
Subject: Epic fantasy and a night off
Posted by [Maren](#) on Thu, 14 Jul 2011 23:32:28 GMT
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Epic fantasy and a night off

Subject: Re: Epic fantasy and a night off
Posted by [EMoon](#) on Fri, 15 Jul 2011 04:36:41 GMT
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Huh...and the room is empty...and I've read as much as I could stand (sorry...the truth) of the Clarkesworld thing on epic fantasy.

And being alone in here, on the empty stage in the empty theater, and no spotlights on unless some rat fries itself on the light board...I'll say it.

Yes, I write epic fantasy. Yes, I know what epic fantasy is, and I write it. Not ONLY epic fantasy, but yes, epic fantasy. And I'm not ashamed to claim it, and you can't argue me out of saying that's what I do, and of all my invented worlds, the one of the epic fantasy is closest to my heart.

Some of the people talking at the topic got it right. Some were...inadequate (not of course our Hellgoddess.)

It's not style--though a good epic fantasy will create the style it needs. You can't make an epic fantasy with fancy language (that's not how Tolkein did it, fancy languages though he invented.)

It's not about the kind of scope that means lots of people, lots of territory, lots of action: that's Cecil B. DeMille cinematic extravaganza. It IS the kind of scope that connects a human heart to its deepest depths to a great problem most cannot connect with. All the way down, all the way in, to all the way out, and all the way up.

It's not grand characters in extravagant costumers with armfuls of magic items and shiny weapons...though somewhere in there, someone may have any of those. It's one or more individuals who are ordinary in themselves--or apparently so--and must do the extraordinary with whatever resources they have or can find.

It's the inverse, in that sense, of classical tragedy as defined by Aristotle, where he said the appropriate protagonist was a king or queen...in epic fantasy, the appropriate character is a hobbit, a woodland elf not a high elf, an apparent vagabond ranger...or a sheepfarmer's stubborn daughter.

And yet the structure IS Aristotelian...in that although the problem is external to start with, the struggles the characters have are also, in the sense of "fatal or near-fatal flaws" internal. It's not enough to have superheroes who battle supervillains, pitting their superpowers against the supervillains' superpowers--that's not epic. No, the hero of an epic fantasy has daunted courage, fumbling intelligence, clouded judgment...must overcome his/her own traits and make them into something else, all while coming to grips with that grand outside problem. At the end, the once lumpy and awkward caterpillar in the confining chrysalis breaks out, and has that triumph...and only maybe, occasionally, lives to sit by the fire and bore the grandchildren.

It's not setting--or, as with language, a gorgeous setting, richly detailed, is not enough. A true epic fantasy will generate the setting it needs, from the bones of the earth up to the stars. Plenty of stories have richly-detailed gorgeous settings but lack the epic quality of the story itself.

Hellgoddess got it right: it's the story. An epic fantasy has the whole-body unity of true Story...no matter how long it is, no matter how many characters, it pulls through, it connects in all the ways a good story does connect. The current of the Story-river never stops, though it may slow, speed up, roar over waterfalls, bounce wildly through rapids, cut through stone, even change course in a flood. There's the power of gravity in it: it's going somewhere big, and it gets there.

Someone else (forget who, now) also got it right: in epic fantasy, the people matter in a way most of us can't believe we do. They are the only ones who can do what must be done...and because they are not all impervious, perfect, incredible superheroes to start with, because we're shown their weaknesses, their mistakes, and yet they DO matter and they DO succeed...we ordinary, lackluster readers feel a flicker of greatness in ourselves as we recognize both their humanity and their ability to stretch beyond.

We do not know the exact words in which the early epics were told or sung...we know the version that was written down, or in some cases a version still being told at a time someone came along to record it or write it down. What we can surmise is that the Story--which is character/motivation/plot so melded that they cannot really be separated--the Story is what deserved retelling and retelling until finally it ended up on paper to be studied in college classes. I read some of Homer in Greek, in college...and it was a goose-pimples experience to think I was so much closer to the first time that story was told than I had been, reading it in English as a kid. But still...it's the story. It's a Story so big, so resonant, so densely layered that you can hear it or read it over and over and still find mysteries in it. How many plays, how many short stories, how many "historical" novels have come out of Homer? We read Beowulf in high school...struggling to read a few lines in the original (not making it!) and then in a modern translation. The same shiver, the same sense of touching something very very old, and very very alive. Beowulf isn't just Beowulf...behind Hrothgar, behind the Grendel, behind Grendel's mother...is that ancient world...and it's still in us, alive, and if we touch that--the epic fantasy or the myth--those old, old parts of us wake again...the coils sliding over one another, the eye gleaming out of darkness.

So. To claim it is to risk being laughed off the stage. Who am I, to be on the same stage as Tolkein and Homer? Nobody. Not in the same league. Nonetheless...I do claim it. I write epic fantasy.

(The rat not having cooperated by immolating itself in the wiring, she walks off the stage in the dark, falls over something, barking both shins, sprains a wrist, cusses inexpertly, and leaves the theater to the hiss of rain on the pavement outside.)

Subject: Re: Epic fantasy and a night off
Posted by [Diane in MN](#) on Fri, 15 Jul 2011 06:13:42 GMT
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Coming at this from the standpoint of a reader of epic fantasy in one form (Homer, the Gawain-poet, Malory . . .) or another (Tolkien, T.H. White, Le Guin . . .) for more than half a century, I think EMoon has hit the bull's-eye with her post. I often find "Epic Fantasy" to be a corner of the fantasy world populated primarily by People Who Really Need an Editor, but that wouldn't be the case if more of what gets that label met her definition.

Quote: It IS the kind of scope that connects a human heart to its deepest depths to a great problem most cannot connect with. All the way down, all the way in, to all the way out, and all the way up.

This is the heart of it. This is what, finally, makes the hair on the back of the neck come up. It's why the world outside the book can also be changed by the time the last page is turned. "All the way down, all the way in, to all the way out, and all the way up." "There and back again." YES.

Subject: Re: Epic fantasy and a night off
Posted by [Knitronomicon](#) on Fri, 15 Jul 2011 10:44:08 GMT
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Quote:"All the way down, all the way in, to all the way out, and all the way up." "There and back again."

"Further in, and further up!"

Subject: Re: Epic fantasy and a night off
Posted by [AJLR](#) on Fri, 15 Jul 2011 12:47:01 GMT
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Very interesting discussion, and equally interesting inputs here.

For me, epic fantasy (though I'm not sure I've ever labelled it as such in my own thoughts) is a reaffirmation of being human, fallible, persistent, and able to have an effect on how things work in a life. A story that makes things too easy for the protagonist(s) is unsatisfying, another one that is all doom and defeat is (for me) impossible to engage with because it needs to be translatable from real life and that's the way things are there in 99% of cases.

Subject: Re: Epic fantasy and a night off
Posted by [BurgandyIce](#) on Fri, 15 Jul 2011 18:32:37 GMT
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And I needed that break because I'd just found out that Damar was not one story but lots of them, and I panicked.

As a Damar enthusiast I squeaked outloud when I read this. Maybe I already knew it from before, but some things are news no matter how many times I read them (except for No Sunshine Sequel - I got that one). Please-please-please let those stories all out!!!!!! (Whenever you can and they cooperate and all that, only soonish)

And I've heard hints of this....

My worst nightmare? Peg II could run to III. It's not going to. I couldn't stand it.

...and just thought I'd say it. Three is more and nice and since I've gotten over the abrupt cutoff from I to patiently wait for II, I can (almost) calmly say GO FOR IT - whatever the story does, I will thoroughly enjoy it.

And thank you, btw, for wrestling these stories out of wherever they were hiding.

Subject: Re: Epic fantasy and a night off
Posted by [jmeadows](#) on Sat, 16 Jul 2011 09:50:54 GMT
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drops a blanket over BurgandyIce

Shh. Whatever you do, don't startle the Hellgoddess with talk of trilogies. We may not make it out alive if you do that.

slips a book and flashlight under the blanket

Subject: Re: Epic fantasy and a night off
Posted by [BurgandyIce](#) on Sat, 16 Jul 2011 15:06:49 GMT
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jmeadows wrote on Sat, 16 July 2011 02:50*drops a blanket over BurgandyIce*

Shh. Whatever you do, don't startle the Hellgoddess with talk of trilogies. We may not make it out alive if you do that.

slips a book and flashlight under the blanket

mumbles heart-felt apologies which quickly become squeals of delight followed by extended silence with intermittent chuckles
