

## Why Use Fantasy Literature in the Church?

At first blush, the answer to this question is an easy one. We should use fantasy literature because our kids love it. But we need to go deeper than that. After all, we all love things that aren't necessarily good for nurturing our faith development...chocolate, for example. So, why DO children (of all ages) like fantasy and how can we use it as an educational tool in the church? Are there certain guidelines we should follow, specific criteria to look for, particular story lines that are acceptable? Yes...and no. I've found that even the absence of explicit Christian themes can be a talking point about our faith.

First we have to engage our children's interest. Without a doubt, fantasy lit does that, especially literature that is rich in detail and illustration. Recently, I used a pop-up book based on The Chronicles of Narnia by C. S. Lewis (illustrated by Robert Sabuda) for a children's message. The children were fascinated with the illustrations as much as the story. One child in particular, I noticed, sidled closer and closer until he could touch the book. They were interacting with the story through the amazing illustrations. Once inside the book, it was simple for me to draw parallels between the story of Narnia and the stories and people from the Bible that they knew.

When we think of fantasy, most of us have visions of magic swords or dragons or wands. Actually, there are several categories of fantasy fiction and magic is only one device used to move the action along. The categories of fantasy are:

- ***Personified animals or toys.*** Some well known examples are The Velveteen Rabbit and Winnie the Pooh. A novel that I read recently about a rabbit made of china was The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane by Kate DiCamillo...a good book with important messages for seven – ten-year-olds. Oh, who am I kidding? I couldn't put it down.
- ***Fantastic or outlandish characters/situations.*** The seven dwarves in Snow White certainly qualify as outlandish, don't they? Some of them weren't even very likeable. Then there are the vampires and werewolves (most of whom ARE likeable) in the *Twilight* series. And if finding yourself falling down a rabbit hole with a little girl named Alice isn't a fantastic situation, I don't know what one is.
- ***Time slips/time travel.*** A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court is one of the most entertaining books I've read in this category and is, typical of Mark Twain, very witty. Madeleine L'Engle's A Wrinkle In Time is still a favorite after even all of these years.
- ***Utopia/Dystopia.*** I read Aldous Huxley's Brave New World in high school, mainly because it was short. I'm glad it was. Stories about a "perfect society" give me the creeps. I recently read The Giver by Lois Lowry, a story about the perfect society "gone

wrong.” Still creepy to me but these books are very popular. If you don’t believe me, just look at the great number of them written, especially in the last hundred years.

- ***Different, extraordinary worlds.*** Tolkien’s Middle Earth (The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings Trilogy) has got to be the best example of an extraordinary world in literature. It has everything: elves, dwarves, orcs, magic, wizards, dragons, intelligent women and brave men, talking trees and even a couple of pretty amazing horses. It is so well written that you forget it isn’t an epic story based on the mythology of Great Britain (there’s no such thing, actually) but purely the product of one extraordinary man’s imagination. There are many other such worlds in fantasy literature, too: Whoville, Narnia, Oz, Pern, Midkemia, and Xanth to name a few.

Children are all about imagination. Their toys, dolls, games, books, and play times are geared towards exercising their imaginations. This “play acting” helps make concrete and tactile concepts that they can’t grasp intellectually. Yet. Concepts like righteousness, resurrection, eminence, transcendence, and Trinity. By using good fantasy stories (and I emphasize the word “good” - believe me, there’s lots of junk out there), we can help link their worlds of make-believe and their very real world of faith in Christ in ways that they can comprehend. Fantasy lands contain a wealth of Christian themes that can be used as “connecting points.” But with so much fantasy literature to choose from, how do you select good stories? Here are a few guidelines that work for me:

#### THINGS TO LOOK FOR

- Good role models
- Call of the hero(s)
- Spiritual education
- Fellowship
- Loyalty amid adversity
- Racial and cultural diversity
- Perseverance
- Overcoming evil
- Sacrifice
- Provision (special gifts, talent, resources)
- Virtue (tolerance, faith, hospitality, respect, forgiveness, mercy, courage, discipline)

---

#### THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR

- Questionable virtues
- Violent resolutions

- Books that do NOT treat magic as part of a world of make-believe
- Stories that appear to recruit children into the occult
- I have one other rule for selecting entertainment of any kind: if something bad happens to children or animals, stay away from it. Far away.

Prepared by Kelly Hames, MACE student at Union-PSCE in Charlotte, 2009