

Truth and Fantasy

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A few weeks ago, my three-year-old daughter was eating her breakfast cereal, when she suddenly cried out in surprise. A rainbow, from a prism hanging in our window, had landed squarely on her shirt. She gazed down at the rainbow, fascinated, as it slid slowly across her chest.

With exaggerated stealth, I crept up to her and placed my cereal spoon under the rainbow. I lifted the spoon, filled with vibrant colors, toward her face, taking great care not to spill any of them. My daughter needed no explanation to know just what I was doing, and watched the approaching spoon with wide, playful eyes. When the rainbow came close enough, she opened her mouth and swallowed it in a single gulp.

She smiled at me. Then, with the sigh of a connoisseur who has just tasted a true culinary delight, she said, “Ahhh, colors.”

It would be lovely, I’ve often thought since, to dine that way. Not just once in a while, but all the time. I’d much prefer a small bowl of rainbow cereal (or starlight soup, my personal favorite) to a grand repast of haute cuisine. Call it lack of imagination—or lack of spot remover, since I’ve never tasted an elegant sauce that didn’t wind up decorating my shirt—but I can’t think of any better way to dine.

Surely that is how the muses of fantasy must eat, seated around their glittering table somewhere in the clouds. They would use only the most wondrous ingredients, pure, undiluted—and remarkably potent. What could be better than a simple pinch of starlight in your soup?

I do not mean to imply that the literature inspired by those muses of fantasy must also be simple. On the contrary. Expert chefs such as J. R. R. Tolkien, Madeleine L’Engle, Ursula Le Guin, Lloyd Alexander, T. H. White, Natalie Babbitt, and Susan Cooper have concocted exquisitely complex characters and tales. Meals that are rich with subtle and surprising flavors. I am convinced, however, that even such wise chefs couldn’t succeed without paying attention, first and foremost, to the quality of their ingredients—making sure they are always fresh and true.

As these authors have proven, well—written fantasy can touch us deeply, even change our lives in lasting ways. Still, I am surprised at how many people continue to dismiss the whole genre out of hand. That seems especially odd since we live in an era when reality grows more fantastic every day. But to many, the very term “fantasy” seems to imply some sort of excess: “If you’re not reading or discussing something real, then you can try this fantasy stuff.” Or something lightweight and incoherent: “Who is going to believe that sort of fantasy?”

A major part of this problem is that there is, unfortunately, plenty of cheap, formulaic fantasy around—whether in the form of books, television shows, films, computer games, or online

sources. Many of these claim to create new, fantastic worlds. But their “worlds” are really nothing more than sketchy landscapes, violent weather, and a few predictable, robot—like characters. They may be exceedingly complex in their technology, but they lack depth, coherence, and in the end, believability. They often lack, as well, any moral vision deeper than “more is better” or “might makes right.”

Excellent fantasy—the kind represented by T. H. White’s *Once and Future King*, Madeleine L’Engle’s *Swiftly Tilting Planet*, Gail Carson Levine’s *Ella Enchanted*, Richard Addams’ *Watership Down*, or J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*—is utterly different. But how? What is the mysterious distinction that can make some fantasy so wondrously compelling, and other fantasy so regrettably shallow?

The crux of that distinction, I believe, lies in the ingredients—whether they feel true, first as individual elements, and second as an integrated whole. For as paradoxical as it sounds, the best fantasy is true. It must be—to win our honest belief in a brand new world with brand new rules.

The aura of truth is arguably important in many forms of fiction, but it is absolutely essential in fantasy, which seeks to take us to places beyond our everyday experience. For this kind of literature to work, Coleridge’s oft-repeated standard of maintaining “a willing suspension of disbelief” in the mind of the reader is just not enough. There is nothing suspended, or willful, about our beliefs in the best works of fantasy. We simply believe. A tale of fantasy is something to be swallowed as completely and willingly as my daughter swallowed that rainbow.

That is why the expert chefs of fantasy use only the truest ingredients, straight from the muses’ kitchen, whether they are dealing with character, place, voice, or the guiding ideas that lend weight to their tales. Such writers combine those elements in original, unforgettable ways, to be sure—but the ingredients always come first. If any of them seem false, the whole story will fail. And if all of them seem true, both individually and together, the story can achieve a convincing narrative structure, a believable hero, and even a lasting spiritual depth.

There are three essential levels of truth in any fantasy capable of winning our belief: sensual truth, emotional truth, and spiritual truth. Some tales are more true on some levels, less on others. But the greatest are true on all three levels at once—and within each level, they are true in each of their fundamental ingredients. Allow me to illuminate this point by taking a closer look at these levels of truth:

Sensual truth requires bringing all five of the reader’s senses to life. If we have been cast ashore on a strange coastline, we need to smell the briny breeze, hear the screech of gulls overhead, and feel the coarse sand between our toes. If we have awakened in a deep forest, we must catch the scent of resins on the air, see the shafting light through the boughs, hear a squirrel scampering up a cedar and feel the flakes of bark drop on our hair. And more. To really believe in a place, a moment, we need to feel even the subtlest sensations: the stirring of the mist, the shadows in a pool of water, the subtle hues of a sprig of moss.

In achieving sensual truth, the most essential ingredients often come in the form of details. I am grateful for the fact that, long before I ever tried my hand at fantasy, I was a nature writer. (My first story, written when I was seven, told the life history of a chestnut tree near my home.) This

background makes me acutely aware of the power of a single, well-chosen detail. For example, Tolkien introduces us to hobbits by showing us where they live, how they speak, what they celebrate and fear, how and when they eat—and even the fact that they have hairy toes. This attention to detail gives Bilbo, Frodo, and the others much more reality (and considerably more personality) than they would otherwise possess. We know them—right down to their toes.

Emotional truth goes beyond the senses, engaging our hearts. In compelling tales of fantasy, we believe the emotional elements as fully as if they had happened during our own lives. It doesn't matter at all that the terrain, and the characters themselves, are wholly imaginary. In Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle In Time*, Meg's love for her younger brother feels completely genuine, even if it finds expression in a highly unusual way on a distant planet. Similarly, while most of us probably have not encountered a magical harp, we feel real sorrow when Fflewddur Fflam, Lloyd Alexander's quirky bard in *The Book of Three* and other tales, offers to sacrifice his own magical instrument to help his friends. Often in fantasy, humor opens the door to emotional truth—since humor nudges us to see things from a different angle, or to acknowledge the intermingling of joy and grief, pride and shame, or hope and despair.

Spiritual truth is the deepest of all, connecting us with something profound, something inextricably linked to the human condition. When people ask me why the lore of Merlin, King Arthur, and the Round Table have lasted so many centuries and reached across so many cultures, I point to the spiritual truth embedded in these tales. Merlin alone has been with us for nearly fifteen hundred years, primarily because we continue to see so much truth in his struggles and aspirations. We laugh and cry at his attempts to mesh the dark and light sides of humanity through his pupil Arthur; we understand his yearning to gain wisdom from nature and his fellow living creatures; we applaud his efforts to build bridges between people—including people as antagonistic as the Druids and Celts of sixth century Britain—even as we suspect that those efforts are likely to fail. It was Merlin's spiritual depth, more than anything else, that made me want to explore the lost years of his youth, but I knew from the start that I was plunging into a pool much greater than any single story, a pool whose wellsprings lie in the depths of the human soul.

Fantasy that is true on all of these levels has the capacity to awaken our senses, engage our emotions, and enliven our spirits. And something more. The best fantasy can give us a whole new perspective on ourselves, through creating an altered mirror that reveals our world afresh. But such a mirror must be more than merely distorted: It must also be true. Then, as we look into it, we discover things about ourselves, be they disturbing or encouraging or altogether absurd. And we believe.

By recasting our assumptions, fantasy can lead us beyond what is known and comfortable. It can coax us into the cracks, often invisible, between what is mortal and immortal, between nature and culture, and between conscious and unconscious. It can help us redraw—or eliminate—the boundaries that may divide such concepts as youth and age, masculine and feminine, personal and political.

More striking yet, well-wrought fantasy can inspire new images and concepts to sprout from those cracks between ideas. For this kind of story is not just a meeting of ideas, a mingling of concepts—but a flowering, a fusion, from which something altogether new might emerge.

That is why the realm of fantasy is so richly varied, so full of possibilities. Fantasy can exist anywhere—on a street corner, down a rabbit hole, on a treetop, in a wardrobe, or on the head of a pin. As long as the underlying ingredients are true, and their consistency among themselves is complete, the flavors of a meal of fantasy are limitless.

I have long believed that the power of imagination is really another form of the power of creation. It is our personal form of that power, something anyone can possess. If a reader finds a story about an imagined world to be true, in all its characters and places and cultures and voices, then that reader holds a full picture—a complete vision—of that experience. And if he or she can envision such a new world, then he or she can inhabit it. And yes—create it.

Envisioning is at the core of fantasy. In fact, the word itself comes from the Greek word *phantasia*, meaning “to make visible.” Yet I fear that the term fantasy no longer serves us well. For too many people, the formulaic and shallow examples of fantasy have tainted the whole genre, making them hesitant to explore it.

I would, therefore, propose a new term for the kind of imaginative literature that feels true: visionary tales. It is a term, like the old one, that springs from humanity’s ability to envision and create. Yet it is unburdened by the baggage of “fantasy.” And it implies, if not a complete moral vision, at least an idea or two worth pondering. Most importantly, the phrase visionary tales carries an invitation to envision, and thus create, a new world—the kind of world we can believe in, enter into, and return to whenever we choose.

Tales that are both imaginary and true, whatever name we may give them, offer us an endless variety of tasty meals. Let us say to the chefs: Bring them on! And don’t forget that pinch of starlight in our soup.