

Words from the Editors: How to Detect the Fantastic

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When we decided to devote an issue of *First Opinions, Second Reactions* to fantasy, the editorial staff began a long year's journey in defining what fantasy works for a youthful audience were like, and what they demanded of their audience. We finally agreed that like all fantasy, these books ask their readers to suspend disbelief, recognize the familiar embedded in the fantastic, and enter into a carefully developed and sustained secondary world.

Brian Attebery has said that the narrative transaction between the fantasy author and the reader is defined by a mutual willingness to believe in what cannot be and experience a communal transaction, asserting, "Indeed, there is a sense in which the fantasy readership forms a sort of folk community shaping the narratives that it consumes" (55). Attebery defines the fantasy author as someone who knows his audience and realizes they come to the story with certain expectations:

A fantasy writer is not writing to a faceless posterity but to a knowledgeable, coherent, and demanding group. This real audience may actually be encoded in the text as a component of the postulated reader to such an extent that an outsider, someone new to the genre, may find the narrative impenetrable. (35)

Once we began to think like Attebery, we limited our selections to ones that might have special appeal for a youthful audience, whether they lived in the United States or somewhere else—say, in Australia, where one of our editorial board members lives. In order to better see how appealing fantasy might cross cultures, we turned to Christopher Cheng and asked him to tell us about authors whose books have been published in both Australia and the United States. Then we requested his help in finding new Australian books that could be reviewed by Australian teachers and librarians. The exciting results of our collaboration can be found in this issue.

Our final choices from the American market have largely been influenced by Attebery's ideas: the audience encoded in these fantasy books is young and may come with narrative expectations that would go unrecognized by a more mature reader. For instance, in picture books such as *Moonpowder*, objects manipulated by the heroes are ones that both child and adult readers can recognize and name, but the child can see them as extensions of his or her world. What becomes unnatural in fantasy depends upon the reader's everyday experiences. Manipulations of detail can cause the youthful viewer

to question earlier adult-shared interpretations of power and reality, as we see in some of the commentary concerning Neil Gaiman's *The Dangerous Alphabet*. Once the young adult reader enters the fantasy world, he "sees" his world differently and sometimes can be intrigued by the author's allusions to contemporary issues, which is exactly what happened in Jeff Spanke's class.

We hope that this issue causes you to ponder the appeal of modern fantasy works. We have concluded that authors who create fantasy for youthful readers develop credible plots and characters, engaging a young audience in explorations of a secondary world while implying how these worlds intersect with their own everyday one. Because fantasy is founded on everyday expectations and experiences, these authors demand that we entwine reality and the fantastic as we read. We think you'll see how books meet—or fail—audience expectations as you read the reviews in this issue. Enjoy!

Work Cited

Brian Attebery. "Fantasy and the Narrative Transaction." *Style* 25.1 (1991): 28-41. Print.