

## Fantasy Literature: Further Thinking

The collection 'Fantasy Literature: An Introduction' guides audiences who are just getting interested in fantasy and want to know where to start. Stuart Lee's video lecture 'Introducing fantasy literature' suggests why this genre is so fascinating, and the other podcasts in the collection introduce a range of authors, some very well-known and some whose work is being rediscovered – or who are producing new books.

In this 'Further Thinking' collection, the speakers open up the topic of fantasy in more eclectic and complex ways. They investigate larger questions, such as form: the role played by verse and prose in key fantasy works, or explore some of the ways in which fantasy can be theorised. Ideas of world-building, the creation of Secondary Worlds and their history (*mythopoeia*, in Tolkien's terms), portals, magic and its rules. More than one podcast engages with historical overviews of fantasy in writing for children and its lasting association with Oxford and its English Faculty. Some of the talks dig down into more difficult or adult material: Tolkien's *Silmarillion*, his encyclopaedic account of the legendarium of Middle-Earth (which has an accompanying teaching pack) or the hit HBO TV show, 'Game of Thrones', broadcast from 2011-19. Just why did this medievalist fantasy series capture viewers' interest on an unparalleled global scale? Another podcast asks: 'What is a fantasy university like?' Andy Shamel reflects on Terry Pratchett's Discworld series and its Unseen University, a satirical take on Oxford and its traditions of learning.

Other lectures include thoughtful discussion of Oxford's own Philip Pullman, situating him in a tradition that includes Lewis Carroll and J. R. R. Tolkien, and a range of interviews with him and the great Alan Garner. The Oxford Fantasy cluster (which organises these podcasts) has been working to widen the global range of authors considered here, and so there are episodes on extraordinary world of Chinese fantasy writing, increasingly available to English-speaking readers, or indeed, in the case of Chinese-American author R. F. Kuang, written in English. There are also interviews with living contemporary fantasy writers, including Kuang, Kath Langrish and Elizabeth Knox and with the leading fantasy scholar, Catherine Butler.

Literature scholars are often interested in sources, tradition and allusion. So, we discover in detail how professor of Old English literature, J. R. R. Tolkien put his unparalleled knowledge of the Old English epic *Beowulf* to work in his imagining of Middle-earth. There are also episodes on literary allusions in the *Harry Potter* series, often criticised as rather un-literary, two episodes that look at the reception of Old Norse mythology in twentieth-century or more recent writing, while Emma Smith looks back to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The 'Further Thinking' collection is a work in progress, so it's worth checking in regularly to discover new authors and books, or challenging reflections on well-known and well-loved stories. Fantasy is a worldwide, profoundly important genre, always reaching outside itself to speak to contemporary society about its fears, desires and aspirations; its popularity reflects that unparalleled capacity to speak particular kinds of truth.