

Fantasy and the Heart of a Child  
By Bryan Davis

“Daddy, can I have a sword for my birthday?”

Many parents have heard such a call from little boys who feel the drive to raise a weapon of defense and protection. It starts early, because it is inherent in their make-up. Boys and girls alike possess a God-given drive to do great things, and a wise parent understands how to feed such internal hunger, by providing wholesome stories of the fantastic, tales of heroes and heroines that promote judicious development of a child’s budding dreams.

The proof of this drive is easy to see. Watch boys play. Their imaginative games send them tromping from yard to yard, jumping hedges to attack the enemy, rolling for cover behind the doghouse, and sending Orcs to their doom in the sand pit, the evil uglies squealing in dismay at the brave little heroes and their gleaming weapons. This is their youthful journey, part of their training to be heroes.

Maybe a boy’s yearning began at the mall when he walked by the huge movie posters depicting a tale of brave hobbits and a golden ring of power. A blue-eyed Frodo stared into his eyes, hypnotizing him with images of bravery and heroism. A gaggle of young girls gathered around another poster featuring a bespectacled young wizard and his magical schoolmates. Or maybe it began earlier, deep in the heart of his mother’s womb as a seed of heroism was implanted in his soul, an instinctive urge to do battle against evil and defend the helpless against the enslaving powers of corruption. He was called to be something more than what he could see

with his eyes, a warrior greater than the weak heroes portrayed in the media. He sought another world, a world in the realms of the fantastic.

Why does the world of fantasy mesmerize our youth? The movie industry certainly has taken note. And bookstore shelves bend with hundreds of volumes filled with battle lore from ancient times, even from distant galaxies, heroes and heroines struggling and finally conquering in whatever quests their conjurers create.

These fantastic stories involve our children's minds so much that they discuss their content in depth, memorize the spoken lines, and even learn new languages never uttered in any real culture. But how do these stories capture the hearts of young people? Is it simply the fun and frivolity of escapism? Or does the answer lie deep in their longing hearts?

We have within us a craving, a deep desire to commune with a power greater than our own, yet many of us crawl along in life without even a glimpse of our hidden passion. There has to be a reason for living. There must be a Camelot, a hidden Utopia where we can rest from our personal campaigns. Fantasy opens our eyes to a better place, a shining city we do not yet know. And the stories provide a mental bridge as we pursue horizons we could never distinguish with our 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. From my experience as a father of seven and as an author who receives e-mails from young people all over the world, it seems to me that boys and girls manifest two distinct kinds of programming. I realize these stereotypes are not universally accepted, but many boys seem to be wired as protectors, heroes if need be. Girls often gravitate toward being wise counselors and strategists, skilled in everything that is less brutish, while willing to be cunning warriors if their male counterparts fall.

When a young man watches a wide screen and sees a hero draw steel from scabbard, displaying a bright, sharp sword as his biceps bulge, the boy feels valor, the bravery of a knight. He becomes the champion he has never been, copying the role model he may have never witnessed in real life. When the hero mounts his steed and charges bravely into conflict, a boy feels his heart race, his blood pumping hot. He rides the horse, too, not knowing why his spirit has attached to that rugged man on the screen, why his mind has pulled him into the saddle. Does the child know that he, too, was built to charge the battlements, to defend the weak, to conquer evil?

When a young lady sees a heroine work behind the scenes to prepare reinforcements, persuade the powers that be 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 of her own life, to prevent disaster. Without her, all would have been lost.

In our culture, where do we see such heroism, the living out of these dramatic stories of knights, maidens, and villains? Nobility has vanished. Virtue and heroism have faded with the silhouette of the last champion riding off into the sunset. It seems that too many men seek only monetary ends while too many women crave vanity.

Yet, our children are seeking something more, something worthwhile, something that lasts forever. If they can't find nobility in the hearts of their parents, truth in the words of their teachers, or virtue in the so-called heroes of our times, they turn to internal fantasies. As Richard Abanes wrote, "We obtain comfort by seeing evil unmasked, condemned and destroyed. We are offered hope through being shown that at least somewhere, even if it is in another world, good

has triumphed.”<sup>1</sup> And there are many authors and Hollywood producers who are willing to give children the images they crave—some for good, and some that leave much to be desired.

Some parents, who are commendably cautious, worry that approving fantasy tales promotes the idea that it’s okay to learn from a lie. Yet, they misunderstand the role of a myth. Fantasy is not a lie, because it doesn’t pretend to be true. It is a vision, the mind’s dramatic sketch of what we were meant to be. Good fantasy is a blend of survival and worship. It demonstrates faith, hope, and love--the three abiding gifts--wielded in integrity and nobility, and illustrated in ways that readers will never forget. As author Terry Pratchett wrote, “Let there be goblin hordes, let there be terrible environmental threats, let there be giant mutated slugs if you really must, but let there also be Hope. It may be a grim, thin hope, an Arthurian sword at sunset, but let us know that we do not live in vain.”<sup>2</sup>

Other parents wonder why fantasy is useful. Why should we read it? We live these qualities, so our children see nobility and honor in our lives, and we teach the precepts of the Bible, so they understand faith, hope, and love. Why fantasy?

Such parents are wise in their dual pursuit—teaching from the Holy Word and showing the truth by example. Their children are blessed. Yet, it’s interesting that Jesus taught in at least three ways. He certainly taught from the Scriptures and by example, and He added a third method, storytelling. And these stories sometimes contained fantasy elements, amazing details that stayed in the memories of His listeners—a camel passing through the eye of a needle and a rich man and a poor man viewing each other across a great void. Not only that, the miracles Jesus performed were fantasy stories made real, and the lessons He taught through those miracles will not soon be forgotten by those who beheld them.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Abanes, *Fantasy and Your Family* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, Inc., 2002), 21.

<sup>2</sup> Terry Pratchett, “When the Children Read Fantasy” [on-line], July 28, 1999. Concatenation (1994). February 12, 2003. Available from :<http://www.concatenation.org/articles/pratchett.html>.

By following Jesus' example, parents have an opportunity to add a great tool to their teaching arsenal, fantasy stories that create lasting images to which children can relate. A boy can see himself drawing a sword, gazing at his fingers wrapped around a battle-worn hilt and following shimmering steel upward to the razor-sharp point. His eyes go from earth to heaven, first meditating on his limited strength, then raising his thoughts to the skies, and considering the God who fashioned every muscle he is about to use, every neuron in his system that will send messages from mind to muscle as he charges to carry out His will.

Many a girl realizes early in her life that she is the earthly reason for a man's charge into danger. Without her, man's resolve wilts, his heart quakes, his sword fails. She is his support, reminding him of the goal, building up his courage, even rallying to his aid should he be dashed to the ground by his enemies.

Fantasy is a catalyst for change, a change for good and not for evil. Strangely enough, fantasy lives to bring an end to itself. If our culture would reflect the values that good fantasy delivers, fantasy would no longer reflect the genre's name; it would be commonplace, lacking allure. Yet, making such a drastic change in this troubled world doesn't seem realistic. In our culture, it can seem heroic just to work for an honest living, lobby Congress for ethical laws, or volunteer to help rebuild a hurricane-ravaged area. These are good, honest deeds and should be held up as honorable activities, yet it's hard to translate these works into the exciting images that fantasy portrays. And for most of us, our everyday lives--often comfortable and lacking danger--are too mundane to compete with our children's fertile imaginations.

In many homes, children often see cheating, lying, and adultery in weak-minded fathers and mothers who seek after their own pleasures. Is it any wonder they try to escape to another

world that gives so much more? The heroes they have been called to be are imprisoned, unable to live freely because there is no model, no inspiration that gives life and breath to their dreams.

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 enough in media of flawed heroes, characters who are the so-called “honest” or “realistic” portrayals of humanity. Children see these fraudulent heroes every day, straw soldiers, easily blown, easily burned. Harboring inner evil they can’t seem to conquer, these characters raise no real cry of victory, only a never-ending lament.

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.

Working together, we can use this genre to capture hearts and minds with champions of virtue, images that will reach in and ignite the flame, setting free the heroes or heroines that God has implanted in the hearts of children. That’s why I have chosen to allow my children to embrace the images that fantasy creates. I want to grow heroes.