



50 Years of Fantasy

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News and comment from the Editor

Jessica Yates looks back on fantasy literature for children in the half-century since the publication of **The Hobbit**.

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Tolkien's particular contribution to children's fantasy literature was the idea of the self-contained imaginary world; but he did not create Middle Earth with children in mind. That particular world was part of a mythology for adults which he had been creating since World War 1 in stories which later became **The Silmarillion**. The idea of a magic world with a medieval-style culture and its own history which would be told and developed in successive books had its roots in adult fantasy literature by authors such as William Morris, J. B. Cabell and Dunsany. That **The Hobbit** slipped into this mythology and claimed it for children as well as adults was a happy accident. Did it also define a new tradition of writing for children which writers have been developing for the last fifty years?

Apart from the stories of Oz by the American Frank Baum, children's fantasies before **The Hobbit** were set in some part of a universal 'Fairyland' or in an England where children encountered fairies or other supernatural beings. The world of children's fantasy was the world of fairy-tale, of witches, giants and the English countryside. The most famous fantasies of the twenties and thirties still remembered today inhabit a landscape of English hills, fields, woods, streams and villages: Eleanor Farjeon's **Martin Pippin in the Daisy-field**, Masefield's **The Midnight Folk** and **The Box of Delights**, Kipling's **Puck of Pook's Hill**, de la Mare's short stories.

The publication of **The Hobbit** in 1937 did not change anything. Although well reviewed among the Christmas books it did not become a bestseller or start a new fashion. (The Carnegie Medal for that year went to **The Family from One End Street**.) Other fantasies published during and just after World War 2 were more successful: Elizabeth Goudge's **The Little White Horse**, Beverley Nichols' **The Tree that Sat Down**. The pastoral tradition continued into the fifties with the **Borrowers** series, the **Green Knowe** cycle and the masterpiece **Tom's Midnight Garden** by Philippa Pearce. Throughout the fifties, though, **The Hobbit** was reprinted almost every year. The huge success of **The Lord of the Rings** (1954-55) sent its readers (some of whom were soon to become writers for children) back to **The Hobbit**; it was the three-book epic written for adults which had the more immediate effect on children's literature.

Oxford influences?

The first children's books to be influenced by Tolkien were published *before* **The Lord of the Rings**. But their author had heard the epic as it was composed and read the typescript in 1949, probably between writing **The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe** and **Prince Caspian**. C. S. Lewis had many other sources for his **Chronicles of Narnia**: mythology, the Bible, and E. Nesbit; however Tolkien provided the medieval culture, North European landscape and the high seriousness of conflict between good and evil where the fate of the world is involved. Tolkien didn't approve of the first **Narnia** books, and probably didn't read the later ones in which Lewis creates a more consistent world. He thought

Lewis had copied his ideas, and disliked the way in which elements from different mythologies were all jumbled up - he also disliked what he saw as the overt Christianity. But as far as child readers were concerned the **Chronicles of Narnia** became instantly popular and have remained so.

Tolkien and Lewis both lectured at Oxford in the fifties. Several future children's writers were students there at that time and nearly all were to specialise in fantasy. Four were women: Susan Cooper, Penelope Farmer, Penelope Lively and Diana Wynne Jones. However, the first of the 'Oxford Group' to achieve fame was a man, Alan Garner, who went down without taking his degree, and was very single-minded about his need to earn a living by writing. **The Weirdstone of Brisingamen** (1960), inevitably, was compared to Tolkien, and there are many verbal echoes (probably unconscious) of the Fellowship of the Ring; but Garner has since insisted that he and Tolkien simply drew on the same sources. However he must have owed some of his instant success to Tolkien's fans: parents and children who loved **Lord of the Rings** and wanted something similar, which Tolkien himself never provided.

Series and cycles

In the sixties epic fantasy became the fashion, especially after an unauthorised paperback edition of **The Lord of the Rings** was published in the USA in 1965, and the well-known 'campus cult' took off, with its Frodo badges and hippy associations. Now authors found their fantasies were marketable: some, like Lloyd Alexander, acknowledged Tolkien's influence; some, like Ursula Le Guin admired him but strove to preserve their originality; and some, like Garner, resented the comparison. **The Weirdstone** in effect started its own trend; it was the first modern fantasy to use ancient myths in a present-day setting, a sub-genre I shall call Folklore Fantasy. Traditional folklore and more recent theories about ley lines, standing stones, the Mother Goddess and the Horned God were plundered to find themes for children's stories. Tolkien also drew on the old legends, but he absorbed them into his mythology giving the folklore roots within his own saga. In the fantasies of Alan Garner and his successors the Old Religion is still alive; there is a weird power in that stone circle, that straight track - a power which may be channelled, might be awoken and may need to be placated; here and now in *this* world. A glance at this year's publishing shows that these themes have not lost their appeal for many children's (and adult genre) writers. Furthermore, Tolkien's influence has spread to table-top wargaming, with Dungeons and Dragons; and in 1982 the style of 'D & D' was fused with the educational programmed text to produce the first 'Fighting Fantasy' game-books from Puffin. Computer games too have been inspired by fantasy as well as science fiction, with the game of **The Hobbit** itself an immediate best-seller.

Tolkien and Lewis set the pattern of writing a series, although **The Lord of the Rings** was only divided into three for publishing reasons. Other writers followed with fantasies which, like Tolkien's, are set in self-contained, mapped imaginary worlds, and with those which explore the conjunction of the ancient lore and modern Britain.

Some are still in print; others have fared less well. This too is an area in which some publishers have not felt (do not feel) particularly secure. American writer, Ursula le Guin created Earthsea, and her three linked stories about the education and deeds of a wizard together make one of the greatest heroic fantasies for all ages. **A Wizard of Earthsea** came out first in this country in Puffin because le Guin's British hardback publishers did not think it would sell. It did ... but fears that the readership for the genre might be specialised and small seemed to be justified as another American sequence, Lloyd Alexander's five **Chronicles of Prydain** (1964-68) began to be published here, and sold so poorly that we had to wait over ten years until 1979 for the last two of the series from Fontana. The Chronicles describe the progress of young Taran from Assistant Pig-Keeper to High King of Prydain, a country modelled on the Wales of the Mabinogian. They blend Celtic legend with an epic struggle of good versus evil, and despite stereotyped characters, repetition and didacticism they have their adherents, while even their flaws could be virtues when recommending fantasy to the inexperienced reader.

British authors joining Garner, Lively and Farmer in trying out the genre included John Gordon, Jane Curry, William Mayne, Susan Price, Judy Allen, William Rayner, Catherine Storr, Peter Dickinson. The best-known British fantasy cycle from the sixties and seventies is Susan Cooper's quintet **The Dark is Rising**. Reading them as they came out I was enthralled and still find them exhilarating, in spite of some hard-worked cliches. Several critics have also pointed

out that 'the Dark' could have been more convincingly evil. Still, the landscapes are descriptive triumphs.

'Too many dark powers'

Apart from these epic cycles, what has survived from the seventies is mainly of the folklore tendency, though one cannot classify the enigmatic **Elidor** (Garner) or **Castle of Bone** (Penelope Farmer) so narrowly. Two of Penelope Lively's fantasies are particularly strong in folklore. **The Whispering Knights** provides a new legend for the Rollright Stones, who help to defeat Morgan Le Fay's plans for a motorway across the Oxfordshire countryside. **The Wild Hunt of Hagworthy** is one of a long line of fantasies including Garner's **Moon of Gomrath** to feature the Horned God and the Wild Hunt. The latest, published this year, is Jean Morris' **The Troy Game**.

Theories about the Old Religion, particularly as found in two classic interpretative texts, **The White Goddess** and **The Golden Bough**, and in the historical novel for adults, Mary Renault's **The King Must Die**, inspired two heroic fantasies published for children but loved by many adults. Joy Chant's **Red Moon and Black Mountain** (1970) starts off as an epic in the style of Tolkien and Lewis, and ends with the sacrifice of the young hero to the

Earth Goddess; Rosemary Sutcliff's **The Mark of the Horse Lord** (1965) also ends with the hero's sacrifice, this time to the Sun God. With its discreet love story and hints of Conroy's homosexual past, it looks forward to the 'teen fantasy' of today where friendship and love are just as important to the characters as their epic quest. In Garner's **The Owl Service** (1967) and **Red Shift** (1973) the relationship is central: the friendship between Gwyn and Alison, the love between Tom and Jan, are doomed by the power of the legend which they re-enact.

In the face of all this John Rowe Townsend (reviewing Susan Cooper's **Greenwitch** in 1974) voiced what some were probably thinking: 'Really there are too many Dark Powers being invoked at present; too many people dipping into the pool of myth and legend; too much waving about of the Golden Bough.' Moving into the eighties we find some writers choosing other genre (Garner) or writing adult novels (Lively, Farmer); but Diana Wynne Jones (whose Dalemark cycle: **Cart and Cwiddier**, **Drowned Ammet** and **The Spellcoats** is her most epic and Tolkienian) remained faithful to children's fantasy and to an audience which now includes her earliest readers, grown up and still enthralled by each new, original work. But new titles by writers using traditional themes were still arriving. **Giftwish** and **Catchfire** by Graham Dunstan Martin (who now writes SF for adults) were firmly in the Hobbit line; in Dahlov Ipcar's **A Dark Horn Blowing** old ballads combine with Norse mythology in the story of a human mother kidnapped to nurse the child of the Fairy Queen. **The Last of Danu's Children** - a good long read - involves three teenagers with black magic and a pact with the Horned God. **The Earth Witch** make a lot of reviewers think of **The Owl Service**, but the plot is more overtly sexual as a young Welsh lad moves into the witch's cottage as her lover, with ominous hints that he will be sacrificed to renew the crops.

American innovation. Older readers

The US market for fantasy has always been more buoyant. Apart from the obvious fact of access to millions more potential readers, not only through the children's book world but also among the networks of SF fans, Americans are much more indulgent to authors who openly follow in someone else's footsteps. Perhaps we British are too snobbish about new writers who need a good model to get them going? A trilogy which isn't well-known over here but was published for children (i.e. teenagers) in the States, **The Riddle-Master of Hed** and its two sequels, is probably indebted to Earthsea for its setting but the stories go their own way as they tell of a prince with a talent for wizardry who is fated to take up a magic harp and sword, and defeat supernatural powers. This is an intensely-written, difficult but rewarding work for experienced readers.

British authors of epic fantasy are wary of being compared to Tolkien and seek to pre-empt such comparisons. Robert Westall gives us the seamy side of feudalism and the technical side of making war in **The Cats of Seroster**, which he says is meant to be anti-heroic and a comment on and criticism of Tolkien. The magical cats of Provence, descended from sacred Egyptian cats, rescue a Duke's son from assassins and call up their legendary saviour, the Seroster, who will be reincarnated in whoever happens to accept an enchanted dagger. Geraldine Harris has deliberately tried to

distance her work from Tolkien's, to create a fantasy world more Oriental and less Northern, to base her languages and names on different sound clusters, and to develop her own set of religions, contrasting the pagan cultures with the decadent Empire of Galkis. The **Seven Citadels** quartet is still a quest, led by a reluctant hero, culminating in sacrifice.

The work of Harris and Westall and of many others including Louise Lawrence, (some) Jan Mark and (some) Margaret Mahy, really has to be classed as Young Adult Fantasy, with an awareness of politics, sex and violence which marks them as good reading for 12+ instead of 'children's books' for 8+. The audience for these books is teenager to adult and it's no surprise to find titles appearing now in adult imprint paperback lists like Unwin Unicorn and Futura Orbit. Time to remember that Tolkien's 'first' audience was adults not children and to note how (inevitably?) writers in this genre (Garner, Mark, Farmer for instance) go up the age-range.

New from the States, where teenagers and adult fantasy fans have long co-existed, is 'feminist fantasy', written by women about young women questing for love and/or power, often magical. Robin McKinley whose re-told fairy tale **Beauty** was ahead of the trend in 1978, says she was inspired by Tolkien's Eowyn. She has followed her successful **The Blue Sword** with **The Hero and the Crown**, set several hundred years before in the same land of Damar. It also features a heroine with inborn magical powers, this time fated to slay dragons and a sorcerer. Before settling down with her prince she has a love-affair with a wizard! In similar vein is Meredith Ann Pierce's **A Gathering of Gargoyles**, sequel to **The Darkangel** which was not so popular over here. This is a much better book in which the heroine, Aerial, finding that the former darkangel, now disenchanting back to a prince, does *not* love her, leaves on a new quest to solve a mysterious prophecy and discover her true identity. Before completing this planned trilogy Pierce has written **The Woman who loved Reindeer**, a romance between a young woman and an enchanted reindeer who can become a man, set in a country resembling Lapland and strong in its sense of culture and invented names. Tamora Pierce's first two books about Alanna, a girl who masquerades as a boy in order to train as a knight, have also been published here. Told in fairly direct language (including American slang) they could be popular with teenagers, and I already know one girl eager for the third, **The Woman who rides like a Man**. **This series (although paperbacked on a children's list) is also for 12+; as well as secret magic powers and excellent fighting skills, Alanna is aware of her sexuality and has problems about squaring her career as a warrior maiden with her feelings for prince Jonathan.**

Here and now

But things are happening on this side of the Atlantic too. The good news is that Methuen's new 'Teens' paperback list this autumn includes Diana Wynne Jones' Young Adult Romance, **Fire and Hemlock**. Based on the Tam Lin ballad it also includes references to Tolkien in a heroic dream-correspondence carried on between the young man under the witch queen's spell, and the brave girl who might rescue him. In the climax the girl, Polly, is faced with a choice of renunciation much like Frodo's. Here again the author has found that the most positive way to use Tolkien is obliquely, as a commentary on the main story. And British and American authors are represented together in an anthology of short stories, **Imaginary Lands**, again for the over-12s, particularly Peter Dickinson's cynical history of a barbarian empire which goes to appalling lengths to destroy a rebellious tribe - with a shock ending which relates it to the modern arms race. There's an Arthurian story, another version of Tam Lin, and a Damarian love story by Robin McKinley.

Younger readers have had less new material. Pat O'Shea's **The Hounds of The Morrigan**, although tremendously long, is easy to read and has short chapters. Set in Ireland it tells of a young brother and sister given a quest by the Irish god, the Dagda, to defeat the evil war-goddess, The Morrigan. Along the way the two encounter more gods and heroes, as well as helpful talking animals, and there's great variety of style from humour and epic archaisms to Irish conversational idiom.

The story of heroic fantasy after Tolkien must make some mention of adult literature. After **The Lord of the Rings** and T.H. White's **The Once and Future King** what next to recommend to teenagers, given that many adult fantasies in today's bookshops are what the fans call 'Tolkien rip-offs' and a waste of teenagers' precious reading time?

I'm picking the recently-completed **Belgariad** by David Eddings. I was so gripped by its exciting story-line that I read right through the quintet in very few sittings. In a practical, unpretentious way Eddings combines some Tolkienian

elements with others from the sword-and-sorcery tradition which pre-dated Tolkien in America. The books are also full of ironic humour as experienced warriors debunk the heroic tradition. The quest for a stolen symbol of power which could defeat the Dark God takes young Garion from insignificant kitchen boy to hero celebrating his wedding-night, which is discreetly off-stage, as are all the sex scenes (though there are witty allusions for adult readers to enjoy).

Violence is mainly hand-to-hand, and there's some compassion for the dead. Eddings' triumph on the bestseller lists illustrates the possibility of making constructive use of Tolkien by blending one's borrowings with loans from other genres, and putting in what Tolkien left out: respecting what he did but going one's own way, which of course is the mark of the best writers of fantasy.

Jessica Yates who was a school librarian in ILEA for many years is now a freelance writer on children's books.

She has been a member of the Tolkien Society for 15 years, and served as its Secretary and Bulletin Editor.

The Tolkien Society can be contacted at: 35 Amesbury Crescent, Hove, East Sussex BN3 5RD (SAE please).

Epic and Folklore Fantasy in print

(ISBNs and prices are omitted to save space, when books are available from mainstream publishers)

Modern Classics

The Weirdstone of Brisingamen/The Moon of Gomrath/Elidor

Alan Garner, Collins and Fontana Lions pbk

A Wizard of Earthsea/The Tombs of Atuan/The Farthest Shore

Ursula Le Guin, Gollancz and Puffin pbk (also one-volume trade pbk as Earthsea)

The Book of Three/The Black Cauldron/The Castle of Llyr/Taran Wanderer/The High King

Lloyd Alexander, Heinemann and Fontana Lions pbk (also two-volume trade pbks as The Chronicles of Prydain)

Over Sea, Under Stone/The Dark is Rising/Greenwitch/The Grey King/Silver on the Tree

Susan Cooper, Bodley Head and Puffin pbk (also one-volume trade pbk as **The Dark is Rising**)

A Castle of Bone

Penelope Farmer, Puffin pbk

The Whispering Knights/The Wild Hunt of Hagworthy

Penelope Lively, Heinemann and Puffin pbk

Modern Classics for Teenagers and Adults

Red Moon and Black Mountain

Joy Chant, Unwin Unicorn, 0 04 823220 3, £2.50 pbk

The Mark of the Horse Lord

Rosemary Sutcliff, OUP and Puffin pbk

The Owl Service/Red Shift

Alan Garner, Collins and Fontana Lions pbk

Recent Fantasy

A Dark Horn Blowing

Dahlov Ipcar, Fontana Lions, 0 00 671896 5. £1.00 pbk

The Last of Danu's Children

Alison Rush, Tor Fantasy. £2.35 pbk from Forbidden Planet

The Earth Witch

Louise Lawrence, Collins, 0 00 184205 6, £5.50; Ace Fantasy, £2.35 pbk from Forbidden Planet

The Riddle-Master of Hed/Heir of Sea and Fire/Harpist in the Wind

Patricia McKillip, Orbit Futura, 0 7088 8051 7; 8050 9; 80 52 5. £2.50; £2.25: £2.50 pbk

The Cats of Seroster

Robert Westall, Macmillan, 0 333 37549 I, £6.95; Piccolo, 0 330 29239 0, £1.95 pbk

Prince of the Godborn/Children of the Wind/The Dead Kingdom/The Seventh Gate

Geraldine Harris, Unwin Unicorn, 0 04 823236 X; 823253 X; 823250 5; 823262 9, all £2.50 except for **The Seventh Gate**, £2.95 pbk

The Blue Sword/The Hero and the Crown

Robin McKinley, Julia MacRae, 0 86203 123 0, £7.25: 0 86203 207 5, £7.50; Orbit Futura, 0 7088 8155 6: 0 7088 8164 5, both £2.50 pbk

The Darkangel

Meredith Ann Pierce, Collins, 0 00 184149 1, £5.95; Fontana Lions, 0 00 672444 2, £1 .50 pbk

A Gathering of Gargoyles

M. A. Pierce. Tor Fantasy. £2.65 pbk from Forbidden Planet

The Woman who loved Reindeer

M. A. Pierce, Hodder, 0 340 40946 0, £7.95

Alanna, the First Adventure

Tamora Pierce, OUP, 0 09 271502 X, £5.95; Beaver, 0 09 943500 8, £ 1.75 pbk

In the Hand of the Goddess

Tamora Pierce, OUP, 0 19 271551 8, £7.95; Beaver, early 1988, pbk

The Hounds of The Morrigan.

Pat O'Shea, OUP, 0 19 271506 2, £9.95; Puffin, 014 032207 8, £2.95 pbk

Fire and Hemlock

Diana Wynne Jones, Methuen, 0 416 50960 6,;E8.95; Magnet, 0 416 04022 5, £1.95 pbk (forthcoming)

Imaginary Lands

Robin McKinley (ed.), Julia MacRae, 0 86203 280 6, £8.95; Futura, 0 7088 8223 4, £3.95 pbk

The Belgariad: - Pawn of Prophecy/Queen of Sorcery/Magician's Gambit/Castle of Wizardry/Enchanter's End Game

David Eddings, Corgi, 0 552 12284 X; 12348 X; 12382 X; 12435 4; 12447 8, £1.95; £2.50; £2.50; £2.50; £2.95 pbk

Suppliers

SF and fantasy titles, including children's books, not yet published in the UK are imported from the USA and available from a range of specialist shops, many of which offer mail order.

Forbidden Planet

The Science Fiction and Comics Bookshop 23 Denmark Street, London WC2H 8NA. Tel: 01-836 4179.

Mail order: P.O. Box 378, London E3 4RD. Tel: 01-980 9711.

Andromeda Bookshop

84 Suffolk Street

Birmingham

B1 17A

Tel: 021-643 1999.

Mail order available.

A helpful starter list, of UK publications, labelled Science Fantasy can be found in Books at the Frontier, recommendations for teenage reading from Books for Students.

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