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Michael Levy , Farah Mendlesohn
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Introduction

The aim of this book is to bring together two traditions of criticism, that of the literature of the fantastic, and that of children's literature. In addition, this book aims to situate children's fantasy in the context of changing ideas of childhood across three centuries; and perhaps most crucially, to consider the effect which the extension of childhood has had upon the writing and publishing of children's fiction. It is a story of separate but overlapping traditions, that of the British Empire and later the Commonwealth, and that of the United States and eventually North America, and of European traditions that have influenced both.

The study of the literature of the fantastic is relatively recent, and in some ways still underdeveloped: the crucial critical texts in the field still number less than ten, and until recently focused primarily on defending and defining fantasy. That fantasy has needed defending stems from the division between high and low in our literary culture, in which belief in mimesis, the idea that a writer or artist can accurately describe reality, took centre stage. Kathryn Hume, in her landmark 1984 study *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature*, wrote, 'It is an astonishing tribute to the eloquence and rigour of Plato and Aristotle as originators of western critical theory that most subsequent critics have assumed mimetic representations to be the essential relationship between text and the real world', but it is in some ways not astonishing at all. Christianity is a hybrid of Greek and Judaic ideas of the world: the first saw literature as primarily moral, the second as primarily historical. The Greek gods and their fantastical adventures were *not* moral, and to Christians were positively immoral; it was easiest to dismiss the unreality that they represented. Kathryn Hume constructs a critical thread through Tasso, Hobbes and David Hume, who, she reminds us, actually 'disparages literary fantasy as a threat to sanity'.[1] John Bunyan, author of one of the great taproot texts of the quest fantasy, explicitly denied that *The Pilgrim's Progress* was fantasy. During the Renaissance, perpetrators of

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such 'lies', from Boccaccio to Sir Philip Sidney, complained about those who criticized their work on these grounds.

If fantasy was a species of lie, then it should not be fed to children. Before the eighteenth century, fantastical tales – folk tales such as Robin Hood, Tom Thumb or Mother Hubbard (already a familiar figure when she appeared in Edmund Spenser's 'Mother Hubberd's Tale', 1578–9, a satire, not a children's story) – were tales not for children, but for the peasantry. Children were taught (if they were taught) from hornbooks, the Bible and, as this story opens, from primers grounded in mimesis. Mother Goose was first mentioned by a French writer, Jean Loret, in *La muse historique* in 1650, and was made more popular by Charles Perrault's *Contes de ma mère l'Oye* in 1695. These stories were intended for the amusements of adults. The transition will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 1, but it is worth noting that the raising of tales originally intended for the peasantry into fare for the court and for adults may well be a reaction to the civil wars that raged across Europe in the seventeenth century.

The wars had led to unprecedented social mixing, which may have spread the tales, but in addition may well have created a climate in which realist literatures were risky: better to take refuge in folk tales, and perhaps tone them down a little to remove their more subversive elements. At the end of the eighteenth century a change in the way (middle- and upper-class) children were understood enabled the fantastical to enter the sphere of children's reading. The perception of the child who is born sinful, who must be tamed and led away from the fantastical to a realist understanding of his or her Christian responsibilities, is gradually exchanged for a notion that the child is born innocent, and can be tempted through the fantastic to the marvellous in Christianity. When fantasy emerges as part of the creative upsurge and response to industrialization in the nineteenth century, many Christians are at the heart of it. The legacy of John Bunyan had been to legitimize fantasy as an acceptable mode of allegory and moral instruction for the Christian, and the immense popularity of *The Pilgrim's Progress* with families demonstrates its utility in moral instruction. This is perhaps epitomized in the work of George MacDonald: both *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871) and *The Princess and Curdie* (1883) are explicitly concerned with the shaping of the Christian child.

It would be nice to say that fantasy no longer needs defending, but hostility to it as a literary form reappears periodically. *The Wizard of Oz* is one of the most frequently banned books in the United States;

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J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* sequence arouses the ire of fundamentalists; modern Islam is often uncomfortable with fantasy – while, at the same time, Christians (e.g. G. P. Taylor) as well as Muslims (e.g. Najiyah Diana Helwani) continue to write allegorical fantasy. Jews, interestingly, seem to have had little tension with the form: the best-known Jewish children's fantasy writer is perhaps Jane Yolen but there are many more. On the secular stage, the division remains closer to that of the eighteenth century: the fantastic is to be regarded primarily as children's literature, and children's literature is to be regarded as innately inferior and less complex.

If the defence of fantasy is ultimately a rather pointless task, the act of defining it was crucial to its early critical history. Rosemary Jackson, Tzvetan Todorov, W. R. Irwin, Brian Attebery and a group of other hard-working scholars have explored the concept in great depth in an attempt to delineate the fantastic, to greater (Jackson, Irwin, Hume) or lesser (Todorov) utility; but apart from the general understanding that the fantastic is the realization of the *impossible* (distinguishing it from science fiction which attempts to realize a possible), a paradigmatic approach grounded in reader response, which assumes that the existence of the fantastic is a constant negotiation between author, publisher and reader, rather than a delineation, has become the dominant narrative.

Brian Attebery's use of the fuzzy set (a mathematical term for sets whose elements have degrees of membership and in which case means a set whose core we can identify but whose edges are ambiguous) to identify a core of texts to which we can point and say 'This is fantasy, and as we move from the core it becomes less fantastical' has worked well, even as it is now being challenged by Farah Mendlesohn and Helen Young, not for its lack of utility but because the original material on which it was based was biased by the selections of respondents and texts, and perhaps most significantly – given the rapid shifts in the field traced in Mendlesohn and James's *A Short History of Fantasy* (2009) – because it reflected a very specific moment in time.[2]

In her introduction to *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Farah Mendlesohn has suggested that it is no longer worth engaging in a debate over the exact definition of fantasy: 'A consensus has emerged, accepting as a viable "fuzzy set" a range of critical definitions',[3] in which the mode of fantasy rather than the nature of fantasy is crucial to an understanding of the form. The four modes Mendlesohn outlines are the *portal-quest fantasy*, a fantastic world entered through a portal and told as tourist narrative in which the protagonists have little access to the underpinning of the world; the *intrusion* fantasy in which the fantastic intrudes upon the normative

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world, disrupting it until defeated; the *immersive* fantasy, in which the fantastic world becomes the primary world for all the participants and is constructed as such, with little explanation; and the *liminal* fantasy, in which reader and protagonist may have very different ideas about what is fantastical and Todorovian doubt underpins the rhetoric.

The concept of a fuzzy set enables two highly opinionated scholars to come to terms with their own differences over whether a given work is fantasy, horror, science fiction or something else entirely. This is possible even when one scholar (Levy) has Coleridge's 'willing suspension of disbelief' firmly lodged in the back of his mind, while the other (Mendlesohn) prefers to argue for the intensification of belief.

The study of children's literature is far more established than that of fantasy, with the first studies of children's literature appearing in the 1920s, along with *The Horn Book Magazine*, now the most prestigious review journal of children's literature. By the 1960s Margaret Meek and Humphrey Carpenter, among others, had begun the work of establishing respectability for the field, and academic journals, such as *Children's Literature*, *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* and *The Lion and the Unicorn*, appeared in the 1970s. However, while the infrastructure of children's fantasy criticism is strong in these journals, and in the general introductory texts such as John Rowe Townsend's *Written for Children* and Peter Hunt's *An Introduction to Children's Literature*, the specialist material is more problematic. Ann Swinfen's *In Defence of Fantasy* (1984) does not position itself as a book about children's literature although it cites only children's texts, and it lacks a historical paradigm (the books are dated according to the edition read); Sheila Egoff's *Worlds Within: Children's Fantasy from the Middle Ages to Today* (1988) is an excellent introduction but now old, and concludes prior to the development of Canada and Australia as significant voices in the English-speaking book market. (A good replacement is K. V. Johansen's *Quests and Kingdoms: A Grown-Up's Guide to Children's Fantasy Literature*, 2005.) The rapid development of Canadian and Antipodean fantasy is why Colin Manlove's otherwise excellent *From Alice to Harry Potter: Children's Fantasy in England* (2003) is problematic: it is simply too narrow and ignores the partial merger of the British Commonwealth and American traditions in the 1990s. Pamela Gates, Susan Steffel and Francis Molson's *Fantasy Literature for Children and Young Adults* is probably the closest to what we have set out to achieve, but its categorization of fantasy into fairy tales, mixed fantasy and heroic-ethical traditions is unilluminating and lacks a contextual or historical overview.[4]

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All of the above titles are highly selective in terms of the texts they study, leaning towards the best of children's fantasy, or simply that which has been loved enough to survive. We have been less so: we began our bibliographies from scratch, creating lists from each period and including lesser-known texts or those which have completely vanished, as we strove to create a narrative history of the field. The working definition of fantasy in this book is broad and to a degree ad hoc. We have excluded obvious science fiction (time travel with equipment or vehicle), alternative history (including steampunk, which is grounded in the early expansion of the rational and mechanical) and tales of horror that lack a fantastical element. We have included time-slips where the facilitating device is magical, and alternative worlds that embrace magic. Animal tales are included where animals behave as humans and there is no attempt to create a mimesis of animal life (so *Redwall*, but not *Watership Down*). We cover all historical genres: myths and legends, fairy tales, romances, ghost fantasies, quests, nonsense tales and paranormal romance.

We have, however, placed genre and media limitations on this book: it is predominantly about what the American publishing industry labels chapter books; we have excluded picture books, poetry, television and film. We have included non-English-language fantasy where it has been foundational (Hans Christian Andersen) or absorbed into the traditions we describe (Tove Jansson). In the early chapters we have attempted to be comprehensive. By Chapter 5 we have moved to tracing strands in the weave. It is a given that whoever you are, wherever you are from, you will discover that a number of your favourite children's fantasies are not discussed or done justice to in this volume, as there is simply too much to cover.

We have used a range of ways to describe and classify fantasy: high fantasy for medievalist and court fantasy, but indigenous fantasy (Attebery) rather than low fantasy for the fantasy of the everyday; urban and pastoral fantasy; and on occasion Mendlesohn's quartet of immersive, portal-quest, intrusion and liminal fantasy when we have wished to describe the narratology of the text. But ours is a book that argues there are more ways than one to consider literature: the filters and questions applied each produce very different and fruitful understandings.

We have also taken decisions around the definition of children's literature that reflect our goal of a flexible and reader-oriented understanding. The first is that children's literature is fiction read to or by children, whether or not it was originally published for children and whether or not adults have approved of children reading it. This particularly affects

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the early chapters of this volume, which concern a time before children's fiction was a category, but it also applies to the work of John Bunyan, Charles Kingsley, Stephen King, Anne Rice, Terry Brooks and Trudi Canavan, whose books have been appropriated by younger readers.

The second decision is almost more important because it explains the changing scope of the book as it proceeds to narrate three centuries of fiction for children: this book might best be understood as a history of fantasy for school-age children. It is very noticeable that the age at which fiction specifically for children is pitched has been gradually extended. In our earliest chapters the protagonist is rarely over eight years old; by the 1930s twelve seems to be the cut-off point; by the 1950s and into the 1980s fourteen-year-olds are regularly appearing in children's fantasy. From the 1980s onwards a new category begins to develop – first through appropriating the work of adult writers, later as new teen lists, until it emerges as Young Adult – which features protagonists in their late teens. By the time this book concludes, there is a swathe of fiction labelled Young Adult (or more recently New Adult) which features protagonists in their early twenties and is clearly aimed at late teens and early twenties readers, readers who are in this modern world still quite likely to be in school or college.

Our aim is to create an overview of the development of fantasy literature within the English-speaking world. This is a tale of distinct but converging book markets: as late as the 1980s and well into the 1990s, there were two children's book markets, one in the USA which eventually extended to collaborate with Canada, and one focused on Britain, which encompassed the British Empire, later the Commonwealth (Ireland declined to join the Commonwealth but it remains part of this nexus). Although some influential books crossed lines, the markets were sufficiently distinct that readers from Singapore, Delhi, Sydney and London were more likely to share their childhood reading with one another than with a reader from New York. These book markets had different flavours. The great outdoors is a feature of American, Canadian and Australian fantasy a full century before it becomes the norm for the British market, where over seventy years we will trace a very distinct trajectory out of the home, into the garden and finally into the streets. This is also a tale of absorption and sometimes appropriation, in which we will trace different source materials, the stuff of fantasy – folk tales, fairy, Greek myth and legend, science, Arthuriana, paganism, medievalism, orientalism – new cultural voices, and different ideologies, particularly feminism, as they shape the emergence of the field.

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We begin with 'How fantasy became children's literature' and in Chapter 1 consider tales such as *Aesop's Fables* (1484), *The History of Reynard the Fox* (1481) and *The History of the Seven Champions of Christendom* (1596), and the ways in which they entered the popular imagination and did or did not receive approval from the cultural elites of their day. We then move on to a discussion of fairy tales, as peasant or Mother Goose stories, as bourgeois *Märchen* and as courtly tales retold and refined, and discuss their influence on the Romantics and on nineteenth-century English writers. This takes us to Chapter 2, in which we explore the British fascination with 'Fairies, ghouls and goblins: the realms of Victorian and Edwardian fancy' and the movement of writers such as Charles Dickens and Charles Kingsley, Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear against the dominant narrative mode of realism, until the point at the end of the century when the majority of that Victorian and Edwardian British children's literature which has survived is firmly in the fantastical vein.

Immigrants to America brought their own folklore with them, but as Chapter 3, 'The American search for an American childhood', argues, it did not easily survive the hostile environment in which it found itself – fascinatingly, this itself would become a theme in the American urban fantasy of the 1990s. When Washington Irving wrote his folk tales, he often stripped them of their fantastic elements, or offered rationalist explanations of his apparently fantastical tales. Yet a strong Gothic tradition developed for adults in the works of Charles Brockden Brown, Herman Melville and Edgar Allan Poe, and this was quickly appropriated by young readers. Hawthorne published two collections specifically for children, *A Wonder-Book for Girls and Boys* and *Tanglewood Tales*, both of which retell the Greek myths, the one set of fantastical material that received college-level approval. Until the publication of *The Wizard of Oz* by Baum, however, American children had little fantasy to choose from; only later was there an explosion of material which leaned heavily towards the whimsical, kicked off perhaps by E. B. White's success with works such as *Charlotte's Web* (1952).

The period between the First and Second World Wars creates a uniquely coherent period in British fantasy, which we will explore in Chapter 4. However, while this coherence is political and cultural, in terms of the fantastic it is a period of wild experimentation with form and content. It includes such rich and diverse work as that of A. A. Milne, Walter de la Mare, Alison Uttley, Eleanor Farjeon, Roger Lancelyn Green, Enid Blyton, T. H. White and, of course, J. R. R. Tolkien. A

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number of these writers, although famous in the UK, were virtually unknown in the United States.

In the aftermath of war, there were drastic changes in both the structures and stuff of British fantasy. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss the changing landscape, social, political and literal, of post-war British and Commonwealth fantasy. War had been demanding of children, both on the home front and in the European and Asian war zones, and we see this reflected in the works of C. S. Lewis, Susan Cooper, Alan Garner, Lloyd Alexander and Margaret Mahy. It had also raised levels of fear, and we see this expressed both in the new quest narratives, and in the wainscot fantasies of Mary Norton, Tove Jansson, Carol Kendall and Patricia Wrightson, and to a degree in the trickster fantasies of Roald Dahl. The widening scope of children's actions in fantasy literature is noticeable and startling. In addition, we begin to see the coming together of the stuff of fantasy, as folklore, fairy and genre fantastic converged.

From the 1960s the diverse strands of fantasy seen in previous generations began to separate into clear subgenres. Chapter 7, 'Middle Earth, medievalism and mythopoeic fantasy', focuses on the strand that came to dominate the 1970s and 1980s, led by the mass-market publication of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* in 1965. American authors such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Patricia McKillip, Robin McKinley, Tamora Pierce and Jane Yolen all moved into secondary-world fantasy, each making use of its traditional structures without necessarily accepting its traditional assumptions. Along the way the Americans also took on Garner's challenge to make use of the stuff of the world around them, from new arguments about medieval Europe to unfamiliar folklores and different religious traditions, while challenging and interrogating colonialist and class assumptions along the way. By the middle of the 1990s this was the dominant tradition, spreading across an international market.

Yet behind the scenes an urban and indigenous fantasy tradition, led in Britain by Diana Wynne Jones, Barbara Sleigh and others, still thrived, existing in the interstices of a publishing market dominated by social realism. In 1997 this tradition was revived by the publication of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, which transformed the children's book market into an international industry. The success of *Harry Potter* and its consequences are discussed in Chapter 8, along with another change, the clear emergence of a separate but linked teen market (where we have sited Phillip Pullman, for reasons we will make clear at that point). Books written for 'children' in the 1990s feel far more distinctly *children's* books, in that they are clearly aimed at the pre-teen to perhaps fourteen-year-old

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market. As the limited age range of the audience for such books became clear, and as the time the average spent in education increased into the late teens and beyond, the outward-bound trajectory of the narratives – towards the adult world of work – in much of the earlier children's fiction of all genres was undermined. Fantasy for teens emerged, shaped around their concerns.

The final chapter, Chapter 9, reflects two very different trends. One set of Young Adult fantasies, often set in *this* world and where the fantastic takes on the role of exotic and disruptive intrusion, is paranormal fiction. Although such tales are often hard-hitting and the characters may have real-world issues to deal with, these are ultimately consolatory fictions, which deal with finding groups to join, and gaining status, often through romance. Another set of Young Adult fantasies deals with what we describe as the fantasy of bitterness and loss: these are uneasy stories of outsider teenagers in hostile environments, and we as critics believe that this subgenre includes much of the finest fantasy for any age group currently being written.

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CHAPTER I

How fantasy became children's literature

Historians of children's literature begin their narratives in a variety of time periods, and with a specific range of texts, but these choices are not value neutral: each choice, for period or genre, tells the reader something about the historian's or critic's understanding of what childhood is, or what children's literature is. Children's fantasy has far stronger roots in tales of the fantastic than it does in tales for children: the history of children's fantasy is essentially one of appropriation, both children appropriating texts, and those who have written for children in the last three centuries appropriating and adapting their material for children. The close relationship between these processes may be one factor in the disproportionate representation of fantasy among those children's book titles which retain their popularity – beyond nostalgia – into the reading lives of adults.

Seth Lerer, in *Children's Literature: A Reader's History, from Aesop to Harry Potter* (2008), begins with the ancients and identifies children's literature less as a body of texts – which was generally shared with adults – than as a mode of delivery: the children of educated classical Greeks and Romans would have been introduced to the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, but would have been taught in excerpts, with an emphasis on memory, recitation and quotation, so that the well-rounded citizen could draw on a common culture of citizenry.[1] This tradition lasted well into the twentieth century in the great British public schools and is well portrayed in that classic of children's literature, *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857) by Thomas Hughes. In this model of children's fiction, fiction is a thing *for* children, but not *of* them. It is a route out of childhood and into the adult world which does not treasure the child or childhood as something precious, and in which children's reading is contiguous with that of adults: it is primarily moralistic and therefore, as with Greek and Roman education, primarily civic.

This approach is valuable to the student of children's fantasy literature because much of what has become the matter (the themes or substance)

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