

INTRODUCTION

Of all the powerful spells that fiction casts upon us – absorbing plots, believable characters, vivid language – one of the least celebrated is its ability to make us feel transported to another time and place. Most avid readers have had the experience of setting down a book and needing to shake off the sights, smells and sounds of a world they haven't actually been to, or that may not even exist. We may never have set foot in Victorian London, and we certainly haven't hiked through Middle-earth, but the writings of Arthur Conan Doyle and J. R. R. Tolkien have made those places seem more real, to millions of readers, than cities we've actually visited.

The works described in this book all conjure lands that exist only in the imagination. Some of these places – the America of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996, page 268), the Japan of Haruki Murakami's *IQ84* (2009–10, page 298) – closely resemble the world we live in. Others – the Alaska of Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007, page 294) and the New England of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985, page 248) – show us how very different our own world might have been, or could become, with only a few tweaks to the course of history. Some of these books, like Ann Leckie's *Ancillary Justice* (2013, page 304), speculate about what life might be like in the distant future, while other works, like Robert E. Howard's original *Conan the Barbarian* story series (1932–36, page 154), postulate a thrilling past that has since been irretrievably lost. Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* (1961, page 194) challenges readers to contemplate a form of intelligent life almost inconceivably alien from ourselves. Satirists like Jonathan Swift and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o concoct bizarre yarns about talking horses and child-bearing corpses to confront us with a pointedly familiar reflection of our own behaviours. Then there are those unfettered fantasists, ranging from Italo Calvino to Neil Gaiman, whose great gift is to offer us visions in which the imagination can be set free to roam wherever it desires.

The roots of all these books lie in humanity's oldest stories: myths, fables and folklore – the tales people made up to explain how the world came to exist and why it is the way it is. While literary criticism tends to valorise the

new and the innovative, the literature of the fantastic seeks a connection to tradition, to what persists even as the world changes. The texts in the first section of this book, 'Ancient Myth & Legend', are, themselves, often attempts to preserve a fading storytelling culture; *Beowulf* (c.700–1100, page 28) and the *Prose Edda* (c.1220, page 36) were the works of Christian authors who sought to safeguard a portion of their pagan past. These books have survived in no small part because of their ability to reach across a span of centuries and speak to the inhabitants of new ages and worlds. The messy love lives of Ovid's gods and goddesses; the questing courage of Malory's Arthurian knights; the dauntless faith of Wu Chengen's Xuanzang – all remind us of the worst and the best of ourselves. But, along with much that is recognisable, these stories also bewitch us with the rich and strange, the miraculous, the astonishing and the awe-inspiring. The first tales human beings told each other, the ones that survive from our unrecorded past, were not about everyday life, but about the extraordinary: talking animals, wicked sorcerers, terrifying monsters and cities built of gold and jewels.

Fantastic literature has always conducted a complex dialogue with the real world. Many of us read it to escape from that world but, more often than not, this fiction aims to make us see our own lives in a new light. Allegories like *The Faerie Queene* (1590–1609, page 54) and epics like *The Divine Comedy* (c.1308–21, page 40) offer their readers moral instruction, even if some of those readers prefer to attend only to the lush spectacle that cloaks the lesson. In *Don Quixote* (1605/15, page 62), Miguel de Cervantes impishly used the structure of a chivalric romance to mock the conventions of the 'romance' itself, a literary genre that specialises in the wondrous. But with Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516, page 52), the most overtly didactic species of literary wonderland came into its own. In the five hundred years since it was published, utopian tales have used invented worlds and nations to critique and exhort readers to change the world. The utopian strain of fantastic literature springs not from myth but from the great age of exploration, when Europeans set out to discover (and, alas, exploit) previously unknown and unmapped

parts of the globe. Travel narratives like Marco Polo's account of his journeys in Asia (c.1300) became immensely popular starting in the fourteenth century, and travellers' encounters with other cultures naturally encouraged wandering Westerners to contemplate what foreigners did better or worse than the people back home.

Utopian fiction also arose from Enlightenment thinking itself. If reason and science proved themselves to be superior tools for understanding and mastering the natural world, why not apply them to the engineering of society as well? Writers would continue to produce utopian tales into the twentieth century; women, in particular, wanted to picture what a culture founded on gender equality or even female dominance might look like and, in a sense, Marxism is a utopian dream. By the nineteenth century, however, authors like Samuel Butler had turned to parodying utopian idealism. Utopias, arguably, make for dull reading, but dystopian fiction has demonstrated again and again – right up to *The Hunger Games* (page 296), a 2008 blockbuster intended for teenage readers – its power to enthral. Some dystopias, like Yevgeny Zamiatin's *We* (1924, page 138) and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932, page 148), are essentially works of social or political criticism – attacks on the dominant ideologies and obsessions of the modern world. Many more simply depict the age-old dilemma of a restless individual at odds with the society into which he or she was born.

Often enough, industrialisation and the rise of the mass media provoked this dissatisfaction, and writing a dystopian novel was not the only way to respond to such forces. The 'Golden Age' of fantasy, during the first sixty years or so of the twentieth century, was largely a reaction to the wholesale destruction of deeply rooted ways of life in which human beings lived in intimate relation to the natural world. Another source of anxiety was the perceived loss of long-standing folk traditions. (The Brothers Grimm first began collecting fairy tales in the early 1800s, not to compile a book for children, but as an act of ethnographic conservation.) The great, genre-defining fantasies of this period, from *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–55, page 188) to *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950–56, page 178), were fundamentally nostalgic, celebrating a vanishing, idealised world that existed before machines and market economies defined our lives. This was also a fertile time for children's fiction, and many of the masters of the period, from I. M. Barrie to Tove Jansson, either incorporated the longing for a simpler, Arcadian idyll into their work or saturated everything they wrote with a melancholy lament for the lost innocence of childhood. Meanwhile, literary modernists like Franz Kafka and Jorge Luis Borges deployed surreal, uncanny and absurd elements in their writings as the ideal tools for portraying the metaphysical paradoxes inherent in a post-religious culture.

The last half of the twentieth century was all about questions, and few literary forms are better suited to fermenting questions than the fantastic. The wonderlands devised by Ursula K. Le Guin, Kurt Vonnegut, Vladimir Nabokov, Samuel R. Delaney and Octavia E. Butler interrogated long-held

assumptions about, respectively, the primacy of European culture, modern warfare, the novel, sexuality and race. Angela Carter took perhaps the most orthodox of literary forms, the fairy tale, and turned it inside out to reveal the unspoken desires and power of women hidden within. Science fiction became more than just a vehicle for technologically enhanced adventure and began to challenge the rapidly evolving post-industrial world, and to warn us about where it is heading. A few prescient writers – William Gibson and Neal Stephenson, first and foremost – succeeded, largely, in anticipating the central role that linked computers would play in the twenty-first century. Most strikingly, by coining the term 'cyberspace', Gibson recognised that our best mental model for understanding the vast and immaterial web of communications perpetually humming all around us is spatial. The internet, we collectively decided, is a place. Much of it is made up of words. It just might be the ultimate literary wonderland.

We still haven't tired of books, though, even when they come to us via a medium constituted of bits and pixels. The wonderlands being created today and waiting to be created tomorrow will also be the work of graphic novelists, filmmakers and video-game designers, and they, in turn, will influence the many writers who have stuck with prose text in all its unadorned glory. Novelists like Salman Rushdie, Haruki Murakami and Nnedi Okorafor have raided the toolboxes of science fiction and fantasy in order to tell new stories of their own homelands. A generation of children has grown up saturated in the imaginative liberty exhibited by J. K. Rowling, as well as the trenchant social criticism of Suzanne Collins. They could not be better equipped to build the fictional ships in which all of us will sail off into the unknown, seeking the far horizon and fresh discoveries that will surpass our most extravagant dreams.

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