

Over the wall ...

Alan Maley visits other worlds.



Of all the genres available to readers, the most popular in recent years has been fantasy. Sales of the *Harry Potter* books broke all records and have been equalled by *A Song of Fire and Ice*, where sales of 12 million copies of a new title within a few days are now commonplace. The possibility of temporarily inhabiting a completely different world which fantasy fiction affords helps to account for this popularity. And the film and TV versions have only served to strengthen the allure of the books.

Early examples of fantasy worlds would have to include the *Alice* worlds imagined by Lewis Carroll, and Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*. And one of the first to become a cult work of fiction through its film version was Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, which still has the power to frighten as well as entertain. Although none of these come close to the mass appeal of the more recent works, it is interesting to note that they have an enduring attraction to readers. *Alice* has been extensively analysed, deconstructed and commented on by both literary and linguistic scholars, and is frequently quoted. *The Wind in the Willows* still appeals perhaps to a younger audience with its

endearing cast of animal characters, and a play based on the book is frequently staged in the UK around Christmas time.

Fantasy and film

The fantasy genre seems to have burgeoned in the last 20 years, with the advent of film versions of most of the better-known fantasy series. The 'big four' would have to be Tolkien's trilogy *Lord of the Rings*, C S Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, J K Rowling's *Harry Potter* series and George Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series – better known as *Game of Thrones*.

Each of these appeals in its own particular way. Tolkien's epic contest between the forces of evil of Sauron and the courageous 'Fellowship of the Ring' grips many people's imagination, with its geographical range, its endorsement of the power of the weak to defeat the strong, its rich and strange cast of characters and creatures, its incorporation of elements (including language) from Norse and Celtic mythology, and its use of magic, wizards and the rest – and of course, that ring. Lewis's *Narnia* series appeals partly through the major child characters, its use of Christian and other

symbolism, the exciting events detailing the victory of good over evil and the sad realisation that childhood does not last. However, although it is still popular, some readers find it a little dated and are uncomfortable with the barely-concealed religious symbolism. J K Rowling's *Harry Potter* books, with their heady mix of magic, teen coming of age and the English boarding school story, are almost irresistible, despite their undistinguished 'pedestrian style', criticised by Harold Bloom as 'full of clichés and dead metaphors'. Clearly, none of this counts when compared with the excitement of the action and the addictive familiarity of the setting and characters. And there is no mystery about the appeal of Martin's *Game of Thrones* titles. These are dark, shockingly brutal, gritty, packed with sex of all varieties, and with amoral betrayal and violence. The characters have a contemporary feel in their lack of any moral compass. Here is a world which is a compound of Imperial Rome under Nero, the Papacy under the Borgias, Russia at the time of Stalin's purges and the crazy reign of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge. In short, it is absolutely compulsive! The punters cannot get enough of it.

The Gormenghast series

Yet, for all the success of these major works of fantasy, the one closest to my heart is the *Gormenghast* trilogy. And I am constantly disappointed that it is not better known nor appreciated for the masterpiece it undoubtedly is. Mervyn Peake manages to create a complete universe in the physical presence of the great looming castle of Gormenghast, ruled over by the Groan family – a place peopled by a cast of grotesque, Gothic characters with bizarre names. There is Lord Sepulchgrave himself, father of Titus, completely lost in his books; Flay, the faithful old retainer, and his arch-enemy Swelter, the head cook; Steerpike, the evil young schemer dedicated to the destruction of everything Gormenghast stands for; Dr Prunesquallor and his spinster sister Irma; the strangely moving Fuchsia, Titus Groan's sister, and her nurse, Granny Slagg; Titus's mother, the Countess of Groan, a forbiddingly eccentric woman who lives with a pack of white cats and attracts birds of all kinds to her massive frame – and a host of others.



And outside the walls live the Bright Carvers, who are a kind of underclass whose only function is to make carvings, most of which are burnt ritually once a year. Indeed, ritual is what rules everything that happens in Gormenghast. It is never questioned, however odd its manifestations: it must be followed to the letter, 'suckled on shadows; weaned on webs of ritual'. And the castle itself is a palpable Gothic presence throughout – a labyrinth of corridors and tunnels, abandoned rooms, stone terraces, ivy-wreathed towers and rotting stairways. And unlike the other fantasy titles mentioned above, Peake does not rely on cloaks or rings that make you disappear, talking lions, dragons, phoenixes or orcs, or any of the usual paraphernalia of the genre. He creates a world of pure imagination, where evil is palpable and where the old and the new contend.

The three volumes total over 900 pages, so even a synopsis of the convoluted plot is not feasible here.

Suffice it to say that in the first two books, the House of Groan is undermined by the evil actions of Steerpike, as he insinuates his way into an almost unassailable position of power. In the third volume, *Titus Alone*, Titus Groan, the 77th Earl, escapes his destiny and runs away into a different world altogether – a kind of modern dystopia with factories, machines and a sophisticated system of surveillance designed to dominate an underclass who are uncomfortably reminiscent of the Nazi camp internees Peake had seen as a war artist at Belsen in 1945. In the illustrated version, Peake's artistic skills contribute to our imaginings of the text.

Peake excels at the extravagant set pieces which drive the action along – the epic fight between Flay and Swelter, the fire in the library which drives Titus's father mad and to his bizarre death, the party at which Irma Prunesquallor is to ensnare her ancient husband, the great flood which engulfs the castle and leads to the final undoing of Steerpike. One of Peake's great strengths is his ability to describe people and places graphically in sharp images that almost spring off the page. A few quotations will give the flavour of this wonderful writing: '... *old weapons that were as rich with rust as a hedge of winter beech*', '*Her eyes were as expressionless as mushrooms*', '*... his flat feet sucking at the stones like porridge*', '*an owl on wings of wool*', '*laughing like crockery*'.

So why has *Gormenghast* been neglected? The fact that it has no film version must be a contributory factor – only an abridged TV film was attempted, and a brilliant stage version only used parts of it. It is doubtless also due to the density of Peake's prose style, which is brilliant but slow moving, and requires a quality of attention which is now rare. For all that, I hope some ETp readers will acquaint themselves with this masterpiece of English fiction.



I regret having had to leave out proper mention of Philip Pullman's well-written and engrossing trilogy *His Dark Materials*. And Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* books are unique in their capacity to evoke a real feeling of evil forces at work in the everyday world. They never fail to

raise the hairs on the back of my neck. Again, it is unfortunate that Cooper is not as well-known as she undoubtedly deserves to be.

Fantasy fiction is unashamedly escapist, of course. But surely one of the pleasures of reading is immersing oneself in another world. And if you can persuade your students to submerge themselves in any of these titles that appeal to them, they will be hooked on reading for good. 

Baum, L F *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* Puffin Chalk 2014

Carroll, L *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* CreateSpace 2010

Cooper, S *The Dark is Rising Sequence* (five titles) Random House 2013

Grahame, K *The Wind in the Willows* Paragon Plus 1996

Lewis, C S *The Chronicles of Narnia* (seven volume box set) HarperCollins 1980

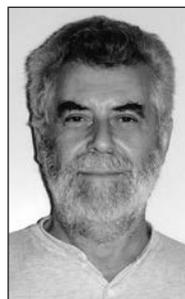
Martin, G R R A *Song of Ice and Fire* (seven volume box set) Harper Voyager 2012

Peake, M *The Illustrated Gormenghast Trilogy* Vintage Classics 2011

Pullman, P *His Dark Materials* (three titles in one book) Everyman 2011

Rowling, J K *Harry Potter* series (seven volume box set) Bloomsbury Children's 2014

Tolkien, J R R *The Lord of the Rings* (trilogy in one volume) HarperCollins 2007



Alan Maley has worked in the area of ELT for over 40 years in Yugoslavia, Ghana, Italy, France, China, India, the UK, Singapore and Thailand. Since 2003 he has been a freelance writer and consultant. He has published over 30 books and numerous articles, and was, until recently, Series Editor of the *Oxford Resource Books for Teachers*.

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