



# My Life with Fantasy Literature

Colin Manlove

Until I was 23 I had no intention of working on fantasy. I originally set out to read science, then history, and in 1962 ended with English. The books of my childhood had been random – *Russian Tales*, Rackham's *Grimm*, Perrault, Anderson and Greek and Roman myths mingled with H.G. Wells, Enid Blyton, adventure stories and American comics. My father was a chemical engineer who professed an inability to tolerate fiction. My mother was pleased by 1920s fairies. I read no fantasy by any of the writers who were later to preoccupy me.

When I went to Oxford aged 22 to do a postgraduate degree, my proposed subject for a biographical B.Litt., T.S. Eliot, died and with him much personal information. Looking for a new topic I consulted my director of studies Catherine Ing, who suggested I explore the Edwardian writer Edith Nesbit, of whom I knew nothing. My initial chapter for the first-year exam was on Nesbit's realistic fiction, but I also became entertained and fascinated by her magic books. This led me to fantasies by other authors and so to an eventual B.Litt on 'The Fairy Tale: and its English Development, 1850-1960' which included chapters on the traditional fairy tale, Kingsley, MacDonald, C.S. Lewis, Mervyn Peake and Tolkien.

Returned to Edinburgh for a job, I was offered a course to teach in what I was beginning to call fantasy. This proved popular – fantasy was then in vogue – and I began to write the book of my thesis, in which I dropped the traditional tale and concentrated on my five somewhat various authors. To justify a book entitled *Modern Fantasy: Five Studies*, I then constructed a rather wire-drawn definition of fantasy which would cover them all. That this definition evoked some agreement has always surprised me.

Fantasy appealed to a speculative habit of mind I owe to my father. However, it has never been my exclusive interest. After *Modern Fantasy* I wrote two books on more 'mainstream' literature – Shakespeare, and literature from 1600 to 1800 which I much enjoyed doing. Later came a book on how to think critically, and articles on authors from Chaucer to Edward Albee.

In 1981 appeared Rosemary Jackson's brilliant *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion*, which focused rather more on European than British or American fantasy. Jackson, whose preference was for subversive and revolutionary kinds

of fantasy, had little but contempt for the likes of Tolkien, Lewis and MacDonald, regarding them as shallow and sentimental conservatives and Christians. By the light of her book I saw that there were two broad classes of fantasy – the Anglo-Saxon which she often condemned and the European sort which she espoused. Later I saw a further division in the characteristics of English and Scottish fantasy. This and other interests formed the basis of a number of studies I wrote over the next twenty years.

I have just completed a book I long felt I owed to George MacDonald for the mysterious visions he has let me enter. But although on life's last lap I meant to go on to a history of fantasy, I think I would prefer to try to write for children. We shall see.



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