

# Why I Write About Elves

*by* TERRY BROOKS

While traveling on airplanes I frequently pass the time working on notes for a manuscript or the manuscript itself. Frequently, a fellow passenger will notice and ask what I am doing. At this point, the conversation can go off in any number of directions, but the destination never changes. The exchange, though the words and their order will vary, always goes something like this:

“What are you working on?” the other passenger will ask.

“I am a writer,” I answer.

“Oh. What do you write?”

“I write books, novels.”

“What sort of novels?” Or, my personal favorite, “Would you have written anything I might have read?”

Now at this point I have tried giving any number of responses, all of them intended to accomplish one thing—to describe in succinct fashion what I write. But whatever variation of the

following I employ, it is never as successful as I would wish.

“I write fantasy,” I might say.

Or, “I write fantasy/adventure stories.”

Or, “I write stories about elves and magic.”

Sometimes I throw in J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, even though only the books of the Shannara series are really Tolkienesque in form. Sometimes I mention Harry Potter, even though nothing I write is like J.K. Rowling's work. I always hope that mention of Lord of the Rings or Harry Potter will be enough of an explanation, even though I ought to know by now that it rarely is and frequently just confuses people.

In any case, what happens next is that almost without fail I get one of the following three responses.

The first is a blank stare, followed by a hesitant smile. The stare and smile ask an unvoiced question. What sort of fantasy might I be talking about? Is this the sort of fantasy that involves salacious activities? You don't mean that sort of fantasy, do you? You don't look like that sort of person.

The second is to ask if my books are for children. There is something about the words 'fantasy' and 'elves' and 'magic' that suggests 'children' to a rather large body of readers. It is as if for them such words belong in a child's lexicon and right-thinking adults should know this intuitively.

The third response is the worst. Can I name some titles? I hate this one, because chances are excellent that no matter which titles I name, unless I choose the Star Wars: Phantom Menace adaptation, which is really not representative of what I write, the listener will not know them. This will make both of us feel bad, although I have become a master at smoothing over these

rough waters by suggesting you can't read everything and they shouldn't give the matter another thought, blah, blah, blah.

All three responses share an unmistakable commonality—the readers who make them do not quite know what to make of fantasy books or those who write them. As far as I can tell, fantasy is the only form of fiction writing that elicits such consternation. If I were to say to those who ask that I write science fiction, no one would blink an eye. Everyone knows what science fiction is. Or if I were to say that I write romances, mysteries, westerns, thrillers, horror stories, war stories, literary fiction, young adult fiction, or even mainstream contemporary fiction, I don't think I would get the same reaction. It is as if fantasy has been placed in its own separate space in the pantheon of literature, a space quarantined and roped off with yellow 'crime scene' tape so that the Great Unwashed will not wander in by mistake.

I know I overstate my case, but this whole business of trying to explain my work and not being able to do so frustrates me. The fact remains that there is something about fantasy books that many readers find perplexing. So I want to take this opportunity to discuss what I think triggers those odd responses I keep encountering and why if people better understood what fantasy was about they might be more willing to engage in reading it.

Let me begin by pointing out that there are all sorts of fantasy stories, an entire gaggle of different types loosely separated by headings with which only the faithful are familiar: heroic or epic fantasy, dark contemporary fantasy, urban fantasy, historical fantasy, and humorous fantasy, to name only a few. Fairytales are an instantly recognizable type of fantasy, usually the one we encounter first as children, either in the stories of the Brothers Grimm or Hans Christian Andersen or in derivations thereof. Epic fantasy is another form with which readers are familiar, because it is the one that has its roots planted most deeply in European literature. Mythologies and

legends from European countries are the earliest examples of such stories. J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings is the best known modern epic fantasy, the book most people think of first and to which most current writers owe at least a token debt. It incorporates all of the classic elements of the form and provides a blueprint to which any discussion of epic fantasy necessarily must refer.

It is worth taking a moment to discuss these elements, many of which appear over and over again in other forms of fantasy as well. Epic fantasy includes four basic elements: a quest, a little band of heroes to undertake it, an archetypal confrontation between good and evil, and a component of magic or the supernatural without which the story cannot be resolved. There are other elements that might also be included, but these four are almost always present in any fantasy story.

The Shannara series is epic fantasy, but my other books are of another sort entirely. Nevertheless, one or more of the four basic elements keeps creeping in, an essential part of the storytelling fabric. Of course, I see these elements surface in other types of fiction as well, cropping up here and there. Use of magic or the supernatural, in particular, has become a staple of plotting in almost every form of fiction, and its very pervasiveness would suggest that fantasy is borrowed from more liberally than any other type of fiction. One need only look as far as Isabel Allende, Alice Hoffman, James Lee Burke, Toni Morrison or Cormac McCarthy, to name only a few critically acclaimed mainstream fiction writers using magic or the supernatural, to see that this is so.

Still, understanding epic fantasy's basic elements does not really explain how fantasy differs from other fiction, especially if we accept that those elements are so prevalent elsewhere. A close examination of the writing process suggests there are more similarities than differences.

Successful fantasy requires the same basic components that all good fiction requires—a solid plot, interesting characters, an element of conflict, good pacing, and dialogue that advances the story or reveals the characters.

So maybe all this is a waste of time. Maybe fantasy really doesn't differ from other types of fiction and those odd responses I keep encountering can be eliminated with a little reader education.

But maybe not. Writing fantasy differs in at least one basic way from writing other forms of fiction, one that is so intrinsic to the creative process that without it, the entire effort fails. Every other form of fiction is able to rely on our world and its people, whether past, present or future, for a storytelling foundation. Sure, there are frequent variations, but whether the story is about science fiction or history, South America or Iceland, Inuit or Zulu, robot or rabbit, there is always a relationship with either this world, or its people, or both.

This is not true of fantasy. More often than not, fantasy takes place in an imaginary world. It relies on imaginary creatures and that all-important element of magic. In order for this to be possible and for the book to succeed, there must be an acceptance of both characters and story that, however odd or foreign to a reader's real life experience, allows for a willing suspension of disbelief. Within the parameters of the world the writer creates, everything must hang together in a reasonable, cohesive way. I learned this lesson the hard way some years ago from my editor, Lester del Rey, when he made me throw out an entire book for failing to achieve consistency of behavior in an imaginary world. Believability is essential to fantasy storytelling, and it begins with consistency.

What this consistency requires, unlike any other form of fiction, is world building from the ground up—not just of people and places, but of flora and fauna, of animals and birds, of food

and drink, of life from the smallest act to the largest. World building, of course, is the process of creating a new world and its various components. Every detail that might have a bearing has to be considered before the story can be written, not necessarily for the purpose of including those details in the story, but so that it will feel to the reader as if the writer could have included them had he chosen to do so.

I am always reminded of E.L. Doctorow's reply on being asked how he so successfully managed to create the feel of a time in which he had not lived. The answer attributed to him, whether he said it or not, is wonderful. He said that any writer worth his salt ought to be able to take a single sentence written in that time and from that single sentence build an entire world.

What he was saying, of course, is that the creation of a world and its inhabitants comes from thinking through the details. A thorough consideration of those details comes in turn from a writer's judicious use of the imagination. Nowhere is that more true than in fantasy literature, where frequently everything is imagined, yet must feel as if it were real. To achieve this, the writer must immerse himself in his world so thoroughly that it becomes real to him—as real as the world in which he lives—so that he can then make it feel real to his readers.

None of this is to say there isn't world building involved in other forms of fiction. There is, but it is not as extensive or as risky. We are more willing to accept a story about ancient Egypt or colonization of Mars or thefts of nuclear submarines because such stories are grounded in aspects of history and science and politics with which we are familiar. But how prepared are we to accept stories about elves? There aren't any elves, after all. No one has ever seen one. Magic isn't a part of our lives, at least not in the fantasy storytelling sense. Dragons and griffins and flying horses aren't real. Leprechauns and pots of gold don't exist. Fantasy requires the aforementioned willing suspension of disbelief. It requires an exercise of imagination that

accepts the possibility of the impossible.

How willing are we to allow that? How willing are we to embrace what we know doesn't exist? Religious experience aside, we are not as willing as we should be, I suspect. So I should hardly be surprised that when I tell people I write stories about elves and magic they are less than impressed. What in the world do I expect them to say? “Oh, good for you! Elves and magic are so important these days!”

But, do you know what? I think they are. If I didn't think so, I wouldn't be so attracted to writing about them. Good fantasy mirrors reality, but it doesn't reflect an exact image. That is what makes it so valuable. It shows us reality in disguise, then allows us to unmask it. It frees us up to reconsider our attitudes and beliefs. I think this is what I like best about writing fantasy; I can write about our world and all of its problems without seeming to do so. There is no implied threat of confrontation if I am writing about a place or time or people that don't exist. After all, I'm not writing about you or anyone you know. I'm not writing about current affairs. I'm not taking sides on a hot topic issue. I'm writing about something imaginary.

The problem with much of what we read is that we have our minds made up about any issues the story might presume to address before we turn the first page. We know how we feel about things. We expect to have our beliefs confirmed, not changed. But that sort of baggage gets left behind when we read fantasy. We understand that we must suspend our disbelief, and so we are willing to read and consider ideas that in another form we would avoid like the plague. All we require is an entertaining story. But if the writer is doing his job, we also get a story that transforms or inspires us in ways we might not recognize at first, but on reflection can provide us with fresh insight.

None of which helps me in my efforts to explain in twenty-five words or less why I write

about elves. I don't expect that will change. I don't expect that things will ever get any easier when strangers ask me what it is I do. Maybe that is just the nature of the beast.

I guess I could give them a copy of this article and tell them to read it. Better yet, I could tell them to go online at Amazon.com, buy it and then decide for themselves if writing about elves makes any sense to them.

But they probably already have their minds made up.

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## TERRY BROOKS

### AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT

With twelve million books in print, and eighteen consecutive New York Times bestsellers, Terry Brooks is a master of the fantasy genre. He was born in Sterling, Illinois in 1944, and spent the first 40 years of his life there. Brooks received an undergraduate degree from Hamilton College, NY and a graduate degree from the School of Law at Washington & Lee University. An avid writer since high school, Brooks was inspired to write fantasy fiction after reading *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*. Whilst practicing law during the day, he wrote at night and in 1977 published *THE SWORD OF SHANNARA*. It became an instant success and became the first work of fiction to appear on the New York Times trade paperback bestseller list, where it remained for over five months. Brooks has been unstoppable ever since. After publishing the *SHANNARA* trilogy, Brooks retired from law to devote himself to his writing career. He continued to write outstandingly successful fantasy fiction, including the *MAGIC KINGDOM* series, and it was whilst writing *THE WORD & VOID* trilogy that George Lucas, the creator of *Star Wars*, personally asked Terry to write the novelization *TO STAR WARS EPISODE 1: The Phantom Menace*. Brooks didn't hesitate and a month before the release of the movie, the book was

published with great success. Terry has returned to the SHANNARA series with two new trilogies —THE VOYAGE OF JERLE and HIGH DRUID OF SHANNARA. Terry Brooks lives with his wife Judine in Seattle and in Hawaii.

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