

How to Write a Fantasy Novel

Lee Duigon



In reclaiming cultural ground for Christ's Kingdom, even small gains count. Besides, one never knows what even the smallest victories might lead to.

Fantasy literature has long been popular, especially among young readers, twelve years old and up. When J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series made publishing history, it gave birth to a boom in fantasy. Here, at last, was something that young people really wanted to read!

But an examination of the shelves in any bookstore will show that fantasy, for all its popularity, has a major downside for Christian readers. The market is dominated by unwholesome content—books glamorizing witchcraft, vampirism, zombies, etc.

C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien have long held the fort for Christianity in the realm of fantasy. It's time they received some reinforcements.

A Darker Message

Why write Christian fantasy? The reasons are simple enough.

*Fantasy, like poetry, appeals to a region of the mind not easily reached by other types of fiction. Would it not be good ministry to sow some seeds there?

*Why let the field be monopolized by work that is anything but Christian?

*An effective use of fantasy in Christ's service will make some readers more receptive to the gospel.

Finally, much fantasy is being used today to deliver a darker message. The whole point of today's vampire stories is salvation without Christ. The vampire

enjoys physical immortality, perpetual attractiveness to the opposite sex (for some reason there are no ugly vampires who remain ugly forever), power beyond the lot of ordinary mortals, and no burden at all of moral accountability. The witch, wizard, or magician is far superior to the uninitiated person.

This is especially dangerous to teens and tweens because it's so seductive. Children reach an age when they become aware that they are powerless, relative to the adult world, and they want some power of their own. They read of Harry Potter running rings around his lunkheaded foster parents, or teen vampires doing anything they please without getting grounded—and they want some of that. This kind of fantasy is nothing but an echo of the devil's seduction of Adam and Eve: "Ye shall be as gods."

We can't just let that stand. We have to elbow some of this junk off the shelves and replace it with more wholesome fare.

Re-normalize Religion

Looking back on fifty-plus years of movies, television, novels and short stories, cartoons and comic strips, embracing untold thousands of fictional characters, it's hard to find religious faith playing much of a part in the lives of those characters. Apparently the vast majority of them simply live without it. This is a very peculiar and even unnatural situation.

Up until fairly recent times, religious belief and culture were inseparable. Read American letters and speeches from the nineteenth century, and you'll

see what I mean. But even by then, fiction in the Western world had begun to drift away from religion: faith is less visible in nineteenth-century fiction than it was in real life. By the time we get into the twentieth century, fictional characters can live out their whole lives without voicing a single religious sentiment or taking part in a single religiously motivated action.

The children of the twenty-first century, from infancy on, consume an incalculable amount of fictional content in movies, television, and other media. What they see, while being entertained, influences their worldview and their beliefs. If it were not so, no one would bother to produce commercials.

What children see in fiction, for the most part, is a world without a god. God is tacitly assumed to have no active role within the fictional world. When religiously motivated characters do appear in a movie or a TV show, it's usually to be made fun of—ignorant, nasty, narrow-minded fools, etc. But far more often there's simply no religious belief at all in evidence.

One of the tasks of the Christian fantasy writer, therefore, is to re-normalize religion—specifically, the Christian religion. Create fantasy worlds in which religion is as deeply rooted and vital as it has been in most real-world cultures for most of human history—not just painted on, but permeating everything; at least as deeply as the secularist pseudoreligion permeates our own culture today.

This is not to say we create a fantasy world and fill it with Presbyterian churches attended by all the characters

(although, on second thought, it might be worth a try). In my own work, I have tried to be more subtle than that.

When we read C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, we who are Christians can easily see that Aslan, the Great Lion, is to be identified with our real-world Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Christ appears here as a lion because Lewis imagined a world inhabited by talking animals. Their savior, naturally, would be in the form of a talking animal. Once we see Aslan give up his own life to save an undeserving sinner, and then be resurrected in the flesh, we can't not see him as Jesus.

But it may take some time for the modern, religiously desensitized reader to see this. Meanwhile, Lewis hoped to create in the reader's mind a receptive environment for Christ Himself. To what degree he succeeded is a matter of opinion, but there can be no doubt of his objective.

We are probably wise to assume that some of our readers will have little or no knowledge of Christianity, may even be averse to it, haven't read the Bible, and won't want to be "preached at." It is just such people whose hearts we most want to change. But how are we to reach them?

A Few Simple Rules

My own fantasy writing is guided by certain principles that may be adopted by others—the fields being already white to harvest and the laborers being few. To present them briefly:

***God is still God, even in a fantasy world.** God, who created the world we live in, is the creator and sovereign lord of the world that I have imagined. In that world are characters who know this and characters who don't. The important thing is for the reader to know it, without being clubbed over the head with it. This requires some delicacy of touch.

***God's moral laws, as given in the Bible, apply to the fantasy world.** It can't be otherwise: God's laws proceed from His own righteousness. Even in an imaginary world, murder, adultery, theft, and all the other sins will still be sins. And virtues will still be virtues.

You'd think those two rules would go without saying, but remember the nature of the competition. We are going up against books about girls using witchcraft to get whatever they want, boys learning wizardry so they can wield power over other human beings, vampires who are their own salvation and a law unto themselves—all without a glimmer of God's grace. The moral order in our fantasy world must be a godly order.

No Magic, Please

***Allow what the Bible allows: mortals can't do "magic."** This may seem counterintuitive. After all, what's a fantasy without magic?

Lewis and Tolkien have already blazed this trail. "Magic" in Narnia is woven into the fabric of the world and is best employed by Aslan. Witches in Narnia do great harm by magic, but they only look human: they aren't. And in Tolkien's world, powerful magic is done by spiritual entities—"wizards" to whom power has been divinely delegated, and evil spirits in rebellion against God's order. In both these fantasy worlds, mortals are unable to wield magic and get into real trouble when they try. (Remember what happened to the great man, Denethor, in Tolkien's *The Return of the King*, as a result of trying to use the magical seeing stone.)

In the Bible, Moses is able to produce water from a rock by striking it with his staff. If this were a Harry Potter novel, Moses would have learned this "magic trick" by studying at Hogwarts wizards' school. The power would be his, to use as he saw fit. But in the Bible

the power is all God's—and woe unto Moses for forgetting to acknowledge that! Similarly, the Israelites were under no illusion that any magical power of their own collapsed the walls of Jericho. They only did as God commanded and saw God's might destroy their enemy's defenses.

We don't want our fantasy to whisper to young readers that there is power out there waiting for them to pick it up and use it: that they can be as gods. We would rather teach that to God belongs all sovereign power and that our highest aspiration is to be servants of the true and living God.

We needn't let that inhibit our imaginations. As we see in the Bible, God's servants can get involved in some pretty hair-raising adventures—well worth reading about.

Let 'er Rip!

***Give your imagination free rein—within the moral and spiritual boundaries set by the Bible.**

The appeal of an imaginary world is that it's very different from our own. There's no faster way to explode a fantasy than to drag into it some of the cultural rubbish of our own time and place. I actually read a fantasy novel once in which an elf turned to a dwarf and said, "We must respect diverse lifestyles." So much for that fantasy.

C. S. Lewis populated his Narnia with talking animals, along with creatures of classical mythology like fauns and dryads (a decision that his close friend, Tolkien, questioned). Tolkien wrote of hobbits, elves, dwarves, and dragons. Both created worlds with their own geography, cultures, and histories.

Allow your fantasy world to follow its own arc of history, as different from the real world's history as you please. My own fantasy world, for instance, unlike Narnia, has yet to meet its Savior. God created it and is in an ongoing

process of redeeming it from sin. The exact methods He uses there are not the same as the ones He has used in our world, because—obviously—they're different worlds. In my world of *Bell Mountain*, the modern age comes before the medieval period; animals thought to be extinct (or not even known about) are wandering in from parts unknown; prophecy breaks out in unexpected places; and God takes into His service children, the elderly, eccentrics, little hairy humanoids living in the ruins of ancient cities, heathen armies, and one or two thoroughly bad characters—passing over the wise, the great, the rich, and the powerful. And of course the inspiration for this is the Bible, Joel and First Corinthians chapter 1 in particular.

What Not to Do

Finally, at all costs we must avoid “plugging in” religion just so we can say we have a “Christian” book. Bright young readers are sensitive to phoniness. They don't like being manipulated. Worse, a writer's awkwardness will look like phoniness and have the same effect.

Religion must be an integral part of the Christian writer's imaginary world and the lives of the characters who inhabit it. To know if this is so, apply a simple test: will the story hold together without it? If the answer is “yes,” then you have only tacked religion on to your story rather than embedded it, and you must try again.

It should be our aim to use fantasy to prepare the way of the Lord into the reader's heart. It should be our tactic to be as innocent as doves and as wise as serpents. In *Bell Mountain* and its sequels, I have tried to induct the reader into a world where Biblical principles are always operative, even though that world's history is very different from ours. Its scriptures and its practices look different, but that's only on the surface. Underneath, it's governed by the same

God who reveals Himself to us in the Bible and by the same immutable principles of righteousness. 🏰

Lee Duigon is a Christian free-lance writer and contributing editor for the Chalcedon Report. He has been a newspaper editor and reporter and the author of the newly released novel *Bell Mountain* from Storehouse Press.

Duigon ... Jonadab Review cont. from page 18 currently to right the moral and cultural decay in the West. We cannot vote ourselves out of the crisis ... Political activism does not build strong Christian families, necessary to any stable and moral society, yet Western governments grow more hostile and adversarial to the Christian Church and family. *Laws being enacted will make further persecution of the Christian Church and family inevitable*” (pp. 141–142; emphasis added).

One Family's Rules

The Moores list the “home rules” they've established for their family (p. 118).

- *Family celebrations and traditions.
- *Brothers and sisters regarded as permanent friends. (And how many Christian parents have been dismayed by some of the “friends” their kids picked up in public school?)
- *Regular worship, Bible study, quiet time, and Scripture memory.
- *Supper together around the table without a television.
- *Short accounts when we have sinned.
- *Practical holiness.
- *Correction for disobedience, disrespect, stealing, and lying.
- *Homeschooling or Christian schooling.
- *Showing respect for parents and others in authority.

“Raising a family for God does not just happen,” they add. “Children do

not arrive on our doorsteps as obedient Christian disciples” (p. 119).

Is any of this easy? Of course not. “Isolation from events is impossible,” the Moores grant (p. 122). Yes—sooner or later, your children are going to want to know what those *Twilight* books and movies are all about: and they're going to want to know about worse things, too. “We can ultimately go nowhere on this earth to escape all problems. We must lovingly engage our culture for Christ without being overcome ourselves” (p. 123). A very strong Biblical foundation is indispensable. The corrupt culture in which we all must live never rests from its work of moral erosion. But in the long run, “Our security is in God alone” (p. 123); “God's justice will prevail” (p. 125); and “The righteous will be rewarded” (p. 126).

The Promise of Jonadab is available on www.amazon.com, or it can be ordered directly from the publisher.

We recommend it because we agree with Ray and Gail Moore that Western culture is in a very bad way, and families had better make a plan to protect themselves. The best plan is to trust in God and live by His Word ... generation after generation.

We don't know what's coming down the road. It might be destruction; or it might be repentance, revival, and renewal. If we, like Jonadab, put our families in a right relationship to God—and teach our children to do the same for their children—we can be sure that God will bless us. 🏰