

Fantasy and the Heart of a Child
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A boy dreams with a sword in his hands. A girl makes those dreams a reality.

“Daddy, can I have a sword for my birthday?” He tugs on my sleeve and pulls me down to eye level while pointing toward the toy store shelf.

“A sword?” I ask, peering into his wide eyes. “Why do you want a sword?”

“‘Cause Jamie’s gonna be Aragorn, and he’s got one, and Scott’ll be Frodo, and he’s got one. I want to be Sam, so I gotta have one, too.”

The neighbor’s boys are good kids, always playing with little Caleb, though he’s by far the youngest of the group. Their imaginative games send them tromping all over both yards, jumping hedges to attack the enemy, rolling for cover behind the doghouse, and sending Orcs to their doom in the sand pit, the evil uglies squealing in dismay at the brave little heroes and their gleaming weapons. This was Caleb’s youthful journey, part of his training to be a champion for God. There was no doubt; he needed a sword.

Did his yearning begin down at the mall when we walked by the 30 gorilla-sized movie posters? One depicted Caleb’s favorite, a tale of brave hobbits and a golden ring of power. A blue-eyed Frodo stared into Caleb’s eyes, hypnotizing him with images of bravery and heroism. A gaggle of young girls gathered around another poster featuring a bespectacled young wizard and his magical schoolmates. Or maybe it began earlier, deep in the heart of his mother’s womb as a seed of heroism was implanted in his soul, an instinctive urge to do battle against evil and

defend the helpless against the enslaving powers of corruption. God had called him to be something more than what he could see with his eyes, a warrior greater than the weak heroes portrayed in most of Christian media. He sought another world, a world in the realms of the fantastic.

Why does the world of fantasy mesmerize our youth? The movie industry certainly has taken note. And bookstore shelves bend with hundreds of volumes filled with battle lore from ancient times, even from distant galaxies, heroes and heroines struggling and finally conquering in whatever quests their conjurers create.

These fantastic stories involve our children's minds so much that they discuss their content in depth, memorize the spoken lines, and even learn new languages never uttered in any real culture. But how do these stories capture the hearts of young people? Is it simply the fun and frivolity of escapism? Or does the answer lie deep in their longing hearts?

God has instilled in us a craving, a deep desire to worship, yet many of us crawl along in life without even a glimpse of our hidden passion. There has to be a reason for living. There must be a Camelot, a hidden Utopia where we can rest from our personal campaigns. Fantasy opens our eyes to a better place, a shining city we do not yet know. And the stories provide a mental bridge as we pursue horizons we could never distinguish with our physical eyes.

Young people are especially aware of fantasy's alluring call. Boys and girls, still unjaded and brimming with ideals, feel their God-given programming. God has wired boys to be protectors, heroes if need be, and girls to be wise helpmates, skilled in everything that is less brutish, while willing to be cunning warriors if their male heroes fall.

When a young man watches a wide screen and sees a hero draw steel from scabbard, displaying a bright sharp sword as his biceps bulge, the boy feels valor, the bravery of a knight.

He becomes the champion he has never been, copying the role model he may have never witnessed in real life. When the hero mounts his steed and charges bravely into conflict, a boy feels his heart race, his blood pumping hot. He rides the horse, too, not knowing why his heart has attached to that rugged man on the screen, why his mind has pulled him into the saddle. Does the child know that he, too, was built to charge the battlements, to defend the weak, to conquer evil?

When a young lady sees a heroine work behind the scenes to prepare reinforcements, persuade the powers that be to send troops, or kindle the fire in quavering hearts, she feels God's calling. When the lady crashes a jar over the villain's head to save her fallen hero, a girl's heart leaps. The courageous helpmate has used whatever strength she had, at risk of her own life, to prevent disaster. Without her, all would have been lost.

In our culture, where do we see such heroism, the living out of these dramatic stories of knights, maidens, and villains? Nobility has vanished. Virtue and heroism have faded with the silhouette of the last champion riding off into the sunset. It often seems that modern men seek only monetary ends while women crave vanity. But many children seek something more, something worthwhile, something that lasts forever. When they can't find nobility in the hearts of their parents, truth in the words of their teachers, or virtue in the so-called heroes of our times, they turn to internal fantasies. As Richard Abanes wrote, "We obtain comfort by seeing evil unmasked, condemned and destroyed. We are offered hope through being shown that at least somewhere, even if it is in another world, good has triumphed."¹ And there are many authors and Hollywood producers who are willing to give children the images they crave—some for good, and some that leave much to be desired.

¹ Richard Abanes, *Fantasy and Your Family* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, Inc., 2002), 21.

Fantasy is not a lie, because it doesn't pretend to be true. It is a vision, the mind's dramatic sketch of what we were meant to be. Good fantasy is a blend of survival and worship, the use of God's gifts to bring glory to him. It demonstrates faith, hope, and love--the three abiding gifts--wielded in integrity and nobility, and illustrated in ways that our culture will never forget. As author, Terry Pratchett, wrote, "Let there be goblin hordes, let there be terrible environmental threats, let there be giant mutated slugs if you really must, but let there also be Hope. It may be a grim, thin hope, an Arthurian sword at sunset, but let us know that we do not live in vain."²

Every male can relate to the feeling of drawing a sword, gazing at his fingers wrapped around a battle-worn hilt and following shimmering steel upward to the razor-sharp point. His eyes go from earth to heaven, first meditating on his limited strength, then raising his thoughts to the skies, and considering the God who fashioned every muscle he is about to use, every neuron in his system that will send messages from mind to muscle as he charges to carry out His will.

Every female should learn that she is the earthly reason for a man's charge into danger. God has created her to be man's treasured, holy vessel, to be cherished and protected at all costs. Without her, man's resolve wilts, his heart quakes, his sword fails. She is to be his support, reminding him of the goal, building up his courage, even rallying to his aid should he stumble.

So, can fantasy make a change for the better? If our culture would reflect the values that good fantasy delivers, fantasy would no longer be what it is; it would be commonplace, lacking allure. Yet, making such a drastic change in this fallen world doesn't seem realistic. In our culture, it can seem heroic just to work for an honest living, lobby Congress for ethical laws, or take a missions trip to a dangerous part of the world. These are good, honest deeds and should

² Terry Pratchett, "When the Children Read Fantasy" [on-line], July 28, 1999. Concatenation (1994). February 12, 2003. Available from :<http://www.concatenation.org/articles/pratchett.html>.

be held up as honorable activities, yet it's hard to translate these works into the exciting images that fantasy portrays. And our everyday lives--often comfortable and lacking danger--are way too mundane to compete with our fertile imaginations.

In many homes, children often see cheating, lying, and adultery in weak-minded fathers and mothers who seek after their own pleasures. Is it any wonder they try to escape to another world that gives so much more? The heroes they have been called to be are imprisoned, unable to live freely because there is no model, no inspiration that gives life and breath to their dreams.

The Christian publishing world has been slow to embrace fantasy. Harry Potter has made fantasy a pariah in some circles, and many are cautious about the effects fantasy can have on impressionable minds. Even if a story creates heroic characters who honor virtue and point to God as their source of strength, a publisher may still balk if it perceives a difficult market. *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *Lord of the Rings* have proven, however, that virtuous fantasy has tremendous potential. These works have been treasured by millions of people all around the world.

Perhaps more Christian publishers will find new stories, fantasy tales worth a financial risk, and make bold ventures into the field. The benefits could be extraordinary, not only for the publishing companies, but also for our culture. They may not only inspire the hearts of those already committed to God, they may also intrigue lost souls, those without heroes to guide them. Boys are looking to take the sword and discover the man that God has put in their hearts. Girls seek a heroine, longing for someone to imitate, a true lady cast in the image of God's design.

We have enough in Christian works of flawed heroes, characters who are the so-called "honest" or "realistic" portrayals of humanity. Children see these fraudulent heroes every day, straw soldiers, easily blown, easily burned. Harboring sin they can't seem to conquer, they raise

no real cry of victory, only a never-ending lament, reaffirming our culture's lie that we are all spineless sinners. And it is a lie. God has called us to the truth, to be more than conquerors, saints and warriors in a land of sinners and weaklings.

We have an opportunity to create strong soldiers for Christ by using the power of story, even through the pages of the impossible. If parents will allow fantasy its proper place, as an inspiration toward holiness, allowing powerful images to create God-honoring models in children's minds, authors will be moved to create more of those fantastic images. As the market grows, as book-buyers seek heroes displaying faith-empowered integrity and strength, more publishers will have the freedom to take a chance on these works. Working together, we can use this genre to capture hearts and minds with champions of virtue, images that will reach in and ignite the flame, setting free the hero or heroine that God has implanted in the hearts of children. That's why I have chosen to allow my children to embrace the images that fantasy creates.

"Sure, Caleb," I say as I slide the box from the shelf. "That's a great idea." I hand the package to my son, a plastic sword and matching shield ready to equip the next great child warrior. As we walk to the checkout, Caleb's hands tightly clutch the precious armor, and I can already see the exciting battles flashing in his eyes. The next step in training a soldier for Christ has begun.