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Format: Bachelor thesis
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Acclaiming the Future

A Critical Analysis of the Contemporary Value of High Fantasy Literature

Foreword to this thesis

I took the opportunity to write about a genre I feel passionate about for this thesis. As I started to look for secondary literature to support my analyses, what I found was almost completely based on related topics, not much on high fantasy itself. Especially on the subject of the fantastic, which is close but ultimately not relevant to my choice of genre. I've used one line from Todorov's *The Fantastic*—almost the go-to work for literary critics interested in this area—in all, and it was a quote from another text to support the claim that the fantastic differs from the marvellous, on which high fantasy is built.

As I started to worry about the sustainability of my own thesis, I realised that this *is* my topic. Consider everything that has been allowed to wear the tag of literature in the last few decades. Some of these definitely fall into the popular or cult category, yet are given serious consideration. Not high fantasy, as if the genre were already dead and buried with no other frontrunner than Tolkien. But when a genre—any genre—is still alive, turning out novels and having publishers especially devoted to it (such as Tor Books), literary criticism *cannot* assume that no other literary work will be turned out. Therefore, its quiet refusal to pay serious attention to the genre is incomprehensible, even unreasonable, and has created a very dismissive atmosphere—from the critics down to the mainstream reader public.

I tried to show in this thesis that high fantasy *is* deserving of literary criticism, without denying that its boundaries have long been consolidated and mostly still are. Yet, that there are also authors who attempt to experiment with them, and break through them. Even in motifs, which I first considered exceptionally stale, I genuinely found progress, development and real world attachment. Literature can be found everywhere, and criticism is meant to find it. So, as Roland Barthes advocated for the death of the author as the almighty god of literature, consequently giving the reader a voice, I will stand by a more recent development: the death of the divide between literature and reading ('literatuur en lectuur'), the death of literary disdain for everything not 'high' literature, and the acceptance of genres that through this process are rediscovered. There is no reason why any one genre should not be able to contribute here, considering the statements made in this thesis on the value and literariness of the high fantasy genre.

Acclaiming the Future:

A Critical Analysis of the Contemporary Value of High Fantasy Literature

Fairytales do not tell children that dragons exist. Children already know that dragons exist. Fairytales tell children that dragons can be killed.

– G.K. Chesterton.

Introduction

Undisputedly, high fantasy¹ banks on the testing of limitations—within the text *and* outside its bounds; exploring our beliefs about man, society, the nature of reality and that of imagination. To the reader, the fantastical or marvellous in high fantasy is abundant enough to be defamiliarizing—opposite of the other subgenre of fantasy, in which elements appear in doses to remind the reader of its wonder—and accepted as truth within the scope of the novel. Yet I would argue that it is the juxtapositioning of this outward appearance of an absolute absence of reality, with a very *real* representation of reality and contemporary mindset that gives high fantasy a place among other literary endeavours. *The Lord of the Rings* by Tolkien has always been considered such, yet other acknowledgment is slow in coming where mainstream novelists turn out an equal ratio of lecture versus literature, and the sustainability of the created world is stronger despite its completely reinvented footing. Next to this, high fantasy offers two unique characteristics unmatched by any other form of literature; its push-and-pull relationship with reality, and its capability to revitalise and reinvent its roots, going unnoticed by literary criticism.

High fantasy's relationship with reality has always been difficult to define: it appears clear-cut, as no other form of literature so completely dispenses with our own world or even its most basic elements—even science fiction is based upon a prediction of the evolution of technology and man (Manlove 18)—but high fantasy's *rejection* of reality is rooted in our

¹ There is a distinction between two sub-genres of fantasy. In the first, fantastical elements are present in what we consider our own, real world, or there exists a magical world next to ours, in which the first is the Secondary, the latter the Primary World (phrases coined by J.R.R. Tolkien). Such novels include *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, or J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*. The second subgenre, usually named 'high fantasy,' is based upon the 'marvellous' rather than the 'fantastic,' which means that there is only a Secondary world in the novel, to which magic is inherent and logical. The genre includes novels such as Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Mistborn* series by Brandon Sanderson, the central focus of this thesis.

knowledge of it, and built upon our *understanding* of it: ‘Unlike the novelist, whose responsibility it is to portray the society he finds around him, the fantasist must create a society, and an entire world, which is unlike his own and yet intimately connected with it, reflecting its beliefs, wishes, and fears (Attebery 15). Defining high fantasy’s relationship with reality, the general consensus appears that we cannot have one without—at the very least—invoking the other. Zanger maintains on this issue that:

Each fantasy takes its distinctive shape from those aspects of the real world it most strongly rejects. ... Fantasy, consequently, always exists in a symbiotic relationship with reality and its conventionalized representation, depending on it for its existence and at the same time commenting upon it, criticizing it, and illuminating it. (226-7)

This same engagement is, perhaps even more unexpectedly, shown in the way the genre owns and transforms (originally fairytale) motifs. The supposition that motifs are wholly fixed even throughout time is an uncritical one, but has led literary critics to disregard high fantasy as a genre that—not unlike the utopian—consolidated its boundaries too quickly and has become a stale mould incapable of true literary capabilities beyond its first instances (e.g., Tolkien). This image is enforced because high fantasy world building is reminiscent of the Middle Ages, instead of looking towards present or future (Manlove 23, 31) and—according to literary critics—because the content of the genre is ‘highly conventionalized,’ leading to ‘the narrative often [being] circular and static’ (Manlove 31). Presently², literary criticism of the high fantasy genre has dropped off almost completely.



High fantasy author Brandon Sanderson, 1975-present

Boldly stated, it can be concluded that the literariness of the high fantasy genre has been given up on. Literary critics have failed to recognize the very real strides high fantasy has made in renewing and reinventing itself, and has a unique position of combining a striking critique of contemporary mindset without actually mentioning the world it is based upon. This thesis will therefore attempt to broaden the scope of criticism by examining contemporary examples of high fantasy literature that bring a fresh point of view to the discussion, primarily

² *The Aesthetics of Fantasy Literature and Art*, in which this essay appears, was published in 1982, and in Manlove’s afterword it is stated that this particular essay was written earlier and reworked for the compilation (27). *The Lord of the Rings*, featuring prominently in all essays of the compilation, was published in 1954-5. It is after the exhaustive discussion of Tolkien’s work that literary criticism shows a significant drop of studies towards the high fantasy genre.

the *Mistborn* series by acclaimed author Brandon Sanderson³. To contrast new developments in high fantasy and analyse how the genre evolves by constantly reinventing its core characteristics—even motifs—, this thesis will predominantly compare Sanderson with the one authority of high fantasy even literary critics agree on: J.R.R. Tolkien. Using both his theory (“On Fairy-Stories”) and practice (*The Lord of the Rings*), we can define what the



J.R.R. Tolkien, 1892-1973

original boundaries of the genre were: ‘Tolkien’s story was noted by critics sympathetic to the genre as the work they had been waiting for, the first extensive exploration of the possibilities of modern fantasy’ (Attebery 154)⁴. Tolkien’s criteria in “On Fairy-Stories” are handily summarized by Lois Kuznets, which I use as a reference throughout the thesis:

... a substantial and original fantasy world. This world has to be both sustained enough (often through two or three volumes) and clearly and significantly delineated enough (often by incorporating elements of classic mythologies), to serve as a fitting background for a story in which the forces of good and evil clash and in which evil is, at least temporarily, defeated. The protagonist of the story may be, and usually is, ordinary in ways with which most modern readers can identify, but he must perform heroic acts in the course of the story, which usually has a romance-quest structure. By its end, he must achieve the status of a hero among his comrades, who somehow need him to complete their number even though they are, in contrast to the hero, usually extraordinary in ways with which the audience cannot identify. (19-20)

The criteria Tolkien and Kuznets present here can be broken down into three categories, which consist of aspects highly relevant to the high fantasy genre. They will subsequently be used to examine the most significant reinventions and experimentations high fantasy has undergone in contemporary literature: **world creation (delineation)**, focusing on the

³ Sanderson has been introduced to the broader high fantasy audience when he was asked to finish the last novel of *The Wheel of Time* series by Robert Jordan’s widow. Sanderson, like Tolkien, very strongly believes in the value of the high fantasy genre, combining theory with practice, making him a perfect contemporary touchstone in this thesis. His essays on fantasy and literature are posted on his website, and his practical repertoire is more than encompassing: varying in length from short stories to twelve book-series, and experimenting very consciously with consolidated boundaries—the insertion of change and development, and technology. I recommend reading his “Form and the Fantastic,” to give insight to his theory as expressed by his practical work, and which largely underlines both my own claims on high fantasy and my analysis of Sanderson.

⁴ ‘Modern fantasy’ here means the identification and formation of what we now consider to be the high fantasy genre. Tolkien’s work lifted it from its more scattered origins of folklore and children’s literature, defining high fantasy as an independent literary incursion recognized by critics. To this effect, I will consider Tolkien the starting off point, and for argument’s sake accept whatever original connections existed beforehand. To those interested in Tolkien’s views on children’s developing mental abilities and personal taste in accordance with high fantasy, I will gladly recommend reading “On Fairy-Stories.”

expression of reality through imaginary landscape; **use of motifs**, that critics are fond of cataloguing yet rarely strive to understand, to build character and plot; and **sustainability**, both within the text and outside of it.

Mirror realities

Beyond entertainment, beyond curiosity, beyond all the emotions such narratives and legends afford, beyond the need to divert, to forget, or to achieve delightful or terrifying sensations, the real goal of the marvellous is the total exploration of universal reality
– *Mabill, qtd. in Todorov 57*

Delineation and sustainability, two elements that Kuznets chooses to address in one sentence only and which are discussed first and last here, are closely connected. The first encompasses how the Secondary world is built from choice elements, the latter its ultimate believability and how much space—both literal and figuratively, as we will see—is necessary to facilitate said believability. Concerning ourselves with (physical) world building, J.R.R. Tolkien put much stock in the heritage of well-known elements and motifs in fantasy literature⁵ (‘incorporating elements of classical mythology’), which has contributed to a quick conventionalisation. Although the question why the standardized use of medieval-like worlds still works for the genre is one in its own right, I focus here on the literary value of high fantasy’s underlying mechanism; the mastery of push-and-pull between realities and the way it invites societal critique.

Tension between realities

High fantasy maintains a difficult to define relationship with reality, pulling known elements and then pushing off against them in a flux of alienation and familiarity. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* is a powerful reminder of the fine line all literature walks between our reality and the novel’s reality⁶, as Tolkien’s style displays a subtle ambiguity towards the tension field. Middle Earth’s physical surroundings appear no different from the possible vistas of actual reality, the extensive detailing adding to the world’s realism (both in terms of world building

⁵ According to Tolkien, elements of stories are preserved in time: new elements are continuously added to and extracted from a body of heritage (‘the Soup’, as Tolkien calls it), from which new stories are created (“On Fairy-Stories” 52). This process is both a knowledge and use of intertextuality, of which high fantasy has been purposely aware far longer than mainstream fantasy.

⁶ Literary critics distinguish between real reality and the novel’s reality in mainstream literature as well, considering them *not* the same—showing how fine that line really is.

as in closeness to our reality). Those elements then that are alien, are rooted in well-known mythology so they *appear* familiar⁷: ancient elves as legend-keepers; evil as hideous and corrupting; nature-based creatures as Old Man Willow and the Ents that only consider trespass a crime (*FotR*⁸ I ch.6; *TT*⁹ III ch.4). Magic, the fundamentally alien despite it being part of us one way or another throughout history, is just as characteristically subtle as the rest of Tolkien's world building¹⁰: indirect and ambiguous displays of the mastery of nature and natural events (Gandalf collapses the bridge to stop the Balrog, *FotR* II, ch.5; Glorfindel riding Frodo to safety *FotR* I, ch.12), and presumably infused objects such as the One Ring or Galadriel's gifts:



Reality world building is both recognisable and estranging, subtly manipulating our ability to understand the concept of reality

‘Are these magic cloaks?’ asked Pippin, looking at them with wonder.

‘I do not know what you mean by that,’ answered the leader of the elves. ‘... They are Elvish robes certainly, if that is what you mean. ... Yet they are garments, not armour, and they will not turn shaft or blade. But they should serve you well: ... You will find them a great aid in keeping out of the sight of unfriendly eyes.’ (*FotR* II ch.9)

In contemporary authors we observe a more playful approach to this tension than in Tolkien. Elements of our reality are picked up and blended together in unexpectedly new combinations that at the same time incite recognition and enforce defamiliarization in the reader, pushing them away with the end result of this elemental blending. By re-finding intertextuality, perhaps inspired by the discovery and use of it by mainstream literature¹¹, high fantasy

⁷ Tolkien is more traditional in his taking from and adding to the vast collection of story-elements. Later authors (in all literary and media forms) now show a tendency to not merely borrow and give back, but purposely ‘twist’ known elements to give them new meaning and context. Such redefinition will be discussed in the next part of this thesis.

⁸ *LotR: Fellowship of the Ring*.

⁹ *LotR: Two Towers*.

¹⁰ Considering this subtlety and Tolkien's theoretical work on fantasy it is possible that, with *LotR*, Tolkien attempted to prove that no matter if a story is true to its origins or the amount of alienation (considering *LotR*'s extensive language and myth foundation) in it, high fantasy is not as removed from mainstream literature as it is pushed to appear.

¹¹ Mainstream literature is influenced enough by the push-and-pull technique to increasingly go beyond ‘conventional’ reality in order to maintain a defamiliarizing standard, creating post-modernist novels in which reality building begins to resemble that of high fantasy, although it receives significantly higher recognition for the same literary mechanism.

revitalises its conventionalized chronotopes¹²—the literary combination of time and space, such as the medieval-magical world. In Sanderson’s *Mistborn* trilogy the use of this sophisticated push-and-pull of our reality to create the high fantasy world is purposefully evident, to take down expectations and open readers up to Sanderson’s own particular view (brandonsanderson.com¹³): the prologue starts on a plantation amidst skaa workers reminiscent of African-American slaves (*Mistborn* I, 1-15), but there is also mention of a ‘pocket watch’ (3), and as the story subsequently centers around the capital city, we see it fashioned after 18th century London and its distinctive hierarchy from a ruling head to nobility to the poor.

It is this deliberate blending of source material from our reality that has the potential to endlessly renew world building, and which contemporary authors use to break through the stale reputation of high fantasy worlds. Sanderson is very aware of the standardized boundaries and challenges them. In the acknowledgment section of *The Alloy of Law*, taking place in a later era of the *Mistborn* world, he states: ‘I [want] to move away from the idea of fantasy worlds as static places, where millennia would pass and technology would never change.’¹⁴ It is addressed in-story as well in the *Mistborn* trilogy, where the unchanged nature of the world for a millennium—expressly its technological development—is attributed to the Lord Ruler, purposefully *keeping* it stale (*Mistborn* III, 242-243). Now, however, it is ready for development: ‘a second epic trilogy set in an urban era, and a third trilogy set in a futuristic era’ (Sanderson, *The Alloy of Law*, acknowledgments section).

Societal critique

World construction also conveys within it how we view and critique our own reality—Tolkien wrote *The Lord of the Rings* from 1936 to 1949, the bulk of it during the war years (Tolkien, *In de ban van de Ring* 9-10). There are easy comparisons to be made between the war in Middle Earth and the one in our reality, but the heart of what Middle Earth is lies in its identity when unthreatened: an idyll. It has some clear parallels with the utopic idyll, such as

¹² A concept coined by Mikhail Bakhtin, who further states about the chronotope that ‘it expresses the inseparability of space and time. ... fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole’ (84-5). Of these particular, recognizable combinations certain types are attributed to certain scenes and genres (85).

¹³ <http://brandonsanderson.com/annotation/106/Mistborn-Prologue-Part-Two>. The webpage is part of a chapter-by-chapter commentary by the author, reflecting on creating the *Mistborn* series.

¹⁴ In *The Alloy of Law*, Brandon Sanderson continues a world in which skewed physical characteristics such as the red sun, constant ashfalls and struggle of plants to grow—preeminent in the *Mistborn* trilogy—are set right. In *TAoL* the world pulls dangerously close to our own without much push-and-pull except for its magic system and religion, which do not get much space in this standalone novel. Experimentation is by definition apt to fail, and is by definition synonymous with the life and growth of a genre. The question of how far an author can go to push the limits of any genre is a very conscious one today.

living harmoniously with nature and races working together in acceptance, if not friendship. *LotR* also very much adheres to the positive escapism Tolkien believes all literature to have, yet some indulge in more than others (“On Fairy-Stories 79). What is interesting is that Brandon Sanderson gives us the reverse in *Mistborn*, which is a clearly dystopic world socially and physically. By ending the rule of the Lord Ruler, the protagonists hope not only to create equality, but to change the *physical* world too: ‘I decided that I’d see her dream fulfilled. I’d make a world where flowers returned, a world with green plants, a world where no soot fell from the sky’ (*Mistborn* I, 286). The idyll is not the high fantasy world—*our* reality is, and explicitly so, showing an interesting change in attitude.

Which elements of our reality are chosen for the push and pull of the novel’s reality evolves as certain matters become more important to our culture and society. Where Tolkien is concerned, the absence of modern technology in high fantasy ‘may, almost certainly does, proceed from a considered disgust for so typical a product of the Robot Age’ (“On Fairy-Stories” 80)¹⁵. The contemporary trend of increasingly steeper explanations of the inner workings of magic, usually rooted in real world physics, shows

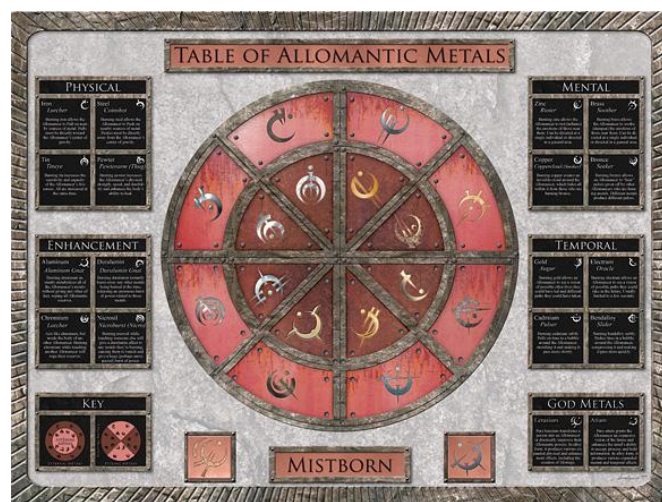


Table of the Allomantic metals in Mistborn, similar to real world elemental tables and complete with a description of each metal’s characteristics

that technology is not only accepted now, we are coming to be defined by it: ‘Metals¹⁶ come in groups of four—or, at least, the lower eight do. Two external metals, two internal metals—one each that Pushes, one each that Pulls’ (*Mistborn* I, 335); ‘In the case of Allomancy, net power is gained. It is provided by an external source. [...] Hemalurgy [...] destroys. By taking abilities from one person and giving them to another—in reduced amounts—power is actually

¹⁵ Yet, the desire for absence of technology does not mean there is no room for reason: ‘It certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity. ... The keener and the clearer is the reason, the better fantasy it will make’ (“On Fairy-Stories” 74-75).

¹⁶ In the *Mistborn* trilogy, the magic system is based on the ability to ‘burn’ metal. Once the metals are ingested, an Allomancer can burn certain—but not all—metals, each with its own distinctive power. The citation further states: ‘Practice will also let you sense the three patterns within the pulses: one for the physical metals, one for the mental metals, and one for the two greater metals. Pulse length, metal group, and Push-Pull variance’ (*Mistborn* I, 335).

lost. [...] In Feruchemy, power is stored up, then later drawn upon. There is no loss of energy' (*Mistborn III*, 278; 296; 303)¹⁷.

On a smaller culture-based perspective, American born author Sanderson explores questions of slavery and freedom and inserts into the circumstances of the beaten down skaa workers a heritage that Americans still struggle with. It also underhandedly incorporates the question of physical difference between the skaa and the nobility—through intermingling this is no longer true, yet government propaganda still uses it to justify their treatment of the skaa (*Mistborn I*; *Mistborn III*, 204-05) as was done with the African-American people, and which was also a tactic of the Germans during the Second World War. But the most striking and contemporary critique found in the *Mistborn* trilogy, is how we treat our earth. There is a pressing awareness in the novels that the world is struggling to survive and a desperate attempt to restore nature is underway. It is valued as precious—echoing our own rising understanding of *our* earth's preciousness and *our* need for ecological action, as evidenced by the birth of ecocriticism and such measures as the Kyoto Protocol, as we cannot undo our faults with magic.¹⁸

Heroes live happily ever after

But at the same time, the commonplace statement about them is true: every character is the hero of his own story. Each has a justification for his actions that is convincing to him. It's fun to give these people voices.

– Thomas Perry

The heroic figure, the hero's path¹⁹ and the happy ending are part of what is considered the most pertinent proof of high fantasy's staleness: its on-going use of motifs. In itself the motif

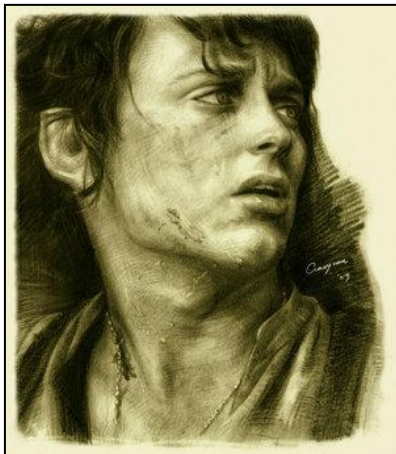
¹⁷ Especially when viewed in reverse—technology as part of the magic system. Incorporating technology and later era-worlds would not necessarily allow a novel to fall outside of the genre; this is evident in Sanderson's *Infinity Blade: Awakening*, a short story written as a prequel to the videogame (*IF: Awakening*, acknowledgments section). In a physically traditional medieval world, computers and cyborg-human hybrids are viewed as strange yet integral to the world as part of its magic, proving that high fantasy can very well break its boundaries beyond what critics deem possible.

¹⁸ Reflecting upon the push-and-pull between realities, I would offer an accompanying interpretation of Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* series, which creates its own unique niche. Pratchett invites his readers to discard all expectations, reversing real world reality and the novel's reality: what is normal to the reader is strange and otherworldly in *Discworld*, and *Discworld's* reality is completely left of center. It critiques society in the same way Pratchett seizes on it, with an enthusiastic mock-reverence of commercialism, turning out novel after novel, spoofing other genres that are popular at the moment or capitalizing on certain cultural themes such as football, rock music, or politics.

¹⁹ Most commonly the motif is referred to as a quest or romance-quest structure, as with Kuznets. In consideration of the high fantasy genre, 'path' would be of more appropriate use here—contemporary high fantasy

is amply analysed and recorded by literary critics such as Propp or Aarne and Thompson, but one distinct problem has always been overlooked—they analysed *fairytale* motifs. Because of a superficial appropriateness to employ their classification systems in the high fantasy genre, it is applied without further analysis of how the motif behaves specifically towards the genre, and is influenced by it in turn. To assume the motif as absolute and unchanging in time and context is an oversight which would be unpardonable in any literary field, and in this thesis will prove to be false.

One reason Tolkien's work has been influential enough to create a new genre, is because of his deep understanding of the psychology of the hero, the path s/he takes and the subsequent consequences this has for the happy ending—proving that once established, it is not always for the hero to enjoy: 'I have been too deeply hurt, Sam. I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me. It must often be so, Sam, when things are in danger:



Drawing of Frodo, portrayed by Elijah Wood in the movie adaptation of The Lord of the Rings

someone has to give them up, lose them, so that others may keep them' (*RotK*²⁰ VI ch. 9). Tolkien added to the hero-motif an understanding of real world cost and sacrifice that the cardboard heroes of fairytales and medieval romance²¹ have never had, changing the motifs fundamentally from the first novel of the genre onwards. Tolkien smashed the covenant of dichotomous good and evil by creating a psychologically grey area for the hero, and therefore what the happy ending means. Consider Tolkien's treatment of Frodo, who is *genuinely* turned by the Ring and if not forced, would have taken power (*RotK* VI ch.9). And ever since, high fantasy has experimented with (anti-)heroes

whose worth, sanity and altruism are constantly called into question, allowing for any kind of hero to bring about a happy ending that is equally morally challenged.

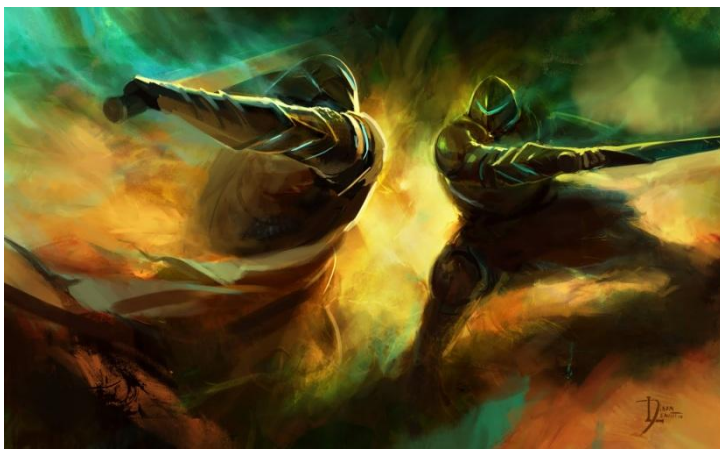
So why does literary criticism not recognize this?—Because it does not recognize high fantasy's engagement with our reality, and therefore misses how real world developments are integrated into its use of motifs. The question then becomes: what use *do* we have for the representation of motifs, in these specific ways? One possible answer is that the assignation of

revolves its plot not only around the actions of the hero, but also his or her psychological development, sometimes even with prevalence.

²⁰ The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King.

²¹ Medieval romance also uses the mentioned motifs, but the hero is undisputedly good or becomes thus to gain the happy ending. A flawed character like Lancelot makes for a good story, but can never be expected to be worthy, in effect keeping the dichotomy.

both blame and righteousness has become increasingly ambiguous after the open discussion on two World Wars, as opposed to the perfect role models medieval society was given by the church. It is no coincidence that one of the most prevalent themes of *The Lord of the Rings* is the slow corruption of power. Even more contemporary, high fantasy motifs reflect society's awareness of an ethical responsibility towards self, planet and future, which has made the world's countries try to collaborate instead of compete, and which has altered the heroic structure as well.²² In the *Mistborn* trilogy, a number of protagonists fit Kuznets's summary of Tolkien's criteria, which vitally contribute to one or more consequent steps that lead to the happy ending—a collaboration nearly a tag-team of sorts. But what is truly impressive, is that



Recognizability of heroes and antagonists is becoming increasingly difficult

Sanderson also brings his *antagonists* into this fold, as all characters become increasingly ambiguous with each addition of information, deepening our Tolkien-inspired grey area-exploration of intent, act and morality. It leaves the reader the uneasy space to settle the solution according to their own discretion, undisputedly providing the happy ending but for the

assignation of blame; exactly that which has become so difficult to us.

In “Sweeney Among the Archetypes: The Literary Hero in American Culture,” Jeff House connects four types of hero (across all literature) to the American culture—to which Sanderson belongs—to American/*Mistborn* themes: the ‘defending of social systems or successfully subverting them,’ and the hero as a literary means of societal critique (69). Both the ‘innocent’ and the ‘wise saint’ (68) are usually auxiliary characters, who trust in their values and persist in them with simplicity of heart. According to House, they represent an easy problem-solving: ‘our “can do” philosophy insists that all things are possible if we can only find the solution that is undoubtedly there’ (68). Sanderson takes them further, as in

²² Before I begin my interpretation of Sanderson, I want to offer an example by George R.R. Martin. In a reflection of modern day disillusionment with the corruptive power of politics, his series *A Song of Ice and Fire* has no heroic type, and after a Hitchcock-like manoeuvre (killing off the only likely hero immediately) no clues are given as to who will generate the happy ending—if there will be one at all in a power-hungry grab for the chance to be king. The series not only brings a multi-layered critique of contemporary society, but also another breaking of the so-called stale boundaries.

Mistborn these heroes become central without shifting type—Elend, the innocent, as he forms democracy in the second novel and then becomes *Mistborn* himself in the third novel, and Sazed, the sage, when he as the endorser of the central heroes, finally becomes *himself* the Hero of Ages, a god to look out over the *Mistborn* world²³. True to Sanderson, the ultimate Hero is simply the final one in the series of steps necessary, not by definition the best fit. Sazed contemplates: ‘Of all of us who touched it, I feel [Vin] was the most worthy’ (*Mistborn* III 720).

The trickster and warrior archetypes are equally similar, most prevalent in main protagonists. Kelsier answers to the first, as ‘the distrust the mass of Americas feels for authority ... [he] represents those who feel helpless to defeat authority but seek to subvert it by any means outside direct confrontation’ (House 66). *Mistborn* I, according to Sanderson, is a novel about overthrowing regimes wrapped in a heist-story²⁴, giving the trickster the perfect platform. When Kelsier shows his true intent he shifts to the warrior archetype, ‘the hero who does not flinch when facing the enemy, who willingly challenges what most of us would not’ (66), as he manoeuvres himself to die a martyr’s death by the Lord Ruler, sparking the hard-won rebellion. After he is killed, Vin goes from innocent—such as is common in high fantasy novels, the protagonist goes from apprentice to hero—to the warrior archetype. She is set up as the main hero: we follow her development as stated by Tolkien and Kuznets (opposed to Kelsier’s that happened before the events of the novels, or that of auxiliary character Spook who is hinted to after the novels), yet Sanderson makes clear that all heroes can be heroes, as she dies and her advisor Sazed unexpectedly finds himself the actual Hero of Ages²⁵.

In the end, the hero-motif has most fully changed in Brandon Sanderson’s hands not through his heroes, but through his antagonists. The more the story progresses, the more similar Vin, retrospectively, becomes to the lord Ruler. This is not in morality or intent, as

²³ Although Elend has to be tutored—thus changed—to hold onto his new democracy in the second novel, he will always stay true to the values of his innocence-persona and does things just a little differently than all the others in order to hold on to them. When Sazed momentarily loses faith and abandons his values, it turns out to be those and his extensive works in service of them that is the final step of the happy ending, without which it couldn’t have happened.

²⁴ <http://brandonsanderson.com/annotation/113/Mistborn-Chapter-Four-Part-Two>

²⁵ As this happens in the final chapter of the *Mistborn* trilogy, such a twist would have read as a cheat for shock-value instead of a valid heroic choice by the author, were it not that Sanderson conveyed through his treatment of the hero-motif that anyone vitally contributes. Sazed is just the final piece of a large puzzle: no one is—or should be—the ‘one’ hero. (Considering our fascination with broken heroes, it goes to show how much we have changed this motif. From medieval heroes who can do the impossible, to the realisation that no man, no matter how great, can bear such a responsibility alone.) Helping to establish the choice for Sazed in that last moment as logical, are the contemplative blurbs before each chapter in Sazed’s style: they center him without the reader realising it. (Each novel has them, reflecting on previous events but with vitally important information, whose identity and relevance is revealed at the end. In the first novel the information helps to defeat the Lord Ruler, in the second it reveals a deep-laid deception that sets up the third novel and in the third Sazed explains all *Mistborn*’s defamiliarizing elements according to the logic of the world in real reality’s beloved methodological way.)

Vin's character comes closer to the more ideal hero while the Lord Ruler as an antagonist is obviously flawed, but through act and consequence. The Lord Ruler mistakenly altered the world to its terrible state, but tried the rest of his life to keep the balance—in his eyes through necessary and acceptable means. When Vin realises that she was led by the destructive power Ruin almost all throughout the three novels, that her road to the happy ending was actually a set-up for Ruin to be released, she becomes untrustworthy in the eyes of the reader. She becomes a questionable character who has made at least as large—perhaps a larger—mistake as the Lord Ruler. Her actions are tainted by the realisation she worked for evil, even if unbeknownst and even with a good heart. The Lord Ruler's intentions were honourable as well, protective even—even if his methods were to the taste of few. So which is which?

The real question becomes: do the boundaries even *exist*? Are they both becoming so much of a grey area that they can be considered as one within the hero-motif? It is made obvious here that the antagonist needs exploration in light of its influence on the hero's and the motif's relevance to our society—by allowing our heroes to darken we accept the flaws of righteousness; do we begin to accept the flaws of blame and the infliction of hurt by making antagonists lighter?

Sustained worlds

To be multiply recontextualizable, the literary text must appear complete in itself. The boundary of the 'work' therefore, will be that point at which the constructive principle stops—the point beyond which we have no right ... to expect it to be interesting outside the context of its origin.

- Morson 41

The sustainability of the world is divided into two aspects; the art of building a Secondary world whose logic is intrinsically sound enough to produce a believable reality within the possibilities of that world ("On Fairy-Stories" 60), and the longevity of the world's existence. For this part of the thesis I will look at how high fantasy finds space to sustain its world in-text despite experiments with the novel's length and format, and through its paratext, which is ever broadening cross-media and which introduces new ways of supporting sustainability. The influence of our reality on this aspect of high fantasy has us observing the most blatant and at the same time most subtle connection, that of request-and-demand: in the first instance,

publishers have a say in the shape of the novel both format-wise and content-wise²⁶, thus influencing the manner in which high fantasy authors approach the space they have to build sustainability. In the second instance, the reader becomes directly involved with the high fantasy world, as certain forms of paratext allow the reader and author to interact²⁷ and together can create a powerful sustainability outside of the boundaries of the material novel.

Formats

Considering the first aspect, Kuznets summarizes the requirement of sustainability as the need for ‘two or three volumes’²⁸ (19). Obviously, as the world’s logical soundness must be built and explained from scratch, it demands much of the story’s available writing space, becoming a character in itself. Tolkien indulges his world by condensing information tightly in *The Lord of the Rings*. It slows the pace for the contemporary reader, but as Middle Earth is so strongly similar to our reality—and with plot Tolkien neither feels the need for outrageousness—the novel uses its densely packed narrative to subtly bring Middle Earth’s unique character to life, lending credibility and thus sustainability to both it and the psychological development of its characters. Reversing the hypothesis, we could perhaps claim that the detailing in fact allows Middle Earth to stay *similar* to our reality despite profiling a unique high fantasy world (see note 9).

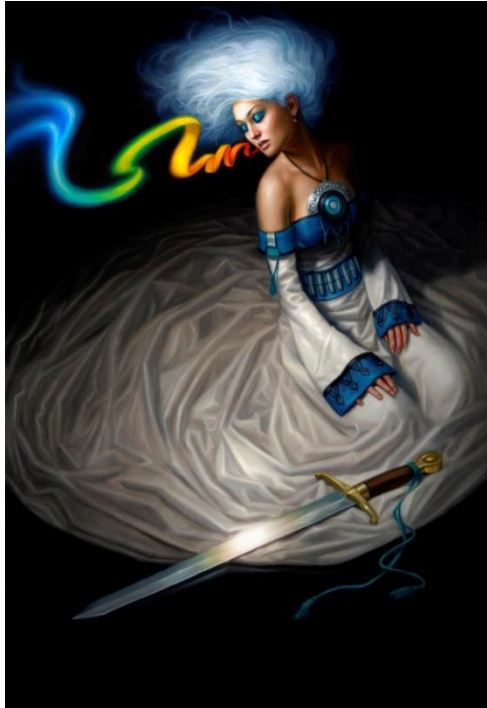
With Tolkien’s saturated mode of writing out of style and a bold experimentation with differing lengths of high fantasy formats, contemporary authors need to find new ways of retaining the same sense of sustainability. Additionally, the challenge of believability has become greater as worlds turn increasingly alien from our own—adding imaginative races and wildlife, intricate magic systems and experimenting with societal and environmental settings, making contemporary novels actually more escapist than that of Tolkien, who advocated it in his work (“On Fairy-Stories 80).

²⁶ For instance, trilogies are set up in such a manner that the first novel has a passably complete story arc in itself, so publishers can opt out on the other two when the first novel doesn’t take. Another example is that long series are usually only granted to established fantasy writers, as they will provide less of a risk to a publisher’s profits.

²⁷ Especially in high fantasy, fanbases are clearly delineated and have usually established a rapport with the author most commonly through the internet, which allows the reader in certain ways to become part of the paratext. High fantasy has this clear establishment of author-reader interaction just *because* it has a multiple-novel format, allowing the reader to influence an on-going process instead of commenting after the fact.

²⁸ I take this to mean the more general ‘story’s length.’ A novel’s format can usually be grouped around three examples: the standalone novel, which has the least space; the trilogy, which uses the space of three novels for one story arc; and the series, which has practically unlimited room for world building. There are ofcourse hybrid forms, with which to gain more time with sustainability but that is also in itself proof that the world is indeed sustainable (consider Pratchett’s *Discworld* standalone novels that each add to the characterisation of the world, or adding a trilogy to a first, it allows the world to deepen but through other story arcs).

Sanderson's *Mistborn* is a good example showing that to introduce the same amount of sustainability, the space in the novel needs to be optimized by the author—gauging key moments when to remind the reader of the arresting strangeness of the world, and when to explain said elements—the push-and-pull with reality thus creating a flux of plot movement. In order to explain the magic system at about a third of the (first) novel, Kelsier does this in-



Cover of Brandon Sanderson's *Warbreaker*, his latest standalone novel

story to his novice apprentice Vin²⁹, allowing for the reader to gain this knowledge at the same time, lumping together large quantities of information without losing plot momentum.

The second most common format is the series, a larger word count allowing for more space to delve deeper into creating solid world sustainability. As series tend to encompass more plotlines and POV-characters³⁰, it appears that the extra space is used to add plot complexity—thus that high fantasy world sustainability itself is not greatly added upon by extending the material scope³¹. The indication of this appears that world building can be saturated fairly

quickly, perhaps thanks to the contemporary technique of identifying key moments to create flux, which needs ('requires', but also certainly 'must

have') less space than Tolkien's detailing approach. This is supported as the setback of series tends to be that they can become either too encompassing to invest in, or feel dragged out and lose momentum³².

Therefore, if sustainability *can* be established over a relatively short amount of space, it is time to look at the standalone novel—still largely a novelty³³. As it has a small scope, the

²⁹ High fantasy novels usually use this set-up to ease the reader into the novel's world together with the central character, not only to create an attachment to the latter but allowing for the basic premises of the world's logic to be firmly set for the reader, as the world's believability—thus sustainability—depends on its inner consistency.

³⁰ Point of view.

³¹ High fantasy worlds appear no more complex in series than in other formats, nor do series spend significantly more words on the push-and-pull to establish its reality for the reader (compare *The Wheel of Time* series by Robert Jordan; *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R.R. Martin).

³² For instance, *The Wheel of Time* uses up much space rehashing already established characters. In a small but telling example, Nynaeve is said to pull her bread when angry. The literal mentioning of this is repeated in almost every segment she appears in over the span of more than ten novels.

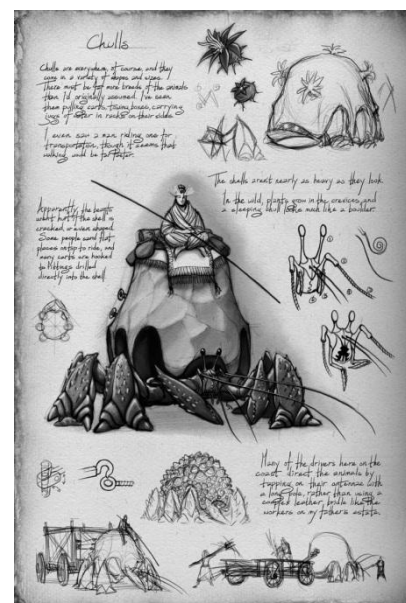
balance of convincing world building and a compelling plot becomes a very precarious one. Sanderson has written two, each holding up their own unique magic system, social hierarchy and environment: *Warbreaker*, and his debut novel *Elantris*. In *Elantris*, the central plot is the mystery of why the magic no longer works, centering on what said magic is and explaining its alienness as part of its momentum. *Warbreaker* on the other hand relates the magic system only marginally in its fighting scenes, centering the novel on the alien hierarchy and politics of a world ruled by living gods. The difficulty with the standalone novel therefore remains that it has an unfinished feel; there is always more to be discovered than can be covered³⁴.

Paratext

The other aspect of sustainability lies in the accompaniment of the actual text, which Genette called paratext:

... [the] accompaniment of a certain number of production, themselves verbal or not, like an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations. ... "An undecided zone" between the inside and the outside, itself without rigorous limits, either towards the interior (the text) or towards the exterior (the discourse of the world on the text) ... a zone not just of transition, but of transaction. (262-3)

Paratext³⁵ is incredibly well-suited to support and advance the sustainability of a world, and is also evidence of it, as the more paratext appears surrounding the text in the desire to continue the world, the more it shows its strength. One time-tested appearance is the insertion of maps and appendixes to add not only extra information, but to lend credibility to the actual possibility of the world's existence: 'this concern for the credibility of the secondary world created in modern fantasy likewise accounts for the care over topography. ... A modern



Drawing from *The Way of Kings*, detailing its wildlife

³³ I focus here on 'purely' standalone novels, that introduce a world and then abandon it after the novel wraps up. The variant of standalones Pratchett uses fall under a different technique, as Discworld becomes an overall combining story arc for all novels.

³⁴ Consider that even though the space can be too limited for the story arc, high fantasy readers are also not accustomed to standalones. We have little trouble accepting this economic take in mainstream literature (see note 10 on postmodernism's reality building).

³⁵ Considering Genette's definition of paratext, I also assume the author's website to be part of paratext, as it contains more information on the world and the process behind creating the world. It is also a perfect example of the exchange platform Genette mentions in which author and reader can freely interact.

audience ... is less willing to accept vagueness and inconsistency in this area' (Thompson 219). In later editions of novels, an added section from the author often appears, commenting on reader's reviews and critiques, explaining the world and adding to its backstory—already showing this interactive element. Unfortunately, when communicating in this way, it is always after the fact. Thanks to the internet, this need no longer be the case. Contemporary authors keep blogs³⁶, post chapters that have been edited out, or even their work notes. There is an upward trend of authors embracing the internet as an open-exchange platform with readers, Sanderson is one of the most extensive examples. The *Mistborn* trilogy has an extensive guide the reader can follow chapter-by-chapter, devoted to background information on writing the novels. These additional pieces of information embed themselves into the world, making it more sustainable not only because it adds to believability, but because it allows the world to exist off paper.

Using the internet offers many different possibilities of reader-author interaction, allowing the reader to become involved not just in the reception, but in the production as well, ensuring their investment in the world before the novel is actually out—sustainability pur sang. *Warbreaker* was posted for free on Sanderson's website as he wrote it³⁷, involving the reader from draft to finished product. Another real value of reader-author interaction is that the author receives information from the reader on the work in a far more direct and especially more personal manner, connecting the author to the people he is writing for, and for the reader to give something back. A very good example shows readers of *The Way of Kings* starting the trend of posting fake reviews of the novel on Twitter, taking hilarious forms. Sanderson put these on his website³⁸ in recognition of his readers, and the insider-joke they have all become a part of.

Conclusion

Reflecting back

High fantasy is not recognized as literature by literary criticism. Reasons given as to why are its stale conventionalism, its inability to transcend motifs, and its lack of actual reality and thus real world-critique. I hope to have given enough insight in the development and

³⁶ Less extensive, but known for his open-and-honest blogs in response to readers, is Patrick Rothfuss. Mosttimes funny, sometimes sarcastic—especially when the extensive process of creating a novel is undervalued by impatient readers—in his answers, he usually accompanies these with authentic cartoons showing a healthy dose of self humor (www.patrickrothfuss.com, see the 'Illustrations' section for an example).

³⁷ Sanderson maintained towards his publishers that even with the free e-book, the paper versions would sell, as his readers were both loyal enough, and would want the finished, refined product as art-enthusiasts.

³⁸ <http://brandonsanderson.com/book/The-Way-of-Kings/page/59/Fake-Twitter-Reviews-of-the-Way-of-Kings>.

techniques of contemporary high fantasy to have disproven these claims, especially in consideration that many literary genres share significant characteristics with high fantasy that *are* recognized by literary criticism. A case could be made by comparing high fantasy to the strongly motif-based Irish literature on Cú Chulainn; the even more ancient roots of King Arthur-stories; the almost immediately consolidated boundaries of utopian fiction³⁹; the almost-too-grand events of the epic; or the fantastical elements present in medieval, children's, dystopian and postmodernist literature. The only element of high fantasy that is not found and valued in other forms of literature—thus appearing to be the reason that has kept high fantasy from being considered such—is the apparently complete dispersal of our reality. However, this thesis has shown that in the discussed, essential elements of high fantasy our reality is an integral part of its process and reception.

Authors of high fantasy expertly push and pull elements of our reality to create their own, reflecting a societal critique in which elements they choose. Recently, authors have become more aware of the possibilities in pushing boundaries, partly because of our real world embrace of technology; as science is increasingly integrated into the magic system, authors use this new compatibility to push their worlds forward through development and



Change in high fantasy literature develops underneath its surface, as seen, and habits can be hard to break; cover art for Sanderson's The Way of Kings which features multiple heroes

change. The same is happening, although perhaps more subconsciously, with the motifs of high fantasy elements as they too take on a real world message. *How* we present the hero is connected to reality—everyone can be a hero, and a happy ending is a team effort that no one can do alone. As the real world looks towards cooperation instead of its history of colonisation,

the same is effective in high fantasy motifs and means that there is no ground to the statement quoted in the introduction on high fantasy only able to look to the past. Literary criticism has not looked beyond the surface of high fantasy and thus not recognized its connection to reality and its status as literature. Real world influences outside of the text also help renew the genre

³⁹ Although both indeed quickly consolidated, there is a stark difference that does not go unnoticed: as utopian fiction consolidated, it didn't survive outside of its first burst of existence. If consolidation of boundaries really is all there is to high fantasy, it would not be as strong today as it was during Tolkien's time.

and thus ensure its sustainability. The experimentation with differing lengths of novels has allowed authors to become experts at efficiently identifying key moments for push-and-pull, building worlds in a way that other literature has benefited from by adapting it for themselves, as high fantasy is influenced by mainstream literary techniques.

The effect of the reader, a new consideration for literary criticism, is applicable to high fantasy as well, perhaps again even more here as high fantasy fanbases are more clearly defined and approachable from both sides. There is a direct interaction possible due to the popularity of the internet and changing the bond between author and reader. The author is humanised as readers are given insight into his/her thoughts, doubts, creative process and reactions to the readers. The reader is acknowledged by the author, and is stimulated in its contribution to the novel before, during and after creation.

Considerations

Here, I would like to expand on the conclusions made before. One of these is the relationship of high fantasy with ‘true’ technology. High fantasy worlds do remain predominantly pre-technology, notwithstanding some hesitant experimentation. Reasons for this need not be high fantasy’s inability to look beyond the past. Technology has as much difficulty being translated into literature as a magical system (besides the creation of believability for the latter), as both have the pitfall of being used as a *deus ex machina* for a solution and destroying the credibility of the story. The inevitability of the cell phone in multiple forms of media almost proved to be its undoing, just as magic can be used as a short-cut to an easy way out—which is why it has restrictions and consequences alike to a service malfunction for cell phones.

Both systems actually work in a very similar manner, which means that introducing both in a high fantasy world would create two different systems, thus rendering us with an imbalance.

Unless they can be forged together (see note 16).

Considering this, the absence of technology—especially as the magic system has become more technical in itself—can apparently be attributed to another reason than high fantasy’s inability to evolve and is an excellent start for a comparative study of systems in high fantasy and mainstream literature.



The compatibility of fantasy and technology

Developing this thought, the exclusion of high fantasy from criticism actually culminates in literary criticism harming itself. There is much to be learned from high fantasy's literary techniques—some of which are already valued in other forms of literature, although its source is largely unrecognized—and by creating an exchange platform, high fantasy can infuse alternate uses of techniques based on the same principle with new insights, helping each other achieve greater heights. Consider also, that next to the particular use of literary techniques, high fantasy incorporates relevant messages reacting to a real world societal critique. For instance: the new and upcoming ecocriticism studies nature in literature and how nature is portrayed. Environment and nature are never so thoroughly considered elsewhere as they are in high fantasy, yet as literary criticism does not recognize the genre, ecocriticism loses a valuable source of data. Whether or not nature is alike in our reality and the novel's reality, nature is used to convey the same message. Whenever nature *does* diverge into “made-up” territory⁴⁰, we must consider that the transgression of boundaries from the actual to the imaginable is nothing new. Compare posthumanism transgressing the boundaries of what is human—why not physical reality as we know it now?

To conclude this thesis, high fantasy is claiming a future for itself as a genre, and its recognition as literature would be of great value to literary criticism as a whole, with new uses of technique and cross-relational aspects to consider. High fantasy develops its themes, pushes its boundaries and interacts strongly with our reality. As literary criticism exists to find an open exchange of ideas and techniques—allowing all that fall under it to benefit from its fruits—and with the concept of literature constantly evolving through our ability to understand and respect the value of the different and the experimental, there is no reason why high fantasy should not be considered under the same scrutiny.

⁴⁰ Although here again a case could be made for stating that high fantasy looks to the impossible rather than the possible-in-the-future—we simply do not know what evolution will bring, so we should not assume anything that is not connected to high fantasy's magic system (of which I believe we have proven satisfyingly it does not exist).

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Illustrations

- p. 4 <http://aidanmoher.com/blog/2010/11/interviews/interview-brandon-sanderson-author-of-towers-of-midnight-and-the-way-of-kings/>
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- Note 3 6 <http://blog.patrickrothfuss.com/2009/02/concerning-release-of-book-two/>⁴¹.



⁴¹ Coincidentally, when looking for the cartoon, I discovered Patrick Rothfuss actually links to Brandon Sanderson in this particular blog. Having been inspired by Sanderson's auction of the naming rights of a character in his new novel, Rothfuss has done the same.