First Opinion: Fantasy Monday


Scott Peters

Fantasy literature has enjoyed enormous success over the last decade. The Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings series as well as stand-alone titles, such as the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, have become increasingly popular to the degree that the former two have been made into major motion pictures.

In keeping with themes of young adult fantasy novels, the Keys to the Kingdom begins its seven-book series with Mister Monday, the title also referring to the antagonist fantasy character and current master of the Lower House. After Mister Monday is tricked into giving up the lesser of his two Keys to Arthur Penhaligon at the onset of the adventure, both characters spend the rest of the story in a struggle to obtain the other’s remaining Key. Arthur is a classic young adult protagonist in Nix’s attempt to bridge this fantasy novel with the idea of social realism—he is new to his school, unassuming, and unpopular because he is athletically lacking from near-debilitating asthma.

Set mostly in the alternate world of the Lower House, the story progresses as Arthur attempts to find a cure for the mysterious sleeping sickness that has affected his world, the Secondary Realm. While people on the outside work to find a cure, Arthur hurries to obtain the second and greater Key from Mister Monday in order to save his world and take his rightful place as heir to the Lower House.

A mix of stream-of-consciousness observations and dialogue allows the reader to participate in Arthur’s adventure. As in many YA novels, the protagonist is an adolescent boy who is torn from his world of normalcy and made to participate in a grand adventure far beyond his expectations.

In today’s classrooms, where time is too often relegated to direct instruction, fantasy novels connect to students on a creative level that is often left untapped. Such books also offer students the opportunity to unconsciously confront their own decision making and problem solving. Readers of Mister Monday will see how Arthur decides whether to run from an uncomfortable situation or make the moral decision to stay in and attempt to save his family and friends. Readers may identify with the daily challenges Arthur faces at school and may intentionally or unintentionally connect such challenges to those faced by Arthur in the fantasy world of the Lower House.

The format and content of the book make it hard to put down. The numerous titles in the series make it well suited for students interested in a complex plot with multiple
characters venturing across multiple fantasy worlds. Fantasy young adult novels in general are ripe for comparative discussions and activities using popular novels such as Harry Potter and classic canonic pieces such as Huckleberry Finn. Mister Monday reminds me why such books are so popular among people of all ages.

Works Cited


About the Author

Second Reaction: Entering an “Other” World


*Sharon McGuinness*

Arthur Penhaligon is an unlikely hero. Even though his first name might conjure an image of a knight, he is a weedy adolescent, plagued with bouts of asthma. His illness is supposed to kill him, but he is saved by an unusual key, shaped like the minute hand of a clock, when his adventure into another world begins.

Mister Monday, the eponymous character of the first book in a series of seven, is the Trustee whom Arthur must defeat to gain possession of the hour hand key—the match to his minute hand—in order to gain control of the Lower House. Mister Monday’s underlings, the dog faced “fetchers,” have unleashed a plague upon the people of Arthur’s world, and they will stop at nothing to gain possession of Arthur’s key, for Mister Monday needs both keys to be Master.

Arthur’s quest ensures the reader be captivated by the fantastic. A higher being called the “Architect,” whose ancient text is called the “Will,” evokes a religious feel, as does the continuing good versus evil theme. Alternative realities exist in the mysterious house (the Epicentre of All Creation) Arthur is instructed to enter and locate the hour hand key. The Lower Atrium of the House seems to be a bureaucratic maze of memos. It is here that he meets Suzy Turquoise Blue, a child led to this other world by the Piper. She decides to help Arthur, and together they are able to enter other worlds via improbable stairs, weirdways, wormholes, spiderways, and magic lifts. They take the reader on a roller coaster ride meeting a terrifying, almost Promethean character called the “Old One,” who is chained to a clock and has his eyes eaten every twelve hours, and a dubious character known as Pravuil. Who can they trust? Arthur is tested again and again as he ascends to meet Mister Monday at the top of the house and the ultimate final battle. Even though we feel sure Arthur will triumph, the story now has us transfixed until the end, when we are relieved to think that Arthur can settle into his former life. Or does he?

Garth Nix has delivered an intricate, intriguing narrative, rich in vivid imagery. He uses allusions to Greek mythology, Christianity, and folk tales to give his story depth. Although not usually a reader of fantasy, I became more engrossed as the story developed. It would require a dedicated younger reader to grasp the details within the book, which can be confusing at times; however, the story is compelling. Upon reaching the end, I am
sure he or she will be eager to read the next in the series, *Grim Tuesday*, to see what Nix has in store for our now likely hero.

**About the Author**

*Sharon McGuinness* is a teacher librarian in a primary school south of Sydney, in NSW, where she combines a love of teaching with a passion for librarianship. She is a strong advocate for school libraries and holds a firm belief in the power of reading for enjoyment. She calls herself a “closet writer,” with her first short story being published. She recently received a state-level Quality Teaching Award. Her teacher librarian’s website can be viewed at <http://smclibrary.shaz.googlepages.com/home>.