

# Fantastic Fantasy Writing

## Unit 1: Fantasy Times

*A brief potted history of the genre and the types of fantasy you might want to explore.*

### *So you want to write fantasy?*

Congratulations, you've hit on the oldest and most varied of all literary genres! It certainly didn't start with Tolkien. Modern fantasy's roots are in ancient myth, legend, epic, saga and fairytale. But its most direct ancestor is the medieval romance: a Celtic-flavoured quest adventure of magic, supernatural creatures, danger and deep meaning, spiced with a lot of action, some humour, some terror and a great deal of romantic dilemmas. The greatest of all the medieval romances is the story of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, which has inspired literally thousands of different spin-offs over the centuries.

More recently, fantasy has been the mainstream of children's literature, but the twentieth century saw a massive upsurge in fantasy literature for adults, inspired by the huge success of JRR Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. Today, it's one of the biggest-selling of all literary genres. It used to be that Australian writers of fantasy had to be published offshore, but these days, many Australian publishers are very much on the lookout for fresh, original fantasy.

### **There's all kinds of fantasy. You could write:**

- Epic quest fantasy involving a created parallel world (*Lord of the Rings* style)
- Historical fantasy (such as my own *Forest of Dreams*, set in the 12th century)
- Urban and contemporary fantasy (e.g. the novels of Charles de Lint)
- Fairytale fantasy (e.g. the novels of Robin McKinley)
- Humorous fantasy (e.g. the novels of Terry Pratchett)
- Science fantasy (a blend of science fiction and fantasy, such as the novels of Isobelle Carmody)

### **Sophie Masson**

*An incisive and elegant commentator, Sophie Masson has over 30 novels published in Australia and internationally.*



*Philip Pullman, Garth Nix and Lloyd Alexander have all highly praised her fresh and intriguing fantasy. Sophie has recently been appointed to the Literature Board of the Australia Council.*

[www.northnet.com.au/~smasson](http://www.northnet.com.au/~smasson)

- Timeslip fantasy (e.g. Diana Gabaldon's novels)
- Allegorical fantasy (e.g. *Animal Farm*)
- Dark fantasy (a blend of fantasy and horror, for instance, the novels of James Herbert, or Stephen King)

Have a look at some of these books. And don't worry, there are no hard and fast rules. A fantasy novel can in fact blend all or some of those styles - the sky's the limit, whether you're writing for children or adults.

### **A good story**

Fantasy is like any other kind of fiction - you need a good story, good characters and good writing. In further tutorials, we'll explore these things in more depth, but watch out for:

- Derivative writing based on copying of secondary sources. Don't rewrite *Lord of the Rings* or *Harry Potter*! Instead, go back to the primary sources: those world myths, epics, sagas, legends, fairytales and medieval romances that are the backbone of good fantasy writing.
- Writing for a perceived 'market.' Don't! Write what YOU truly love and are interested in. Readers can tell if you're only going through the motions.
- Magic that is badly thought-out.
- Cardboard characters, whether human or not. Your readers must care about these people - love them or hate them - even if they don't come from our world!

### **ACTION ACTIVITY**

Before you embark on your big novel, consider this. What kind of fantasy are you most drawn to, as a reader as well as a writer? Think about the fantasy you've enjoyed, as an adult and in childhood. Write down a few of your favourite books. Then write down what you think made these books great, for you. Now, if you can, think of fantasy novels you haven't liked. Why didn't these work for you? This exercise will give you some good clues as to what direction you should embark on.