

PORNOKITSCH 2013

SAMPLER FOR HUGO VOTER PACKET
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Hey, *thanks!*

If you're reading this, that means you're a Hugo voter, and *that* means you're responsible (collectively or individually) for Pornokitsch being on the ballot for Best Fanzine. We're delighted, proud, overjoyed and ecstatic – hell, we'd be at a loss for words if it weren't for the thesaurus.

This little packet is meant to 'demonstrate nominees' activity in the year of eligibility', and we've tried to take a selection of works that showcase what happened in our online nook during the course of 2013.

The first piece – Anne's article on the legacy of Roger Ebert – explains the *why* of Pornokitsch. Spoiler alert: we take everything seriously. That doesn't mean we don't have fun (we have *lots* of fun), but it means that we (try to) approach science fiction, fantasy, young adult, horror, comics, movies, books, whatever with the *respect* it is due.

The other half of what Pornokitsch is about is love. That's a big gooeey, sappy word, but, damn – we *love* this stuff. That's the Fanzine Way. Hazarding a guess, from the fact that you've paid good money to travel to London and lock yourself away in a convention centre with like-minded folks – you're pretty fond of this stuff too. The second article we've included, 'An Introduction to Book Collecting' is one small expression of this sentiment.

Pornokitsch is primarily a review site (over 200 books and films reviewed in 2013) and the ones we've selected – Jared on *Dragonlance Chronicles*, Anne on *Super 8* and *Terminator* – may not be for the biggest, best or even the most recent books and films, *but* they were the ones we enjoyed writing the most. All things being equal, that seemed like the best way of deciding.

Some of our activity in 2013 wasn't *actually* ours, and we want to thank the other authors and fans that wrote for Pornokitsch last year. James Smythes' 'Hindsight' is a look into the realities (and anxieties) of a new writer. (One that, we hasten to add, has established himself as one of Britain's most celebrated SF authors.) Tiffani Angus' 'Gateway Smut' is another of our

favourite pieces, a friendly (and funny) guide to approaching one of genre's fastest-growing, yet least-discussed, areas. We are very grateful to both to them as well as to our other contributors.

Our final thank you is to our readers and commenters, who are, without a doubt, the best in the world. We've never had to moderate comments or ban IPs, and for every recommendation we put up in a review, we get a half dozen back from the community. What we're *not* able to capture in this packet, rather unfairly, are their contributions: the chat on the site and on social media around each article. Two of the articles we've included - 'Can there be fantasy disaster fiction?' and 'Fifty "Essential" Epic Fantasies' – spurred discussion on Pornokitsch and elsewhere. Some of it is even still ongoing. Please don't be shy about chiming in...

We enjoyed revisited 2013 to put together this sampler, and hope you enjoy reading it. Thanks again – and we'll see you in London!

Annc C. Perry & Jared Shurin

London

May 2014

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**PORNOKITSCH, MEMES
AND THE SHADOW OF
ROGER EBERT**

Roger Ebert, the eminent American film critic, died on Thursday night. He was seventy. As ill as he had been for the last decade, the news of his death was still shocking. I followed him on Twitter. I read his reviews. I read his last announcement, made the day before he died, that he was going to be slowing down in his reviewing going forward. It was still a shock. As of now: a world without Roger Ebert.

Movie criticism was, for maybe 20 years, the first form of criticism people encountered. Reading the Friday papers, with their reviews of the week's new releases, very often informed the weekend's activities. And even if one didn't get to the cinemas before the film left, or the movie one was interested in wasn't showing anywhere accessible, it would be on the shelves of the local video store in less than a year. Watching a film, and agreeing or disagreeing with the review of it one had read: well, that's critical engagement in its purest form.

The first form of criticism they encountered, I should qualify, that *mattered*. We were certainly all encouraged to engage critically with school texts, for example, but that was *work*. Engaging with movies, and with movie reviews – that was *fun*.

For a generation or two, movie reviews *really* mattered. With the rise of the home video market, 80 years of cinema history suddenly became accessible. For untold numbers of kids – latchkey kids without a lot of stuff to do after school or on weekends – video stores were Mecca. And, since one couldn't sustain oneself purely on new releases, going into a video store armed with a list gleaned from a '10 Best' column, or a book of reviews, was vital.

So movie critics like Roger Ebert, with his regular, syndicated reviews, his comprehensive books, and (perhaps, for the moment, most importantly) his well-known TV show, really, really mattered. Ebert in particular was at the forefront of the conversation about movies in America, and everyone had an opinion about his opinions.

I was in college in Chicago the year Ebert's long-time reviewing partner, Gene Siskel, died. I remember very clearly;

there was a *lot* of discussion about their different tastes and which of the two was 'better' – whatever that meant. The consensus around the table, I recall, was that Siskel was the superior reviewer of the two. He was certainly the more cerebral and less raw of them. I, 18 and insecure, felt ashamed to admit that I preferred Ebert's reviews, Ebert's tastes. That I always had.

Fourteen years on, I have no problem admitting that I still, absolutely prefer Ebert's reviews, Ebert's tastes. Even when I didn't agree with them. I preferred Ebert, and his reviews, for a two reasons. He was accessible; his reviews were conversational, and neither pandering nor exclusive. And, honestly more importantly, *he liked the same stuff I liked*. I found a lot of the 'great' cinema everyone told me I *should* like, as a smart sensitive girl, irritating or boring or otherwise unapproachable. I liked stupid comedies, action films, summer blockbusters, barbarian films, animated films. And Roger Ebert, of them all, didn't tell me that there was something wrong with me for liking the things I liked. Or that I had terrible taste. He told me that there was no shame in being drawn to the films I was drawn to. And this is the important part: he told me that the films I liked were *just as worthy of being taken seriously* as any other film.

In his book *Life Itself: A Memoir*, Ebert wrote:

What I expect to happen is that my body will fail, my mind will cease to function and that will be that. My genes will not live on, because I have had no children. I am comforted by Richard Dawkins' theory of memes. Those are mental units: thoughts, ideas, gestures, notions, songs, beliefs, rhymes, ideals, teachings, sayings, phrases, clichés that move from mind to mind as genes move from body to body. After a lifetime of writing, teaching, broadcasting and telling too many jokes, I will leave behind more memes than many. They will all also eventually die, but so it goes.

To whatever extent I am a critic, I am a critic because of my early relationship with Ebert and his reviews. The lessons I learned from him – to be approachable in writing, and to take *everything*

seriously – have crystallized over the years. If there is anything that Pornokitsch and The Kitschies share, it is the crystallization of those two ideas: Pornokitsch and The Kitschies are meant to create and participate in conversations. And Pornokitsch and The Kitschies take – at least, *try* to take – everything seriously. Pornokitsch and The Kitschies may be nothing more than the shadows of a meme, but they are and remain a legacy of Roger Ebert's.

The fact that I also learned not to be ashamed of my tastes – that I could be smart and sensitive and love deeply internal foreign period films *as well as* disposable summer blockbuster action films; that my tastes are not inconsistent, nor do they reveal some fundamental flaw in my character, nor do they say that I'm too stupid to appreciate 'good' movies... that, too, is directly related to my early relationship with Ebert the critic.

We genre fans are often told that the books we love (and films, and TV shows, and games, and, and, and...) aren't important – that they *aren't worthy of us*. If I have devoted myself to any single idea; if Pornokitsch and The Kitschies are an expression of anything at all, it is this, a meme, gleaned 20 years ago from Roger Ebert. It is the idea that the things we love are important. That they are worthy of being taken seriously.

That they are worthy of us.

Written by Anne.

First published on Pornokitsch on 10 April 2013.

THE DRAGONLANCE CHRONICLES

I'm afraid this isn't going to be a conventional review, more a series of discursive notes, all rather indelicately glomming together to form one of my more specious arguments.

As far as an actual review, just to set the stage:

I think the Dragonlance Chronicles – *Dragons of Autumn Twilight* (1984), *Dragons of Winter Night* (1985) and *Dragons of Spring Dawning* (1985) – is of a time and a (hand-wavey, theoretical) place. I've reread the three books recently, and that's not really an experience I'd recommend to anyone else.

For the sake of this particular blog post/ramble, I'm more interested in the Chronicles' *influence*, which I believe has been criminally downplayed.

What makes a book an influential fantasy – and by that, not just having an impact on one author, but across the entire genre? For the sake of some sort of structure, I'd argue that the answer is a combination of both *innovation* and *ubiquity*.

The former is straightforward. Unless there's something innovative or new involved, there's no change to measure. Reiterating the status quo may be a type of influence, but we can't measure the absence of an event – a negative. A book needs to do something different for us to track how those changes promulgate.

Similarly, without ubiquity – not just presence, but *omnipresence* – we can't assume that a book had the opportunity to make an impact. Arguably, for something to be an influence on this scale (genre-wide), it needs to be so large that it doesn't even matter if another author has read it. We can assume that someone in the publishing chain (from the rights team to the commissioning editor to the sales director to the copy editor to the agent) has read it and we can assume its presence is so vast that, even subconsciously or indirectly, its innovative presence has been somehow communicated.¹

1 ...which is why authors are often not the right people to talk about their own influences.

One example – just to set a benchmark. George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* is a major influence. It is the best-selling series in fantasy, and its presence on HBO has brought more new readers to genre fiction than anything since Harry Potter. Martin’s work is a mainstream success, it has recognisable reference points that can be found in the fantasy books that followed and it is very, very good (that latter point isn’t actually relevant in this context, but still a Nice to Have). It is hard to make any sort of claim that Martin’s books aren’t influential on modern fantasy.²

Ground rules established.³

Which brings us back to another series, pre-dating Martin’s by ten years, that possesses the same critical combination of ubiquity and innovation: *Dragonlance*.

Ubiquity is the easy part to demonstrate. *Dragonlance*, the intellectual property, was created by Tracy Hickman and Margaret Weis as a shared universe for TSR, the then-owners of *Dungeons & Dragons*.⁴ The *Dragonlance* books and gaming modules were both published in 1984 and the setting was an immediate hit.

By 2008, there were more than 190 novels set in the *Dragonlance* universe with total sales of over 22 million copies. The role play setting also thrived, appearing on and off in *Dungeons & Dragons*’ many editions. There were collectible trading cards, comic books, miniatures, tabletop and computer games and a shockingly bad movie. TSR, a non-book company, was one of the largest publishers of the 1990s, all off the back of this one series.⁵

² Big, big footnote here: *Anglophone* fantasy.

³ Another example, if you want it: *The Wire*.

⁴ Anyone remember the awkward generational change-ringing that occurred when *Magic: The Gathering* bought *Dungeons & Dragons*. And then the death knell when Barbie bought them both.

⁵ Anecdotally, I remember that stores like Waldenbooks used to have *shelves* of *Dragonlance* books. In some ways, it was actually kind of hard to find non-*Dragonlance* genre fiction in a mall bookshop. Not that I tried until I was at least 19.

As for innovation, at the time of its release, Dave Langford panned the first book for being ‘inspired by an AD&D campaign full of chunks ripped bleeding from Tolkien’. And, certainly – and let’s get this out there now – the writing is pretty appalling.⁶ I can’t defend it for being good, but, beneath the obvious Tolkien analogues (of which there are several), the series did do things differently.

Here are seven things that Dragonlance did differently – all seven of which we can now see everywhere in contemporary fantasy. (Beware: I’m not throwing in specific examples of modern usage, but feel free to insert Martin, Sykes, Abercrombie, Newton, Jemisin, Weeks, Erikson, as you see fit...)

1. Death of major characters. (Er, spoilers!) Fundamentally, the series’ co-production as a role-playing game gave the authors a radically different approach to fantasy fiction. The protagonists in epic fantasy can’t die. They’re chosen. They’re destined. They’re heroes. But, at the same time, role-playing games are made fun by the tension of death. Without lethality, there’s no game. Weis and Hickman raised the stakes by killing off major characters in the Dragonlance Chronicles. Of particular interest: Sturm. The armour-clad, super-honourable, child-of-destiny style knight. He doesn’t even get the dignity of sacrificing himself nobly, he just gets skewered to establish someone else’s character. Dude doesn’t even live until the final book.

Moreover, by establishing this relatively early in the series, Weis and Hickman dialled up the tension every time someone was in danger. There are certainly incidents where people die and come back (Riverwind, Tasslehoff), but there’s an element of chance involved – folks also die and stay dead (Flint, Sturm).

2. Unchivalric warfare. The War of the Lance, the book’s central conflict, touches every corner of the continent. Civilian populations are uprooted, cities are occupied and destroyed, refugees are chased from one hostile land to another, innocent

⁶ Not that appalling writing has ever been a barrier to the popularity of some fantasy fiction.

people are enslaved, assaulted, the whole horrible nine yards... What's not shown? Big epic battles. They are referenced but, with two exceptions, never shown. The heroes aren't larger than life figures, turning the tide of battle. They're scampering around at the edges, simply trying to survive. The war is bigger than they are.

And the war is *messy*. The quaint pastoral forest home is levelled by dragonfire. The noble elves are evicted by the high fantasy equivalent of nerve gas. People – innocents – are maimed, tortured, raped and killed, all because of some mysterious greater conflict, about which they know virtually nothing.

3. Flawed Elves. This seems like a relatively small point, but it is a noteworthy one. The Dragonlance Chronicles has revisionist elves. Dungeons & Dragons elves were always based on Tolkien's vision of ethereal paragons. Dragonlance took the same systematised elvish traits but interpreted the Elvish 'attitude' differently. The elves are still supernatural immortals, in possession of ancient wisdom and inhuman talent, but they're also terrible, terrible people. They're out of touch, jingoistic and arrogant; reactionary, isolationist and overtly racist. They possess the same superhuman physical characteristics as Tolkien's elves and, as a result, believe that they're the high fantasy equivalent of the Aryan Master Race.

4. Multiple POV characters. Something that's now everywhere. Again, easy to see the RPG roots in this one. A chosen one makes for a terrible game because a) that means the character can't die (boring) or b) one player is more 'special' than the others (unfair & un-fun). In Chronicles, everyone gets their say, and the perspective flips from chapter to chapter. The party splits and goes on a handful of different adventures, rejoins, splits again... each time we realise that what everyone is doing is of equal importance (or, arguably, no importance at all). Tolkien split the party, but not like this.

5. Ambiguous protagonists. Again something that's everywhere. As with the point above, it is silly to argue that

Dragonlance invented moral ambiguity. However, the series combined the traditional fantasy archetypes (Sturm the knight, Tasslehoff the Spielbergian childlike fool) with more unusual fare. Tanis is self-loathing. Raistlin is evil. Caramon is an idiot. They all have their own motivation for taking part in the Big Quest, and, for none of them is a blind desire to ‘save the world’.

6. Death of the prophecy. Dragonlance is, in its broadest sense, about free will, not predestination. There’s no ordained resolution to War of the Lance – no cosmic hoops to jump through that will ‘solve’ everything. The guidance from the gods is flawed, and generally boils down to ‘do what you can’. The series even ends ambiguously: evil has not been wiped from the world, the land has not been healed and a hero has not arisen to save the day. This leads to the final innovation of the Dragonlance saga...

7. Philosophically neutral. The underlying concept for the Dragonlance world is one of balance. In the past, we learned that Good had won – the Kingpriest ran a shining empire that ruled the continent with an enlightened fist. Unacceptable, so the gods – all of them – chucked a mountain at the world. Thump. Cut forward a few hundred years to the Chronicles. Civilisation has regrouped, individual countries and nations have formed again. But now Evil has the upper hand, and the sinister Dragonarmies are quickly conquering the world a bite at a time. The goal is to stop them, and, indeed, the series ends in an uneasy status quo with a haphazard alliance of ‘good’ keeping a wary eye on a resilient, firmly-established presence of ‘evil’.

It isn’t just about the language, but the very concept. The heroes aren’t vanquishing Evil. They’re not removing Evil from the land or restoring the reign of Good. *The objective is to maintain a balance.* This isn’t the result of a subjective definition of ‘evil’ (‘cause Evil is very firmly established as nasty), but a belief that balance is the best we can do. Bad things will continue to happen. Life will never be fair. There’s no Utopian conclusion – just constant vigilance and, at best, a kind of ‘alright’.

I think Dragonlance's idea of neutrality is the most important innovation of them all. As a storytelling device, no longer needing a happy ending means that authors have more capacity to surprise and invent. This also makes positive resolutions, if not more deserved, at least better appreciated, as they are no longer expected. Neutrality allows for greater characterisation. And, above all, worlds in which things aren't always fair or sensible are closer to our own, which opens up the genre for fantasy stories that are more than parable or escapism.⁷ Philosophically neutral is a very big deal.

So if you accept all of the above (big if), why aren't the Dragonlance Chronicles better cited – or even acknowledged – as one of the major influences on contemporary fantasy?

Well, that calls for another list. (A shorter one.)

Three reasons:

1. The writing really is awful. There's a lot of exposition, purple prose, heavy-handed systemisation, melodramatic dialogue... But, again, objective quality has never been a barrier to importance in fantasy. The same flaws – clunky exposition, predictability, melodrama – can be found, to varying degrees, in every major fantasy series. For better or for worse, infodumping and unrealistic dialogue have never been barriers to the appreciation of epic fantasy.⁸

2. It is tie-in fiction. For all its commercial success, tie-in fiction has always been criticised by the mainstream of genre readers. Why? Fantasy is a genre that's predicated on elaborate world-building and strong plotting. For tie-in fiction, the author doesn't get credit for the former. The world is established, the writer is merely 'playing' in it. Similarly, the plotting is discounted because there's a canonisation question. Either the writer is 'just' filling in gaps around an existing continuity (so they're not 'originating' the story) or they're going off-piste and ignoring the 'official' continuity. Damned if they do, damned if they don't.

⁷ Escapism as part of the mix is great. But just as the best science fiction is about the present, the best fantasy is about reality. This probably belongs in another blog post.

Both of these reasons are, of course, bollocks. Writing in an established world is just as complex and noteworthy a skill as creating a new one, if not more so. Ask Hillary Mantel. The canonisation concern is equally as, well, naive – a way of declaring one imaginary story to be more ‘real’. (I’m personally looking forward to the coming canonisation apocalypse, when the Game of Thrones TV series deviates from the books.)

[Nor, in the case of the Dragonlance Chronicles, is the tie-in label even accurate. The game and the novels were both developed by Weis and Hickman, written simultaneously and released within the same few months. The exact order is ‘The Test of the Twins’ short story (March 1984), *Dragons of Despair* adventure module (March 1984) and *Dragons of Autumn Twilight* (November 1984). Of course, the fact that I have to scrounge up release dates to argue a point on which is more ‘real’: the novels about dragons or the game about dragons is inherently ridiculous.]

Still, despite the fact that Black Library, Doctor Who, Assassin’s Creed and movie novelisations routinely outsell their genre peers, the geek hierarchy insists that tie-in fiction is somehow inferior.

3. The movie sucked. I mean, the movie really sucked. Thankfully, it sucked so hard that it managed to implode, like a Black Hole, into a state of near-invisibility. Were it better known, Dragonlance’s historical legacy would be irretrievably tarnished. As it is, once seen, it cannot be unseen. But ultimately, because of its (dramatic) failure to reach outside of geek culture, Dragonlance’s ubiquity will be forever limited. As a media and commercial property, it has already peaked. Game of Thrones is on billboards. We can talk about it with our cousins and work colleagues. Dragonlance? Dragonlance will never be cool.

There is a lovely irony to way those last two points fit together, isn’t there? We applaud those properties that climb ‘up’ to film and television, but have reservations about those that originate in non-book media.

Still, cool or not, Dragonlance has done more than almost any other post-Tolkien property in influencing fantasy. Its narrative and conceptual tropes can be found in every nook and cranny of the genre, and much of the modern low fantasy resurgence can be traced back to (or through) Dragonlance as well. If only the Chronicles were better books, or, perhaps, had a better movie, they wouldn't be neglected. Instead, despite their impact on the genre, the Dragonlance Chronicles are consigned to dustbin of its history.

Written by Jared.

First published on Pornokitsch on 8 April 2013.

SUPER 8 AND THE BIG BUT

So, we finally got around to watching JJ Abrams' *Super 8* a few nights ago, and it was really fun! I enjoyed it more than I expected. Jared enjoyed it more than he expected. It fell into that particularly robust niche of (arguably peculiarly American) storytelling: a boy reconnects with his estranged father. Their story opens with them as far from each other as they can be; by the end of it, they're playing catch.

There's a second, interrelated story being told, too: The kid is *weird*, man: awkward, geeky, likes monster movies and comic books. You know the type. And the father? You know his type, too: distant, damaged, normalized; doesn't really know how to connect with his kid. In *Super 8*, the kid's a model-making weirdo and his dad is deputy sheriff.

The story ends the same way, though: they still wind up playing catch. No matter how different they are as people, they can come together as normal fathers and sons do.

(‘Playing catch,’ I don't need to point out, is a metaphor. Though often a literal one! In *Field of Dreams*, they play catch. Literally! *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*? They ride off into the sunset together. Literally! You get the picture. Fathers and sons, finally seeing eye to eye.)

I'm an American. I grew up with these stories. They're everywhere. They mean a lot to me. They resonate.

I'm also a geek. I grew up with *those* stories, too – how weird kids connect with their ‘normal’ authority figure parent-types. (Or normal kids and their weird parents, but that's a slightly different kind of story.) Everyone comes to understand each other a little better. Ties are bound. These stories also mean a lot to me. They also resonate, y'know?

But you know what else I am?

Female.

And you know what I'm really goddamned tired of? These fathers/normal & sons/geek stories. Like *Super 8*. Like *Real Steel*. Like *Last Crusade* (and I love *Last Crusade* I really do). Like *Field*

of *Dreams*. *Iron Man 2*. *Batman* whatever. *Superman* whatever. Like all of them.

Because over and over, these stories are *not about women*. Indeed, they specifically *exclude* women from participating in the action: *Super 8*, for example, has a really interesting, strong female character who (spoiler!) gets kidnapped by the alien, the act which thus motivates the father and son to come together and understand each other and improve their relationship and also rescue her.

And, over and over, I find myself wondering: why? Why are these stories so specifically about men? Why is that there aren't action movies about mothers and daughters fighting the Nazis, or aliens¹, or even building baseball fields together?

Okay. Here's the part where I've cut out a 3000-word rant about the depiction of women in popular culture to get to my point: *Super 8* and the Big But.

The Big But is this: *but why are they all men?* Why are the geeky, movie-making kids in *Super 8* boys? (Elle Fanning's character is invited to participate because the inviter has a crush on her; she's not an integral part of the group.) 'Oh, that's realistic,' you might say. 'Thirteen-year-old boys don't have female friends.' *But they do*. Seriously, every single one of you reading this right now: think back to when you were 13. Did you have a friend of the opposite sex?

Me too. Quite a few, in fact.

'Oh, but it would change the story; they'd just be obsessed with each other or something.' *But they already were*. Two of the main (male) characters had a crush on the female character. Add a female character into the geeky boy mix and what do you get? Nothing more or less than what was already written into the story.

1 With the enormous and must-be-made-more-often exception of *Aliens*. I have my problems with James Cameron, but he's awfully good at strong female characters.

How about, ‘oh, but boys and girls can’t be friends. Not really.’ *But they can.* I mean, I don’t *really* have to make an argument about that, do I?

Maybe we’ll get to the root of the matter with this objection: ‘this isn’t a story about girls.’ And, if that’s what you think, here is where there’s nothing I can say or do to convince you that, actually, it is. This *can* be a story about girls. It *can* be a story about boys. It *is* a story about parents and children. It *is* a story about people. (And monsters.)

No *story* is inherently gendered; it’s the *storyteller* who makes it about something, and not about other somethings. I can give you some anecdotal evidence, for example: I was a geeky kid, raised by a very (to my eyes) normal single parent who loved me but who was distant and very intimidating. Sound familiar?

‘Oh, but it’s different; you’re a girl and she was your mother, so you spent all your time talking about makeup and boys and your periods.’

What a boring relationship we must have had.

For the record (*hi, Mom!*), we didn’t. We had a great, complicated, difficult, meaningful, awesome relationship. We still do. And, you know what? She’d be fantastic to fight the Nazis alongside of. (Seriously, they’d stand no chance.)

My point is: *it isn’t different.* There is no reason for these stories, these films to be about men and their relationships with other men. There is nothing inherently masculine about them. There is no reason for girls to be depicted only as the terrifying, desirable *other* that they are. As victims. As objects.

While we’re on the topic, JJ, I really enjoyed the rebooted *Star Trek*, but why are all the main characters still men? Why, in *Star Trek Into Darkness*, are the only two female characters defined solely by their status? Uhura is a girlfriend, and a waspish, weepy one at that. Thanks, JJ. Thanks for that.

And Marcus? She’s important because she’s someone’s daughter. That’s it. That’s her point. That’s the entire reason why

she's in the film. (Oh, except maybe also the underwear shot. She was also in the film so we could see her body. Yay!)

So, back to the Big But. The older I get, the less patience I have with geeky films. Too often now, I'm walking out of theatres thinking to myself, 'gosh, that was fun. *But why are they all men?*

And I find there is no satisfactory answer.

Written by Anne.

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**WHY THE
TERMINATOR'S SARAH
CONNOR IS STILL THE
BEST SARAH CONNOR**

I know Sarah Connor tops everyone's list of hardcore badass female characters, but they're usually referring to *T2* Sarah Connor, or the *Sarah Connor Chronicles* Sarah Connor. And that Sarah Connor is totally, 100% an amazing hardcore badass character.

But for my money the most amazing Sarah Connor is the Sarah Connor of *The Terminator* – the nice, normal, soft young woman who is confronted with an unbelievable, extraordinary situation, a situation in which she is hunted by a serial killer who turns out to be a robot from the future who will literally kill anyone and everyone between itself and her, for this totally insane reason: she might someday have a kid who'll start a war against the future robot overlords.

And the only thing standing between her and this literally unstoppable killing machine is a guy who a) claims to be from the future, b) clearly has terrible PTSD, c) reveals that he's been in love with her for essentially his entire adult life, and d) is wearing smelly hobo pants.

Oh, but there's one other thing standing between Sarah Connor and certain death, and that thing is Sarah Connor. Because Sarah Connor is a total hardcore badass. Even here, where she's soft and pretty and wholly unprepared for being hunted by a robot programmed to kill her and everyone standing between it and her, Sarah Connor is a total hardcore badass.

Over the course of the film, Sarah sees people - including a precinct building full of cops - maimed and murdered because of her, because they're trying to protect her, or just because they got in the way. She learns that every other 'Sarah Connor' in LA has been brutally murdered. She learns that her roommate has been brutally murdered. (Later she'll learn that her mother has been brutally murdered.) She totally falls for the smelly hobo-pants-wearing, seriously emotionally compromised nutcase from the future and then sees him die to protect her.

But at no point does she give up, close her eyes, and pray for the darkness to come. She just keeps fighting.

And, as importantly, she keeps fighting not because she believes she's the future mother of the messiah or whatever, but because she herself is a fighter. She doesn't know her smelly-hobo-pants-wearing paramour impregnated her. She almost doesn't really believe him about being from the robot war-torn future. This Sarah Connor – soft, pretty Sarah Connor – doesn't fight to save the world, or make it safe for her (possible) future son, or to teach anyone any important lessons about preparedness and survival or whatever. She fights for herself. She fights to *survive*.

Hardcore badass male characters fight for themselves all the time. But there always has to be an *excuse* for a female character to fight, because it's apparently so damned hard to believe that soft, pretty girls can and do discover their hard inner cores and very bad asses just to survive. And that excuse, more often than not, boils down to 'a man.'

And that's what makes *this* Sarah Connor such a hardcore badass. And, moreover, that's what makes this Sarah Connor so special, and so vanishingly rare among even hardcore badass female characters. She's not fighting because of a man. She's fighting for *herself*.

Written by Anne.

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INTRODUCTION TO BOOK COLLECTING

Advice, such as it is, for new book collectors.

Figure out why you're doing this.

And, speaking as a die-hard bibliophile, 'because I can't imagine not' is a perfectly acceptable answer. But maybe you see them as long-term investments, like wine or stamps or something. Or you're after a quick profit – eBay, dealing, etc. Or you love an author, his or her books express your inner philosophy and you need them all for you. All of these reasons are great, but they will impact what sort of books you're looking for and what condition they're in – new, used, signed, inscribed, etc.

Pick a theme.

I chose 'theme' not 'topic' deliberately, because it can be something more intangible – a category that may only be specific or identifiable to you. It'll matter whether you pick a tight theme, say, the works of Joe Abercrombie or a broad one, e.g. 'grimdark'. The benefits? Well, with Abercrombie, you can achieve it. Despite his best efforts, there's still a finite amount of Abercrombiana. The idea of completing a collection is kind of cool, if slightly harrowing the instant a new book comes out.

With a broad collection, you'll never finish. That can be frustrating, or fantastic. The broader the theme, the more likely you are to find something for your collection: every flea market, Forbidden Planet trip or lazy eBay browse will reveal more stuff for your ever-growing shelves. (I'd also warn against going *too* broad. Collecting, say, 'fantasy' is dangerously woolly. You'll not only never achieve it, but you'll go broke trying. Boundaries keep you sane.)

From personal experience: I stumbled on two of Maxim Jakubowski's Black Box Thrillers – just as reading copies. Then I found a third. Then I did some research, and learned there were only nine. So, the quest began, and, within about a year, ended. Awesome. Satisfying. Now what? Fortunately, I'm *also* after Fawcett Gold Medals, and, at last count, there were an infinite number of them. Whew.

Themes are also a matter of, for lack of a better word, ‘geometry’. Any two points make a line, and then whammo, you’ve got a potential collection. For example, multiple books with the same cover artist. Period typography. Publisher. Setting. Anything. Again, this can drive you mad – if you declare ‘COLLECTION’ every time you get a pair, you’ll go nuts. But sometimes this can also be wonderful – when you make a link between a few books and think, ‘hey – collecting William Gibson means I’ve got a few books with advertising in them. I wonder what other SF books address marketing?’ or ‘Hmmm. I love Hammett, what other books take place in San Francisco?’. Be prepared for your themes to spiral out of control – that’s part of the fun.

Of course, the answer is always be interested in everything. But that’s why we’re fans as well, right?

Now... are you looking for value or completeness?

Is it more important that you get all of Ursula Le Guin’s books? Or do you want the best copies of her books? (Or, of course, both.) You can approach a collection either way. Imagine an author like Le Guin or Stephen King, or a theme like Ace Doubles or Gollancz yellow jackets. Just having one of everything would be an incredibly impressive achievement. Alternatively, you could ignore all Ace Doubles that aren’t mint. Or Gollancz yellow jackets that aren’t first editions. It ties back into what you want out of your collection: do you want to *read* everything or to *own* it?

What does value mean to you anyway?

It helps to think about books in several ways:

As a text. The object is insignificant; getting the text, however, is important. Ties in with the idea of completeness – the book is valuable because you want the content, not the package.

As an object. You may never read this book, it is there as an object, not a text. A first edition is more valuable to you than a later printing; a mint first edition is more valuable than a battered one. Finding dust jackets (unclipped, of course) is important. Mylar book covers are essential.

An a historical artifact. This object has a story of its own. Maybe it is from the collection of another author, or your own grandmother. Maybe the previous owner left fascinating and enigmatic annotations. Perhaps it has the bookplate of a publisher, or is an ex-library ‘file copy’ from the British Museum or the BBC. The value is in the unique story that this copy has to tell.

‘Value’ – either tangibly expressed as money or intangibly as ‘emotional connection’ – can stem from any one of the above.

Deep question: is it more important to search or to find?

This sounds a bit abstract, but, seriously. Book hunting just so you can hunt for books is a perfectly reasonable way of going about it. Think about what’s fun for *you*.

With Amazon (either normal or Marketplace) and Abebooks, you can essentially laser in on any book you want, and get it with a single click. Does that increase or decrease the fun you’re having? Those two sites are at one end of the spectrum. On the other end, lurks pure serendipity: flea markets, dealer rooms, charity shops. In-between: wandering into Foyles, Forbidden Planet, mailing lists from dealers and small bookshops. It is really up to you.

Again, a personal example: I’m missing *one* John D. MacDonald. One. Dude wrote a million books, I don’t have *one* of them. I know exactly which one (I’m not telling) and I could click and get it right now for \$20. But my JDM collection started with a box of second-hand copies that I got for a nickel each from the parking lot behind a restaurant in Phoenix, Arizona. I’ve spent almost ten years on it. So buying the last one like that? Just feels like cheating. I’m finding it through blind luck or not at all.

Signed stuff is awesome, right?

Again, that’s all up to you – but, generally speaking: yes. If you think of the three ways to add value – signatures make the book a more valuable object, they turn it into an ‘endorsed’ text (the author is ‘approving’ it after all) and they give that copy a story of its own.

Often the ‘big’ question is whether to get something ‘flatsigned’ (a signature) or ‘inscribed’ (‘To Jared’). Other variations include

‘S/L/D’ (signed, lined and dated – which means the author includes a quote and dates the book to the time of signature) or ‘doodled’/‘sketched’ (exactly what it sounds like) or even ‘warmly inscribed’ (in which the author actually sounds like they knew the person who is receiving the book, e.g. (‘To Jared, thanks for the scarf, now get off my lawn,’) etc.

A few tips:

Getting proofs signed (not inscribed) often says, ‘I got this copy for free, now I’m going to put it on eBay and make a lot of money off of it’. Not every author cares, but some do, and I don’t entirely blame them. I always get proofs inscribed – a way of saying that your copy will never leave your possession.

Inscriptions do lower the resale value, so if you’re getting a book signed in order to resell it, think twice. Unless you know a lot of people named ‘Jared’.

There are exceptions. If the inscription is to someone famous, for example. That’s an association copy (a book that also has value by association with someone/thing). ‘To Jared’ devalues a book. ‘To Patrick Ness’ doesn’t. Also, over time, the disparity between signatures/descriptions becomes less noticeable, and, after a hundred years, generally doesn’t matter. (That may seem like ages, but we’re talking about books from 1913 and earlier.)

What can help?

The best tools will always be Twitter and Google, because a million other collectors are all one click away. But I would suggest some basic stuff – for example:

Start a catalog. You’ll want to set this up sooner rather than later, as going back and filing stuff can be a pain in the ass. I use Collectorz’ Book Collector (there’s a free trial, so you can see if it is to your taste). I also have friends that use Google docs, Excel spreadsheets, GoodReads, LibraryThing, even manual checklists.

Start a *portable* catalog. This will also come in handy before you know it. Honestly, ‘want lists’ are nice – and extremely useful when you’re dealing with online booksellers and the like. But, in my experience, you’ll probably get to the point where it is more

useful to know what you have than what you don't have, so you don't keep buying duplicates. Most of the electronic catalogs now have apps (like Collectorz) or mobile sites (like GoodReads) which are really helpful.

Learn how to identify first editions. Else you will be hosed by dealers and online descriptions. There are a lot of great lessons on this subject on the internet, but I really do recommend getting a pocket sized guide like one of these. You won't need it forever, but it helps for the first few fairs.

Learn how to identify other editions as well. Book Club Editions are often sold as first editions, and can be almost identical - but are often slightly different sizes and won't have prices on the dust jackets. And if something is 'Ex-Library' there's a reason it is being sold for 10% of its real value. If you just want it to have a copy of the book, go wild. But it'll be ugly.

Consider other references. *Firsts* magazine is fun, and worth flipping through, but unless there's an article immediately relevant to my interests, I wind up tossing it out pretty quickly. There are loads of checklists and books and guides - both as websites and in print. If there's a big *thing* I'm collecting, like Ace Doubles, it helps me to have a reference, if only to have a complete checklist. But general guides? Less useful. A lot of people swear by Joseph Connelly's *Modern First Editions*, but, honestly, it is trying to cover everything in a single book (and does very little genre). When you're going for breadth: just use the internet.

Finally, remember that there's always one more.

If you go into this thinking that you can 'win' and have the definite collection of something, you're just going to wind up frustrated (and poor). It is more important to turn this on its head: collecting is something you can do *forever*; there will be always more books to find and opportunities to grow your own personal stash of treasures.

Written by Jared.

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**FRIDAY FIVE:
GATEWAY SMUT**

With one notable exception, we've never *actually* written about porn on Pornokitsch.¹ Or erotica. Or any *other* sort of sexually-charged literature. And, all joking aside, this is a huge and diverse genre, and, to an outsider, more than a little intimidating. What's it about? What's good? What are the classics? *Where do we start?*

Fortunately, we've got Tiffani Angus, here to explain where smut begins...

* * *

I read erotica. I write erotica. But as a young reader, I didn't jump right in and start with Anais Nin. I built up to it, reading things that didn't seem like smut. Gateway smut, if you will, where the sex scenes weren't the most important parts of the book ... but those few pages were always the most handled.

The summer I turned thirteen, my best friend and I spent hours lounging around on the couch, scanning through her mom's stacks of Harlequin paperbacks to find the dirty goods. This was the early '80s, when the Harlequin status quo of virginal heroine gave way to new imprints that allowed the girl to have 'done it' already. Sadly, my friend's mom didn't read those, so we were left with vague (and much too short) sex scenes. Still, it was a start, albeit a disappointing one.

No *Fifty Shades of Grey* back then, being read openly on the bus. Your smut was either out there, in the form of *Playboy*, or it was buried beneath glossy dust jackets of 'women's lit'. But life finds a way, and the smut got found.

Here are five novels that that taught me about smut, and will probably continue to teach others as well...

Flowers in the Attic by V.C. Andrews: Children hidden away in the attic of a mansion, two generations of incest, and filicide. The spawn of several sequels (the final one finished by a ghostwriter after Andrews' death), *Flowers* was popular among my young

¹ Editors' note: That being Anne's review of *Caligula*. It isn't 'safe for work' and we'd feel dirty even putting the link in here.

teenage friends and me because the narrator is a teenage girl like us... only trapped in an attic with her handsome, sensitive, strong older brother. Hey, he wasn't our brother, so we could understand the attraction. With each page the adult characters' actions became more reprehensible — and unrealistic — but we couldn't look away. We knew the incest was taboo, but that's part of what made it so hot since the scenes weren't terribly explicit.

Clan of the Cave Bear by Jean M. Auel: Ayla, a Homo sapiens girl, is raised by Neanderthals; her story is full of herb lore, geologic goings-on, and early-human history. It's 'educational'. It's also full of doggy-style sex, which is eye-opening for a teenager who doesn't think that people 'back then' - our parents, their parents, people several thousand years ago - ever did the deed.

Turns out I wasn't alone in my reasons for reading the series. My grandma read it around the same time, and told the story about a conversation she had with one of her best friends: Liz said, 'I don't like all that sex and stuff; I want to read about the landscapes and plants'. My grandma's response? 'I skip the landscape to get to the sex!'

Scruples by Judith Krantz: This doesn't pretend to be something it's not. It's the excessive 1980s, in your face with expensive cars, over-furnished apartments, and couture clothes, interspersed with sex scenes. It's fantasy, a sort of non-BDSM *Fifty Shades*, more concerned with consumerism than sex. But with sex. In the over-furnished apartments and out of the couture clothes.

Portnoy's Complaint by Philip Roth. I read this when I was 15 or so. To be honest, I don't really remember much about it except that there was lots of masturbation. And I got funny looks from all the adults who saw me carrying it around. That right there—that it disturbed grown-ups, but not enough for any of them to call me on it—told me that it was worth reading.

Fear of Flying and *Fanny, Being the True History of the Adventures of Fanny Hackabout-Jones* by Erica Jong: The first is

the more 'serious' of the two, the birthplace of the 'zipless fuck'; the second is Jong's take on John Cleland's *Fanny Hill*, considered to be the first porn novel in English. I have to pair them because of Jong's influence on sex writing in general, and her influence on my sex writing in particular. I didn't get *Fear of Flying* when I read it - the politics didn't make much sense to me as a teenager without much knowledge of feminism - but it had sex scenes in it, and it was something that smart people read.

Fanny, however, is smut with random capitalization. I didn't find it on some hidden away shelf labelled 'erotica' but on the shelves of the library where I worked. It taught me that smut could be joyous and fun while being ridiculously dirty, in contrast to *Nin* (who I started to read at about the same time), who always felt too serious.

Honorable Mention: *The Sleeping Beauty Trilogy* by A.N. Roquelaure (Anne Rice): Yes, for all intents and purposes, this is erotica, so it's not 'gateway' at all. I've included it because of when it happened. It has recently been re-released, but back when I first read it, it wasn't well known. Despite her popularity, most people didn't even know Anne Rice had written it, so it was still 'secret' enough.

Honourable Not-Mentioned: I never read *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, and, had I done so, it would most likely have been a censored version and not made this list.

Tiffani Angus is a Creative Writing PhD student and graduate of Clarion 2009. She's published fantasy at *Strange Horizons* and in the new anthology *Tails of the Pack*, and her smut can be found in *Best Women's Erotica 2012*.

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**HINDSIGHT:
JAMES SMYTHE**

I had a conversation with a bookseller recently about debut novels. We were surrounded by piles of Nick Harkaway's second (amazing) novel, *Angelmaker*, and talking about how different it is to *The Gone-Away World*, his (amazing) debut. The bookseller likened *The Gone-Away World* to *Zadie Smith's White Teeth*: a sense that the book was all-encompassing, wide-reaching, so full of things, of knowledge, of stuff that the authors were desperate to say. He asked about my first novel, *Hereditation*: whether it shared similar ideas. I hung my head in shame. It tried to, but nobody should read it, I said. It's just not very good.

Hereditation (and really, what a godawful title) was born out of my doing a PhD. In a story far too long (and potentially litigious) for here and now, I had to come up with a new creative component for my Critical & Creative Writing doctorate when my first supervisor left the university. I had been working on a post-apocalyptic novel about religion (two things I'd revisit when I wrote *The Testimony*), and when she went, I needed something different. My new supervisor asked if I had anything else, anything fresh that would work. I was going to, essentially, start the PhD again.

I'd been toying with something that was, then, called *The Sloane Brothers*. It was initially inspired by *Frasier* – as all good art should be – specifically, an episode where Niles compares his relationship with Frasier to being like the Collyer Brothers.

If you don't know them, they were famous hoarders, living in New York in the mid-20th century. When they died, it was discovered that their brownstone was full of every bit of junk (140 tons worth) that they hadn't thrown away over the past god-knows how many years. They had carved tunnels through the rubbish to help them navigate; one of them had gone mad and blind, and the other devised a diet of nothing but oranges to help cure him. (I'd argue, therefore, that they were both probably quite mad.) I loved reading about them, and loved reading about their history: their father a gynecologist, and they were able to trace

their history back to the Mayflower, the first Americans to land and found their new country.

I thought that this could make a good idea for a novel. Not the main story, necessarily, but more how they got there. How this family with history and a Name, such as it was, could end with these two brothers, alone and going insane in a house that needed gutting. Whether I was wrong or right, I had a few chapters, fragments rather than anything more. Two were written as period pieces: set way back in history, casually researched, but meant to be vague and loose, hazy in the way that passed-down histories can be. They were the stories, not the facts. My new supervisor liked it, and it was decided, almost as quickly as that. I was going to write this book.

Over the next year, the thing took shape. It was going to be huge, sprawling. A central-spine narrative that featured a fictional version of these brothers going through their lives. One would fake his death, become homeless, addicted to drugs, start to unravel. The other would begin his own decline, alone and entrenched in their home, unlucky in love, caught up in riots. They would meet up again, later in life, and one would care for the other as they slowly died. Throughout the spine, though, they would uncover their own family history, through stories and found artifacts. They would piece together who they were and where they came from. What made their ancestors the men that they were; and what was passed down to them. There was a section set in 1560, concerning their ancestor Juan Miguel, farming beetles for coloured dye in the Americas with the (real life) conquistador Vasco Núñez de Balboa; there was one in and around 1914, where another ancestor, Quaid, helped start production on *The Wizard of Oz*; and one set in 1865, aboard the USS *Shenandoah*, the ship that fired the final shot in the American Civil War. These sections were heaving, attempting to tell entire lives in single chapters, all the while tying the narrative into the main story thread and American history both. But they were the bits that I loved: these weird, surreal, picaresque short stories that I hoped were

funny and dark in equal measure. They were fantasy versions of real histories, as the whole book was: an alternate version of a family's life, a life that in reality didn't do these things, but could have. I wanted to include everything I could, write in every style that I wanted. I told myself, somebody's sure to want to publish this. How could they not? (Quick note: this was 2006. I was still young, and slightly more stupid than I am now.)

And that was just the narrative. The structure of the thing was equally push-the-boat-out: because my thesis was grandly-titled *Taking The Index Back: What Print Fiction Can Learn From The Internet* (again, this was 2006), I was looking at ways to roll hypertext back into a print medium, presenting the novel as both a fully online version, and a traditionally bound text. So it had, at one stage or another, multiple indices, footnotes (both fictional and not), embedded images, family trees, references. It was amazing.

Only of course, it actually wasn't. It was a complete and utter mess once you removed the academia and literary theory from it. What I thought was equal parts *Tristram Shandy*, *Don Quixote*, *Cloud Atlas*, *House of Leaves* and *Infinite Jest* was, in fact, a shambles. Of course, there was no way I could see that, so I sent it off to agents. I had somewhere in the region of fifty rejections. I was, it's safe to say, dejected. There was stuff I loved in there, that I had researched, poured my heart and soul and time into. It was my version of the Great American Novel, damn it! I shelved it. I decided to write something commercial, about a writer who might or might not have been a serial killer. (Cue the psychologists.)

A year later, I wrote a terrible short story that was accepted into a compilation of far better short stories, and the publisher, Parthian, asked if I had anything else, a novel or whatever. I did, I said: I've got the newly-retitled *Hereditation*. (If ever something should set off a warning sign, it's that title.) They read it, and they liked it. Or, rather, they liked parts of it. 'Would you be open to doing some work on it?' they asked, and I said that I would. Of

course I would! Somebody wanted to publish it. I was going to be a published writer.

So, over the next few months, I worked with my editor there, Lucy, to turn the book into something publishable. I did a pass on it, and they fed back. But after a few back and forths, I still hadn't grasped one of their main editorial requests. Lucy had to break it down for me. They felt that the strength of the novel lay within the story of the brothers, not the historical sections; so would I mind cutting those back? Or, you know, removing them entirely?

I was gutted. These were the heart of the novel: the thing that I was actually proud of. They were the suit: the story of the brothers was just the mannequin wearing it. I fought, but not much. Parthian wanted to publish the book. It was, I quickly became aware, a choice: make these edits, or don't see the book come out. I went through the text and I gutted it. I tore out the footnotes and the indices and the titles and the everything, and then I set about cutting back the ancestral stories. What had been one hundred and twenty thousand words became eighty. I rewrote. I rewrote. I tried to make this work, and still keep the spirit, leaving parts of the historical story embedded as minor slips in the narrative. When it was done, it was a halfway-house. It wasn't what I wanted; and, I suspect, it wasn't what the publisher wanted. But it was what we had.

It was published in 2010, four years after I wrote the first draft. It had three reviews: a lovely one in *New Welsh Review*, that seemed to enjoy the parts that I did; a middling one in *Buzz* magazine, which didn't like the parts that I did; and a terrible one in *The Spectator*, which stated that I was ripping off Faulkner (an author I had failed to get around to reading). We did a launch event or two, and I smiled, but I didn't love the book. It hurt a bit, actually. While it was going through the protracted process of publication, I wrote *The Testimony*. I wasn't sure it was better, but I was sure it was closer to something that I actually wanted to write.

This is all a protracted way of getting to the things that I would change about *Hereditation*. While it's tempting to say Everything, the real answer is pretty simple: I'd change what I thought the novel was. I'd drop my preconceptions about knowing better, about thinking that I was the one at whom the buck stopped. I'd basically rewrite the little shit, listening to the advice of my editor and the publisher. For better or worse, they thought that it could be an interesting quasi-alternate-history fantasy-tinged thing of weirdness about these brothers in New York, and that maybe that story would be interesting enough. Write it well, make it focused, keep it tight, and the characters will come through. I didn't see that. I saw what I had once imagined the novel could be, and it was a novel that couldn't ever have worked. I was naïve, and a worse writer than I thought I was, and I didn't see that others wanted what was best for the book as much as I did. More, even: this was their money on the line. At the launches I read from it, and I wanted to read the historical bits, but Lucy had to nudge me to not. She knew what I didn't: that those were fun bits of short story that didn't really belong in the book. Didn't matter whether I loved them, they should have been cut.

I was in Waterstones about a month after the novel came out when I realized that. I had been keeping track of how many copies they had on their shelves (the number never moved from four, in the Local Interest section), and a book in the New Releases section caught my eye: *Homer & Langley*, by E.L. Doctorow. It was the story of the Sloane Brothers, of New York, and their lives. They hoarded stuff in their brownstone. They lived there together, until the end. It was, the quote on the back by a broadsheet informed me, 'an extraordinary story and a charmingly wry take on life.' I stood there and gawped, because this was what *Hereditation* might have once been. (It couldn't have been, of course, because I am no E.L. Doctorow, but you know what I mean.)

I had fucked it up. I could have listened to the editor, to people who knew better than I, but I didn't.

I bought Homer & Langley and I read it that afternoon. I loved it. How could I not? It was brilliant, better than I could ever dream of writing, and it was the story that I already knew almost off by heart. It added stuff as well – side-tales, details, things that made the characters feel so utterly real. I haven't looked at *Hereditation* since.

Maybe it's not as bad as I think it is. Some people like it, which is nice. They can see something in it, through the flaws. I suspect that what they see is the nugget of truth that first attracted me, the thing that's indelible: the true story behind it. If I had my time again, I'd write it to stay closer to that story, rather than the bastardised, tweaked alternate history grab-bag that it became. I'd listen to my editor (a lesson I've tried, desperately, to learn from); I'd kill my babies, as they say. I'd change who I was when I wrote it, what I was trying to say.

I wouldn't have it be published, if I could help it. It would be a trunk novel, waiting there until I looked fondly back on it and wondered if I could ever do anything with it, before throwing it back into the folder and forgetting about it all over again.

Oh, and I'd change that bloody title. Because, really, what was I thinking?

James Smythe is the author of *The Testimony*, *The Explorer*, *The Echo*, *No Harm Comes to a Good Man* and *The Machine*. *The Machine* was a finalist for both The Kitschies' Red Tentacle and the Arthur C. Clarke Award.

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**CAN THERE BE FANTASY
DISASTER FICTION?**

Writing up the review for *The Explosion* led to thinking about disaster fiction as a genre which led, inevitably, to thinking about fantasy.¹ (This is, ostensibly, a fantasy-focused blog, although you wouldn't really know it outside of DGLA season.)

Could there be fantasy disaster fiction?

As with all things, we need to define a term or two:

By 'fantasy disaster fiction', I specifically mean 'disaster fiction in a fantasy setting'.

By 'fantasy', I mean secondary world + magic exists + *dragons n' wizards n' whatnot* type fantasy. Not science fiction - there's loads of disaster fiction in SF (and arguably, *all* disaster fiction is SF as well).

By 'disaster fiction', I mean books like *Airport* and *The Glass Inferno* and *The Poseidon Adventure* and *Condominium* and *Tropical Disturbance* and *The Explosion*. Books where the primary conflict comes from a catastrophic disaster occurring in a defined space. And where the plot comes from establishing a complex system, seeding the flaws in said system, and then recounting the destruction of that system and the resulting chaos and struggle to re-attain some sort of stability.

Is that possible in fantasy? After mulling it over, four responses - in order: *no, maybe, 'yes', yes (potentially)*.

No. This one is something Anne and I bandied around together, and I think it is the 'rightest' answer.

It helps that disaster fiction is set in our world for empathy, but what's more important is that the disaster relies upon *understood natural laws*. In a fantasy world, there's too much room for magical / inexplicable / impossible intervention - and, even if that doesn't happen, the reader expectations are still shifted. What's fundamental to disaster fiction is that there is no 'divine intervention', it comes down to humanity versus a failing system. If the possibility of 'divine intervention' even *exists* in the mind of the reader, the story won't work.

¹ Editors' note: Hans Heinrich Ziemann's thoroughly mediocre thriller about meltdown at a nuclear power plant. We'd include a link to the review, but really, 'thoroughly mediocre' just about covers it.

Maybe. That said, I think there *are* a few isolated episodes of disaster fiction within fantasy.

For example, the volcano episode in KJ Parker's *Pattern*, or the plague in *The Folding Knife*. What's notable there, I suppose, is that those are both typically Parker books and don't have any magic in them. In fact, if anything, those are both books in which Parker is rather firmly establishing traditional natural laws.

Another example is Miéville's *Perdido Street Station*. The city is a complex system, the Slake Moths are the flaw, and, as is traditional for the disaster genre, everything goes to hell at the halfway point. The problem here is twofold. First *Perdido* is no more or less disaster fiction than it is *anything else* – from paranormal romance to hard SF. Miéville's work is Miévillian, and no other genre. Second, *Perdido* both works and doesn't work as disaster fiction because of the way it adheres to non-science. Calling it 'magic' isn't really right: *Perdido* feigns a system, but, at the same time, abhors it. There's a lot of deliberate hand-waving and magician's force, but that's a distraction from the fact that the non-science can do anything, at any time. *Perdido* and *Bas-Lag* *seem* to follow logical rules, but they actually very much do *not*. So, in a sense: yes, *Perdido* shares some of the aesthetics of disaster fiction, but, underneath the surface... not really. It walks and talks like a duck, but it is really a duck-shaped lure on the dangling proboscis of a deep sea monster.

'Yes'. Possibly the problem with trying to spot disaster fiction in fantasy is that most fantasy is too *rural*. *Airport*, *The Glass Inferno*, etc, all rely on complex systems with population density: it may be semantic, but that's what makes it a *disaster* and not an isolated tragedy. Being that most of the fantasy that I read is still stuck in the pseudo-Middle-Ages-European style, everyone is simply too dispersed.

But what if you extend the geographic boundary? So, for example, what if the entire world were a single system, threatened by a single disaster? Traditionally, this would immediately throw the book into science fiction (see: every book by Charles Eric

Maine). But in epic fantasy, reducing all the world's problems to a single point is the stock in trade.

Let's take, for example, *The Lord of the Rings*. We have a status quo: the bucolic country squireness of the Shire, the feudal utopia of the human lands, the artisanal spirituality of the Elves and Dwarves. This is firmly established (with a heavy focus on the Shire) throughout *Fellowship*. But, as with the fire in *The Glass Inferno* or the terrorist in *The Explosion*, our scenes of the system in beautiful balance are undercut with fragments of 'well, that ain't right'. Black Riders. Troll migrations. Orc sightings. If the delicate harmony of Middle-Earth is maintained properly, these things don't happen. But *something* is wrong here, and even as most people try to ignore it, a few desperate doom-sayers have spotted the impending disaster. (See: Saruman as the greedy land developer in *Condominium*, brushing over the problem in order to further his personal ambition.)

And, indeed, it is the series' midway point where the disaster strikes: Sauron invades. And the rest of Middle-Earth – that supposedly-invulnerable system that we now know is fatally out of whack – crumbles. In Gondor, the civil service has taken over. In the Shire, industrialisation. In Rohan, political corruption. Everywhere, Orcs. **IF ONLY WE HAD ONLY LISTENED.**

The final part is the *reaction* to the disaster, and, boy, is Middle-Earth lucky to have had those monarchist-eco-warriors ('eco-conservatives'?) in place. They throw the widget in the wodget (flip the master switch, find the miracle cure, which is at the bottom of the flood/fire/terrorist camp) to purge the evil and then devote themselves to mopping up the little problems. Industrialisation is purged. The monarchy is rethroned. Princes marry princesses. Orcs are removed from the premises. We return to the glorious summer days where we began.

This is just one – slightly ridiculous – example. But it *does* work. Two fundamental conceits of epic fantasy are a) the Gaia complex: the world is one connected organism or system and b)

all evil can be reduced to a single point. The world is dying. Find the Evil One and hit him with a sword. Solved.

The major *flaw* with the disaster fiction / epic fantasy parallel is that most epic fantasy, a la Tolkien, *resets* – the end result is a return to the status quo. Disaster fiction is more Hegelian: after the disaster, the world has changed – it stabilises in a new place.

This perhaps, leads us back to our initial problem with ‘disaster fantasy’: only in a magical fantasy world can problems be simply... rebooted and, often, simply forgotten. Disaster fiction books are all united by how they serve as a *warning* – against hubris, carelessness or simple human frailty. Epic fantasy carries no such warning, because the world doesn’t move on – it merely reverts.

Yes (potentially). So, from the above, you’d need: population density, a disaster, a series of creative challenges dealing with survival and recovery, natural laws (or magical laws that are extremely consistent and instinctively accepted by both reader and author) and some sort of fallout/result (e.g. it can’t just revert and be forgotten). I’m not sure if that exists as a fantasy *book*, but as a RPG scenario? That would be *perfect*.

So, in conclusion: *no* (probably) but also *maybe* (but not really), ‘*yes*’ (in a way) and *yes* (theoretically).

I suppose the most interesting point, long-term, is the ‘yes’ – not as an answer to the initial question, but as a cross-genre lesson for epic fantasy. It isn’t ‘can there be fantasy disaster fiction?’ but ‘how can we make disaster in fantasy more realistic / tragic / meaningful / well-written?’. I suspect that the horror genre learned that lesson a long time, whereas science fiction still has yet to learn. But that’s a spurious theory for another blog post...

Written by Jared.

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**FIFTY 'ESSENTIAL'
EPIC FANTASIES**

Liz Bourke, Justin Landon, Tansy Rayner Roberts and I have challenged one another to write and compare our lists of ‘Essential’ Epic Fantasies.

The rules are as follows:

- No more than one book or series from each author. For example, J.R.R. Tolkien could go in for *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings* series, but not both.
- No anthologies.
- You can only list books that you have read.
- Definitions of ‘essential’, ‘epic’ and ‘fantasy’ are left to personal interpretation.

That third rule sadly limits me to things that are in English, which means this is an extremely Anglo-American list. Sorry about that – and, as always, please leave feedback and suggested reading in the comments.

I’ve defined ‘essential’ as ‘gives or informs a useful perspective on the category’. I’ve also tried to cover as much of a range as possible with the fifty picks – I wanted my ‘essential’ list should be a *holistic* view of the category. Favouritism is unavoidable, but I’ve balanced out some of those picks with books I really dislike. Only fair.

Specifically, because I’m a nutball, I’m interested in how the epic fantasy category has progressed, or, in many cases – stayed fairly static. There are some strands of epic fantasy that seem, well, completely unchanged over two thousand years. There are other strands in which the category actively pulls in tropes and themes from other genres. This first part of the list – Homer to the early 1980s – focuses on establishing these strands. The second half of the list is more about progression, or, in some cases, the lack thereof.

As with all lists, I look forward to the debate. Please share your own ‘essential’ books, and don’t forget to check out what the others have done: Liz, Justin, Tansy.

Homer's *Odyssey* (8th century BC). This one has it all – a hero's travels across the world, battling and outwitting monsters, encountering sorceresses and beasts, getting moral lessons and/or having ridiculous sexual conquests. His reward? To (re)marry a princess and (re)claim his rightful throne.

Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485). It would be very easy to clutter this list with Arthurian folklore, so I'll just use Malory.

Wu Cheng'en's *A Journey to the West* (1592). Like the *Odyssey* but with more humour, a better party dynamic and an overarching moral theme.

The King James Bible (1611). I don't want to start a theological argument by referring to the Bible as 'epic fantasy', but I do think it is essential reading for the appreciation of epic fantasy. In the same way as, say, *Dungeons & Dragons*. (I'm going to hell.) So many of the themes of Anglo-American epic fantasy stem from this one book: the sense of moral consequence, personified Good and Evil battling for the fate of ordinary people and, of course, apocalyptic eschatology ('of course'). Plus, stylistically, I think there's something to be said for how the florid prose of the King James version has infected the genre.

Lord Dunsany's *The King of Elfland's Daughter* (1924). Very pretty; very questy. There's an ethereal high fantasy strand that, as far as the 20th century goes, seems to begin here.

H.P. Lovecraft's 'The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath' (1926). If we're following threads, Lovecraft's mystical 'Dream-Quest' follows on quickly from Dunsany. Although some of his Dream Cycle stories pre-date *Elfland*, this one follows the same mold of the ethereal

fairy-tale. Dreamy wanderings and astral messengers and, you know, Nyarlathotep.

Robert Graves' I, Claudius (1934). A great book, and, as Sophia McDougall once pointed out, actually a fantasy. There's a prophecy and a chosen one and everything. Truly epic as well – this is about good and evil emperors, an overlooked hero that goes from (virtual) orphan to king and, above all, the rise, fall and reclamation of one of the most fantastic empires in fiction. Or, you know, history. Let me have it: this is the one nod to historical fiction on the whole list.

C.L. Moore's Jirel of Jorey stories (1934 - 1939). Here comes the sword and sorcery! Moore's stories came to *Weird Tales* after Robert E. Howard's Conan, but I think the haughty Jirel is a more interesting character; one whose quests had slightly more scale than Howard's barbarian. Plus, a female protagonist with strength and agency?! Having her very own adventures!?! Ridiculous.

C.S. Lewis' The Chronicles of Narnia (1950 - 1956). Spoiler: Aslan is Jesus.

J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings (1954 - 1955). Odd that the light-hearted story of a gardener's voyage to see an elephant has been so badly misinterpreted over the years.

Norton Juster's The Phantom Tollbooth (1961). The whimsical children's epic fantasy / metaphorical epic / one of the greatest books ever written. It was this or *The Neverending Story*, and Michael Ende didn't have Jules Feiffer illustrations.

Peter S. Beagle's The Last Unicorn (1968). How many epic fantasies are there from the monster's point of view? Granted, this monster is a pretty little unicorn/allegory that's eventually voiced by Mia Farrow, but...

if you need an example of extremely Sixties (flower) fairy tale interpretations of the fantasy epic? Here you go. Now let's get out of this decade.

M. John Harrison's *Viriconium* (1971). Instead of Peake's *Gormenghast* or Vance's Dying Earth series. In its own nebulous way, I think *Viriconium* is the best combination of 'it looks epic when the lights are off' and 'rule-bending, uncontrollable Weirdness'. (It reminds me of an interview with China Miéville, in which he talks about the possibility of a Viriconium RPG: 'Roll against ennui!') (We should make that a t-shirt...)

Michael Moorcock's Elric (1972 - 1977ish). I subscribe to the theory that Elric began as an over-the-top pastiche of epic fantasy – and more interesting because of it. This demonstrates a self-awareness that won't be seen in again in the field until, well, not for a while at least. (I also think Elric eventually jumped the shark. Then he made love to the shark. Then he killed the shark. Then he wrote poetry about the shark. Then he stared into the void, cursing the universe for a while.)

Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* sequence (1965 - 1977). Weird that a series that essentially fuses Christian and Celtic mythology (two things I don't really care about) could be so compelling. But this is a great series and belongs here as a demonstration of a contemporary epic, a young adult epic, multiple Chosen Ones, brains-not-brawn conflicts, secret worlds, etc. etc. etc.

Ursula K. LeGuin's *Earthsea* (1968 - 2001). In the spirit of the television adaptation, I'm going to change the type to white: **Essential for: seductively non-systemisable magic, non-white and/or non-male heroes, harrowing magical apocalypses and, in *The Tombs of Atuan*, one of the best examples of role reversal ever. The 'princess in**

the tower' is the one with the agency, the power and the central narrative.

Richard Adams' Watership Down (1972). Fantasy should've just stopped here. The Lord of the Rings with psychic rabbits. How do you top that? 'We're done, guys – Richard went bunny.'

Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax's Dungeons and Dragons (1974). If I were doing my list in the style of March Madness, the four number #1 seeds would be the Bible, The Lord of the Rings, Dungeons & Dragons and one more that I'll get to in a moment. D&D (and I've sort of arbitrarily chosen one edition here) gave us the rules for epic fantasy. What, statistically, it means to be Chosen, the ideal party structure for narrative progress, what character development looks like on a level-by-level basis and exactly how viciously you have to skewer the Evil One with the Sword of Whoopity-whack.

Anne McCaffrey's Harper Hall trilogy (1976 - 1979). I recently wrote a piece for *Adventure Rocketship* on music in fantasy. The gist of which is that a) it is everywhere, b) it owes a lot to Tolkien's interpretation of the 'bardic tradition' and c) it owes even more to LARPerS, who use poetry and music to approximate 'magic' whilst ducking wooden swords. Anyway, music and magic. Two things that, by definition, are difficult to describe with the printed word. Which hasn't prevented every fantasy hack for fifty years from shoving a mandolin and some poetry in their Lord of the Rings knock-off. McCaffrey, by contrast, did it really nicely. She uses the 'much appreciated but not, like, *useful*' position of the musician in society to great effect, writing an interesting fantasy saga about class, art and problems-that-aren't-resolved-with-swords. Plus, dragons.

Dave Sim's Cerebus (1977 - 2004). I lied. Here's another self-aware epic fantasy. (A little *too* self-aware at times.)

Tanith Lee's Tales from the Flat Earth sequence (1978 - 1987). Epic fantasy evolving by poaching (style and substance) from other genres, in this case, romance, horror and the Gothic.

Lyndon Hardy's Master of the Five Magics (1980). Another genre overlap. Hardy's book is an oft-overlooked example of fantasy imitating science fiction. *Five Magics* is all about the 'science' of magic. Hardy builds a rigorous and internally consistent set of rules, world-building focused on the system, not the setting. If 'any sufficiently advanced, etc', than any 'tediously over-explained magic is indistinguishable from science fiction'.

John Milius and Oliver Stone's 'Conan the Barbarian' (1982). My fourth #1 seed. (*/watches Howard fans explode*) For one, the movie is a great example of the fusion of epic fantasy and sword and sorcery. Whereas, arguably, most of Howard's original stories are purely the latter. The epic/S&S blend is a trend that's been dominating the category since then, and is everywhere today. There's a distinctly progressive, linear plot arc, but also moral ambiguity and a focus on character development. Questioning whether the ends are worth the means, etc. Also, incredibly influential. We owe much of the post-Tolkien fantasy resurgence to the commercial success of this ridiculous film. And by that, I don't just mean within our cosy genre bubble, but beyond it. When you say 'fantasy', a whole generation thinks of Arnold strutting about in furry underwear. We like to pretend the genre is better than this film, but...

David Eddings' Belgariad (1982 - 1984). 'Neo-Tolkien' – and Eddings could just as easily be Terry Brooks, Raymond Feist or any of the other authors that churned

out sagas of teenage stableboys, discovering their specialness and stomping off to fight the big evil and avenge their parents' death. Pros include surprisingly moreish character-focused narrative. Cons include the unfortunate tendency to make sweeping stereotypes, whereas every single member of a race or nation looks and acts exactly the same (often with uncomfortably problematic real-world analogues). (Another legacy of D&D, come to think of it...)

Stephen King's The Dark Tower series (1982 - 2012). What began as the self-indulgent, faux-literary meta-fantasy epic of an 18 year old actually turned into a really interesting faux-literary meta-fantasy epic that combined the quest narrative with tropes and influences from a hundred different non-traditional sources, from Westerns to musicals. Well played, Mr. King.

Marion Zimmer Bradley's The Mists of Avalon (1982). One of (if not *the*) most classic fantasy stories of all time, retold from a completely different point of view. New perspectives raise new questions – what is a hero? What is a villain? What's good and evil? All the trappings that we've been taking for granted, turned on their head.

Robin McKinley's The Hero and the Crown (1984). Good lord, a female protagonist with agency! Mature sexual politics! (Also, badass dragonslaying!) It is fun to look back thirty years and find a book that, in many ways, is still more progressive than what's being published today.

Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman's Dragonlance Chronicles (1984 - 1985). Already addressed at length.¹

¹ Editors' note: Included in this very packet. Handy!

Terry Pratchett's *Guards, Guards* (1989). Fantasy comedies – of which Pratchett, Robert Asprin and Craig Shaw Gardner are three examples – have always been pioneering genre self-awareness. *Guards, Guards* has characters questioning the nature of epic fantasy, even as they tromp around within one.

Richard Awlinson's [a pen name for two authors] *Avatar* trilogy (1989). Another RPG tie-in. And, if you'll forgive the painfully trendy term, an excellent example of transmedia world building. The trilogy is uses many of fantasy's traditions (linear, scavenger hunt style narratives, chosen one protagonists, detailed world-building) as a means of fleshing out an entire media property. More interesting for what it demonstrates than what it is.

Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* (1989 - 1996). Lots of stuff going on here – lots of good quests in here, but with different protagonists (*Preludes, Season of Mists, A Game of You,...*) and all with unusual twists to them. Plus, contemporary, urban stories in which our world is the wonderfully magical realm. Sandman wasn't the first to do this, but a huge part of Gaiman's messianic charisma is his ability to convey the belief that reality is an epic fantasy setting.

Terry Brooks' *The Heritage of Shannara* (1990 - 1993). Heritage is a fusion of dying earth fantasy plus post-apocalypticism plus a bit of anti-industrial ranting. Brooks actually does all of this pretty well, making Heritage a solid attempt at mashing modern themes into a classic setting. Plus, I'm a sucker for stories in which the good guys are overturning the existing social order rather than defending it. A more critical interpretation? After Brooks copied everything *else* Tolkien wrote, Heritage is four books on the Scouring of the Shire.

Clive Barker's Imajica (1991). Horror/fantasy hybrid. [Unrelated, but one of those books that weirdly snuck into the mainstream. Lots of people that wouldn't read, say, Howard, were happy to read *Imajica*, which was what, like a *billion* times geekier?]

Terry Goodkind's Wizard's First Rule (1994). Wow, I loathe this book. But... it covers off the long-winded neo-macho fantasy epic (see also: *Wheel of Time*). *Wizard's First Rule* is also significant as a work of (Objectivist) philosophy – in which the author gleefully embraced epic fantasy's reactionary subtext and ran with it. It pretty much epitomises everything I don't like about the category, all bundled up in one convenient, repulsive package.

Andrzej Sapkowski's The Witcher Saga (1994 - 1999). The reverse of the above. Sapkowski's saga – only part of which has been published in English – is all about moral ambiguity and looking at old fantasy archetypes (especially fairy tales) in a new light. Less about world-building, more about using secondary worlds as a platform to tackle tricky questions.

Robin Hobb's Farseer Trilogy (1995 - 1997). In my mind, I see Hobb's work as an example of gradual evolution, a tiny nudge further away from the Eddingsiana of a decade earlier. The Farseer Trilogy is still a chosen one story in a high fantasy setting with big evils, but it also weaves in the idea of the flawed protagonist and the hint that maybe the good guy doesn't win everything at the end of the book. Baby steps, especially when contrasted with the flying leap a year later in...

George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire (1996 - 2084 [estimated]). Love it or hate it, one of the biggest things to happen in epic fantasy since... 'Conan the Barbarian'? Dungeons & Dragons? Only time will tell

exactly how huge the impact of Martin's series will be. The tropes are all there and recognisable, but they've gone horribly, wonderfully wrong. Everything we're trained to see in high fantasy has been twisted and then knotted with a sort of brutal realism. (And that's just the literary significance – GRRM has probably done more to raise the profile of the fantasy genre than any modern author that's not...)

J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter (1997 - 2007). Orphans and wizard schools, epic battles against the big bad, revelations of magic, etc. I think when Harry Potter got big, a lot of fantasy fans (myself included) were complaining that we'd already been reading this stuff for years... then we ran out and bought them anyway.

China Miéville's Perdido Street Station (2000). There's an epic fantasy woven in here somewhere – hell, there's an old-school D&D adventuring party stomping around – but it is Miévillian. Every genre is in here if you want to find it. Still, this is part of the dying earth/Weird strand, and has inspired many imitators (most are attempts to recreate the Bas-Lag/New Crobuzon setting rather than the underlying themes, but, c'est la vie).

Susanna Clarke's Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell (2004). Two books in a row that are just really *smart*.² We'll break that streak with...

Stephanie Meyer's Twilight series (2005 - 2008). This is a terrible series, terribly written with terrible things to say. So, yes, I'm trolling everyone, *Twilight* fans and epic fantasy readers alike. *But*, this is an epic fantasy told from the non-Chosen One point of view. Bella is the

² Plus, there's something charming about the way the author put all the world-building into the footnotes. If you wanted a story about *characters*, read above the lines. If you care about the *stuff*, skip down and read the fine print. Bonus: Clarke made the fae interesting again.

bride/reward, not the hero. She's the mother and wife of a Chosen One, but not chosen herself. There's no sense of empowerment here: Bella lacks all agency – which only furthers the comparison with the bride and mother archetypes in traditional epic fantasy. (Want the world's most depressing picture of genre's 'progress'? Compare *Twilight* [2005] to *The Mists of Avalon* [1982].) Incidentally, *Twilight* outsold *The Wheel of Time*, the *Dark Tower* series and *A Song of Ice and Fire* combined. Hell, if you threw in everything else in this list not by Rowling or Tolkien, you wouldn't bridge the gap. Good book? No. Significant? Undeniably.

Scott Lynch's *The Lies of Locke Lamora* (2006). Much discussion and debate about this one. First, one book – not both. *Lies* isn't the *best* example of post-Martin revisionism, urban (not rural) epics, unexpected plot twists, roguish anti-heros or epic/sword-and-sorcery blending. However, it is a pretty good example of *all* those things and has the benefit of being brilliantly written. I've nobly included crap like *Goodkind* and *Twilight*. Adding in Lynch lets me sleep at night.

Joe Abercrombie's *The First Law* (2006 - 2012). Abercrombie represents fantasy on two fronts. First, the sprawling epic, combining ostensibly gritty selective realism with traces of high magic (e.g. Erikson, Gemmell, et al.). Second, the whole grimdark thing. Like any other trend, a couple people (Martin, Abercrombie) did something really, really interesting – they explored the idea that 'actually a fantasy world would be really brutal/disease-ridden/awful on a day-by-day basis'. Their commercial success was immediately followed by dozens of pale imitations, all based on the false assumption that readers love them some diseased brutality. It is

always easy to poach an aesthetic. The actual underlying insight? Harder to copy.

K.J. Parker's *The Folding Knife* (2010). A post-revisionist epic that stresses moral ambiguity and difficult ethical decisions. It sucks that I don't have room to include Daniel Abraham's *Long Price Quartet* or David Anthony Durham's *Acacia*, but, yikes, we're already almost at fifty.

Brandon Sanderson's *The Way of Kings* (2010). Despite all the new trends of the last dozen years, isn't it comforting to know that someone is still churning out epic fantasy the old-fashioned way? Vast battles. Chosen ones. Big evils. Meticulously plotted magical systems. 1,000 pages of training sequences. Clashing empires. Dubious racial politics. Sanderson may be the best there is at writing epic fantasy the way epic fantasy has always been written. How's that for a mixed compliment?

Maurice Broaddus' *Knights of Breton Court* trilogy (2010 - 2011). A great example of how the oldest fantasy inspirations/tropes (in this case, King Arthur and his Court) can still be made fresh and relevant. In this case, the story of the rise and fall of the Round Table is layered on inner city Indianapolis.

Erin Morgenstern's *The Night Circus* (2011). Fundamentally starting from the same place as, say, Harry Potter – about the agony of being 'chosen' and the triumph of love and righteousness, plus, you know, wizard school. But Morgenstern's book takes cues from romance, horror and literary fiction to be a truly modern sort of epic.

Jesse Bullington's *The Enterprise of Death* (2011). Again, a traditional epic structure (quest, curse, lost princesses, evil wizarding, etc.) but with thoroughly new

twists. *Enterprise* is a meandering picaresque tale, an unconventional protagonist and a disquieting discussion of agency.

Karen Lord's *Redemption in Indigo* (2012). While discussing my list with others before today, two people challenged this one, but I think *Redemption* couldn't be *more* perfect as an example of how the epic fantasy is evolving. An ordinary (but extremely good) person becomes chosen, the recipient of vast and uncontrollable magical power from whimsical, activist deities. She immediately comes to the attention of A Big Bad Evil, and only by a quest through strange lands (and times) can our heroine emerge victorious. Yet... at the same time, there's no swordplay, no big battles and it is ultimately about redemption, not victory.

N.K. Jemisin's *Dreamblood Series* (2012+). A fitting conclusion to this list and an epic fantasy series that is hugely exciting for the future of the genre. It has a fascinating and creative setting, strong and progressive characters and fresh interpretations of traditional tropes – all while being unquestionably, comfortably epic.

Written by Jared.

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