Escape into the Fiction of the “Other World”: Australian Fantasy Literature

Christopher Cheng

Fantasy literature is vitally important, especially for children. Fantasy literature feeds the imagination; it permits escape; it enables an ordinary child to do extraordinary things. Fantasy literature empowers today’s child, who often encounters disempowerment when told what to do and how to do it. And fantasy literature is hot in Australia—although for a while it seemed that fictional didactic social realism stories would fill our bookshelves. Now readers are able to escape into the fiction of the “other world.”

We have been blessed for a long time with a strong tradition of wonderfully creative fantasy writers. Today they stretch across many age groups, from the authors (and illustrators) embedding fantasy elements within our picture books, to those creating fantasy titles for junior readers, right through to novels written for older readers that might also cross over into the adult reading world. Additionally, the genre varies widely and includes heroic fantasy (where the quest adventure is all consuming), historical fantasy, animal and animated toy fantasy, and those fantasies where the other world is beyond normal human abilities and where it enters or sometimes even takes over our own reality.

Many of the fantasy titles are not stand-alone books; they can be titles within a series or a number of series. Recent prolific fantasy writers include Sophie Masson (series include Thomas Trew), Carole Wilkinson (series include Ramose and Dragonkeeper), Garth Nix (series include The Old Kingdom Trilogy and Keys of the Kingdom), Richard Harland (the Wolf Kingdom quartet in Scholastic’s Fantastica series), and D. M. Cornish (Monster Blood Tattoo series). But the imagination of other worlds is not limited to novels. Multi-award-winning creators Shaun Tan <http://www.shauntan.net> and Graeme Base <http://www.graemebase.com> both produce imaginative other worlds in their evocative fantasy picture books. Shaun’s Tales from the Outer Suburbs has images of places familiar yet unseen and characters that stretch the imagination. Graeme’s Animalia and The Eleventh Hour encourage an exploration and examination of their unbelievable other worlds.

In many of our titles there are elements that are uniquely Australian and create a distinctly Australian voice, including the landscape, the language, the characters—even our distinctly Australian humor and vernacular. But there are many titles that do not identify with any particular Australian idiom. These books cross boundaries and could be anywhere in this world—or the other ones. Two of those titles are featured here. These two authors, Garth Nix and Kate Forsyth, are wonderful exponents of the fantasy genre; they create fantasy worlds where the characters, their agency, and the landscape are totally
believable. Many of the titles created by these two authors are published worldwide and readily available.

Australia’s most successful and prolific children’s fantasy creator is Emily Rodda. Her titles include *Deltora Quest* (a quest adventure series of magic, sorcery, monsters, challenges, and good versus evil), the *Rowan* series (a six-book series about a boy against the odds who confronts monsters and visions and much more), the two volumes of *Fairy Realm* (a story of fairies, elves, and magical beings inhabiting a realm abounding with magic in the garden of a young girl’s grandmother), and her latest creation, the *Rondo* series (currently two titles, in which an old music box, passed through generations, is the portal to an other world of magic, trickery, sorcery, families, talking animals, and the continuing battle of good versus evil). I urge you to explore these websites:

<http://www.emilyrodda.com>
<http://www.scholastic.com/worldofdeltora_australia>

Author Anna Fienberg and illustrator Kim Gamble have created the *Tashi* books, a series for younger readers that are loved by kids around the country. The books are often based on existing tales. They are exciting, have good messages, are fun reads, and contain Tashi’s stories as told to his real friend Jack. Tashi comes from a magical land far away and has adventures that can be a little dangerous, but he always outwits demons, warlords, genies, or monsters. Here’s the place to visit if Tashi interests you:

<http://www.tashibooks.com>

Garth Nix creates the most believable other worlds in his internationally acclaimed fantasy titles found in a number of series, including the *Abhorsen* trilogy (which depicts necromancers, charter marks, magical bells, and a heroine who has power over the dead and magical) and the *New York Times* best-selling *Keys to the Kingdom* (a seven-book series, the first title beginning on Monday and the last ending on Saturday). This series features Arthur, an asthmatic boy who is the rightful heir to the Keys of the house and who is forced to wrest the seven Keys (objects of power) from their immortal guardians—the trustees who each control part of the house. For anyone who has missed these titles, they are a must-read, as they absorb the reader’s senses within the pages.

<http://www.garthnix.com>
<http://www.garthnix.co.uk>
<http://www.abhorsentrilogy.com>
<http://www.keystothekingdom.com.au>

Kate Forsyth is a prolific writer of classic fantasy (many of which are for adults and are found in *The Witches of Eileanan* series). Her recent *The Chain of Charms* children’s series (the six titles in Australia, NZ, Italy, and the UK have been published as a single title in the US) was the winner of the 2007 Aurealis award <http://www.aurealisawards.com> for children’s long fiction. In England, during Oliver Cromwell’s harsh reign, gypsy cousins
Emilia and Luka have to retrieve the six charms once worn by a gypsy queen and reunite them if they hope to save their imprisoned family—but for each charm there is a price to be paid.

<http://www.kateforsyth.com.au>
<http://www.chainofcharms.com.au>

Other authors to investigate for truly memorable fantasy include:
Sophie Masson
<http://users.nsw.chariot.net.au/~smasson>
<http://thomastrew.blogspot.com>
Carole Wilkinson
<http://www.carolewilkinson.com.au>
Richard Harland
<http://www.richardharland.net>
D. M. Cornish
<http://www.dmcornish.com>
<http://www.monsterbloodtattoo.com.au>
<monsterbloodtattoo.blogspot.com>

All titles mentioned are available internationally in Europe and or the United States.

About the Author

Christopher Cheng is a full-time children’s author who has also been a school teacher and national book seller and holds a Master of Arts in Children’s Literature. He has published award-winning children’s nonfiction and fiction, including picture books and historical novels. More recently he has written the libretto for a children’s musical. He is currently a National Ambassador for the Australian Government’s Literacy and Numeracy Week Initiative <www.literacyandnumeracy.gov.au>.

On his blog, <www.newkidsbooksinoz.blogspot.com>, Cheng promotes Australian children’s books. He is a member of the Children’s Book Council of Australia (CBCA) and reviews children’s books for print media and radio. He regularly appears in Australian schools and at literary festivals, is Co-Regional Advisor for the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI), and is on the advisory board of FOSR.

For more information about the author, visit <www.chrischeng.com>.