Magical Mayhem: Guidelines for Fantasy

By
Chawna Schroeder

My love affair began in the first grade. Each week at the start of Sunday school, the teacher would read aloud from a book to my class. With that story about talking animals, an evil witch, and a forest where it was always winter but never Christmas, I gladly escaped the confines of brick walls, squirmy classmates and hard plastic chairs for a few moments every Sunday. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* had cast its spell upon my imagination, and I have courted the world of fantasy ever since.

So with some surprise I discovered in my teens that not everyone shared my love of the genre. The controversy surrounding Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings made that infinitely clear. In fact, fantasy is one of the most divisive realms of fiction—for good reason too, with its talk of witches, wizards, and magic.

What, then, is the truth? How do faith and fantasy intersect?

Three Advantages

The first thing to consider is whether fantasy has any value. Sure, exploring other worlds can be fun and entertaining, but that doesn't mean it's healthy for us as Christians to consume. After all, Paul admonishes us to dwell on "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable," those things excellent and praiseworthy (Philippians 4:8). So what good can fantasy give us?

It teaches us about ourselves and the world around us. Fantasy and science-fiction, more than any other genre of fiction, removes us from the world so familiar to us. You step into an alien world and suddenly anything could happen. Nuances become the lifeline to understanding, and you notice the smallest details—and the truth underlying them.

For, although fantasy is often strange and wild, it rarely introduces hard, complex theology. Rather it places the familiar truth in such a bizarre setting we can't miss it, much in the same way that a red apple, overlooked in a basket of fruit, can become the center of attention sitting on an empty green couch.

Fantasy expands our concept of God. After all, God "is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or *imagine*." (Ephesians 3:20, emphasis mine) While I don't believe Narnia exists, who am I to say that He couldn't have—or if I'm wrong, didn't—create it or another, more magical place? That dares me to dream big! For how often do we not have because we don't ask (James 4:2), and how often do we not ask because we dare not dream?

Fantasy also reminds us of our need for the heroic…and the supernatural. This, I believe, is the driving force behind fantasy's unprecedented growth today, especially in the secular market. We were created for the supernatural (God). We long for good to triumph over evil. We seek role models, mentors, idols, *anyone* who can show us why we should do right, how we should live, and what's worth dying for. But although we instinctively know this, far too

often in our real world those "heroes" fail, evil seems to win, and God—well, if He's like what I hear about, He might be good, but powerless; why should I follow Him?

But fantasy gives each of these back to us. Evil loses in the end. Heroes stand true, sacrificing everything to do what's right because it is right. And the supernatural elements, even the wrong type, tell us that we *aren't* alone, that there's something bigger than us out there and we do have a purpose. And once again the world is set the way we instinctively know it should be and gives us hope that, no matter how bad things get, the real world can be set right too.

The Dilemma

Of course, this supernatural hole is exactly what makes fantasy so potentially powerful… and dangerous. After all, another supernatural being beside God wishes to fill this void with himself. But just because Satan can twist it doesn't mean the original is intrinsically evil. On the contrary, the things that Satan twists most and tries to dominate are often the things most potent for good—which is a strong argument in itself of why Christians shouldn't relinquish the battleground of fantasy to Satan.

But how do you tell the difference between good fantasy and Satan's twisted imitation? For words like *magic*, *wizard*, and *witch* dot the landscape on both sides of the battlefield, words associated with the satanic in Scripture.

While tabooed words might make it easier to divide stories into "acceptable" and "unacceptable," words are also fluid, often dependent on their context. And if we can't read anything simply because it contains the word *witch* or *magic*, we would have to write off the Bible itself! Therefore, I suggest we look not as much at the specific words as what those words represent—starting with Scripture.

Witches, Seers, and Magic

In the Bible supernatural power—good and bad—abounds. On one hand you have God and his followers (angels, prophets/seers, and apostles) while Satan and his minions (demons, witches/sorcerers, and magicians) stand in opposition on the other hand. While both employ human and non-human agents to do things beyond normal human ability (the basic attribute of "magic"), the characteristics of their powers differ greatly.

First, *their power differs in how they can use it.* The people serving God may be able to do miraculous things, but they can only use their power as God wills (compare Acts 14:8-10 with Philippians 2:25-27). But witches, sorcerers, and magicians use their power when they wish to fulfill their own desires. That's why they could employ their powers for pay (e.g. Acts 16:16).

As a side note, whether people employ satanic power for good or bad doesn't matter; their lack of submission to another's will shows an attempt to wrest power from God. This is why **there is no such thing as white magic**; pride is the finite claiming superiority to the infinite. Therefore, God *always* condemns any power apart from Himself, whether obtained or consulted (Leviticus 20:27; Deuteronomy 18:10-12; Acts 13:6-11; Revelation 21:8).

Second, *God's power is superior.* In Exodus 7:10-8:19 we read of a confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh's magicians. While the magicians could duplicate three of the

miracles (but only three), they couldn't reverse God's work. Instead they contributed to the death and destruction.

And ultimately, that is the main difference: *Satanic power enslaves and destroys, while God's power brings life.* Prophets and apostles heal (e.g. Peter and the crippled man, Acts 3:1-10), but demons cause illness and handicaps (e.g. the demon-possessed blind-mute, Matthew 12:22). Similarly the false prophets make predictions, which lead to destruction (Jeremiah 23:30-40), while God's prophets call for life-giving repentance (e.g. Ezekiel 18:30-32).

The Problem of Semantics

Now that we understand the *type* of power forbidden by Scripture, we can turn our attention to how this applies to the fantasy realm.

Of course, we first look at the words used, for many fantasies, especially in Christian fiction, don't contain "magic" at all or they associate *witches* with evil and *prophets* with good, just like in the Bible. A good example of this is C.S. Lewis's White Witch: in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* she is described as "a perfectly terrible person" and "bad all through." That conforms to the biblical idea of witches, i.e. they are evil.

But ultimately, words can take you only so far. Secular fantasy has twisted words like seer and prophet, and Christian fantasy struggles to find ways to describe people with supernatural power. Thus Christians fall back on back on the collective lingo of fantasy.

Therefore we must dig deeper, into the characters' and their powers' origins.

The Origins

In the Bible we find many non-human beings wielding abilities far beyond human capabilities with no condemnation (angels and demons). Likewise, fantasy births many non-humans able to do things normally excluded to humans. If it isn't wrong for angels to wield supernatural power, why would it be for fairies and elves and other such characters?

Again consider the White Witch: C. S. Lewis writes, "She's no daughter of Eve…there isn't a drop of real human blood in the Witch." She isn't human. Nor is Aslan. The humans in the story—Lucy, Edmund, Susan, and Peter—have no "magical" power. You see the same in *The Lord of the Rings*. The ones who have supernatural powers—elves and wizards—aren't human, while the humans Aragorn and Boromir have no special abilities beyond normal giftedness (e.g. Aragorn's healing ability, which isn't instant nor guaranteed like supernatural healing).

But what about humans with supernatural abilities? They also exist in real and fantastical worlds. So we must dig deeper, comparing the characteristics and uses of those supernatural abilities to the biblical equivalent. Can the character summon the magic on whim? Is the power of the good characters greater than that of evil? Do their powers heal or destroy, bring life or death? To whom do they credit their power? Or as John White's character Mab the Seer sums it up in *The Sword Bearer*:

"Sorcerers, wizards, magicians—they chose to serve themselves. They want their own power. They want magic…It is true I have power…but it is [God's] power…It is to be used in his service. Magic is stolen power."

Fantasy and Faith

So where do faith and fantasy intersect? That's hard to say.

While there's clearly some "Christian" fantasy and some "satanic" fantasy, between them lays a vast gray area where murky beings roam the landscape. Sure, it's not perfectly safe. Sure, we might encounter some enemies.

But armed with the knowledge of Scripture and an understanding of the power of God, I believe we can dispel some of the mists surrounding these stories and tread these lands safely. And who knows? There we might just discover ourselves, a hero, or even God Himself.

About Chawna Schroeder

Chawna Schroeder spends her days working as a professional liar, better known to most people as a novelist. She loves spinning stories and fabricating fantastical tales about characters caught between two worlds—not to mention fiction writing provides the easiest explanation for her imaginary friends. Otherwise people tend to look strangely at a 20-something adult conversing with invisible people.

When Chawna isn't working or meeting other novelists' imaginary friends, you can usually find her poring over her studies in biblical Greek and Hebrew. She has studied both languages under a seminary-trained pastor for several years and has done some teaching of the Greek and Hebrew.

Since she doesn't have a split-personality (despite what family members and friends may contend), these duel passions for fiction and Scripture must share the same mind and therefore often collide. Sometimes that's not a problem; fiction and Scripture meet and part on congenial terms. But at other times they get into a fight. So what is a writer to do? Write, of course!

So Chawna is writing *Bearing the Sword,* a six-part a curriculum teaching discernment in and through fiction. The first part is available this spring. In addition to this, she posts frequently on her blog, Imagination Investigation (www.chawnaschroeder.blogspot.com). There she explores the boundaries of fiction and faith, reviews books, and talks about the occupation of writing.

Not convinced that you trust this strange person named Chawna Schroeder? Stop by www.chawnaschroeder.com to find out more about her and the stories she writes, or contact her directly at imaginationinvestigation@yahoo.com.