

## Accessible Fantasy

The modern genre of fantasy is largely dominated by two categories: epic and young adult. Romantic fantasy (romantasy) is—unfortunately and much to the detriment of the genre—quickly becoming a third and equal member at the table. There are many works under the table, however; works within the umbrella of fantasy that do not fall into mainstream categories. Mervyn Peake’s *Gormenghast* is an example of fantasy that is neither epic, romantic, nor aimed at young adults. It reads much more like high-brow literature. It is credited as the first ‘fantasy of manners’ novel, a subgenre that now includes authors such as Jo Walton, Susanna Clarke, and Katherine Addison. These have rather taken the subgenre and made it theirs, however. As it stands today, fantasy of manners has little in common with anything Mervyn Peake wrote.

I didn’t think much about subgenres when writing and developing my fantasy world—that’s the beautiful innocence of writing and worldbuilding: you don’t think about the labels and logistics, you just write. But, when publishing my first Dawnheim novel (*The Dark House*), one of my greatest challenges was deciding what to categorize it as. I hadn’t written epic fantasy, nor had I written something geared toward young adults—I certainly hadn’t written romance. For a time I categorized it in my mind simply as “a curious little book.” Fantasy of manners was the closest thing I could come to. But, as I continued exploring Dawnheim, I began to question whether or not my works fit into the subgenre. During the publishing of my third Dawnheim novel (*The Fishermen’s Ledger*), I decided my work was similar to that of Peake, but didn’t fit the largely romantic curve overtaking the subgenre he founded. I sat down and started reviewing my work, dissecting what I put into my novels and what I wanted to communicate in order to find a classification for it.

First and foremost, I sought to communicate life. Dawnheim is fantasy, and it possesses all the necessary qualities to be labeled such, but the stories I tell within it are not epics. More often they circle an environment in which characters live and interact around an isolated conflict. In *Hestle*, this conflict is the arrival of a stranger in a rural community and the cruelty of the local physician. It is the addition of reality that keeps me from writing young adult material as well. Young adult fantasy is a superheroesque formula in which an adolescent is given or born with extraordinary abilities and responsibility and reacts to circumstances out of their control in order to save the world. Love triangles, plucky best friends, and evil adults are all an expected part of the equation. The protagonist’s youth is often overlooked if not forgotten because they are the acting adults in their narratives. The result is an entertaining (empowering for teenagers, perhaps) but ultimately unnatural portrayal of life.

This brings me to the genre that owns my heart: classic literature. I read much more classic literature than any other genre. This being the case, my fantasy novels take after the works I admire. I have found that I love the ‘little people’ in literature. I connect with the simple lives that contain so much truth, conflict, and relatable drama; their grounded settings are both uneventful and spectacular. I value the way an author is able to turn a character who will never do anything world-changing into a larger-than-life figure whose personality and psychology are far too interesting to overlook. This is what keeps me from epics; I don’t want my writing to be so burdened by the scale of a story that my characters take a backseat. Some writers may be able to effectively gather these qualities beneath the umbrella of epic or young adult, but I wanted a more focused direction.

Calling my work “literary fantasy” is rather presumptive and egotistical. I have modeled my work after literary fiction, but literature is most often proven by the test of time. So I went back to thinking and found the second thing I wanted out of my novels: accessibility. This is often lacking in fantasy because the genre is required to remove the

reader from what they know and plunge them into something new. *The Lord of the Rings* is an example of this. Tolkien designed his world and wrote with verbiage that paid homage to myth; the fact that Tolkien is difficult to read is intentional on his part. And, while I love his world, stories, and characters, it is hard to share his work with the modern reader. Almost everyone I've suggested his works to has either given up before Frodo leaves the Shire or passed it off as being on their reading list. This provoked a problem I wanted to overcome with my writing. I wanted my novels to be the sort that, while challenging and as artful as I could make them, did not exclude less experienced readers. I had my grandmother in mind when writing; she is a well-read woman but does less difficult reading now than she used to. Furthermore, she does not read fantasy. I wanted her to be able to read what I'd written without tiring or being bogged down by magic and lore. This had been successfully done with my science fiction series, *The Odyssey of Jason Peterson*. She absolutely devoured the four novels and was able to do it easily while receiving everything I had put into them. This has also been achieved with my first three Dawnheim novels. I looked at literary fiction again and saw that, while some of it is certainly difficult—either due to antiquity, complexity, or cultural differences—it is generally easier to engage with than Tolkien. There is something about it with which the reader is able to connect once they grow accustomed to antique prose. There is a sense of relatability lacking in epic fantasy and which young adult fantasy is unable to retain. Literary fiction is more real, not because it is most often set in our world but because it is centered around the human experience. That's what I wanted to do with Dawnheim: explore the human condition in a fantasy world.

Based on my research and what I had examined in my writing, I set for myself three rules to follow when writing accessible fantasy:

1. Each novel must be readable on its own, without previous knowledge of the world or its history. In the same way one can pick up a Dickens novel without having to first read *The Pickwick Papers*, I did not want Dawnheim, accessible fantasy, to be a series of books following a singular narrative but rather a collection of works set within the same world, able to be read in any order.
2. The writer must reveal only as much as is needed for the story at hand. No matter how complex the world is, nor how much work I have put into languages, cultures, and history, the reader cannot be overwhelmed by what I know about my world. What is revealed must be as natural for the reader to receive as for the characters within the story to communicate it. It would be nonsensical to detail the entire history of the United States of America simply because a story is set within it.
3. The characters, while not required to be physically human, must create a human connection with the reader. Fantasy hinges largely on blatant heroes and villains; this need not be the case with accessible fantasy. The characters must be free to make their own decisions and behave in a way that is not narratively sound or traditional. The reader must feel that they are reading humanity—expressions of life—rather than stereotypes or plot points.
4. The art and technique of writing must bleed into the narrative. It is the sad truth that many genre authors do not grow because they do not need to; they find an audience seeking something specific who, so long as this something is supplied, are willing to ignore bad or lazy writing. Writing is an art, and accessible fantasy must encourage growth and experimentation.

These rules laid down for me a guideline I have followed throughout Dawnheim. Through these rules I have developed a definition for accessible fantasy:

“A subgenre that merges the spectacular and mythological qualities of fantasy with the character-driven, sociological, and experimental traits of literary fiction. Accessible fantasy places emphasis on examining and communicating the human condition through worlds and characters removed from but thematically intertwined with humanity.”