Let There Be Dragons

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I have still got the first book I ever read. It was *The Wind in the Willows*. Well, it was probably not the first book I *ever* read - that was no doubt called something like *Nursery Fun* or *Janet and John Book 1*. But it was the first book I opened without chewing the covers or wishing I was somewhere else. It was the first book which, at the age of 10, I read because I was genuinely interested.

I know now, of course, that it is totally the wrong kind of book for children. There is only one female character and she's a washerwoman. No attempt is made to explain the social conditioning and lack of proper housing that makes stoats and weasels act the way they do. Mr Badger's house is an insult to all those children not fortunate enough to live in a Wild Wood. The Mole and the Rat's domestic arrangements are probably acceptable, but only if they come right out and talk frankly about them.

But it was pressed into my hand, and because it wasn't parents or teachers who were recommending the book I read it from end to end, all in one go. And then I started again from the beginning, because I had not realised that there were stories like this.

There's a feeling that I think is only possible to get when you are a child and discover books: it's a kind of fizz - you want to read everything that's in print before it evaporates before your eyes.

I had to draw my own map through this uncharted territory. The message from the management was that, yes, books were a good idea, but I don't recall anyone advising me in any way. I was left to my own devices.

I am now becoming perceived as a young people's writer. Teachers and librarians say, 'You know, your books are *really popular* among children who don't read'. I think this is a compliment; I just wish they would put it another way. In fact, genre authors get to know their reader profile quite intimately, and I know I have a large number of readers who are old enough to drive a car and possibly claim a pension. But the myth persists that all my readers are aged 14 and called Kevin, and so I have taken an interest in the 'dark underworld called children's literature.'

Not many people do, it seems to me, apart from those brave souls who work with children and are interested in what they read. They're unsung resistance heroes in a war that is just possibly being won by Sonic Hedgehogs and bionic plumbers. They don't have many allies, even where you would expect them. Despite the huge number of titles that pour out to shape the minds of the adults, my Sunday paper reviews a mismatched handful of children's books at infrequent intervals and, to show its readers that this is some kind of literary play street, generally puts a picture of a teddy bear on the page.

Perhaps the literary editor's decision is right. In my experience children don't read reviews of children's books. They...
live in a different kind of world.

The aforementioned school librarians tell me that what the children read for fun, what they will actually spend their money on, are fantasy, science fiction and horror and, while they offer up a prayer of thanks that the kids are reading anything in this electronic age, this worries them. It shouldn't.

I now know that almost all fiction is, at some level, fantasy. What Agatha Christie wrote was fantasy. What Tom Clancy writes is fantasy. What Jilly Cooper writes is fantasy - at least, I hope for her sake it is. But what people generally have in mind when they hear the word fantasy is swords, talking animals, vampires, rockets (science fiction is fantasy with bolts on), and around the edges it can indeed be pretty silly. Yet fantasy also speculates about the future, rewrites the past and considers the future. It plays games with the universe.

Not all robots

Fantasy makes many adults uneasy. Children who like the stuff tend to call it 'brill' and 'megagood'. This always disturbs people. (It worries them so much that when someone like P D James uses the mechanisms of science fiction helpful people redefine the field, thus avoiding bestowing on her the mark of Cain; the book isn't science fiction 'because it's not all about robots and other planets'. P D James writing science fiction? Impossible. But Children of Men is a science fiction book, as is Time's Arrow and Fatherland. As was Brian Aldiss' Methuselah's Children, Kurt Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse Five and Philip K Dick's Man in the High Castle. Science fiction, the stuff that is seldom reviewed, is often good; it doesn't need robots, and earth is room enough.)

Of course science fiction and fantasy are sometimes badly written. Many things are. But literary merit is an artificial thing and exists in the eye of the beholder. In a world where Ballard's Empire of the Sun cannot win the Booker, I'm not too in awe of judgements based on literary merit.

Not long ago I talked to a teacher who, having invited me to talk at her school, was having a bit of trouble with the head teacher who thought that fantasy was morally suspect and irrelevant to the world of the '90s.

Morally suspect? Shorn of its trappings, most fantasy would find approval in a Victorian household. The morality of fantasy and horror is, by and large, the strict morality of the fairy tale. The vampire is slain, the alien is blown out of the airlock, the Dark Lord is vanquished and, perhaps at some loss, the good triumph - not because they are better armed but because Providence is on their side.

Why does the third of the three brothers, who shares his food with the old woman in the wood, go on to become king of the country? Why does James Bond manage to disarm the nuclear bomb a few seconds before it goes off rather than, as it were, a few seconds afterwards? Because a universe where that did not happen would be a dark and hostile place. Let there be goblin hordes, let there be terrible environmental threats, let there be giant mutated slugs if you really must, but let there be hope. It may be a grim, thin hope, an Arthurian sword at sunset, but let us know that we do not live in vain.

Good and evil

To stay sane, if I may gently paraphrase what Edward Pearce recently wrote in the Guardian, it is frequently necessary for someone to take short views, to look for comfort, to keep a piece of the world still genially ordered, if only for the duration of theatrical time or the length of a book. And this is harmless enough. Classical, written fantasy might introduce children to the occult, but in a healthier way than might otherwise be the case in our strange society. If you're told about vampires, it's a good thing to be told about stakes at the same time.

And fantasy's readers might also learn, in the words of Stephen Sondheim, that witches can be right and giants can be good. They learn that where people stand is perhaps not as important as which way they face. This is part of the dangerous process of growing up.

As for escapism, I'm quite happy about the word. There is nothing wrong with escapism. The key points of
consideration, though, are what you are escaping from, and where you are escaping to.

As a suddenly thirsting reader I escaped first of all to what was then called Outer Space. I read a lot of science fiction, which as I have said is only a 20th-century subset of fantasy. And a lot of it was, in strict literary terms, rubbish. But this was good rubbish. It was like an exercise bicycle for the mind - it doesn't take you anywhere, but it certainly tones up the muscles.

Irrelevant? I first came across any mention of ancient Greek civilisation in a fantasy book - by Mary Renault. But in the '50s most schools taught history like this: there were the Romans who had a lot of baths and built some roads and left. Then there was a lot of undignified pushing and shoving until the Normans arrived, and history officially began.

Ways of seeing

We did Science, too, in a way. Yuri Gagarin was spinning around above our heads, but I don't recall anyone at school ever mentioning the fact. I don't even remember anyone telling us that science was not about messing around with chemicals and magnets, but rather a way of looking at the universe.

Science fiction looked at the universe all the time. I make no apology for having enjoyed it. We live in a science fiction world: two miles down there you'd fry and two miles up there you'd gasp for breath, and there is a small but significant chance that in the next thousand years a large comet or asteroid will smack into the planet. Finding this out when you're 13 or so is a bit of an eye-opener. It puts acne in its place, for a start.

Then other worlds out there in space got me interested in this one down here. It is a small mental step from time travel to paleontology, from sword 'n' sorcery fantasy to mythology and ancient history. Truth is stranger than fiction; nothing in fantasy enthralled me as much as reading of the evolution of mankind from proto-blob to newt, tree shrew, Oxbridge arts graduate and eventually to tool-using mammal.

I first came across words like 'ecologist' and 'overpopulation' in science fiction books in the late '50s and early '60s, long before they had become fashionable. Yes, probably Malthus had said it first - but you don't read Malthus when you're 11, though you might read someone like John Brunner or Harry Harrison because their books have got an exciting spaceship on the cover.

I also came across the word 'neoteny', which means 'remaining young'. It's something which we as humans have developed into a survival trait. Other animals, when they are young, have a curiosity about the world, a flexibility of response, and an ability to play which they lose as they grow up. As a species we have retained it. As a species, we are forever sticking our fingers into the electric socket of the universe to see what will happen next. It is a trait that will either save us or kill us, but it is what makes us human beings. I would rather be in the company of people who look at Mars than people who contemplate humanity's navel - other worlds are better than fluff.

And I came across a lot of trash. But the human mind has a healthy natural tendency to winnow out the good stuff from the rubbish. It's like gold mining: you have to shift a ton of dirt to get the gold, if you don't shift the dirt, you won't find the nugget. As far as I am concerned, escapist literature let me escape to the real world.

Compost for the healthy mind

So let's not get frightened when children read fantasy. It is the compost for a healthy mind. It stimulates the inquisitive nodes. It may not appear as 'relevant' as books set more firmly in the child's environment, or whatever hell the writer believes to be the child's environment, but there is some evidence that a rich internal fantasy life is as good and necessary for a child as healthy soil is for a plant, for much the same reasons.

Of course, some may read no other kind of fiction all their lives (although in my experience science fiction fans tend to be widely read outside the field). Adult SF fans may look a bit scary when they come into bookshops, some of them have been known to wear plastic pointy ears, but people like that are an unrepresentative minority, and are certainly no
weirder than people who, say, play golf. At the very least they are helping to keep the industry alive, and providing one
of the best routes to reading that there can be.

Here's to fantasy as the proper diet for the growing soul. All human life is there: a moral code, a sense of order and,
sometimes, great big green things with teeth. There are other books to read, and I hope children who start with fantasy
go on to read them. I did. But everyone has to start somewhere.

Please call it fantasy, by the way. Don't call it 'magical realism', that's just fantasy wearing a collar and tie, mark-of-
Cain words, words used to mean 'fantasy written by someone I was at university with'. Like the fairy tales that were its
forebears, fantasy needs no excuses.

Dragons can be killed

One of the great popular novelists of the early part of this century was G K Chesterton. Writing at a time when fairy
stories were under attack, for pretty much the same reason as books can now be covertly banned in some schools
because they have the word 'witch' in the title, he said: 'The objection to fairy stories is that they tell children there are
dragons. But children have always known there are dragons. Fairy stories tell children that dragons can be killed.'

The above article is an edited version of the speech given by Terry Pratchett as a guest of honour at the Booksellers
Association Conference dinner in April this year. We thank the Bookseller, and Terry Pratchett, for permission to reprint
it.

The following Terry Pratchett titles are published by Doubleday in hardback and Corgi in paperback:

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His Discworld titles are available from the same publisher.

The dragon illustrations accompanying this article are by Wayne Anderson. They're taken from *Dragons: Truth, Myth
and Legend* by David Passes, published by David Bennett Books, 1 85602 050 9. The book is a collection of dragon
stories from around the world.

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