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The Journey of Self-Discovery in Fantasy  
Annotated Bibliography

The realm of fantasy is seen as a haven, a way to escape one's reality. It is a way to embark on a journey of the mind, to explore fantastical worlds and meet characters that have great destinies thrust upon their shoulders (and not always willingly). It can be said that young adults enjoy this gateway, perhaps even need it. Sometimes it is to break up the monotony of daily life, other times it is to find the answers to burning questions that they are too afraid to ask. It can be difficult to teach adolescents that they are capable of achieving greatness. If the lessons are too didactic, they quickly lose interest. Too confusing, and they walk away feeling more lost than they initially were. Fantasy novels—both of the children and young adult variety—have the ability to teach without being wholly up front about what is being taught. A reader can see a bit of themselves in the main characters of fantasy novels, that special coming-of-age story where the hero or heroine embark on a quest and learn about themselves, maturing and transforming along with the reader as they discover their true potential.

The journey of self-discovery is an essential concept for young adults. Knowing that they have value and are important to those around them helps to ease young readers into the scary state of adulthood. The characters in the following fantasy novels are nowhere near perfect. A few believe that their flaws define them and that they can do no better, such as Sophie from Diana Wynne Jones's *Howl's Moving Castle*. Characters like Eragon and Ged from *Eragon* and *The Earthsea Cycle* can show young adults that their pasts and origins do not dictate where they are headed. Stripping away the magic and the grandeur adventures at the heart of the fantasy novels reveals a core that speaks to a young adult—it gives them a sense of empowerment and hope. Although they may not be able to take on fearsome enemies like the lovable Bilbo Baggins of *The Hobbit*, they fight their own very real battles. Like young adults, these characters are layered and multifaceted. They have weaknesses and strengths, as well as failures and triumphs. Through it all they gain insight into what drives them, what it means to discover that they are worth so much more than what they give themselves credit for.

***Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*** – J.K. Rowling

Rowling, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. New York: Scholastic, 1999. Print.

For twelve long years, the dread fortress of Azkaban held an infamous prisoner named Sirius Black. Convicted of killing thirteen people with a single curse, he was said to be the heir apparent to the Dark Lord, Voldemort.

Now he has escaped, leaving only two clues as to where he might be headed: Harry Potter's defeat of You-Know-Who was Black's downfall as well. And the Azkaban guards heard Black muttering in his sleep, "He's at Hogwarts... he's at Hogwarts."

Harry Potter isn't safe, not even within the walls of his magical school, surrounded by his friends. Because on top of it all, there may well be a traitor in their midst.

(<http://www.amazon.com/Harry-Potter-Prisoner-Azkaban-Rowling/dp/0439136369>)

Living under the roof of Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia was never easy for Harry. Forced to dress in Dudley's hand-me-downs and sleep in a cupboard under the stairs for a good chunk of his life, Harry has little else to look forward to in life. It was not his eleventh birthday that he realized he was part of world much bigger than the one he had been forced to live in. Through his time at Hogwarts, he forges an unbreakable friendship with Ron and Hermione, all while learning what it means to be a proper wizard. Although Harry's story may seem simple at its core, it is far from it. Harry treasures his time at school and his bonds because he once started from nothing. There are many concepts Harry learns: loss, death, fear, and pain. Yet, these things only serve to make him stronger. Overcoming adversity in hard times is an idea that young adults can appreciate. The underdog is a beloved caricature because young adults see themselves in those types of characters. Harry's portrayal is no different. He learns the importance of strength in mind and heart and what it means to pave one's destiny with their hands. To go from the boy in the cupboard to one of the greatest wizards of his time is a triumph that can resonate with many young adults as they struggle to find their own place.

Paolini, Christopher. *Eragon (Inheritance, Book 1)*. New York: Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2005. Print.

Fifteen-year-old Eragon believes that he is merely a poor farm boy—until his destiny as a Dragon Rider is revealed. Gifted with only an ancient sword, a loyal dragon, and sage advice from an old storyteller, Eragon is swoon swept into a dangerous tapestry of magic, glory, and power. Now his choices could save—or destroy—the Empire.

(<http://www.amazon.com/Eragon-Inheritance-Book-Christopher-Paolini/dp/0375826696>)

Like the rest of the characters in these fantasy novels, Eragon comes from humble beginnings. Farm boy does not exactly display the potential to start an uprising and dethrone an evil king. It is not until he loses everything—his uncle and his home—that he decides to embark on a journey with the old storyteller, Brom. Even though he seems to be down on his luck, Eragon learns that a great destiny awaits him and that as one of the last Dragon Riders he is more important than he ever gave himself credit for. Through the people that he meets, Eragon learns what it means to gain and to lose things of importance—a concept that young adults struggle with for a good chunk of their lives.

***Nicholas St. North and the Battle of the Nightmare King (The Guardians)*** – William Joyce

Joyce, William. *Nicholas St. North and the Battle of the Nightmare King*. New York: Atheneum for Young Readers, 2011. Print.

Before Santa was Santa, he was North, Nicholas St. North—a daredevil swordsman whose prowess with double scimitars was legendary. Like any swashbuckling young warrior, North seeks treasure and adventure, leading him to the fiercely guarded village of Santoff Claussen, said to be home to the greatest treasure in all the East, and to an even greater wizard, Ombric Shalazar. But when North arrives, legends of riches have given way to terrors of epic proportions! North must decide whether to seek his fortune... or save the village.

(<http://www.amazon.com/Nicholas-North-Battle-Nightmare-Guardians/dp/1442430486>)

Taking classic fairytale figures such as Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny, and the Sandman, Joyce puts a spin on them and turns them into the Guardians of Childhood, heroes that protect children and the

embodiment of their hopes and dreams. There is a catch, however: the guardians have no power unless the children truly believe in them. One of the most important characters in this book is a young girl named Katherine; although she is fearful, she is determined to set things right. On her journey with North, she learns that strength does not equal the size of one's muscles, but in the size of their heart. Although a whimsical tale of adventure and sacrifice, Joyce's series shows the potential of the young—for all of the title character's skills with his swords, he is powerless to stop the Nightmare King. Katherine is the true heroine as she jumps headlong into the fray to save her friends' lives, wielding nothing but a dagger and her unwavering resolve.

***Howl's Moving Castle*** – Diana Wynne Jones

Jones, Diana Wynne. *Howl's Moving Castle*. New York: HarperCollins, 1986. Print.

Sophie has the great misfortune of being the eldest of three daughters, destined to fail miserably should she ever leave home to seek her fate. But when she unwittingly attracts the ire of the Witch of the Waste, Sophie finds herself under a horrid spell that transforms her into an old lady. Her only chance at breaking it lies in the ever-moving castle in the hills: the Wizard Howl's castle. To untangle the enchantment, Sophie must handle the heartless Howl, strike a bargain with a fire demon, and meet the Witch of the Waste head-on. Along the way, she discovers that there's far more to Howl—and herself—than first meets the eye.

(<http://www.amazon.com/Howls-Moving-Castle-Diana-Wynne/dp/0061478784>)

Sophie has the short end of the stick because she is the oldest. She is afraid to take chances because she believes she does not deserve anything besides inheriting her father's hat shop, insuring that she lives a humdrum, safe life. She does not think she is particularly beautiful and so she is content hiding behind her work. Because Howl only preys on beautiful girls, she thinks no harm will come to her. She hides behind her work until the Witch of the Waste places a curse on her, forcing her to leave the comfort of her surroundings to travel in search of breaking it. She eventually meets Howl and he treats her rudely at first, until Sophie learns that she must stand up for herself or she will never be heard. Jones portrays Sophie in a way that speaks to many young girls. They do

not think they are worthy enough and so they settle for less than what they deserve. Sophie slowly begins to see that she has value as a person, that she is not defined by her limitations and that there is beauty in imperfection.

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***The Hobbit, or There and Back Again* – J.R.R. Tolkien**

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1937. Print.

Bilbo Baggins is a hobbit who enjoys a comfortable, unambitious life, rarely traveling any farther than his pantry or cellar. But his contentment is disturbed when the wizard Gandalf and a company of dwarves arrive on his doorstep one day to whisk him away on an adventure. They have launched a plot to raid the treasure hoard guarded by Smaug the Magnificent, a large and very dangerous dragon. Bilbo reluctantly joins their quest, unaware that on his journey to the Lonely Mountain he will encounter both a magic ring and a frightening creature known as Gollum.

(<http://www.amazon.com/The-Hobbit-There-Back-Again/dp/054792822X/>)

From the beginning, it is made apparent that Bilbo is not your average hero. Hobbits are creatures that are not known for a love of violence or their physical strength. Bilbo is happy living in his dwelling, forgoing excitement and adventure. When thirteen dwarves come knocking on his door and employ him as their “burglar” to reclaim the Lonely Mountain and its treasures from the formidable dragon Smaug, he is reluctant to go. Through their perilous journey, he manages to save the dwarves from many horrors through his wit and bravery. Bilbo shows that anyone can be a hero, no matter how small. Heroes do not always have to be seasoned warriors or burly men. As long as they have the will to achieve their ambitions, anything is possible, no matter what may stand in the way.

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***The Lightning Thief (Percy Jackson and the Olympians, Book 1)* – Rick Riordan**

Riordan, Rick. *The Lightning Thief*. New York: Disney-Hyperion, 2006. Print.

Percy Jackson is about to be kicked out of boarding school... again. And that's the least of his troubles. Lately, mythological monsters and the gods of Mount Olympus seem to be walking straight out of the pages of Percy's Greek mythology textbook and into his life. And worse, he's angered a few of them. Zeus' master lightning bolt has been stolen, and Percy is the prime suspect...

([https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/28187.The\\_Lightning\\_Thief](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/28187.The_Lightning_Thief))

Percy is a twelve-year-old boy with dyslexia and ADHD, very real disabilities that youth struggle with; he has been expelled from every school that he has attended. On the other hand, his friends are the ones that are studious and “smart.” That does not stop Percy from being courageous and loyal. He may not be book smart, but he is clever. He is a character that young adults can relate to because he echoes the boy in seventh grade that everyone knew. Throughout the story Percy finds out that he is a demigod and through this revelation he tries to find out who his father is while looking for the culprit of Zeus’ stolen thunderbolt. He learns that people can be their own heroes—that a person does not have to don a suit and cape to recognize the change they can bring.

***The Girl of Fire and Thorns* – Rae Carson**

Carson, Rae. *The Girl of Fire and Thorns*. New York: Greenwillow, 2012. Print.

Once a century, one person is chosen for greatness.

Elisa has always felt powerless, useless. Now, on her sixteenth birthday, she has become the secret wife of a handsome and worldly king—a king who needs her to be the chosen one, not a failure of a princess. And he's not the only one who seeks her. Savage enemies, seething with dark magic, are hunting her. A daring, determined revolutionary thinks she could save his people. And he looks at her in a way no man has ever looked at her before. Elisa could be everything to those who need her most. If the prophecy is fulfilled. If she finds the power deep within herself. If she doesn't die young.

Most of the chosen do.

(<http://www.amazon.com/The-Girl-Fire-Thorns-Carson/dp/006202650X/>)

Elisa's has a few things working against her: issues with body-image, loneliness, and the fact that she feels undervalued as a person. Her family treats her harshly, and the only form of solace in her life is her nanny, who happens to coddle her to the point of overprotection; the only comfort she has is food. Despite Elisa's circumstances, she is a relatable heroine who finds faults in herself but is unable to see beyond them. Her character goes through a transformation when she is kidnapped and forced away from the sheltered life she has been living. As she learns about the world, she learns about herself and begins to understand who is really right and who is really wrong. Instead of relegating herself to a bystander, she decides to take an active role in her fate and to fight for the things she wants to achieve. Young adults will find themselves lost in the world and its culture and become a part of something bigger just as Elisa does.

***The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe (The Chronicles of Narnia, Book 2)* – C.S. Lewis**

Lewis, C.S. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. 1950. Reprint. New York: HarperCollins, 1994. Print.

Four adventurous siblings—Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy Pevensie—step through a wardrobe door and into the land of Narnia, a land frozen in eternal winter and enslaved by the power of the White Witch. But when almost all hope is lost, the return of the Great Lion, Aslan, signals a great change... and a great sacrifice.

(<http://www.amazon.com/Lion-Witch-Wardrobe-Chronicles-Narnia/dp/0064404994/>)

Lewis's story of the Pevensie siblings is a classic that has withstood the test of time. The four children are a few of many that were evacuated from London during World War II during the Blitz. As they spend their days in the countryside, the brothers and sisters discover a world vastly different from their own, filled with magic and mystery. Readers can become frustrated with the second-youngest child, Edmund, as he betrays his siblings for sweets and empty promises from the White Witch. Actions come with consequences, something that individuals must learn. However, that does not mean there is no room for forgiveness. All of the children eventually become kings and queens of Narnia, showing that all great people are not impervious to making mistakes on their journey to self-discovery.

***The Sword in the Stone (The Once and Future King, Book 1)* – Terence Hanbury White**

White, Terence Hanbury. *The Sword in the Stone*. 1938. Reprint. New York: Philomel, 1993. Print.

Once upon a time, a young boy called “Wart” was tutored by a magician named Merlyn in preparation for a future he couldn’t possibly imagine. A future in which he would ally himself with the greatest knights, love a legendary queen and unite a country dedicated to chivalrous values. A future that would see him crowned and known for all time as Arthur, King of the Britons.

([https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/43545.The\\_Once\\_and\\_Future\\_King](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/43545.The_Once_and_Future_King))

There are few that are not acquainted with King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Arthur was not born a king; there was a time when he was young and filled with curiosity. At times he was bumbling as he learned about magic, but as the series progresses the tale begins to turn philosophical as Arthur grows more complex with the passage of time. Greatness is not a process that happens overnight—it takes years. Young adults will have a fun time seeing how a clumsy boy becomes King of Camelot, and that, like many of the books on this list, great things come from small beginnings.

***A Wizard of Earthsea (The Earthsea Cycle)* – Ursula K. Le Guin**

Le Guin, Ursula K. *A Wizard of Earthsea*. 1968. Reprint. Boston: HMH, 2012. Print.

Ged was the greatest sorcerer in Earthsea, but in his youth he was the reckless Sparrowhawk. In his hunger for power and knowledge, he tampered with long-held secrets and loosed a terrible shadow upon the world. This is the tumultuous tale of his testing, how he mastered the mighty words of power, tamed an ancient dragon, and crossed death's threshold to restore the balance.

(<http://www.amazon.com/Wizard-Earthsea-Cycle/dp/0547773749/>)

Ged’s (or Sparrowhawk’s) story is a coming-of-age tale like most fantasy novels of its kind. Ged comes from a poor village in the mountains where many in his company are illiterate. Akin to Harry Potter, he attends a



school where he learns magic, such as the names of things and the meanings behind them. Overstepping his boundaries, he unleashes a creature from the darkness that is a dark manifestation of himself: his inner-shadow. The battle to overcome his inner demons is literal. He has to look inward as much as outward to right his wrongs. The road to self-understanding is long and hard, traits that young adults can relate to. Sometimes the ending of the journey—the thing that a person tends to want the most—is not always in plain view, but the road to reach it is necessary to take.