

Finding Fantasy for Any Reader

I have a confession to make. I don't really enjoy reading fantasy fiction. I have issues in "suspending disbelief" and accepting make-believe. And yet...I love science fiction and time travel and dystopian stories. And I do like E.B. White's classic novels and movies based on fantasy books. So, I guess I do like fantasy after all. That's my point; kids who say they "don't like" this book or that genre may not have found the books or stories that speak to them. That's the wonderful thing about any genre of literature for young people, including fantasy—there's such a wide variety of books, trends, authors, styles, and topics to choose from. And, fantasy has some of the deepest roots of all.

There is something especially timeless about fantasy. The magic of fantasy needs no particular historical setting, so the stories often transcend the time and place of their writing. They are grounded in the oral tales that are part of folklore and traditional literature; stories of heroes and magic, dragons and wishes. But even more, fantasy speaks to something deep within the human psyche—the wonder and worry about our place in the universe. Some of the earliest books ever written for children have been fantasy novels including *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, published in England in 1865, and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, published in the United States in 1900, among others. In fact, even before there was "children's literature," children read fantasy novels intended for adult audiences, such as *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). Plus, some of our most beloved characters in children's literature come from fantasy novels, such as Peter Pan, Winnie the Pooh, Dorothy, and Pinocchio. These and others have also translated well into now-classic films, such as *Matilda*, *Mary Poppins*, and *Babe* (the pig). And consider one of the bestselling books for young people: *Harry Potter*, the book that launched a reading resurgence and a panoply of new fantasy novels and series. What is it about the Harry Potter stories that so captivated hundreds of thousands of readers of all ages? Is it the "what if" posed by the books? *What if this is not my real family? What if I have magical powers and I just don't know it?*

Fantasy for young readers may be as simple as having animal characters that talk or as complex as creating whole imaginary worlds such as the Hogwarts school of magic in the Harry Potter books or the land of Middle-earth in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings series. And what an impact these fantasy novels have had in encouraging reading on a gigantic scale, as well as the publication of more fantasy, including longer works previously thought too challenging for children. At the other end of the spectrum, the gentle fantasy *Charlotte's Web* by E. B. White published in 1952 also holds its place on the bestseller list. Ghost stories, time travel tales, horror stories, science fiction, and even tales of the supernatural are all popular forms of fantasy stories. In a recent article in *Booklist*, Maggie Reagan wrote, "Fantasy is blossoming lately, we've been seeing stories that draw from a widening variety of mythologies and cultures and stories that breathe new life into old tropes" (2019).

Who reads fantasy? Fantasy novels often hold special appeal to proficient readers who are in middle grades and above for their independent reading. In fact, children who are identified as "gifted and talented" are often especially fond of fantasy. This makes sense, if you think about it. Fantasy novels are often longer and may contain challenging vocabulary—made-up words (like "Quidditch") and scientific concepts (like "tesseract"). This may be difficult to comprehend for a less able reader. In addition, fantasy novels often have a child protagonist who is extremely bright, often misunderstood, possibly a loner. Gifted children often feel that way themselves and thus identify with the character's struggles. But, there are so many different kinds of fantasy that you can surely find one that will appeal to all the different readers you know. You can find hilarious fantasy like the Discworld series by Terry Pratchett and scientific fantasy like the classic Tripods Trilogy by John Christopher, for example. Recent "Top Ten" titles of fantasy highlighted in *Booklist* included *Charlie Hernandez and the League of Shadows* by Ryan Calejo, *Lalani of the Distant Sea* by Erin Entrada Kelly, *Sal and Gabi Break the Universe* by Carlos Hernandez, and *Small Spaces* by Katherine Arden, among others. We owe it to our children to present this genre to them in some form since it reflects many of our deepest wishes for the triumph of good in the world.

Work Cited

Reagan, Maggie. "Monster Mash." *Booklist* 115, no. 22 (2019): 76.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN ACTION

One Book in Action: Where the Mountain Meets the Moon

Choosing a single title of fantasy for emphasis is one way of inviting children to sample the genre, particularly young readers who might not have tried it before. Although many readers have become avid fantasy fans through the *Harry Potter* phenomenon, there are still children who may find the faraway settings strange and the length and vocabulary of fantasy novels challenging. Thus, it can be helpful to guide children's experiences with fantasy literature in purposeful and creative ways. For this chapter, we will center on Grace Lin's Newbery honor book, *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon* (Little, Brown, 2009), the story of a young girl in China who goes on a journey to find out how to change her fortune. This book was chosen by Al Roker as a selection for his *Today Show* Kids Book Club, and a fun video clip of Grace talking with Al and the children appears on Grace's website. At her website (GraceLin.com), you'll also find links to her TEDx Talk (on YouTube), as well as crafts and creative activities. Plus, there are educator guides and activities for many of Grace Lin's books, including extensive discussion questions and comprehension-building activities for *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon* at her publisher link (and at her publisher site (<http://www.gracelinbooks.com/inner.html>)).

To Begin

Where the Mountain Meets the Moon is a lovely selection to read aloud, with its short chapters and mini-folktales and fairy tales and abundant dialogue. Invite volunteers to read aloud the Chinese "story" chapters (which are labeled "The Story of . . ." and appear in a different font). If time is short, just share Chapters Five and/or Six, each is three or four pages long, in which our heroine, Minli, sets off on her adventure. There is also an audio clip of the author reading an excerpt aloud on her website, plus the book is available as an unabridged audiobook from Listening Library. Then browse through the ten full-color illustrations Grace created for the book as well as the two-color pictures that open each chapter (and project them if you can) and invite the children to talk about what they think will happen in the book based on these illustrations. Many of these same images are woven throughout the book's digital trailer, which gives an

evocative feeling for introducing the book (available at <http://www.gracelin.com>).

Making It Real

Take this fantasy novel and make it concrete for children by gathering objects referenced in the book or related in some way. In the story, Minli packs a variety of items as she sets off on her journey. See how many you can find to display along with the book: a needle, a pair of chopsticks, her white rabbit rice bowl, a small piece of dried bamboo, a hollow gourd full of water, a small knife, a fishnet, some uncooked rice, a large pot, and one copper coin. Talk about why she might have chosen to bring these items and predict how they might come in handy. She also uses some of these items to create a compass (rice bowl, water, and bamboo) which helps guide her on her way. Find, share, or make a compass together and talk about how to use a compass, an orienteering skill. And if you're really feeling adventurous, try bringing and keeping a pet goldfish, an auspicious and lucky creature in Chinese culture and a key figure in *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon*.

Poetry and Folktale Connections

Make connections to poetry with works by poets of Chinese heritage or poems on the topic of dragons and with Chinese folktale collections or picture book adaptations. Here are just a few examples. Bring books to browse and invite children to choose their favorite poem or tale to pair with Lin's novel.

Foster, John. 2004. *Dragon Poems*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Mak, Kam. 2001. *My Chinatown: One Year in Poems*. New York: HarperCollins.

Tucker, Kathy. 2003. *The Seven Chinese Sisters*. Ill. by Grace Lin. Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman.

Wong, Janet S. 2000. *Night Garden: Poems from the World of Dreams*. New York: McElderry.

Wong, Janet S. 2003. *Knock on Wood: Poems about Superstitions*. New York: McElderry.

Young, Ed. 1989. *Lon Po Po*. New York: Philomel.

Young, Ed. 2004. *The Lost Horse: A Chinese Folktale*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Young, Ed. 2005. *Beyond the Great Mountains*. San Francisco: Chronicle.

More Story Resources

Author Grace Lin offers an amazing variety of book-based resources for this and many of her works online at her website, <http://www.gracelin.com>. For example, for information about the creation of *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon*, you'll find a video clip of Grace talking about the book's "origins, themes, and character inspirations" as well as links to multiple interviews on her blog tour. You can also get ideas from her online book launch party complete with cupcakes and cookie recipes. You'll find directions for making a compass, tips on drawing a dragon, information about Chinese symbolism and characters, and more recipes. Plus, there's a separate "Event Kit" that provides downloadable invitations, posters, and a puzzle game, perfect for Moon Festival celebrations or book club gatherings. In addition, there are even directions for making a simple board game created by an avid reader named Emme, age eleven!

Finally, for the latest on author/illustrator Grace Lin's life and work, look for her more informal blog, <http://www.gracelinblog.com>, where she posts pictures, vignettes and activities, and where you can sign up for her newsletter and access the newsletter archives.

Other Books by Grace Lin

Children who enjoy the story of *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon* may want to continue reading additional books by author Grace Lin, particularly the companion novels, *Starry River of the Sky* (Little, Brown, 2012) and *When the Sea Turned to Silver* (Little, Brown, 2016). At Grace Lin's website, you'll find an overview video, behind the story mini-documentary, awards and reviews, activities, an event kit, interactive read aloud script, recipes, directions, and more.

Grace Lin is also the author of contemporary realistic fiction books including the Pacy Lin series: *The Year of the Dog* (Little, Brown, 2006), *The Year of the Rat* (Little, Brown, 2009), and *Dumpling Days* (2012), in which a young girl copes with everyday childhood concerns. But just as in her fantasy novels, Lin weaves two parallel stories together: Pacy's everyday experiences alongside her family's stories and memories. For younger readers, seek out her *Ling & Ting* series of easy readers or her engaging picture books that she has illustrated herself like her Lin Family books, *Dim Sum for Everyone!* (Knopf, 2001), *Kite Flying* (Dragonfly, 2004), *Fortune Cookie Fortunes* (Dragonfly, 2006), *Bringing in the New Year* (Knopf, 2008), *Thanking the Moon: Celebrating the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival* (Knopf, 2010), and others like *The Ugly Vegetables* (Charlesbridge, 2009) and *A Big Mooncake for Little Star* (Little, Brown, 2018). Sharing the works of Grace Lin helps children see the diverse interests an author can explore in her writing, as well as how she often weaves her own cultural heritage throughout her writing.

From Sylvia Vardell's *Children's Literature in Action: A Librarian's Guide*, third edition. For more information visit [Libraries Unlimited](#).

About the Editor

Sylvia Vardell is Professor in the School of Library and Information Studies at Texas Woman's University and teaches

courses in literature for children and young adults. She has authored or co-authored more than 100 published articles, more than 25 book chapters and given more than 150 presentations at national and international conferences. She is the author of *Children's Literature in Action: A Librarian's Guide*, *Poetry Aloud Here!*, *The Poetry Teacher's Book of Lists*, *Poetry People*, co-edits The Poetry Friday Anthology series (with Janet Wong) and maintains the PoetryForChildren blog and poetry column for ALA's Book Links magazine.

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