

Magic Is Enchanting

When we read, we dive into unfamiliar worlds. What we experience there shapes us. Sometimes that feeling never lets go. For me, the key moment came when I first read Terry Pratchett's *The Color of Magic*. It was my first fantasy novel, ever. You can argue about its merits, but it swept me up completely.

The fascination never faded. I've read hundreds of fantasy and science fiction novels since then. What I remember most, beyond the adventures and the dangers, are always the countless variations of magic. That doesn't surprise me. I spent time on the subject during my studies, more than once. In countless tabletop sessions, I almost always played the spellcaster. To me, they're the very embodiment of literary fantasy.

After a few years, questions started forming. I wanted to know where certain ideas about magic actually come from. What cultural, philosophical, and mythological traditions do authors draw on? What is it about eerier forms of magic, necromancy, say, that fascinates us so?

I looked for books that took up these questions without being too scholarly or too exhaustive. Academic treatments exist, here and there, but they're hard to get into. Fan wikis offer plenty of detail but rarely go deep. I was looking for something in between: essayistic but compelling, analytical but inviting, the kind of book that makes you curious and keeps reading fun. One that honors the sheer variety of magic without losing sight of the stories themselves.

I didn't find it. So I wrote it.

Who This Book Is For

This book is an attempt to map and reconstruct the worlds of magic in fantasy literature, on several levels at once.

The first is cultural history. Magic is part of what it means to be human, even if we don't believe in it ourselves. Those who practice it are usually searching for answers to existential questions. What does my future hold? What does my past mean? How do I protect myself from suffering, spiritual or physical? Mortality and death, above all, have always called forth magical practice of every kind.¹

Ideas about magic don't arise from nothing. They rest on foundations that are thousands of years old. Ancient myth, philosophical tradition, and occult practice form the historical bedrock of many magical forms. Augustine of Hippo argued in the fourth century that all magic rested on a pact with demons. That idea, and everything it set in motion, still surfaces in countless fantasy novels today. In the nineteenth century, the anthropologist James George Frazer distinguished between 'homeopathic' magic (like affects like, as in a poppet standing in for a person) and 'contagious' magic (things once in contact stay connected, as with a lock of hair or a shared birth), a highly influential framework that underlies the popular image of the voodoo doll (itself a reduced appropriation of Vodou, a real, living Haitian and Afro-diasporic religion), as well as magical twins or curses of every kind.

This book traces, by way of example, historical precedents and foundations, and shows how authors take them up, reinterpret them, and put them to creative use.

The second is fictional and narrative craft. How exactly does magic work? What narrative function does it serve? For some authors, Brandon Sanderson among them, magic functions much like physics: a system with clear limits and possibilities. Ursula K. Le Guin understands it more as a secret language that shapes worlds. Patrick Rothfuss combines both. In his hands, name magic is at once intuitive and complex, yet rule-bound once you've mastered it. All of these systems tell us something about the world in which they exist. And about us, when we step inside.

The third one matters most to me, and it's personal. I want to invite you to dive in for yourself, to read, to discover what magic can be. I want to show you its range, which is why I've drawn on a wide variety of novels: old and new, enduring favorites and the classics of tomorrow, genre-defining works and overlooked gems. This book is a travel guide of sorts. It doesn't just explain what's out there; it invites you to make the journey yourself. Woven into it are my own reading experiences, personal and particular. Let me take you to places I've been glad to visit. I have a feeling you might want to go there too.

The Six Journeys: A Brief Overview

The book is divided into six chapters. Each explores a different form of magic. I've tried to cover as wide a range of aspects as possible, even though not every compelling topic could find its place here. No need to worry. I already have ideas for a second book.

Portal Magic — Wanderers Between Worlds

Portals are thresholds. They mark transitions between worlds and stages of life, between the familiar and the strange. Literature has returned to them for centuries. Ancient myths describe mysterious paths into the underworld. Celtic legend speaks of fairy rings and enchanted hills. Think of Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World*, the Brothers Grimm's *Mother Holle*, or Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. All three build classics of world literature around this imagery.

This chapter explores the variety of portals. Where do they appear? What happens to those who pass through? Why do these stories fascinate us so? Perhaps because every crossing into another world, another life, or another self carries both temptation and danger in equal measure.

The Magic of Music and Sound

Music is something extraordinary. It connects people, stirs emotions, tells stories without words. A world without it seems unimaginable. And yet music as a form of magic is surprisingly rare. That puzzles me.

Perhaps because it resists control and demands considerable practice to master. It happens in the moment, through the interplay of technique, emotion, and resonance. To sing or to play is to put something of yourself into it. That makes this magic deeply personal, and deeply demanding.

We'll look at how music creates entire worlds, why it often carries destructive potential, and how it can be a magic that holds people together.

Necromancy — The Art of Death

The end of life has preoccupied us for as long as we've been human. Necromancy probes the nature of the natural boundary between the living and the dead, and asks how it might be moved. Its themes are existential: mortality, the value of memory, the fear of total loss.

Fantasy offers countless variations on necromantic magic. In Garth Nix's *Sabriel*, it is a skilled craft, a means of bringing peace to the restless dead. Max Gladstone, in his *Craft Sequence*, reimagines necromancers as corporate lawyers trading in divine energy the way others trade in bonds.

Necromancy fascinates us for obvious reasons, but it unsettles us too. It addresses our fear of dying and our wish to get back what death has taken. In these stories, the boundary between life and death can be crossed, moved, or simply ignored. That is what makes necromancy so powerful and so dangerous.

The Magic of True Names

Names are more than labels. In many cultures, a name is understood as the essence of a person or thing. Whoever knows it holds power. That power can betray or save, wound or heal. Fantasy has always been drawn to this idea. Le Guin's *Earthsea*, Patrick Rothfuss' *The Name of the Wind*, and Christopher Paolini's *Eragon* all draw on this magical tradition. This chapter tries to work out

why words can hold power over things, and what that means for the development, identity, and self-mastery of the protagonists who wield them.

Numbers, Formulas, Spaces — The Magic of Mathematics

Mathematics and magic seem like opposites. One rational and precise, the other irrational and inexplicable. Look more closely, and they have more in common than you'd expect. Both exceed what is intuitively understandable. A perfect mathematical circle is no more physically real than a fireball conjured from a wizard's hand: one obeys the laws of logic, the other the laws of narrative. Both work with symbols that claim power over reality. Both construct worlds that exist only in thought, yet insist on a reality of their own.

Fantasy puts this proximity to productive use. Margaret J. Ball, in *Mathemagics*, gives the equations themselves magical force: correctly formulated, they alter the world. In Sara Douglass's *Threshold*, an entire fortress is built according to mathematical principles to manifest the power of the number one.

What happens when equations are no longer abstract descriptions of reality but can warp its innermost structure? The idea that the world rests on a mathematical order, one that can be seized and used, has enchanted people long before science fiction came along.

Magic Schools, Academies, and Universities

Schools have never been only places of learning. They are social spaces, refuges, and sometimes battlegrounds. In fantasy worlds they serve a particular function: they protect their students from themselves and from the world outside. And they protect the world from their students. Hogwarts is certainly the most famous example, but far from the only one.

This chapter explores what it means to be a student at an institution that teaches magic. What makes these places so important, and so precarious? How different are the lessons, the rules, the punishments? What role does adolescence play, and how intense is the pressure to perform? There is a great deal to see, and I've made a conscious decision in this chapter to move beyond magic itself, to show just how wide the range of these stories really is.

What Is Magic, Actually?

Before we dive into the individual chapters, it's worth pausing for a moment. The whole book is about magic, but what is it, exactly? In the real world, there is no clear definition. Not in my view, anyway. Philosophers, theologians, and scholars of every stripe have been trying to describe what magic is for centuries. Alongside religion and natural science, magic is a way of making sense of the world. The boundaries between these three spheres of knowledge are fluid. Depending on the era and the cultural context, one or the other tends to emerge as the dominant story. And because nothing holds those boundaries in place, the balance among these three enduring forces keeps shifting.² Let me walk you through six attempts, spanning seventeen centuries, to answer it.

Augustine of Hippo believed magic described supernatural events of a non-Christian nature.³ To cast a spell was to make a pact with demons. The idea that magic exacts a price, sometimes a terrible one, and can force its user into dependency, recurs in countless novels.⁴

Marsilio Ficino, a natural philosopher of the Renaissance, disagreed. For him, magic was a fundamental force that permeated everything, intervening in natural processes, bridging astrology and medicine. Not something malevolent, but a tool that could be turned toward good.

James George Frazer, writing in the nineteenth century, proposed an evolutionary model, one that modern anthropology has largely rejected. Magic, religion, and natural science represented successive stages of human development. Magic, on this account, was the primitive precursor to everything that came after.

The sociologist Émile Durkheim noticed that magic and religion share a great deal: rituals, sacrifices, ceremonies. The difference, he argued, lay in what they do socially. Religion binds communities together. Magic is a private matter, and becomes the immoral counterpart to religious life by that logic.

Aleister Crowley, probably the most famous practitioner of magic in the twentieth century, defined it in radically individualist terms: "Magick is the Science and Art of Causing Change to occur in conformity with Will." Every intentional act, on this reading, is an expression of magic. That framework echoes widely through the literature of the fantastic.

All of these definitions help us see that the essence of magic may simply resist being pinned down. It is not a closed system but more like a flexible label. People use it to make sense of ritual, without it ever quite settling into a fixed meaning.⁵ The scholar of religion Bernd-Christian Otto describes magic as an *empty signifier*: a concept broad enough to hold wildly different meanings, and one that keeps slipping out of any final definition.⁶ Which is precisely what makes it so valuable for fantasy, and so indispensable to authors and readers alike. Magic can be anything. Natural law or divine gift. It can rest on knowledge or on instinct. Sometimes it is innate. It operates through ritual or through sheer force of will. Its conceptual looseness in the real world becomes a creative and genre-defining force in fantasy.

What matters is that limits exist. Magic needs rules, or a story collapses as soon as every problem can be solved with the right spell. When godlike beings with boundless power are on hand, plot has nowhere to go. Omnipotence tends to be interesting only when it's never fully realized.

Almost every author therefore draws a line around what magic can do. Those limits take countless forms: physical cost (exhaustion, pain, years of life), specialized or secret knowledge, rare materials or artifacts, social and ethical norms.

So while magic resists a single definition, three qualities recur often enough across fantasy to serve as a working compass for this book. First, it does not answer to the laws of physics. It doesn't always overturn them entirely, but it bends and reshapes them regularly. A world where magic actually works is a different world from ours. Second, it follows that magic is never merely a tool; it shapes and constitutes the reality of fantasy itself. Without it, these worlds would never be what they are. Magic is breath, engine, and source of energy all at once. And finally, its power can be used personally. For those who can channel it, whether through knowledge, practice, talent, or the luck of birth, it is a curse, and sometimes a blessing.

In different combinations, all of these qualities appear in almost every fantasy novel ever written. They form the existential backbone of the genre.

Have a Wonderful Journey!

Wherever you're coming from, whatever brought this book into your hands: I