. “Amidst all the danger and drama, don’t forget to address the fact that having powers would be awesome. Flying through the air on an errand, lifting a truck with one hand, cooking with heat vision: letting our characters do the same silly things we would do makes them all the more human and believable. Plus, it allows a chance to write some entertaining scenes,” he says.

A good superhero story includes not only a hero we want to root for but also a sinister supervillain who undermines and pursues the hero. At the core of great characters, Hayes says, there must be believable motivations: “A story can bear the weight of many fantastical elements when it has a strong character foundation to start from.” Hayes says characters will face seemingly insurmountable odds, make constant personal sacrifices, and at times work directly against their own self-interest. When we have a better understanding of their behavior, it helps us form a deeper connection to them. “None of us will ever swing from buildings via webbing like Spider-Man, but we can wrap our heads around the guilt Peter Parker feels that drives him to live that way,” Hayes says. “Similarly, Mr. Freeze might be a robber, but he’s also usually depicted as a husband trying desperately to find a way to save his wife.”

**BUILDING BLOCKS OF
GOOD FANTASY**



World building

Regardless of the subgenre you choose, effective world building can make or break a story. There is a fine balance between giving readers enough and too much information about the world you have created.

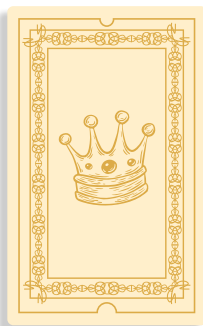
Brooks says, “It’s the old ‘need to know’ rule. Until

readers need to know something, don’t tell them.” This means not overloading the beginning of the story with every detail you know about the world or including big “info dumps” throughout. These slow the pacing of the story and risk losing the reader’s attention.

Brooks adds that if you can cut out the extraneous material, do it and be brutal about it: “Cut out all the boring parts that people skip over, which starts with weather reports, long descriptions of forests, stone walls, etc.”

Aaron believes the most important part of creating a believable world is consistency. “If you set a rule for how magic works, then it has to work that way every single time. You can be clever with the rules and have people use them in interesting ways, but the rules still have to be there, and they have to be consistent.”

She says by staying consistent, you avoid long explanations while also allowing readers to figure things out for themselves because the pattern will be the same every time. She makes sure there are natural laws that happen for logical reasons and are universally applied. “We’ve all read that book where the main character constantly pulls miracles out of the blue to get out of what would otherwise be impossible situations. Don’t be that book,” Aaron says. “Set rules that make sense within the context of your world and follow them, and you’ll be praised to the skies for your masterful world building.”



Writing effective characters

Great characters are essential to any story. By understanding a few essential elements, you will write intriguing and memorable heroes and heroines for your fantasy novel.

Matt Bird, the author of *The Secrets of Story: Innovative Tools for Perfecting Your Fiction and Captivating*

Readers, says when creating characters, especially in fantasy, it's important to be specific and not generic. "In one fantasy novel I gave notes on, the heroine had an amulet passed down to her, and I begged the author, 'Can it not be an amulet? The ancestor passing this down used to be a fisherman, so can it be a magic fishhook? That's something we haven't seen a million times before.'"

Bird says audiences don't really care about stories. They care about characters. In many fantasy books, there is too much backstory and not enough frontstory: "Spend more time on character-building and less on worldbuilding," he recommends. "Once we identify with the hero (believe in their reality, care for their predicament, and invest in their ability to solve this problem), we'll go anywhere with them, but if you try to get us to care about the world before we care about a hero, readers usually tune out."

Brooks also advises authors not to overdo character descriptions. "I really believe that storytelling and explanation of characters work best if you remember to give your readers some latitude in which to imagine the characters. As they read about the character, an image will form in their minds, and it will supersede anything you write down anyway. Every reader sees the character differently."

As a reader and an author, Aaron finds the thing that makes a character truly compelling to her is depth. "There's got to be more to them than what's on the surface," she says. "For me, character growth isn't so much about changing the character as using the story like sandpaper to reveal

what was there all along." This is done by giving characters hidden depths like a truth they don't even know. For instance, she says, "If your smarmy lone-wolf hero would die before acknowledging he needs love, too, then the point of the book should be to get him to admit that, even if only to himself."



Writing exciting action and fight scenes

An exciting fight scene can elevate the tension in your fantasy story. But if not done well, it can bog down the pacing and slow the story down.

Carla Hoch, author of *Fight Write: How to Write Believable Fight Scenes*, and blogger at FightWrite.net,

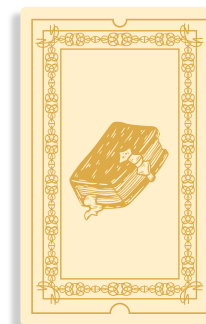
thinks every fight, both on and off the page, consists of three things: confrontation, laceration, and evolution. Confrontation is the physical or psychological warfare, the laceration is the pain associated with the conflict, and evolution is how the character changes as a result.

"How a writer presents those three is where the magic happens," she says. "What I have found is that regardless of the type of confrontation, we readers want something we can relate to. Injury, of any nature, is a great opportunity to connect with a reader." We can all empathize with someone experiencing pain. Hoch says by giving the reader plenty of sensory details to hold on to and experience what the character is experiencing, that connection will happen. She believes sensory details are far more important than writing out all the movements (aka blocking) because readers remember the feelings of a scene more than the actual scene.

When using magic in fight scenes, she says, you must first establish what is normal, otherwise the magic isn't magic: "If everyone can fly, well, it ain't all that big of a deal, now is it?" She goes on to say you need to establish rules for whatever is supernatural. It isn't necessary to spell out every detail to

the reader, but you must know the rules so you can abide by them. "In order to defeat something, you have to know how it works. And you have to be able to defeat whatever it is, or the story is over. So, get all those rules established and do not stray. Fantasy fans especially will eat you alive if you step outside the rules of magic for your world."

Not everyone knows the intricacies of swords, firearms, or nunchucks, but if your character wields a nonmagical weapon, Hoch says to know enough about it to convince people who have experience with it. "If your character is unskilled, it makes sense that they wouldn't know the proper lingo related to the weapon. But a Navy Seal isn't going to call the scope on his rifle an 'eye thingy.' You as a writer should know the basics of the weapon, such as its components, weight, how it's held, and the damage it does. If it's possible for you to hold the weapon and learn to use it, that's great. But I don't think it's imperative. If you use technical lingo, be sure to show its meaning."



Sustaining a series

If you are writing a series, whether it is three books or 10, you should have some idea of the overarching storyline and how each of the books fits.

Van Natta finds half the battle of writing a sustainable series is knowing you're planning to write a series in the first place. "Every experienced author I know has written what they imagined to be a standalone story, only to be surprised when readers clamored for more. Or the author's muse ambushed them with a three-book story arc (ask me how I know)," she says.

Her advice? "If you're a plotter, start with the big problem that everyone in the series will face in one fashion or another, then map out how each book contributes to characters working on that problem. If you're a pantsier (that is, you write by the seat of your pants instead of from an outline),

make notes on the rules in your world after you write and develop a setting that's complex enough to allow multiple stories to be told."



Using magic

Part of the fun of writing fantasy is creating new magic for your characters. Unlike science fiction, which requires magical-type elements be based in science, fantasy allows your creativity to roam free, unencumbered by "reality." That said, Brooks believes magic needs to reso-

nate with the reader and be logical. "For a character to have magic and say 'now that I have this magic, I don't have to think about it' is not very interesting. Characters are only interesting when we examine their weaknesses."

Brooks cautions against using the magic too often or it becomes ordinary, and it should require something of the characters each time they do use it. "I am a big believer that it should diminish them in some way. There's always a price to use magic. It was true in Tolkien. Magic took a lot from the people who used it. Look at poor Frodo, who got diminished right down to nothing at the end. Everyone who was using it had a price to pay."

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As a fantasy author, you have the power to create new lands, form unique magical systems, and take your characters on incredible adventures. When writing in this expansive genre, your only real limitation is the extent of your imagination. ⑦

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