

# BARTON

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### *Dare to Know*

In addition to the recognized sub-genre, fantasy fiction can be organized into several informal subsets:

#### **Comedic Fantasy**

The stories of this subset are a blend of **fantasy fiction** and **humorous fiction** in which the purpose is to amuse the reader. The tone is humorous, and stories are often set in fantasy worlds. Typical fantasy elements and conventions are often satirized or subverted, and may include direct parodies of other more serious works. Comedic fantasy is considered part of low fantasy (as opposed to high fantasy), but not all low fantasy is comedic in nature. F. Anstey's *Vice Versa* (1882), James Branch Campbell's *Jurgen, A Comedy of Justice* (1919), T. H. White's *The Sword in the Stone* (1938), and Fritz Leiber's *Two Sought Adventure* (1958) are classic examples.

#### Common Elements

Quirky settings
Witty writing
Ridiculous or pathetic characters

Absurd magical rules and creatures
Subverted fantasy clichés

#### Modern Literary Examples

<i>The Amulet of Samarkand</i> (2003) by Jonathan Stroud
<i>A Dirty Job</i> (2006) by Christopher Moore
<i>The Colour of Magic</i> (1983) by Terry Pratchett
<i>Dark Lord of Derkholm</i> (1998) by Diana Wynne Jones
<i>Good Omens</i> (1990) by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman
<i>Kill the Farm Boy</i> (2018) by Kevin

Hearne and Delilah S. Dawson
<i>Magic Kingdom for Sale—Sold</i> (1986) by Terry Brooks
<i>An Orc on the Wild Side</i> (2019) by Tom Holt
<i>The Princess Bride</i> (1973) by William Golding
<i>A Spell for Chameleon</i> (1977) by Piers Anthony
<i>Stardust</i> (1999) by Neil Gaiman

#### **Dark Fantasy**

This subset portrays the darker and grittier side of fantasy, with added elements of horror, mystery, supernatural occurrences, and/or a dark, brooding tone. Unlike **horror fiction**, though, the aim is not to frighten or infuse the reader with terror or dread. The gloomy aesthetic is woven into the overarching theme, plot and development of characters. A common element is the lack of heroes, and the protagonist may be an immoral or morally ambiguous character, or a werewolf, vampire, or other monster. Dark fantasy can often feature stories from a monster's point of view, or present

supernatural entities normally considered evil as sympathetic beings. This subset provides a sharp contrast to more traditional fantasy worlds and their moral heroes, quaint villages, and magnificent cities. Arthur Machen's *The Hill of Dreams* (1907), Gertrude Barrows Bennett's *Claimed* (1920), and Clark Ashton Smith's *The Colossus of Ylourgne* (1934) are early examples.

### Common Elements

Dark magic
Thieves
Assassins
Torturers
Organized crime
Decaying cities
Murder
Rape

Violence
Corrupt rulers
Anti-heroes
Dark and gory details
Horrific scenes
Hopelessness
Ambiguity

### Modern Literary Examples

<i>Alice</i> (2015) by Christina Henry
<i>Chronicles of the Black Company</i> (2007) by Glen Cook
<i>Black Sun Rising</i> (1991) by C. S. Friedman
<i>Daughter of the Blood</i> (2007) by Anne Bishop
<i>The Dark Tower: The Gunslinger</i> (2017) by Stephen King
<i>Faerie Tale</i> (1988) by Raymond E. Feist
<i>The Fifth Season</i> (2015) by N. K. Jemisin
<i>Gardens of the Moon</i> (2004) by Steven Erikson
<i>The Iron Dream</i> (1972) by Norman Spinard
<i>The Justice of Kings</i> (2022) by Richard

Swan
<i>Miserere</i> (2011) by Teresa Frohock
<i>The Never Tilting World</i> (2019) by Rin Chupeco
<i>The Red Tree</i> (2009) by Caitlin R. Kiernan
<i>Sabriel</i> (2021) by Garth Nix
<i>The Sandman: Book of Dreams</i> (2002) by Neil Gaiman
<i>Shadow and Bone</i> (2012) by Leigh Bardugo
<i>Tender Morsels</i> (2008) by Margo Lanagan
<i>Three Dark Crowns</i> (2018) by Kendare Blake
<i>Weaveworld</i> (1987) by Clive Barker
<i>The Young Elites</i> (2014) by Marie Lu

### Fairy Tale Fantasy

This subset is often based on or inspired by classic fairy tales, such as those written by Hans Christian Anderson and the Brothers Grimm. Set in the modern world, these books rely heavily on the motifs and plots of folklore. The main trend is to present more adult-oriented reinterpretations that strip away the naïve aspects and expose the concealed archetypes. Distinct from actual fairy or folk tales, this subset presents contemporary, novel-length or series-length stories with complex plots and characters. George MacDonald's *The Light Princess* (1864), Lord Dunsany's *The Charwoman's Shadow* (1926), Italo Calvino's *The Cloven Viscount* (1952), Eleanor Farjeon's *The Silver Curfew* (1953) and *The Glass Slipper* (1955), Osamu Tezuka's *Angel's Hill* (1960), Nicholas Stuart Gray's *The Stone Cage* (1963), and James Reeve's *The Cold Flame* (1967) are classic examples.

### Common Elements

Curses
Princes and princesses
Damsels in distress
Moral values
Magic
Repetition

Children
Witches
Evil stepmothers
Supernatural entities
Wolves
Happy endings

### Modern Literary Examples

<i>The Bear and the Nightingale</i> (2017) by Katherine Arden
<i>Beauty</i> (1978) by Robin McKinley
<i>The Bloody Chamber</i> (1979) by Angela Carter
<i>The Book of Lost Things</i> (2006) by John Connolly
<i>Cinder</i> (2012) by Marissa Meyer
<i>The City of Brass</i> (2017) by S. A. Chakraborty
<i>Daughter of the Forest</i> (1999) by Juliet Marillier
<i>The Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye</i> (1994) by

A. S. Byatt
<i>Ella Enchanted</i> (1997) by Gail Carson Levine
<i>The Girl Who Drank the Moon</i> (2016) by Kelly Barnhill
<i>The Golem and the Jinni</i> (2013) by Helene Wecker
<i>Reckless</i> (2010) by Cornelia Funke and Lionel Wigram
<i>Spinning Silver</i> (2018) by Naomi Novik
<i>Uprooted</i> (2015) by Naomi Novik
<i>The Wrath and the Dawn</i> (2015) by Renée Ahdieh

## Heroic Fantasy

This subset contains daring adventures in worlds filled with magic, in which modern technology does not exist. Author L. Sprague de Camp, who coined the term in 1967, observed that heroic fantasy offers a story in which “all men are strong, all women beautiful, all life adventurous, and all problems simple.” Settings may include a prehistoric Earth or the far future, as well as other planets or dimensions. Focusing heavily on the themes of good versus evil, these books typically feature a large cast of characters led by the “hero” who is often reluctant to be a champion yet on a quest to make something right. Heroic fantasy stories are distinct from high fantasy, as the former focuses mainly on personal conflicts rather than world-endangering matters. Common features of heroic fantasy include intricate plots and lineages, as well as protagonists who often come from low upbringings. They may also be viewed as underdogs with little chance of success, but must nevertheless prevail and complete their quest. Lord Dunsany’s *The Sword of Welleran and Other Stories* (1908), Robert E. Howard’s “The Shadow Kingdom” (1929), “Kings of the Night” (1930), and “The Phoenix on the Sword” (1932), and J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* (1937) are classic examples.

### Common Elements

Mighty heroes
Beautiful women
Battles
Magic

Swordplay
Action and adventure
Conflict

### Modern Literary Examples

<i>The Blue Sword</i> (1982) by Robin McKinley
<i>The Crimson Queen</i> (2016) by Alec Hutson
<i>A Court of Thorns and Roses</i> (2015) by Sarah J. Maas
<i>The Disappearance of Winter's Daughter</i> (2018) by Michael J. Sullivan
<i>Legend</i> (1984) by David Gemmell
<i>Luck in the Shadows</i> (1996) by Lynn Flewelling
<i>Memories and Murder</i> (2014) by L. J. Hansbrouck
<i>The Name of the Wind</i> (2007) by Patrick

Rothfuss
<i>Quag Keep</i> (1978) by Andre Norton
<i>Reign of Madness</i> (2022) by Kel Kade
<i>Ship of Magic</i> (1998) by Robin Hobb
<i>The Sorcerer of the Wildeeps</i> (2005) by Kai Ashante Wilson
<i>Talion: Revenant</i> (1997) by Michael A. Stackpole
<i>Waylander</i> (1995) by David Gemmell
<i>The Way of Shadows</i> (2008) by Brent Weeks
<i>The Wolf of the North</i> (2016) by Duncan M. Hamilton

### High Fantasy

Also called “epic fantasy,” this subset is the most traditional and focuses on stories set in a fictional world, with a focus on epic themes, characters, and/or plots. The setting of this secondary world may include aspects different than Earth such as animals, plants, cultures, civilizations, and belief systems. Magical elements are usually at the forefront of the plot, and the characters typically find themselves involved in the struggle between good and evil with world or cosmic stakes. Stories are generally related from the point of view of the protagonist, with some or much of the plot centered on their mysterious abilities or secret origins. The term “high fantasy” was coined by author Lloyd Alexander in 1971. These novels tend to be lengthy due to the multiple characters, extensive quests, and rich world-building that is associated with the subset. Ursula K. Le Guin observed that language was the central feature, as its effective use creates a sense of place. The major distinction between high fantasy and low fantasy involves the alternate or real world in which the story takes place. William Morris’s *The Well at the World’s End* (1896), Lord Dunsany’s *The Gods of Pegāna* (1905), E. R. Eddison’s *The Worm Ouroboros* (1922), J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954), C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950), and Ursula K. Le Guin’s *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968) were monumental influences on this subset.

### Common Elements

Light vs. shadow
High-stakes conflict
Long journeys

Dragons and other fantastical creatures
Magic and magicians
Historic or unusual technologies

Coming-of-age stories
Sense of wonder
Legendary swords
Royalty
Medieval societies

Epic battles
Heroes or heroines of humble origins
Exotic names
A map on the inside cover

### Modern Literary Examples

<i>Assassin's Apprentice</i> (1995) by Robin Hobb
<i>The Assassin's Blade</i> (2014) by Sarah J. Maas
<i>The Blade Itself</i> (2006) by Joe Abercrombie
<i>The Children of Húrin</i> (2007) by J.R.R. Tolkien
<i>The Crystal Shard</i> (1988) by R. A. Salvatore
<i>The Dragonbone Chair</i> (1988) by Tad Williams
<i>Dragons of Autumn Twilight</i> (1984) by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman
<i>Elantris</i> (2005) by Brandon Sanderson
<i>The Eye of the World</i> (1990) by Robert Jordan
<i>A Game of Thrones</i> (1996) by George R. R. Martin
<i>The Golden Compass</i> (1995) by Phillip

Pullman
<i>The Heir of Night</i> (2010) by Helen Lowe
<i>Jade City</i> (2017) by Fonda Lee
<i>Magician</i> (1982) by Raymond E. Feist
<i>Pawn of Prophecy</i> (1982) by David Eddings
<i>Red Sister</i> (2017) by Mark Lawrence
<i>The Ruins of Gorlan</i> (2004) by John Flanagan
<i>Six of Crows</i> (2015) by Leigh Bardugo
<i>The Sword of Shannara</i> (1977) by Terry Brooks
<i>Tigana</i> (1990) by Guy Gavriel Kay
<i>The Unbroken</i> (2021) by C. L. Clark
<i>Walker of Worlds</i> (1990) by Tom de Haven
<i>The Way of Kings</i> (2010) by Brandon Sanderson
<i>Wizard's First Rule</i> (1994) by Terry Goodkind

### Historical Fantasy

A subset which combines elements of **historical fiction** and **fantasy fiction**. These stories are set in a historical period, generally before the twentieth century, with an added element of carefully hidden magic or supernatural creatures. A common plotline is the removal or retreating of magic from the real world, thereby ending a golden age and allowing history to continue unaltered. A strong emphasis is placed on historical accuracy in regard to the setting. Fantasy stories derived from legends focusing on Arthurian, Celtic, or Dark Ages historical timelines generally fall within this subset. Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1458); Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759); Robert E. Howard's "Red Shadows" (1928), "The Dark Man" (1931), and *Tigers of the Sea* (1969); Lord Dunsany's *The Curse of the Wise Women* (1933); and T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* (1958) are classic examples.

### Common Elements

Royalty
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Arranged marriages
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Patriarchal societies
Key battles/events in history
Dragons and other mythical creatures
Magic
Wizards

Quests
Knights
Legendary swords
Mythological influences
Time travel

### Modern Literary Examples

<i>1014: Brian Boru and the Battle for Ireland</i> (2014) by Morgan Llewelyn
<i>Babel</i> (2022) by R. F. Kuang
<i>The Bear and the Nightingale</i> (2017) by Katherine Arden
<i>Birds of Prey</i> (1984) by David Drake
<i>Bitter Seeds</i> (2010) by Ian Tregillis
<i>The Book Thief</i> (2005) by Markus Zusak
<i>The Bridge of Birds</i> (1984) by Barry Hughart
<i>The Buried Giant</i> (2015) by Kazuo Ishiguro
<i>The Conductors</i> (2021) by Nicole Glover
<i>The Cottingley Secret</i> (2017) by Hazel Gaynor
<i>The Crystal Cave</i> (1970) by Mary Stewart
<i>Eaters of the Dead</i> (1976) by Michael Crichton
<i>The Firebrand</i> (1986) by Marion Zimmer Bradley
<i>Gods of Jade and Shadow</i> (2019) by Silvia Moreno-Garcia
<i>Grave Mercy</i> (2012) by Robin LaFevers
<i>A Hero Born</i> (2019) by Jin Yong

<i>Jonathan Strange &amp; Mr Norrell</i> (2004) by Susanna Clarke
<i>Latro in the Mist</i> (2003) by Gene Wolf
<i>Lord Foul's Bane</i> (1977) by Stephen R. Donaldson
<i>The Mists of Avalon</i> (1983) by Marion Zimmer Bradley
<i>The Moon and the Sun</i> (1997) Vonda N. McIntyre
<i>The Night Tiger</i> (2019) by Yangsze Choo
<i>On Stranger Tides</i> (1987) by Tim Powers
<i>The Poppy War</i> (2018) by R. F. Juang
<i>She Who Became the Sun</i> (2021) by Shelley Parker-Chan
<i>Spellbreaker</i> (2020) by Charlie N. Holmberg
<i>The Skystone</i> (1996) by Jack Whyte
<i>The Strange Affair of Spring Heeled Jack</i> (2010) by Mark Hodder
<i>Taliesin</i> (1987) by Stephen R. Lawhead
<i>The Winter King</i> (1996) by Bernard Cornwell
<i>The World That We Knew</i> (2019) by Alice Hoffman

### Low Fantasy

Also known as “intrusion fantasy,” this subset depicts magical elements appearing in—or imposing on—an otherwise normal world. This magic is often not obvious or is unable to be explained logically. There is an intersect between the “real world” and the fantastical “otherworld,” such as the discovery of characters with paranormal abilities, earthbound mythological creatures, coexistence or conflict between humans and supernatural beings, and secret histories and cultures. This is in contrast to high fantasy, which occurs in a fictional world with magical elements that are generally accepted by the characters. Settings in low fantasy may be in a contemporary, perhaps urban, locale, or one that is futuristic or historical. Protagonists often discover latent magical forces within themselves or their supposedly ordinary surroundings. In another contrast to high

fantasy, characters typically struggle to achieve their own personal goals rather than engaging in epic conflicts. Stories featuring talking animals or inanimate objects coming to life might be considered low fantasy. Writers in this subset often incorporate details of the actual setting that provides local color and atmosphere, both to lend a sense of realism and of magic. Rather than being a commentary on the work's quality, the word “low” refers to those stories that take place on Earth, as well as the prominence of traditional fantasy elements within the work. These books often cross genres with **magical realism**.

### Common Elements

Supernatural creatures
Secret mystical underworld
Hidden magical spaces
Concealed passageways
Modern or historical technology
Real-world mythological influences
Characters discovering the existence of

supernatural forces
Urban locations
Contemporary slang
Interference from human institutions (e.g. police, lawyers)
Colloquial language
Pop cultural references

### Modern Literary Examples

<i>American Gods</i> (2001) by Neil Gaiman
<i>Artemis Fowl</i> (2001) by Eoin Colfer
<i>The Blue Fox</i> (2003) by Sjón
<i>The Changeling</i> (2017) by Victor Lavalle
<i>City of Bones</i> (2007) by Cassandra Claire
<i>A Darker Shade of Magic</i> (2015) by V. E. Schwab
<i>Storm Front</i> (2000) by Jim Butcher
<i>The Gameshouse</i> (2019) by Clair North
<i>Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone</i> (1997) by J. K. Rowling
<i>Hounded</i> (2011) by Kevin Hearne
<i>Kitty and the Midnight Hour</i> (2005) by Carrie Vaughn

<i>The Lies of Locke Lamora</i> (2006) by Scott Lynch
<i>Crimes Against Magic</i> (2013) by Steve McHugh
<i>The Magicians</i> (2009) by Lev Grossman
<i>Moon Called</i> (2010) by Patricia Briggs
<i>The Mystery of Grace</i> (2009) by Charles de Lint
<i>The Night Circus</i> (2011) by Erin Morgenstern
<i>The Raven Boys</i> (2012) by Maggie Stiefvater
<i>The Snow Spider</i> (1986) by Jenny Nimmo
<i>Tiger's Curse</i> (2012) by Colleen Houck

### Sword and Sorcery Fiction

A subset which contains exciting and violent adventures that focus on swashbuckling heroes, with elements of romance, swordplay, bloody battles, and magical characters or supernatural factors. Fritz Leiber coined the term in 1961, which “accurately describes the points of culture-level and supernatural element and also immediately distinguishes it from the cloak-and-sword (historical adventure) story — and (quite incidentally) from the cloak-and-dagger (international espionage) story, too! The word sorcery implies something more and other than historical human witchcraft, so even the element of an alien-yet-human world background is hinted at.” While similar to heroic

fantasy in terms of story structure, plotlines, and tropes, sword and sorcery stories tend to have a darker and grittier tone, content, and characterization. Additionally, clear influences of cosmic horror fiction can be discerned in sword and sorcery fiction, especially in early offerings. Protagonists are typically larger-than-life men or women of action who often triumph blade in hand through pure strength of will. Magic is often the weapon of the enemy. Victories are frequently narrow and sometimes won using quick thinking and cleverness rather than physical might. The main characters tend to be outcasts or otherwise outsiders with no real place in society. The motivations for protagonists are usually less glamorous or altruistic, with self-interest being chief among them. Any world-saving is typically a matter of happenstance. Clark Ashton Smith's *Hyperborean cycle* (1931-1958) and *Zothique cycle* (1932-1951), Robert E. Howard's "The Scarlet Citadel" (1932), C. L. Moore's *Jirel of Joiry* (1934), L. Sprague de Camp's *The Tritonian Ring* (1951) and *The Goblin Tower* (1968), Michael Moorcock's "The Dreaming City" (1961), and John Jakes's *Brak the Barbarian* (1968) are classic examples.

### Common Elements

Barbarian heroes
Beautiful women
Battles
Magic
Evil sorcerers
Decadent cities
Supernatural horrors

Swordplay
Romance
Moral ambiguity
Barbarianism versus civilization
Fast-paced action and adventure
Conflict

### Modern Literary Examples

<i>Aching God</i> (2018) by Mike Shel
<i>Chosen of the Changeling</i> (1996) by J. Gregory Keyes
<i>Conan and the Sorcerer</i> (1978) by Andrew J. Offutt
<i>Conan the Defender</i> (1983) by Robert Jordan
<i>Conan the Swordsman</i> (1978) by L. Sprague de Camp, Lin Carter, and Björn Nyberg
<i>The Copper Promise</i> (2016) by Jen Williams
<i>Gods in Darkness</i> (2002) by Karl Edward Wagner
<i>The Heresy Within</i> (2017) by Rob J. Hayes
<i>Imaro</i> (1981) by Charles R. Saunders
<i>Kellory the Warlock</i> (1984) by Lin Carter
<i>Kings of the Wyld</i> (2017) by Nicholas

Earnes
<i>The Ladies of Mandrigyn</i> (2017) by Barbara Hambly
<i>The Magician's Guild</i> (2010) by Trudi Canavan
<i>Moongather</i> (1982) by Jo Clayton
<i>Mountain of Daggers</i> (2015) by Seth Skokowsky
<i>The Oathbound</i> (1988) by Mercedes Lackey
<i>The Ring of Ikribu</i> (1981) by David C. Smith and Richard L. Tierney
<i>Siege of Talonrend</i> (2013) by Stuart Thuaman
<i>A Shadow of All Night Falling</i> (1979) by Glen Cook
<i>Sword-Sworn</i> (2002) by Jennifer Roberson
<i>Swords and Deviltry</i> (1977) by Fritz



Leiber
<i>Tales of Neveryon</i> (1993) by Samuel R. Delany
<i>The Testament of Tall Eagle</i> (2015) by John R. Fultz

<i>To Ride Hell's Chasm</i> (2004) by Janny Wursts
<i>The Last Wish</i> (1993) by Andrzej Sapkowski

