

Imagination & Identity: Worlds Away At Home

As is common to many younglings, my childhood years were marked with a fervent love for the genres of fantasy and science fiction. It seemed an almost daily occurrence for my poor mother to come to me exasperated that I hadn't heard her calling while I had had my head stuck in a book (read: while I had been rescuing the hobbits from the roots of Old Man Willow with Tom Bombadil - but excuses of that sort were not to be verbalized). When not reading, I was still worlds away from my hometown of little Rocklin, California; my favorite type of play, inspired by these fictional worlds of fantasy, was always heavily imaginative, and the players always had richer backstories than necessary. However, I believe this genre rooted its tendrils into my heart not through mere escapism - this is a sad diminution of its beauty and power and perhaps, the mistake of lesser works in this genre.

My first exposure to fantasy was a discovery of Middle Earth with my father. In this world, my young personhood found a kindred spirit in my father, a fellow adventurer, and we shared many literary adventures after that. After reading *Lord of the Rings* and *the Hobbit*, I did the typical Tolkien deep dive, including the *Silmarillion*, *Unfinished Tales*, *Beren and Luthien*, and *Tolkien Reader*, the last of which gave a closer look at the all too overlooked characters Tom Bombadil and his wife Goldberry. In all their otherness, their wisdom and simple delights shown truer. On family car trips, I was introduced to a lifelong favorite author - C.S. Lewis - through his children's series *Chronicles of Narnia* on audio tape, and I connected with a less likely favorite - *The Silver Chair*. In junior high, my father took our venturing into the realm of science fiction, and in Frank Herbert's *Dune* and Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*, we explored questions of identity and destiny.

During my time in the Program at St. John's, I was tempted from time to time to view the selections of fantasy that had captivated my youth with some mild derision (after all, they weren't Russian novels, were they?). In junior year, however, I was thankfully fully purged of this ridiculous notion when I revisited an old love - Milton's *Paradise Lost*, in seminar and precept. These were my favorite class discussions. We all marveled at Milton's ability to craft a line or even a two-word phrase endlessly rich in layers of meaning that it inspired hours of passionate discussion. Nevertheless, I think he also derived power by choosing to explore themes of origin and destiny - the end of a beginning and more importantly the beginning of an end. Milton's fascination with the Garden inspired me to revisit C.S. Lewis' *Space Trilogy*, whose second work *Perelandra* explored a different ending to the tempting of Eve and third work depicted the end of times. A love of myths and allegory also drove me to Lewis' retelling of the Psyche and Cupid story in *Til We Have Faces*, which brought new depth to the concepts of imagination and love in their pairing. Within the pages of Lewis' *The Great Divorce*, I was inspired to explore the writings of one of Lewis' favorite authors - George MacDonald, who is featured there as a character, the Virgil to his Dante in the *Great Divorce*. MacDonald's fantasies *Lilith* and *Fantastes* were darker and yet every line was rich with wisdom on the theme of origins, endings, and finding destiny in between.

Now married to my best friend, I find myself rediscovering the love of my youth with him with new vivacity. Our imaginations differ wildly and the dreamscape he describes to me is a fantastical world of color and physics defying features - and yet, standing on the shifting sands of Arrakis, the undulating islands of Perelandra, or in the forests of Lothlorien, we find ourselves hand in hand on the adventure together. We believe this experience is best described in one of Lewis' nonfiction works, the *Four Loves* (although not in this collection, this quote speaks to its creation):

Friendship arises out of mere Companionship when two or more of the companions discover that they have in common some insight or interest or even taste which the others do not share and which, till that moment, each believed to be his own unique treasure (or burden). The typical expression of opening Friendship would be something like, 'What? You too? I thought I was the only one.'... It is when two such persons discover one another, when, whether with immense difficulties and semi-articulate fumbblings or with what would seem to us amazing and elliptical speed, they share their vision - it is then that Friendship is born. And instantly they stand together in an immense solitude.

The vision, the insight these adventures provide into the values worth fighting for, the truth piercing in its brilliance, the wonder all too captivating, speaks to something at the core of who we are. And worlds away we find ourselves home, with the promise of conversations to last a lifetime.

I snicker as I glance over at this collection of fantasies, allegories, and science fiction sitting on our bookshelf behind a grate we've secured to the front of the bookshelf to keep my one and half year old avid mountain climber from scaling its heights and all too literally devouring the pages of the tomes perched there. I laugh at the irony that we imagine this to be a collection we are building for her - a collection that began with Tolkien and includes the more recent addition of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* which inspired her middle name - Mina. On long drives to pregnancy checkups during the pandemic we both read *Dracula* for the first time and were captivated by Mina's wisdom and bravery in the face of pure evil. While these adventures must be locked away now in the face of her voracious toddler appetite, it brings great smiles to my heart to imagine the day when we will crack their pages together to discover the beauty that lies within. To say she is an active child is a gross understatement, but that makes the moments seemingly more poignant when I find her seated at the window, gazing at the trees in sheer wonder, excitedly shrieking "Tree! Tree!", or at other moments, her little brows furrowed, barely visible over the pages of a board book masterpiece such as *Going on a Bear Hunt*, clearly not to be disturbed. Hardly a day goes by when I'm not told she looks just like me and yet there are so many aspects of her personality that are distinctly and delightfully other. It is those poignant moments and in this combination of like and unlike that I find myself wondering what characteristics color the landscape of her imagination. While I know the nature of individuality means that I will never be able to experience her unique imagination as she does, I wonder if in the course of the pages of one of these books, we will share a moment of "What? You too?" And I wonder which book that will be.

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*, Chicago: Thompson & Thomas, 1901.

A dear friend from St. John's knowing my love of this work, gifted me a copy as a wedding gift. This copy, which she rebound herself to protect its fragile pages, features large illustrations from Gustave Dore, and it is deeply treasured. The discussions of good and evil, the power of beauty, the human condition that lie within its pages make it a critical fantastical adventure.

Lewis, C.S. *Out of the Silent Planet*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. 1977.

The first in the Space Trilogy, this adventure depicts a race on Mars without deceit, pain, evil, until the first humans venture there. Throughout this series, Lewis expertly utilizes this genre to explore the human condition and the nature of good and evil.

Lewis, C.S. *Perelandra*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. 1979.

The second in the Space Trilogy features a second Eden, in which Eve does not fall prey to the deceiver, and asks us to imagine a new race unburdened by ancestral evil.

Lewis, C.S. *That Hideous Strength: A Modern Fairy-Tale for Grown-Ups*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. 1965.

The third in the Space Trilogy takes us back to Earth and builds to the end times, painting a vivid picture of the struggle in discovering and then choosing good.

Lewis, C.S. *Til We Have Faces: A Myth Retold*, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1980.

A rich exploration of the nature of beauty, love, imagination, and strength - this story challenges its readers to think deeply with each level it unfolds of the well known myth of Cupid and Psyche.

Lewis, C.S. *The Great Divorce*, New York: HarperCollins, 2001.

This allegory analyzes the trials, victories, and failings of every day individuals within the context of a sort of limbo. It also inspired my husband and I, as previously mentioned to read George MacDonald, who greatly influenced Lewis.

Lewis, C.S. *Collection: The Chronicles of Narnia*, New York: Scholastic, Inc. 1948.

This quote from *The Silver Chair* speaks to the importance of fantasy that highlights the true, the good, and the beautiful:

Suppose... suppose we have only dreamed and made up these things like sun, sky, stars, and moon, and Aslan himself. In that case, it seems to me that the made-up things are a good deal better than the real ones. And if this black pits of a kingdom is the best you can make, then it's a poor world. And we four can make a dream world to lick your real one hollow.

MacDonald, George. *Phantastes*, Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 2000.

MacDonald introduces us to a modern man brought into a fantastical realm, where each interaction creates a new standard for what is good. After many of these seemingly random encounters, the main character decides to die for what is actually good.

MacDonald, George. *Liliith*, Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 2000.

MacDonald explores the theme of restoration through death, as the protagonist Mr. Vane continues to fight against his destiny in another world.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *Beren and Luthien*, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

The adventures of Beren and Luthien portrayed long lasting sacrificial love, better than many romances; I would dare to argue because romance was not its focus.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *Silmarillion*, New York: Ballantine Books, 2001.

In the *Silmarillion* the question of origins and the importance of lore was given new meaning.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *Unfinished Tales of Numenor and Middle-Earth*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1988.

In the *Unfinished Tales* was satisfied an unknown desire for Tolkien's unrivaled craft of lore and world building.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Tolkien Reader*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1966.

The *Tolkien Reader* provided a closer look at my favorite characters Tom Bombadil and his wife Goldberry; in all their otherness, their wisdom and simple delights shown truer.

Herbert, Frank. *Dune*, New York: Ace Books, 1999.

Herbert's rich world building is known for setting a high bar for the science fiction genre, but his interest in exploring the capacity of imagination is why it is part of this collection. A favorite quote to illustrate the point:

Greatness is a transitory experience. It is never consistent. It depends in part upon the myth-making imagination of humankind. The person who experiences greatness must have a feeling for the myth he is in. He must reflect what is projected upon him. And he must have a strong sense of the sardonic. This is what uncouples him from belief in his own pretensions. The sardonic is all that permits him to move within himself. Without this quality, even occasional greatness will destroy a man.

Card, Orson Scott. *Ender's Game*, New York: Tor, 2013.

This is the first in a long series of science fiction books I have read, and it's clear throughout that Card wants to use his narrative to speak to the human condition, as can be seen in his Introduction:

I think that most of us, anyway, read these stories that we know are not "true" because we're hungry for another kind of truth: the mythic truth about human nature in general, the particular truth about those life-communities that define our own identity, and the most specific truth of all: our own self-story. Fiction, because it is not about someone who lived in the real world, always has the possibility of being about oneself.

Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 1997.

Stoker's uses the exciting genre of vampires to bring to life the need for good to battle evil unceasingly against all odds. Its heroine Mina is the inspiration for our daughter's middle name.

Rosen & Oxenbury, *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*, New York: Little Simon, 1997.

Contributed by our daughter. While I did not grow up with this classic myself, it has quickly become a favorite family adventure story.