

A Non-Believer Reads Religious Fantasy

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I've told this story before, but in another venue that probably won't overlap with this one appreciably. A few years ago, in my children's literature course, we were reading *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, and a student came by my office to ask about how the book would be used on the final exam. She told me that she was a Christian and had problems with parts of the novel. I'd had a couple of other students who wouldn't read *Harry Potter* for religious reasons in the past, and I'd accommodated them by giving them some other, equally good book to read that they wouldn't find objectionable. This student, however, had clearly read parts of Rowling's book, and not just the beginning, so I asked her how she determined which chapters she could or could not read. Her answer surprised me. It turned out that she was entirely comfortable reading the witchcraft and wizarding bits because witches are found in the Bible and are therefore real. What she couldn't read were the chapters that mentioned centaurs and other non-Biblical creatures because these, she said, weren't real.

I often tell my students that everyone reads a different book, even though the words are identical. Age, gender, cultural background, and religion all affect our understanding and interpretation of what we read. Those of us who are not particularly religious, or who come from a liberal religious tradition, tend to look down our noses at what we perceive as the oversimplified and naive way that some people read *Harry Potter* or *The Golden Compass*, condemning those who cannot tell the difference between fiction and nonfiction, between fantasy and true religion. What I've come to realize, however, is that it isn't usually that simple. Most of my evangelical students are quite bright and are entirely aware that the fantasy books I assign in class are fictional, that their witches and wizards are not real. The possible reality of those beings isn't at issue. What bothers them is something more subtle. I believe it's the fact that reading about fictional magic might cause them to underestimate or become too comfortable with the (to them) very real supernatural dangers that are present in our world. Familiarity may breed, not exactly contempt, but a lack of caution. Given the basic belief that Satan does act on Earth and is looking to trick the unwary, this response, it seems to me, is entirely logical.

Having been raised Jewish, I had relatively little contact with Christianity as a child. I was a bit jealous about Christmas trees, of course, and didn't really understand why my parents wouldn't let us have a Hanukkah bush like our upstairs neighbors did, but other than that, Christianity and things Christian simply weren't very important to me. And yet, I read the Narnia books and *A Wrinkle in Time* and enjoyed them thoroughly (I also enjoyed *The Robe* and other quasi-Christian Hollywood epics). I kind of knew that these children's

books were religious in some sense, but their theological implications were lost on me. Rather, they were simply good stories. I still remember the “sense of wonder” (to borrow a term from science fiction criticism) that I felt upon reading the closing pages of Lewis’s *The Last Battle*, when the world ends and all of the characters make their way to Aslan’s country. I wonder, though, what pleasures I missed because the books’ Christian side was (and essentially still is) meaningless to me. I also wonder if this is why so many people enjoy the Christian fantasies of G. P. Taylor, for example, *Shadowmancer* and *Wormwood*, novels I tend to find at once overly obvious and virtually unreadable.

In recent years, I’ve been writing a lot about the fiction of David Almond. I don’t know anything about Almond’s actual beliefs, but he obviously grew up among intensely religious folk, since his collection of autobiographical short stories, *Counting Stars*, is full of tales in which typical citizens of Northern England run into angels and speak with the dead. *Skellig*, Almond’s first novel, centers on two children who discover a creature who may be an extraordinarily eccentric (and grouchy, and arthritic) angel. *Heaven Eyes* and *Secret Heart* are heavily awash in Christian symbolism and frequently tread on the very edge of allegory, although the primary sources of Almond’s religious imagery are Blake and Milton rather than the Bible itself. I love these books dearly, in part because of their beautiful language and their meticulous handling of complex moral issues, but, again, I wonder how the stories I’m reading differ from what is being read by people who come to Almond through Christian perceptions.

Another religious fantasy novel I love is Lisa Goldstein’s *The Red Magician*, a dark Holocaust tale that grows out of the medieval Jewish folk tradition of rabbis who could work miracles, raise Golems, and lay the angry dead. These are tales that I grew up with, and they are far more real to me than, for example, the Christmas story. The characters in Goldstein’s book could easily be my relatives, their angry dead my own, killed by the Nazis long before I was born. My wife, who is a student of moral development, steeped in the wisdom of Kohlberg and Gilligan, insists that a significant part of our response to great literature is a recognition of moral truths, that on some level Christ’s tale is the Buddha’s tale is Rabbi Hillel’s tale, and I suspect that this is the case. What is truly wise in the Narnia books or *Skellig* will also be found in *The Red Magician*. When I reread the latter, however, I still feel a nagging suspicion that my experience is somehow different from that of my (mostly) Christian students. They find the tale moving, but far-fetched and, well, distant. Although I’m not a religious person, I find it strangely believable, something that could, in some inexplicable fashion, actually have occurred. Everyone reads a different book, but when the tale is close enough, perhaps even unbelievers may believe.

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