

Chapter One

A Hero's Quest, a Writer's Journey

Fantasy is the natural, the appropriate language for the recounting of the spiritual journey and the struggle of good and evil in the soul.

—Ursula K. Le Guin

If you haven't noticed, in the last several years the popularity of fantasy and young adult fantasy has been growing by leaps and bounds: J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series seems to have started the party jumping; thanks to recent movies, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* have come back to life again; Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *James and the Giant Peach* have also had a resurgence of sorts; Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy is doing exceedingly well; Christopher Paolini's *Inheritance* series has made it big on the best-seller lists; *Dragon Rider*, *Inkspell*, and *Inkheart* by Cornelia Funke have all been best-sellers; the ongoing *Artemis Fowl* series by Eoin Colfer is quite popular; and Jeanne duPrau has a sturdy success with *The City of Ember* and sequel *The People of Sparks*. Fantasy is definitely in, and kids are loving it!

What I find about fantasy is that it makes it easier for teachers to take their students on a grand and adventurous journey. When reading and writing fantasy, students have a terrific opportunity to explore the imaginative worlds created by the writers whose stories they read, and to face the challenge of producing the descriptive

details needed to create their own unique fantasy world in the stories they write. And in these new worlds, there's a world of learning going on.

Kids will write for long periods of time, with great effort, and with fabulous results, if you give them something they deem worthy of writing. Every year I ask my students which is their favorite form or purpose of writing. I ask: Is it to inform, educate, persuade, or entertain? They *always* pick entertainment. Fortunately, fantasy sure does entertain—abundantly.

For me, it's entertaining to sit at a table with a student, examining his newly created map, getting to know his characters, exploring his hero's journey, jumping into his story. I'm always amazed by the depth of my students' imaginations. Sometimes, however, there is a huge gap between the imagined visions that arise from their stories and what has thus far been put down on the page. I practically have to wrestle with them to get them to fill in the gaps. They've missed all kinds of descriptive detail, and action, and character thoughts and feelings, and tension that needs to be seen on paper. But that's what the writing process is for: to flush out those details, to write, and rewrite and revise, and improve. In the words of Anne Lamott, author of *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*: "It is work and play together. When they are working on their books or stories, their heads will spin with ideas and invention. They'll see the world through new eyes."

Have no doubt about it. These stories of fantasy are about a hero's quest. The quest begins with the heroes inside the stories, but it ends inside the heroes and heroines who write the stories. And the boon, the prize, that they will receive for their heroic efforts? Why, the published story, of course—a tale that just may stay with them for generations. A story to be read in later years, after they've grown up, married maybe, perhaps had a child, or grandchild, of their own.

I must admit that I harbor my own fantasies that—if I make the writing fun, important, and challenging enough—my students will take their narratives and hold onto them through the years. Perhaps, like what happened with an autobiography that I wrote while in the sixth grade, they'll lose track of their stories, but their mothers will snatch them up and keep them tucked away in some drawer, or stuffed in some lonely box up in the attic, only to be rediscovered years later like treasures in a chest. I have fantasies that—as I did when my mother brought out my old autobiography—my students, when they're all grown up, will hold their stories in their hands, remembering that it was they who wrote them, many years ago. They'll think back to how much work it took to complete the stories, how many activities and minilessons they had to endure, how many conferences it took with Mr. Gust to discuss their writing. They'll sit down, read their stories over, and then also remember how they promised Mr. Gust to read them to their children, if they ever had any, with the hope of having some of the same fun we did putting the stories together in class. Because, as I tell my students when in my class, if you read your story to your children and they're laughing—either with you or at you—at that moment you will be the hero you always knew you could be.

So I dream about them, laughing and giggling with their own children, or nieces, or nephews, grandchildren, or even, students (if they become teachers,



that is). They'll be lounging in a big chair, in some cozy corner, sipping a cup of tea. And they'll have a quiet, private, heroic grin on their shining, smiling faces.

How to Use This Book

There are basically two ways to use this book. The first is to use some of the strategies and activities offered here in piecemeal fashion to provide supplemental support to your students as they complete some other narrative writing assignment. There are lessons here that can help student writers develop a narrative's theme, or describe a setting or characters, or create a plot line or use figurative language or dialogue, and more.

The second way to use this book is to treat it as a tool or vehicle that will take your student writers on a hero's quest, or a writer's journey. In this case, think of it as a template for a rite of passage—or "write" of passage, if you like. In one way, yes, the book is designed to assist student writers in passing from one way of thinking to another. Most of the students who come to me in the fifth grade don't think of themselves as writers. But I can assure you, when they have progressed through the various strategies and activities provided in this book, they most certainly do. And in spite of the many challenges they will encounter, they will enjoy the process, as well. Here is how it works:

- *What do you think of yourself as a writer?* First, before beginning, all student authors should reflect on what they think of themselves as writers. They should be given an opportunity to acknowledge past thoughts, feelings, habits, and patterns about their writing. They should think about which have limited their growth and which have supported their growth. Students need to be given time to acknowledge past feelings about their experiences as writers. Many students have a poor image of themselves as writers, and an even worse view of writing to begin with. Invite students to write the answers to these questions in a journal that they can keep throughout the journey.
- *Shed the old image.* With this clear image of themselves as writers, it is now time for students to let the image go. Students must realize that that's the writer they used to be. Find a way to help your students bury the old, negative image. Have them burn it, shred it, flush it, renounce it. Invite them to do it out loud, to do it in writing. Help them . . . let it go.
- *Begin the journey.* Now the period of trials and tribulations is upon the young writers. This will be a dramatic period of strong exertion. They will have many writing tasks to endure as they work to complete their fantasy stories. As a result, their perceptions of themselves will be forever altered.
- *Discover your new self.* With the writing started and perhaps nearing completion, begin asking your students what new thoughts they have about

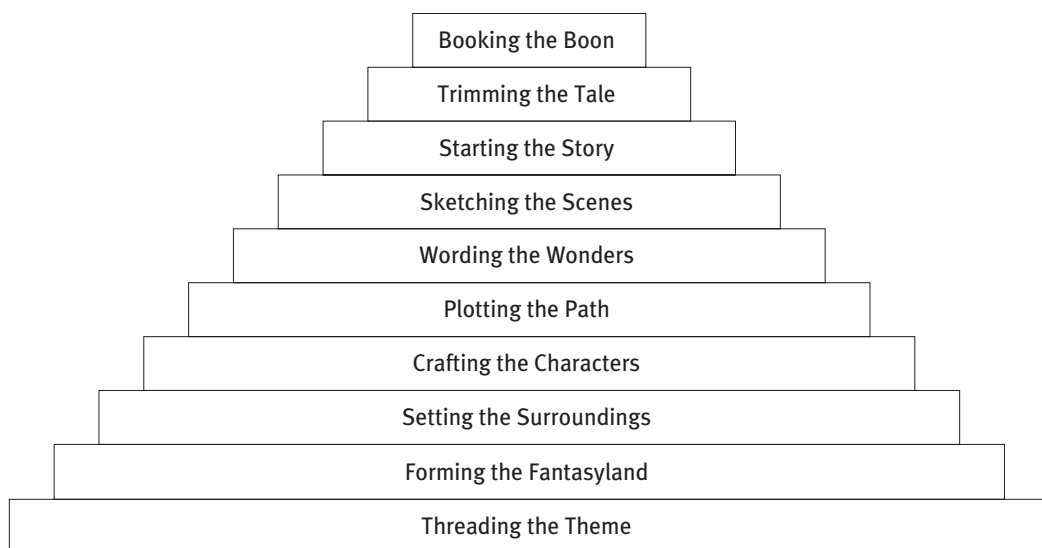


their writing. What new thoughts do they have about themselves as writers? Is there anything about the experience worth sharing, talking about? Let your students know how you felt watching them and their writing progress along the way. Ask your students to see themselves as the new writers that they are, standing on a mountain's peak with a distant view of their old selves as reluctant writers standing down below. What was the old self like? What does it feel like to be the new self?

- *Celebrate.* When the fantasy story and book is done . . . it's time to party! Whether it's simply with the heroic student writers in your classroom, or with added family and friends, you and your students should share your feelings of accomplishment with plenty of ceremony. Let the festivities begin!
- *Acknowledge and dedicate.* The central focus of the celebration is the author's story, the book, the boon, the gift that is offered to the family. Here is where the students give thanks to all those who have participated in the journey, and perhaps to all of those who have been influential in their lives along the way. Their acknowledgments and dedications page can even be read out loud with the offering. Ideally, most of the people mentioned will be present for the reading.

An Adventure in Fantasy

I like to think of this book and the strategies and activities included within as a type of adventure on which teachers will lead their students. As you can see from the following illustration, which shows how the remaining chapters of this book have been arranged, the journey—starting at the bottom with threading



the story's theme, all the way to the top where students will acquire the reward for their efforts, the completed book, or boon—is much like climbing a tall, treacherous mountain. That's exactly the feeling that I want students to have when working their stories: an intense sense of accomplishment and efficacy. It should feel as if they have just scaled a great, mighty mountain.

Genres of Fantasy

*The nicest small children, without the slightest
doubt, are those who have been fed upon fantasy,
and the nastiest are the ones who know all the facts.*

—Roald Dahl

I'm not so sure I'd go so far as Roald Dahl in saying that the nasty kids are the ones who know all the facts, but I do know that a lot of nice children really do seem to feed on fantasy. They love it: all the many forms and subgenres of fantasy. Let's take a quick look at the many subgenres. Perhaps you'll want to teach your students about them, as well.

Epic, High, or Heroic Fantasy

This most popular form of fantasy involves a scenario in which the fate of an entire world is in the hands of the hero. It's the classic struggle of good against evil. There is also a sense of a grand destiny, where the main character—who is often either the legitimate heir to the throne or an ordinary, simple person—somehow saves or restores his or her kingdom. The hero, after gathering up a trustworthy friend and mentor, or a small band of companions, sets off on an epic quest through a land filled with awe and wonder. They're in pursuit of some object of power, such as a ring, or sword, or amulet, because gaining hold of these things will help tip the scales of power back in the right direction. Along the way, the lurking, evil force—sometimes personified in the form of a dark lord—gains power and launches a relentless campaign against them. All kinds of evil creatures crawl out of nowhere.

Often, the hero is portrayed as a magician, or a wizard in training. As the story unfolds the hero or heroine has to make a choice between using his or her powers for evil or good. In all epic, high, or heroic fantasy, the hero is tempted with all kinds of promises from the evil side. Yet, these heroes always fight to find the inner strength to make the right decision, for they know that their choices will also require some personal, lasting self-sacrifice. In the end, with much effort, unexpected help, and internal struggling, somehow these individuals prevail; they fulfill a higher purpose, and a prophecy, to become the heroes they were destined to be, saving their world, once and for all.



Adventure Fantasy

In this type of fantasy the heroes or heroines are on an adventure for the simple purpose of satisfying their own fanciful whims and desires. These heroes—who may include small adventurers like mice and moles, badgers, bunnies, or bears—crave an adventure, and by golly, you can be sure they're going to have a grand time along the way. This type of fantasy is packed full of magic and beasts, and quests for all sorts of enchanted treasures. However, in this type of fantasy, the hero's need to save an entire kingdom or world, and an epic struggle of good against evil, are missing. Instead, the tale is free to follow the freewheeling escapades of the heroes as their wishes and dreams are fulfilled. And once they get what they were after, they return home, of course. But rather than their quest ending with a defining moment that saves the world, the reader is left with the impression that the hero will venture out again, sometime soon, on yet another thrilling adventure.

Dark Fantasy

Dark fantasy includes ghost stories, horror, and gothic fiction. Ghost stories involve all kinds of weird living dead: Funny ghosts may show up and talk to people, haunting them; headless horsemen may go galloping around the countryside, taunting townsfolk; dead bodies may stumble around in search of human flesh. In most horror story plots, the evil force, or forces—ghosts, demons, or phantoms, for example—build up to an intensely scary level, thus raising the tale's tension, until the very end, when good finally prevails. In pure horror stories, anything goes, so watch out for the gore. And, finally, gothic is a particular form of fantasy that involves stories usually set in a crumbling gothic mansion, surrounded by a desolate moor. These stories usually involve an ordinary person who has been pulled into a gloomy world, forced to defend his or her honor against the ghostly inhabitants of the place.

Fairy Tales

Fairy tales are really tales of transformation. They are stories in which the protagonist goes through a massive personal change. A frog might turn into a prince, an ugly duck into a beautiful swan, a puppet into a real live boy, a maid into a princess, a stuffed bunny into a romping rabbit. The familiar theme of the fairy tale is that something beautiful and good can come from something so unsightly.

Magical Realism

In these kinds of stories magical things happen, usually without warning, in the middle of someone's very normal, everyday life. Mysterious events transpire, weird apparitions pop up out of nowhere. And when these strange things begin to happen, the protagonist's life is changed forever. After the adventure through these strange series of events, the life of the protagonist usually goes on as normal, but something inside that individual has changed. Sometimes this interior, psychological change will alter her life in a more meaningful way than



anything external, or physical, ever could. She thinks of herself or the world differently, and that makes all the difference.

Magic

The magic of Faerie is not an end in itself, its virtue is in its options: among these are the satisfaction of certain primordial human desires. One of these desires is to survey the depths of space and time. Another is (as will be seen) to hold communion with other living things.

—J.R.R. Tolkien

Inevitably, your student writers are going to use magic in their stories. Fantasy and magic go hand in hand. However, magic can easily be overused. The worst thing that can happen is that the writer starts using magic at any time for just about any reason. Magic needs limits. When using magic, the writer must be very clear about the rules. Readers shouldn't be thinking that anything might happen at any time. Characters shouldn't be able to solve every problem with a simple wave of a wand. If so, what's the point of reading the story? Any time the hero gets in trouble, the reader will know that some magical trick will be thrown in to solve the problem. Ridiculous!

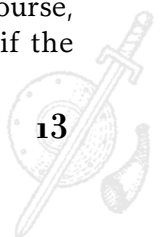
Magical ability and the use of magic should come at a high price. One such price could be the long and arduous training that any mage, magician, or wizard must go through. Another such price is for the character to know that she will no longer live a normal, perhaps happy, life, after its use. Sometimes, the price is paid directly after using the magical power, through diminished energy, an illness, or perhaps a loss of life itself.

The Hidden Force

Most systems of magic assume that there are two worlds. The first is the everyday world where material things, normal sensory experiences, and practical knowledge are the reality. The other is the supernatural world, a world in which a magical force is latent, or perhaps inside of all that exists, and the ability to access this mysterious power is extremely limited. Only a few select individuals, usually after first going through a lengthy initiation process, are able to gain access to this hidden power.

Magic's Moral Component

Magic itself is neutral. It is its application that makes it good or bad. Of course, if the hero uses magic for good purposes, then it is *white magic*. And if the



villain and his or her wicked cohorts use magic to advance evil purposes, it is called *dark magic*.

White magic is used often for healing purposes, to help others improve in health, spirit, or well-being. White magic is usually an antidote to evil. Benevolent charms, bells, holy water, silver bullets, bracelets, rings, amulets, coins, and so on, are used as a form of white magic to overcome any dark magic that may be lurking.

Dark magic is often used for calling up evil spirits. A *necromancer*, often thought of as an evil magician, uses his magic for calling on the spirits of the dead.

Magical Words

If magic is going to be used, chances are that the perpetrators will need to know a few magical words. These spoken words, including spells, incantations, invocations, and enchantments, are all used to access the power of magic. In many stories, these phrases, which are chanted by the practitioner, can be found in spell books. Sometimes, the magical words must be used in combination with a particular ritual or rite.

Magical Tools

Every good magician has a few good tools at hand. A magician's tool can be just about anything. Some of the more common ones are listed here:

- Wands
- Cloaks
- Amulets
- Elixirs
- Charms
- Brooms
- Staffs
- Hats
- Orbs
- Swords
- Crystal balls

Practitioners of Magic

The trained mediums or practitioners of magic are often called *mag*es, *wizards*, *witches*, *warlocks*, *necromancers*, and *sorcerers*. Sometimes practitioners come upon their magical powers accidentally. It is in their nature, and they have the special ability to access the force. Other times, a practitioner comes upon the secret knowledge and ability because a mentor, or teacher, of some sort, has passed it on. The young student, after having endured a precise, long, and arduous preparation period, develops the ability to use the magical powers.

