



Light at the end of the Dungeon

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[Pat Thomson](#) [1]

[27](#) [2]

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Around countless dining room tables groups of erstwhile 'non-readers' are drawing on the books of Tolkien and Ursula Le Guin to enhance their Dungeons and Dragons scenarios. The members of these groups have been driving their teachers into fits of depression and breaking School Librarians' hearts for years. They all learned to read without exceptional difficulty but apparently took no pleasure in it. Such pupils, frequently but not exclusively boys, are generally plied hopefully with non-fiction. We try them with **Lives of Great Footballers** or the newest motor cycle book. It is a path that can lead to lower and lower standards of reading material. Yet now, at fifth and sixth form level, they are not asking for easy reads but for complex, demanding books of a type we never dreamed of offering them before because we were looking for 'relevant' books in fashionable dress.

One reason for this change in attitude is probably related to the improved status of books when they can be associated with external, out of school activities. The role-playing fantasy games are popular leisure pursuits and reading fantasy books is an acceptable part of it. It is also a social activity played in a group with one's peers and the interest is shared. Recommendations are made, books exchanged within the group. The central motivation, improving the game, is always present. The most striking feature is that young people, by people, by now written off as 'non-literary' or 'unimaginative' are thoroughly enjoying the creation of characters, plots and fantastic other-worldly experiences. Why were we never able to tap this creative vein in the classroom? No wonder they did not want the football biographies.

The Dungeons and Dragons handbook lists a number of fantasy books which it recommends to players. It includes Tolkien and Le Guin. as one would expect, as well as C. S. Lewis and Alan Garner. The list for adults includes material from early in the century as well as modern science fiction stories. Andre Norton is featured on the adult list. although the titles cited will be in the junior section of the library in most schools. The following. more recent books are some which D. and D. and other fantasy game players have found useful and which are suitable for school hooks hop stock in that non-players can enjoy them. too.

Victor Kelleher's three books **Master of the Grove**, **The Hunting of Shadroth**, and **Forbidden Paths of Thual** have been well received. They were reviewed in BfK 24. In each case. they provide strong. clear themes, worked through by positively drawn characters. John Christopher's new series about a parallel 'If World' is also proving successful.

Fireball (see BfK 21) has now been followed by **New Found Land** (Gollancz 0 575 03222 7, £5 95) This sequel is perhaps better for gamers as the Viking and South American settings offer plenty of opportunity for interesting scenarios. There are also more unusual books which reflect the creative, imaginative world that fantasy games can offer and the remaining titles are some of the most original.

Prince of the Godborn, Geraldine Harris. (Unwin Unicorn, 0 04 823236 X, £2 50) begins in a welter of names. like a

Russian three volume novel. Far from putting them off, this sort of thing is meat and drink to the dedicated games player. Prince Kerish-lo-Taan, escorted by his half-brother, the Lord Forollkin arrives at the Holy Mountain where the Keeper of the Royal Lodge awaits the arrival of the sons of Emperor Ka-Litraan.

There's a good start. The dramatic characters stalk through a series of extraordinary landscapes as the young Prince sets out to recover the seven keys which will save the Kingdom of Galkis. 'Keys of gold, keys of death.' The best part of it all is that this is the first part of *The Seven Citadels* and we are only just beginning.

The Darkangel, Meredith Ann Pierce, (Collins. 0 00 184149 L £5.95. Fontana pbk this autumn) is a strikingly original book. Ariel must destroy the vampyre, the Darkangel. before he takes his fourteenth bride. As she steels herself to complete the task, she perceives dimly the spark of good which lies buried deep within him and the battle for his soul is engaged. A variety of strange settings are peopled by fantastic creatures, some good, some bad. Some help, some hinder the quest. It is the stuff good games are made of. not least the rooftop gargoyles which in this land, disconcertingly. are living creatures.

The Blue Sword, Robin McKinley. (Julia MacRae. 0 86203 123 0. £7.25) is set in a strangely real and solid country although it is clearly not of this time or this world. Some readers have been reminded of Kipling's India and certainly, there are great sweeps of plain and mountain inhabited by tribes who live by strict codes and age-old traditions and who live uneasily with a more 'civilised' culture which has crossed the seas to manage them - if they can. The Homelanders and the Hillfolk come together to defeat the common enemy in a dramatic climax when the great sword. Gonturan, spitting blue fire, literally moves mountains in the best traditions of epic fantasy.

A Dark Horn Blowing, Dahlov Ipcar. (Fontana Lion. 0 00 671896 5. £1 00) is more lyrical in mood. Magical characters and heroic actions abound but the books fascination lies chiefly in its grip on the imagination and the weaving of the words. Nora. Eben, Eelie and Owen tell four separate strands of the tale which chronicle the events which shake the Kingdom of Erland. When evil is finally_ defeated, three regain their happiness and Prince Eelie inherits his kingdom. 'We were beyond Fire and Ice. far in the Twilight of Time, and the whole sky was ours'. A long way from motor bikes but not so far from the new pop videos.

The Homeward Bounders, Diana Wynne Jones, (Macmillan. 0 333 30979 0. £6 95) has a double edge to it for games players. Not only does it provide the kind of stimulus and ideas which they can build on. the whole book is a game itself. The characters referred to as 'They are manipulating the other characters, like pieces on a board. When the living players learn the truth, they turn on the master players and destroy their power. Everyone is able to return to their own homes except the central character. Jamie, who must remain as anchor to the many worlds. 'You can get on and play your own lives as you like, while I just keep moving.' He is bound to the game forever, just as they have all been victims of other people's fantasy games.

The many-layered complexity of this novel, the dramatic possibilities and the free-wheeling imaginative strokes sum up the attractions of both fantasy fiction and the role-playing games. When young people do not care to read, we may be wrong to think that they must necessarily want something contemporary. something easy. They do tell us that this is what they want, but that is the immediate, most accessible response. The great and growing enthusiasm for fantasy games suggests that we have needs at deeper levels which require an acceptable framework for their release. We need to think, as teachers and librarians, why the games succeed where we sometimes do not. In the meantime, we can work with the interest in the games for they. and books like those described here, have a common rootstock.

Page Number:

11

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