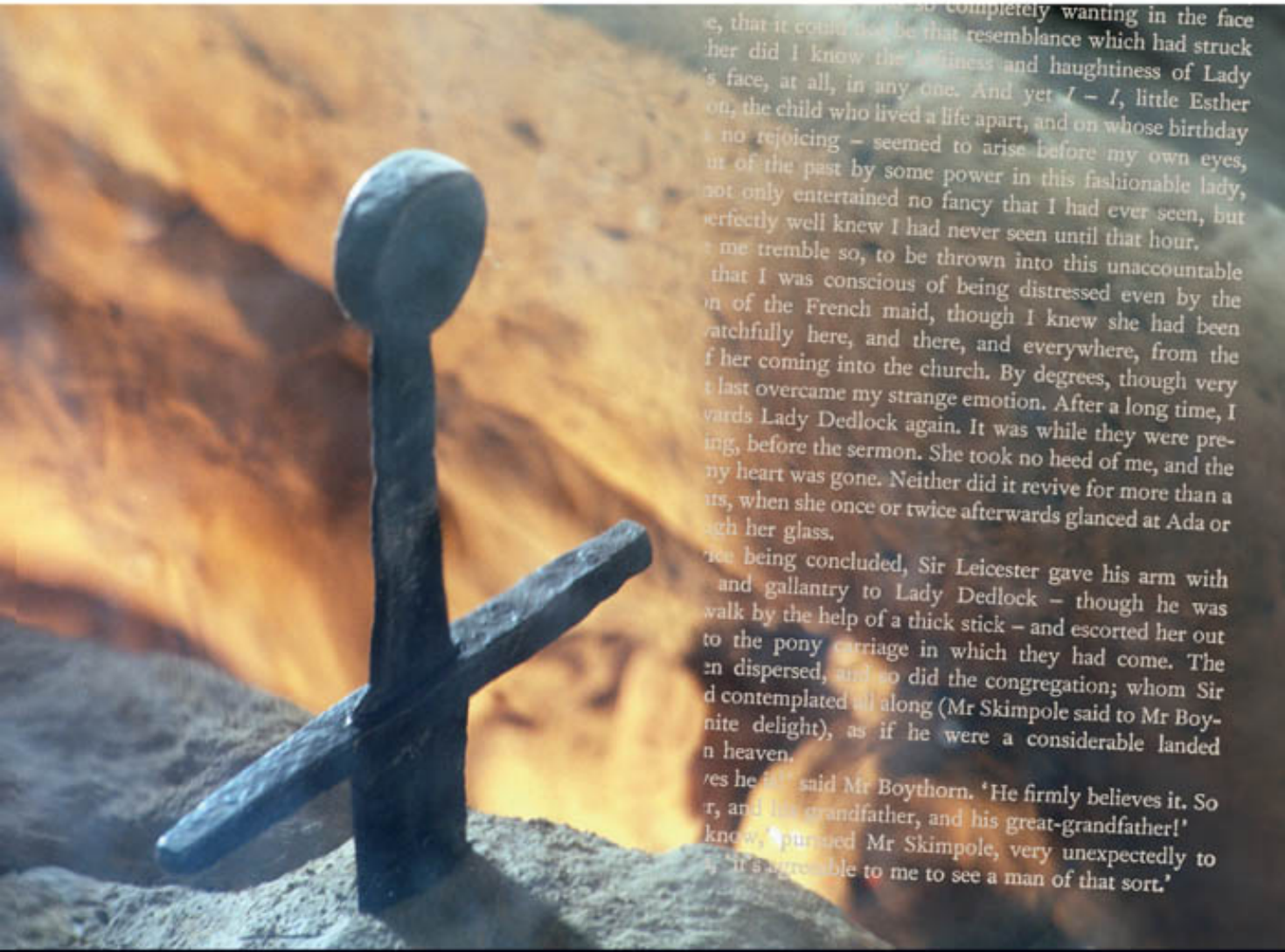
BLOOMSBURY GOOD READING GUIDES

100 MUST-READ FANTASY NOVELS



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FANTASY NOVELS

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A & C Black • London

First published 2009

A & C Black Publishers Limited
36 Soho Square
London W1D 3QY
www.acblack.com

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978 1408 11487 2

This book is produced using paper that is made from wood grown in managed, sustainable forests. It is natural, renewable and recyclable. The logging and manufacturing processes conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Typeset in 8.5pt on 12pt Meta-Light

Printed in the UK by CPI Bookmarque, Croydon, CR0 4TD

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ABOUTTHISBOOK

To understand the references in the one hundred individual book entries to movements and moments in the history of Fantasy, it is advisable to tackle the **Introduction** first (or consult the **Glossary** for definitions of Fantasy and literary terminology). The entries then follow A to Z by author, describing the plot of each title while aiming to avoid too many 'spoilers', offering some value judgements and describing the author's place in Fantasy and/or their other works. The use of the symbol ›› before an author's name in the text (e.g. ›› **Michael Moorcock**) indicates that we have selected at least one of their books as one of the main A–Z entries in the text. We have also noted significant film versions (with dates of release) where applicable, followed by 'Read on' lists comprising books by the same author, books by stylistically similar writers or books on a theme relevant to the main entry. 'Read on a Theme' entries will help those who wish to explore a particular area of Fantasy in more depth and a listing of World Fantasy Award winning novels is included for reference.

This book is not a 'Best of' as we decided it would be impossible to produce a definitive list of the greatest Fantasy novels while limiting ourselves to only one hundred titles without making unacceptably subjective choices. Nor is it a 'Top 100', as popularity polls only tell us what we already know, and as Fantasy is about the unbridled

imagination, too much reliance on the familiar should be anathema to Fantasy readers. Instead, we decided that our title should steer us and we have chosen one hundred books we feel one could read (or read about) to gain an introductory overview of Fantasy, while leaving many essential works to be discovered by the reader in the extra features. To produce a book intended to be a starting point for exploring the genre, we felt that we needed to cover the major themes of Fantasy – from the perennial ideas the reader would expect from their experience of Fantasy in the mass media to the more unusual concepts that rarely make it onto TV or cinema screens. This is why in a number of instances some authors are not represented by what some people may argue are technically their best or most famous books. The necessity of this approach did cause us some pain, especially in the cases of writers who are prolific, brilliant and important to the history of Fantasy but in the end, to ensure we covered the maximum number of authors, we decided that only a handful of writers required more than one entry and all of these are massively prolific, critically acclaimed and phenomenal bestsellers. In short, we have focused on titles that we think are both representative of their themes and singularly important to the development of Fantasy as a genre or a publishing category. Significantly, we have broken with our usual rule of only covering adult novels in this *Must-Read* as it is almost impossible to understand or fully appreciate the breadth of Fantasy literature without considering the many important children's books which have contributed enormously to the development of the genre, a claim that would be difficult to justify with genres such as SF or crime fiction

The tendency since the late 1970s for Fantasy authors to produce multi-volume series also compounded our problems, so our entries

concentrate on first volumes in series, so when we recommend an initial title in a series, we are implying that you may wish to read the sequels we have listed. Where possible, we have listed the titles of **omnibus editions** that collect whole series of books into a single volume, as these collected versions are sometimes attractively priced and easier to locate. Series titles are in bold italics (e.g. ***The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant***), titles of novels and short story collections are in italics, while short stories and novellas are reproduced in quotes (e.g. 'Ill Met in Lankhmar'). Where we use the term **internal chronology**, we mean the order in which the events in a series take place – which can be different from the order in which a series of novels are issued (the ***Narnia*** books of ›› C.S. Lewis include one famous example of this, *The Magician's Nephew*, whose events precede *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the first book of the series to be published).

Younger readers may not be aware that many classic Fantasy 'novels' were originally published as short story serials in magazines (few Fantasy novels were published in book form and labelled as such until the late 1970s), so we indicate this by the use of the word **collected** alongside a date, indicating when the tales were first presented in book form. In the spirit of unfettered imagination that Fantasy relies upon, we have ignored the constraints of our title in a few instances to include a handful of vitally important short story collections by authors highly significant in the history of imaginative literature, whose most important Fantastic work is in shorter forms.

As Fantasy publishing is currently experiencing its second boom in a period of less than forty years, we have excluded a number of currently popular but nonetheless derivative works and writers at the expense of books and authors without whom there would have been no mass

market for Fantasy in the first place. Context is everything: unless the reader has a working knowledge of these writers, they will be unable to judge the real worth of contemporary writers.

As regards availability, we have tried to select a majority of books that are reprinted regularly. A trip to your local bookshop armed with your chosen titles and authors should be enough for a bookseller to check availability for you. However, the commercial reality of publishing is that many classics now remain out of print for years on end, only reaching readers via the goodwill of committed editors at major houses and dedicated fanatics at small presses. The good news is that due to print-on-demand technology and the generally easy availability of out of print titles and imports via the internet, hours of scouring second hand bookshops for that elusive masterpiece should only be an enjoyably serendipitous last resort. We were nevertheless delighted to find that a large number of classic Fantasy titles were in print either in the USA or UK at the time this book went to press.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank the following individuals for their support, inspiration, indulgence and suggestions:

Duncan Bowis, Graham Bray, Dr Tim Coombs (here's to the Commandante's health!), Patricia Jones, Colin Litster, Rebecca and Mark Williams, everyone at Moorcock's Multiverse and everyone at A & C Black.

INTRODUCTION

What exactly is Fantasy? We may already think we know what Fantasy is and what its key works are, but when we try and pin it down, Fantasy becomes slippery and difficult to quantify. Upon visiting bookshops or libraries, we usually discover that the books we immediately think of as typical Fantasies are shelved with the Science Fiction and rarely – if ever – separated from these tales of spaceships, aliens, advanced computer technology and future societies. Sometimes, these bookcases bear the label 'Science Fiction', without any mention of Fantasy, even though they contain the works of Tolkien, Peake and Pratchett alongside the novels of Asimov, Dick and Wells. When we try to separate these two genres, lumped together as they are for historical and practical reasons (more on this later), even more awkward questions arise, most prominent being the inevitable 'What is the difference between Fantasy and Science Fiction?', a query that came up at every single appearance I made at libraries, bookshops and lecture halls while promoting *100 Must-Read Science Fiction Novels*.

The persistence of this question has convinced me that deciding what constitutes the dividing line between SF and Fantasy is an important literary issue for many of us. Consequently, in this introduction I'm going to try to define Fantasy, differentiate it from SF (as we'll refer to Science Fiction), then outline the history of Fantasy

publishing, thus creating a context for the books we've selected as must-reads. Here's my suggested definition of Fantasy:

> *Fantasy is the literature of imaginary and inexplicable places, times, events and beings. Fantasy stories take place either in our world or others, in our time or other times, their authors describing imaginary things that they do not attempt to explain rationally or scientifically, sometimes evoking magic and the supernatural to provide an excuse for the presence of these imaginary elements.*

Implicit in this definition of Fantasy as the literature of the inexplicable are two important points that help differentiate Fantasy from SF:

1. Authors are under no pressure to explain the imaginary elements of their stories rationally when writing Fantasy, but can merely present them at face value.
2. Similarly, readers undergo no pressure to seek rational explanations for the imaginary elements of Fantasy stories, but can simply accept them at face value too.

In short, we can all relax, enjoy and *excuse* the imaginary elements of Fantasy, rather than worry about having to *explain* them. As readers mature, they sometimes become dissatisfied with this, perhaps seeing an author's failure to rationalise the tallest elements of their tales as childish rather than liberating (after all, we've discovered that the real world is complex and demands explanations). Some readers will then reject Fantasy in favour of the rationality of SF and Realism, seeing Fantasy as making poor (or no) excuses in its attempt to convince us of its veracity. Conversely, some readers grow weary of rationality, and merely wish to escape, accept and enjoy the bliss of a good story for its

own sake – it's only fiction, after all! Consequently, Fantasy can re-attract our attention in adulthood, as we grow psychologically dissatisfied with our mundane world of regimented order and predictable tedium. So we return to our pleasure in tales that need no explanation on the part of the author or ourselves. We are back in the land of Fantasy, a place where the inexplicable is King.

FANTASTIC BUT NOT FANTASY? THE PROBLEM OF SCIENCE FICTION

Journalists and presenters working in the mass media have a habit of using the term 'Fantasy' in a very broad sense. This usage actually indicates a line being drawn between Realism and what used to be known as 'Romance', which was a catch-all literary term for any work of fiction or drama that was not realistic. This usage results in misleading and tautological phrases like 'Sci-Fi Fantasy', a misnomer if ever there was one. Most literary critics agree that what the media pundits mean by 'Fantasy' is what they (the critics) call 'The Fantastic', a catch-all term for Fantasy, Science Fiction and any other forms of non-realistic fiction you might care to recognise, such as Magical Realism. Naturally, we don't use the term 'Romance' these days, as the word has become identified with popular love stories, which is unfortunate, as 'The Fantastic' and 'Fantasy' initially appear interchangeable.

What many readers think of when they hear the word 'Fantasy' tends to be the most popular sub-category of the genre, which critics call Genre Fantasy, but which ›› Fritz Leiber dubbed 'Sword & Sorcery' (or S&S as we'll refer to it for short). This more specific usage of the word 'Fantasy' refers to the best-known work of authors like ›› Robert E. Howard and ›› Michael Moorcock, rather than that of ›› Jorge Luis

Borges or ›› Angela Carter. Meanwhile, the works of ›› J.R.R. Tolkien and his acolytes, because of their size and scope, have become the template for what is sometimes called 'High Fantasy'. In terms of content (typically swords, wizards, quests, dragons, little people and sorcerers), there is scant difference between Sword & Sorcery and High Fantasy – the latter merely puts a greater emphasis on events changing the world of the story irrevocably. Consequently, we will refer to both these variants of popular fantasy as 'Genre Fantasy' throughout this book. The glossary at the end of the book will help you keep in mind the specific meanings of each term we use.

While it is often argued that SF is a sub-category of the Fantastic, SF is nevertheless quite distinct from Genre Fantasy. In SF, what first *appears* to be the inexplicable can arise, but it is often explained by the author – through rationalisations placed noticeably and deliberately in the text (these passages are often described as 'infodump') – or otherwise deduced by the reader, who picks up the subtler clues placed by more crafty authors. The nature of these authorial 'explanations' can be implicitly or explicitly scientific in character, and they are therefore intended to indicate the explicable rather than the inexplicable. Science is, after all, about explaining phenomena rationally and completely, without recourse to the vagueness of supernatural agencies. Therefore, you could say that there are simply firm rules imposed upon the imagination by authors when they write SF, rules that are demanded by the SF readership, rules which limit what can and can't be done in SF stories. Specifically, the writer has to make a convincing case for reasonably realistic possible future technologies to explain the presence of elements like androids, time travellers and extra-terrestrials in his tales. Conversely, in Genre Fantasy proper (such as S&S), magic

can be used to excuse the existence of sentient swords, goblins and sorcerers, rather than the author having to explain them scientifically.

But isn't some of the 'science' used by SF writers imaginary and unlikely to ever be created? As we're discussing fiction, not real life, we can safely use the approach of divining an author's intention to determine if a story is Fantasy or SF by looking at what evidence they provide for us in each case, examining the *content* of their stories and evaluating if they are using 'science' or magic. The fact is that most authors intentionally signal that they are referring to scientifically explicable marvels rather than definitively inexplicable ones quite unambiguously in their stories. Additionally, the history of science has shown us that technological developments believed to be impossible in the relatively recent past have become part of our everyday lives and that this continues to be the case as our scientific knowledge evolves, so when reading SF, we assume that the 'imaginary science' of some SF could one day cease to be imaginary and become theoretically possible.

THE DEVIL IN THE DETAIL: SCIENCE FANTASY AND HORROR

Of course, some authors don't like to put limitations on their imagination by obeying anyone's ideas about genre boundaries, producing stories which appear to contain elements of both SF and Fantasy. Other writers (notably Horror scribe Ramsey Campbell) believe that imposing genre boundaries can give a writer's vision discipline and edifying rigour, making their narratives more plausible and authentic to readers. Both viewpoints are valid. The fact is that in the majority of apparently genre-straddling books, there is often one 'novelty' that breaks the camel's back in providing evidence for a work's genre status – and it is

usually a magical/supernatural one. As soon as the supernatural is revealed to be *real* in the world of the story and not scientifically explicable, the tale in question is definitely not SF, but Fantasy, no matter how many of the common 'novelties' of SF (such as robots or spaceships) appear in the text.

One area where making value judgements of these kinds can be almost impossible is in the form commonly known as Science Fantasy, which is probably more responsible than any other type of fiction for confusing readers who are trying to differentiate between Fantasy and SF. Science Fantasy is a term that was popular in the 1970s, used to describe stories set in the future or on other planets where both science and magic (and the important S&S content symbolism of swordplay) *appear* to be present. Many experts cite ›› Edgar Rice Burroughs' ***A Princess of Mars*** as the key forerunner of Science Fantasy. The novel is probably SF, but its narrative and prose have the 'magical' colour and tone found in so much S&S. However, it has no definitive supernatural elements as such, perhaps with the exception of the means by which the hero is transported to Mars, but Burroughs' description of this transition is so lacking in explanatory detail that it could be interpreted one way or the other. SF stories like this, set in other worlds, featuring swashbuckling adventure (but no actual magic) are often called 'Planetary Romances' (key authors of early Planetary Romances were Leigh Brackett, ›› C.L. Moore and ›› Jack Vance). But perhaps the most important predecessor of true Science Fantasy were the ***Zothique*** stories of ›› Clark Ashton Smith. These multi-hued, gothic narratives are set in a far future where magic and science appear to be co-existent. Vance used this idea in his ***Dying Earth*** stories, which – more than any of their forebears – finally codified true Science Fantasy, as it is impossible to tell if the

'magic' in these stories is actually advanced technology or just good old-fashioned enchantment. Other authors following Smith's colourful lead, blending machinery and spells in distant futures depicting somnolent Earths expiring of old age include ›› Michael Moorcock (*Hawkmoon*, *Dancers At The End of Time*), ›› Gene Wolfe (*The Book of the New Sun*) and ›› M. John Harrison (*Viriconium*). All these sagas feature the symbols of S&S – blade-wielding, mystic brotherhoods and so on – but all include what appears to be high technology too.

SF writer Arthur C. Clarke once famously stated that the technology of a truly advanced race would be indistinguishable from magic to a less-developed society, so perhaps if we ever (1) prove the existence of the supernatural and magic, then (2) explain it scientifically, perhaps all Fantasy stories relying on magic could be re-categorised as SF. Because of the ambiguity around the 'is it science or is it magic?' question in most Science Fantasy novels, we have decided to include several of them in this book, as their ambiguous nature discouraged us from including them in *100 Must-Read Science Fiction Novels*. What we have excluded are pure, unambiguously SF Planetary Romances like Anne McCaffrey's ***Pern*** sequence, for example, which appear to be Science Fantasy at first glance. Despite the fact that these books are set in an archaic-seeming society that initially appears to be loaded with Fantasy symbolism, the novels are set on another planet in the future and feature genetically engineered dragons instead of mythological ones. McCaffrey has confirmed that the ***Pern*** novels are SF, a fact that becomes increasingly obvious as the story develops.

As for Horror, it is not truly a genre but an emotional and philosophical approach to writing fiction, as its consistent focus is on our universal fear of death and our concerns about the frailty of our bodies

and minds. Of course, the variable content of horror stories actually places individual books into different genres – while Richard Matheson's scientifically explained vampires in *I Am Legend* make the book an SF classic, the religious elements of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* confirm that his classic tale of the vampire Count is Supernatural Horror. Because of the emphasis on superstition and religion in Supernatural Horror, we can place this sub-genre within the magical realm of Fantasy (in fact, from the mid-1980s on, it became fashionable to call Supernatural Horror 'Dark Fantasy' instead). Finally, realistic serial killer tales with no magical or SF content (but with plenty of psychological mayhem and gory violence), such as Robert Bloch's *Psycho*, could be claimed as a subset of Crime fiction, placing them outside the environs of Fantasy altogether, while still focusing enough on the fragility of the flesh to be considered worthy of the Horror tag.

For the purposes of this book, we have largely excluded Supernatural Horror/Dark Fantasy, as it will be covered in a future *Good Reading Guide*. Instead, we have tried to concentrate on works we feel certain are unambiguously Fantasy. But as we've implied, the very nature of Fantasy is indistinct, so we have at times lapsed over the border into the broader realms of The Fantastic where an author's influence has undoubtedly contributed to the development of Fantasy in significant ways – for example, there is much evidence to suggest that our ›› M. John Harrison selection is SF. Similarly, it seemed perverse to exclude the multifaceted work of ›› H.P. Lovecraft (some of it is arguably SF, much of it is Supernatural Horror, some of it is undeniably Fantasy – but it all falls within the realm of The Fantastic), as his name recurs at numerous junctures in this book in relation to other seminal Fantasy writers. As Lovecraft's primary focus was the eternally inexplicable, he

perhaps typifies the ambiguous, near-indefinable nature of The Fantastic more significantly than almost any other author.

Ultimately, considerable bookselling experience and an unfeasible amount of reading is required to authoritatively separate Fantasy and SF on bookshop shelves (which is why you rarely see such separation in practice, as today no single reader would have time to read all the genre fiction published). Other important reasons why the two genres usually share the same section in bookshops is an historical one, revolving around how commercial publishing developed, the difficulty in placing the work of square-peg authors like Lovecraft and the fact that there are numerous authors who have written both pure SF and pure Fantasy.

ANOTHER FINE MYTH: THE ORIGINS OF GENRE FANTASY

The birth of Fantasy lies in the origins of story-telling itself. From the dawning of our species, we have told tales, beginning with recounting the day's hunting when we first stopped being like other primates and started being human. We imagined gods (or heard their commands to us) and related chronicles of holy individuals and places. We migrated across the globe, telling our stories, discovering new ones from the tongues of others and composed our own narratives from our own experiences. Before writing, stories were passed down from generation to generation as oral tradition, gaining and losing in the retelling until we learned to set them down on stone, wax, skins and paper. Some of the stories we told or heard were true and some were lies, embroidered facts or acceptable exaggerations.

The religious, mythical and legendary writings that have had the most influence upon what we recognise today as Fantasy depend to

some extent upon what part of the world you live in. As Western culture is the most dominant in the mass media, the Fantasy derived from the mythology of Europe is almost certainly the most pervasive. Although Classical Literature dominated the history of education in Europe until very recently, modern Fantasy stories based upon the exploits of the Greek gods and heroes (and their Roman equivalents) are comparatively uncommon. This is probably because the Middle Eastern religions of The Book came to dominate Western civilisation once the pagan empire of Rome gave way to a Christianised one and Muslims and Jews relocated to North-Western Europe. But the movement of these faiths has not resulted in directly inspiring much Fantasy fiction in recent centuries (except for the Christian implications and symbolism of Arthurian legends, a major theme in Fantasy for centuries), as these monotheistic religions by definition reject the idea of any gods other than their own. Instead, it is the mythology of pagan North Europe that still dominates much of our Fantasy literature, perhaps because those of us who are of Eurocentric ancestry (the majority of the readership for Genre Fantasy) find something psychologically satisfying in the idea of the mystical calling of our forbears and ancestral homelands. An examination of the stentorian symbolism and doom-laden worldview of Euro-pagan mythology is outside the scope of this book, but there is no doubt that definitive texts such as Iceland's *The Elder Edda*, Finland's *The Kalevala*, England's *Beowulf* or Wales' *The Mabinogion* and the Teutonic operas of Wagner have had more influence over Western Fantasy writing than eastern epics such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, *The Tales of a Thousand and One Nights* or any other monuments of world folklore you care to mention. Arthurian legends appeared in the Dark Ages and proliferated across Western Europe until the Medieval period

in the form of Chivalric Romances – tales of old when knights were bold. These remained even more constant in their popularity, laying the foundations for the modern novel, providing noble respite from the blood and thunder of Norse sagas. The influence of Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, the works of Chrétien de Troyes, verses like *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the crusader-age legend of Roman soldier St. George slaying a dragon somewhere in the Middle East, when combined with the mythology of Norse Midgard (Middle Earth) are the flesh and blood of Genre Fantasy, be it High Fantasy or S&S.

An extremely significant early modern novel, Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1604) is also central to understanding the history of Fantasy, as it is about a reader obsessed with Chivalric Romances who cannot distinguish reality from Fantasy, pretending to be a knight. At once an argument for Realism, a parody of Fantasy, a fabulation that self-consciously comments upon other texts the reader knows and an extension of the Picaresque tradition (Hispanic tales of low-born rogues that arguably provided the models for some S&S anti-heroes), Don Quixote is a milestone that marks the moment in literary history when we truly began to realise that Fantasy was just that, allowing us to develop the new school of Realistic fiction.

By the late eighteenth century, the novel was established, science was becoming increasingly accepted after centuries of religious dominance and the revolution in ideas known as the Enlightenment ensured that rationalism was the 'in' thing all over Europe and North America. But the reaction to the Enlightenment in the arts was Romanticism, which in its obsession with the sublime, fostered a great flowering of European imaginative writing, from spooky Gothic novels, outright horror, fantastic tales of magic and decadence such as William