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Fantasy in YA Literature

When I was a teenager, books were my sanctuary. Reading allowed me to experience something I might not otherwise be able to. It also provided me with an escape from the mundane of everyday life. Most of the books I read fell into two genres: realistic fiction and fantasy. I used to think they were on opposite sides of the spectrum, but I came to realize that they are merely two sides of the same coin. Just because Rachel Hartman’s *Seraphina* is half-dragon, it doesn’t make her struggle with identity and acceptance any less real than the everyday struggles of protagonists from Sarah Dessen’s novels. The fantasy genre presents a paradox where readers are given both magic creatures and fantastical adventure as well as real-life lessons. As Marjorie N. Allen wrote, “Fantasies often have more to do with reality than any so-called realistic fiction” (LfTYA, Chapter 7).

Fantasy has been attacked for its roots in the imaginary, which critics have taken to mean that its content is inherently unreal or untrue. While the landscape and its inhabitants, customs, and conflicts might be imaginary, they are also completely fathomable and rife with an emotional honesty that makes it feel real. Fantasy allows readers to take up the role of an outsider, looking in and discovering something for the first time. For all its foreignness, fantasy can gift us with real insight into our own society. By acting as outsiders, it’s as if we can see everything more clearly.

Fantasy in YA Literature

Goodman, Alison. *Eon: Dragoneye Reborn*. Viking Books for Young Readers, 2008.

Eon is a twelve-year-old boy who has been training in hopes of being chosen as a Dragoneye—an apprentice to one of the twelve energy dragons of good fortune. However, the truth is that he is actually Eona, a sixteen-year-old girl, but women are forbidden from practicing Dragon Magic. When she is chosen by a powerful dragon that hasn’t shown itself in years, Eona is forced to face the truth behind all the secrecy. The novel’s greatest strength is in its depiction of gender and the roles that women play in a parochial society. In a world where power is forbidden to women, Eona has to learn to accept herself as someone who can be a woman as well as powerful. This novel is more suited for mature young adult fans because of the situations and themes explored with transgender characters, eunuchs, forced intimacy, and physical assault.

Hartman, Rachel. *Seraphina*. Random House Publishing, 2012.

The people of medieval Goredd are preparing to celebrate the 40th anniversary of their peace treaty with dragons when the heir is murdered. All signs point to the murderer being a dragon, fueling tensions that already exist between the two peoples. The main protagonist Seraphina Dombegh, along with Prince Lucian Kiggs, becomes embroiled in untangling this mystery. As they uncover hints of a sinister plot to destroy the peace, Seraphina struggles to protect her own secret: that she is half-human and half-dragon. Underneath the promise of mystery and hints of romance, the novel explores themes of racism and xenophobia that are prevalent in today’s society. Seraphina is presented in a way that ethnic or sexual minorities can relate to: born into an identity that she didn’t choose, she must deal with the shame and the lies shaped by the world she lives in. And just like in our own society, there are those who view any kind of novelty or change as a threat to their very existence.

Hardinge, Frances. *A Face Like Glass*. Pan Macmillan Children’s, 2012.\*

Caverna is an underground city where facial expressions are as carefully crafted as their cheeses and perfumes. It is a dangerous place to be for Neverfell, who has a face that can express her emotions in a genuine and obvious way. When she is finally exposed to high society after a sheltered childhood, she is forced to mature from a naive, innocent child. As much as it is an intriguing tale of political mystery, *A Face Like Glass* is a story of growing up and becoming the person you can be when circumstances force you into dark corners. It teaches readers about letting go of control and having faith. It’s about acknowledging your feelings even when they’re distasteful and ugly.

Jones, Diana Wynne. *Howl’s Moving Castle*. Greenwillow Books, 1986.\*

When a witch’s curse changes her into a 90-year-old woman, Sophie Hatter leaves home and finds herself working for the mysterious wizard Howl. Behind the veil of magical slice of life is a story of destiny and courage. Sophie’s perceived notion of destiny leads her to believe she is resigned to a dull, mundane life. However, her transformation affects more than just her physical appearance, as it allows her to become less afraid of what others think of her. It teaches the important lesson that, ultimately, you are in control of your own life.

Levine, Gail Carson. *Fairest*. HarperCollins, 2006.

In the kingdom of Ayortha, Aza is not the fairest of them all. She is thoroughly convinced that she is ugly. However, she has a lovely singing voice, which is highly valued in her society. On the other hand, Queen Ivi is beautiful but cannot sing. *Fairest* follows the story of how far these two women are willing to go to feel beautiful, exploring themes of self-esteem that resonate with many young women. We are constantly distracted by the idea that our external weaknesses hold us back from true happiness when our faults actually lie in the inability to accept our imperfection. These feelings are inadequacy are exacerbated by a society that encourage conventional beauty. Levine poignantly portrays the harmful effects of envy and shows how destructive self-hatred can be.

McKinley, Robin. *The Blue Sword*. Greenwillow Books, 1982.

Harry Crewe is an orphan girl who, after years of feeling invisible and insignificant, finds her strength after being kidnapped by a mysterious Hill-king who possesses magic powers. Gradually, she discovers an ancient magic inside herself and comes to terms with her abilities. Despite the unexpected situation she finds herself in, she acquires friends and love, as well as a place where she truly belongs.

Parker, Natalie C. *Seafire*. Razorbill, 2018.\*

“After her family is killed by corrupt warlord Aric Athair and his bloodthirsty army of Bullets, Caledonia Styx is left to chart her own course on the dangerous and deadly seas. She captains her ship, the *Mors Navis*, with a crew of girls and women just like her, who have lost their families and homes because of Aric and his men. The crew has one mission: stay alive, and take down Aric’s armed and armored fleet.” *Seafire* takes the character of a pirate and gives it a new spin by featuring a crew made up primarily of women. Its prominent theme is that of family and how people shouldn’t be judged by the mistakes or actions of their family, both blood and found. (Summary taken from Goodreads.)

Raasch, Sara. *Snow Like Ashes*. Balzer & Bray, 2014.\*

The Kingdom of Winter was conquered and its people enslaved, all except for eight rebels who managed to escape. Among them is Meira, who has lived her entire life as a refugee. She is willing to do anything to restore her kingdom to power. Underneath the threat of oppression and the pressure to free their kingdom, Meira is a girl struggling to know where she stands, both in society and in the eyes of her peers. She is constantly seeking approval and wants proof that she’s enough, which is something that resonates with many young adults.

Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 1999.\*

Harry Potter’s third year at Hogwarts proves to be as dangerous as his previous adventures. The presence of Sirius Black and the Dementors loom threateningly over him as he goes about his daily life as a student. This fear of the unknown lurking in the shadows is a prevalent theme throughout the book. People are intent to believe in the one side of the story that they see, rarely going out of their way to learn the other side.

Tahir, Sabaa. *An Ember in the Ashes*. Razorbill, 2015.\*

In a brutal world where the Martial Empire has subjugated several cultures, Laia is forced to make the decision to risk her life to save her brother’s. In exchange for his rescue, Laia aids the rebels by infiltrating the Empire’s military academy, where she discovers that not even members of the Empire are free of its oppression. *An Ember in the Ashes* is a story of survival and bravery, and Tahir is unflinching in her portrayal of violence in an unfair and downright nasty society.