

# Truth in Fiction: Fantasy Genre Inspires Active Faith

(Article for Christian Retailing Magazine)

Dragons and wizards and magic! Oh my!

For some Christians, the “Oh my!” is a shout of joy. For others, it is a cry of anxiety or even disdain. Fantasy in stories generates a variety of responses from Christian readers, some filled with praise, some with condemnation, while many have lingering questions. With speculative fiction titles dominating bookshelves, from *Harry Potter* to *The Hunger Games* to *Percy Jackson*, parents of faith are justifiably curious, skeptical, or unsure of what to do with the genre. And for a long time, Christian retailers had few answers, and certainly few book alternatives that would clearly reflect a Christian world view.

Why does fantasy mesmerize our youth? How do these stories capture their hearts? Is it simply the fun of escapism, or does the answer lie deep in their longings? Perhaps it is a desire to commune with a greater power that calls them to embark on a journey. There must be a Camelot, a hidden Utopia. Fantasy opens their eyes to a better place, a shining city they have not yet seen. The stories provide a bridge to horizons they could never distinguish with their 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. When a young man watches a hero draw steel from scabbard, displaying a bright, sharp sword, the boy feels valor, the bravery of a knight. He becomes a champion, copying the role model he may have never witnessed in real life. Deep inside, his heart comes alive. He feels that he, too, was built to charge the battlements, to defend the weak, and to conquer evil.

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

Our youth long to see good triumphing, to see evil exposed and destroyed. And there are many authors who are willing to give children images they crave—some for good, and some that are poor reflections of that vision.

For most of the previous decade, Harry Potter led the way in the fantasy genre by capturing the hearts of millions of young readers. Yet some Christian parents had legitimate concerns about the content and wondered if there might be Christian-themed books that exhibited the same imaginative flair.

Unfortunately, early in that period, the Christian market had not yet filled that need, so parents continued to rely on the Chronicles of Narnia, though these celebrated tales did not incite the same appeal for older readers or for those who desire a more modern setting.

In 2003, AMG Publishers hoped to fill this void. Acquisitions Editor Dan Penwell met Bryan Davis at a writers' conference and learned about his fantasy story *Raising Dragons*. Bryan had been seeking a publisher for eight years, but mainstream editors deemed it "too Christian," while dragons and fantastical content scared Christian editors away.

AMG decided to take a bold step and publish this story, using the opportunity to create a new imprint, Living Ink Books, the foundation for their approach to creating visionary books for the Christian marketplace.

Within a few weeks of publication, *Raising Dragons* became a bestseller, and because of its success, fantasy titles from other publishers followed the trail AMG blazed. AMG followed up that series with more bestselling titles from Bryan Davis, including *Eye of the Oracle*, which hit number one on the CBA young adult list in 2007, further establishing AMG as the premier publisher of Christian speculative fiction. They later added other top fantasy authors, such as Amanda L. Davis, Wayne Thomas Batson, Steven James, Jenny Cote, Scott Appleton, C. S. Lakin, and D. Barkley Briggs, thereby solidifying their standing in the publishing world. In fact, Family Fiction magazine named Bryan Davis the #1 speculative fiction author in the Christian market for 2011 and Amanda L. Davis the #1 new author overall, proving the market's hunger for the genre.

AMG reports that hundreds of readers have communicated life-altering moments because of these fantasy novels. From initial salvation, to recommitments to Christ, to forsaking sins, to leading others to faith, young readers have been drawn closer to God. Such is the power of a fantastical story.

One teenaged girl wrote, "My life has changed! I now live for God! And still, every time I read one of your books, I feel like I'm filled with the Holy Spirit! *Eye of the Oracle* especially inspired me in that I need to sacrifice, and that God is there no matter where you are."

Even adults are affected by fantasy's high calling. A 44-year-old father wrote, "I'm guessing we all have moments in time when we are spiritually at a low ebb.

Ironically, Christmas day was one of those low points for me. I was toast. However, during the course of reading *The Candlestone*, the prose sparked my own faith and continued to bring my mind back to my Savior and his wonderful love.”

These stories are not really about dragons or wizards; they are about life, about faith, about a journey to a higher plane where heroes are welcome, virtue is honored, and evil is conquered. Christian fantasy is a catalyst that incites a change for good and not for evil. Boys are looking to take the sword and discover the man they feel in their hearts. Girls seek a heroine, longing for someone to imitate, a true lady cast in the image they see beyond the mirror.

We have an opportunity to create strong soldiers 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 heroism, allowing powerful images to create positive models in children’s minds, they will create home-grown heroes who will build and display integrity and virtue.

Publishers and bookstores can work together to capture hearts and minds with champions of virtue, images that will reach inside and ignite the flame, setting free the heroes or heroines that God has implanted in the hearts of children. Because of AMG and other publishers who have followed their lead, parents now have an option, and bookstores have an answer. If you want to grow heroes for God, we have shelves filled with novels that will plant the seeds and provide fuel for growth. Maybe even the parents will peek inside the pages and become inspired themselves. Take a look. The dragons in these books won’t bite, but they will light a fire.