

Fantasy at Oxford

Whilst many places could lay claim to being centres of excellence (or effort) when it comes to Fantasy Literature, the University and City of Oxford deserves a special mention. The series of podcasts contained here seeks to consider this by looking at writers and collections associated with Oxford.

When studying Fantasy Literature one may come across mention of the 'Oxford School'. This is a broadly applied term that covers the writers that have been based in Oxford over the years, often but not always associated with the University; the extraordinary output of a series of writers in the early to mid-twentieth century who wrote and indeed established the genre (e.g. the Inklings – Tolkien, Lewis, Williams, Barfield, etc); the writers of Fantasy literature in the latter part of the twentieth-century who studied at Oxford and were influenced by writers such as Tolkien (e.g. Garner, Cooper, Wynne Jones); or a combination of all of these. What is true to say though is that there is, and never was, a formal 'School' in the sense of a faculty or course within the University that sought to teach Fantasy literature and creative writing. Instead it alludes to the idea that somehow all these people shared some experiences or absorbed something from being in the city or the University that possibly helped shape their work.

What might this be? Is it the history of the city, the history of the University, the collections available in the city, its architecture, the structure of the English literature course at Oxford, or something else? Why is it that Oxford can be associated with a writer such as Lewis Carroll, a mathematician who felt at ease to turn his hand to whimsical fantasy; the establishment of epic fantasy through Tolkien (and to a degree Lewis); the flurry of fantasy novels for 'young adults' by Cooper, and Wynne Jones, but also by Gardner (who left Oxford after only one year); or writers such as Pullman who use the city and the University setting as a natural home for their work?

This series of talks will delve further into some of these questions. Moreover it will also highlight some of the collections and objects dispersed across the University and the city related to many of these writers. From primary source material (e.g. manuscripts) held in the Bodleian or college collections, to works of art that may have influenced these writers (e.g. the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood paintings in the Oxford Union).