

THE *BAG*

OF **Holding**

BY NANCY HOLDER

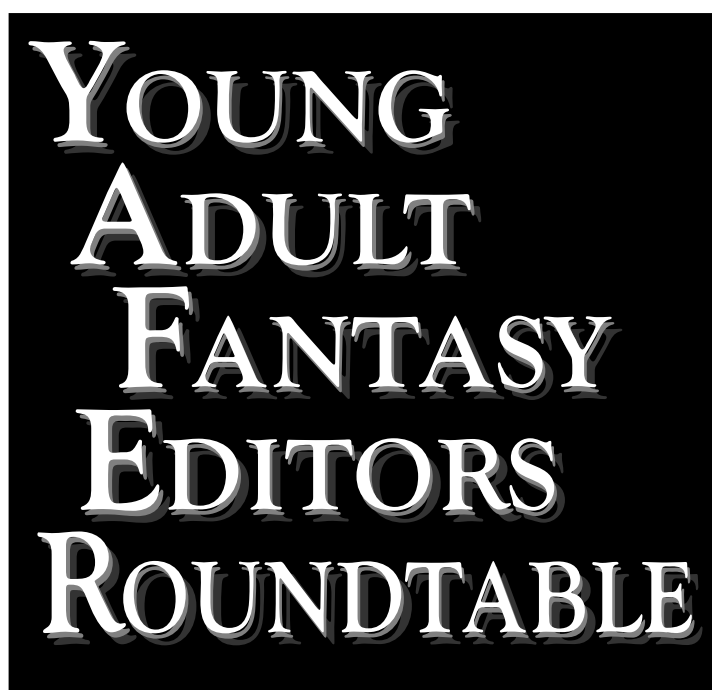


Continuing my series on young adult speculative

fiction, I present three YA fantasy editors in a round robin discussion, with my deepest gratitude. They are:

JH: John Helfers, Senior Editor at Tekno Books, where among many other achievements, he managed the assembly of the Newbery Award series of reprint short fiction anthologies, published by Gareth Stevens. As a freelance editor, he's edited fiction for the YA lines *Actionopolis* and *Adventure Boys*.

KH: Kerrie Hughes, who has edited nearly a dozen YA/accessible anthologies with Martin H. Greenberg, including the *The Girl's Guide to Guns and Monsters*; *Zombie Raccoons and Killer Bunnies*; and the forthcoming, *Chicks Kick Ass*.



I have sold short fiction to both John and Kerrie, and I have stories in *A Girl's Guide to Guns and Monsters* and *Chicks Kick Ass*.

AP: Annette Pollert, my editor at Simon Pulse (Simon and Schuster), for the new *Crusade* YA fantasy series I am co-writing with Debbie Viguié. She is also L.J. Smith's editor (*Vampire Diaries*,) and edits a lot of YA paranormal romance. She is especially proud of Jeri Smith-Ready's upcoming *Shade*.

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(John Helfers)

How do you define fantasy? Dark Fantasy?

JH: I define Fantasy as a genre where impossible creatures exist (dragons, griffins, vampires, etc.) or events unexplainable by modern science (magic, psionics, etc.) happen in a world or narrative. The world may be our own, or a completely different one, but that sense of unreality—that there are things and beings in it that ordinary humans cannot easily explain—must be there.

If I had to define Dark Fantasy, I would classify it as a sub-genre of fantasy that has a harder edge—the protagonist of the story may not necessarily be the hero, for example. In fact, in many DF novels, it may be hard to tell if there is a hero, as most everyone typically has dark pasts, secrets, and their own agendas, which usually run counter to what others want. The choices the protagonist or their party are faced with to accomplish their goals often may have detrimental effects no matter which one they choose. Dark Fantasy is usually much grimmer than the other sub-genres of fantasy—often there is a sense of overwhelming odds arrayed against them, and the protagonist's often face futility or even hopelessness while trying to survive the book's plot.

KH: Fantasy is anything that suspends reality and crosses into the magical. Dark Fantasy adds sex, death, pain and monsters.

How do you define young adult fantasy? Dark fantasy?

JH: My answer is the same as my previous one, only the protagonist is a child or young adult. The same goes for my definition of Dark Fantasy, only sometimes I think it is even harsher—children and young adults can be darker than many adults give them credit for.

KH: YA switches the focus of the main character/s from adult/s to young adult/s. It generally leaves out 'on stage' sex, very foul language, and gore. This really depends more on the author and whether they are writing for an innocent or advanced audience. Dark YA is for the more advanced teen and quite often appeals to adults. Innocent fantasy can be read by, or to, very young children.

What do you think draws readers to fantasy?

JH: In the fantasy fiction genre, literally anything is possible.

What do you think are the strengths of the genre?

JH: The main strength of fantasy is that it can unlock the imagination of its readers, which is one of the most powerful forces in the universe.

KH: Escapism and unlimited possibility.

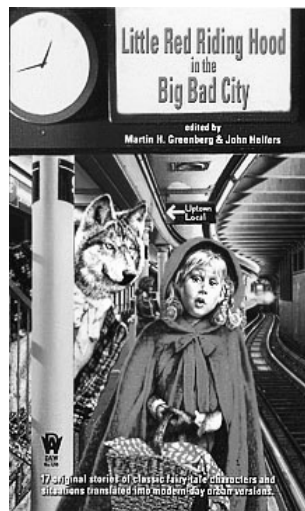
What do you think are the weaknesses?

JH: Paradoxically, fantasy's strength can also be its weakness. Well-crafted or emotionally engaging fantasy can, unfortunately, cause a reader to "fall in love" with that world, fantasizing about it or even "living" in it (whether that happens online in forums and chat rooms or simply in daydreams), to the detriment of engaging in their real, everyday lives. Using fantasy as an escape from everyday life can be a wonderful thing, but readers also have to be aware of where the fantasy ends.

KH: I don't see any in the genre itself. I see it only in writers, editors, and publishers who think they, and only they, know what makes a story successful.

What qualities in a fantasy novel appeal to you as an editor?

JH: To me, characters (both good and bad) that I care about are the most important thing for any fantasy novel. An author can create the most fantastical, wondrous world, but if its inhabitants fall flat, there's no reason to go exploring. A new or different world is also fantastic, but there are plenty of fantasies set in slightly different versions of the modern world we know that are just as engaging. And both of these must come together in a story that is germane to the characters and the world and draws the reader into the book so well that they believe this fantastic story they are reading might have actually happened at some point, in some other dimension, in the universe.



KH: Paranormal stuff, characters that step outside of normal expectations and storylines that aren't predictable.

AP: It's wonderful to check reality at the door and visit another realm. Whether it is a completely imagined world, ancient, future or dystopia, or a world that resembles our own, but filled with vampires, dragons or other mythical creatures, it's thrilling to explore the possibilities. I'd much rather read about an epic journey from the safety of my couch than put on my sneakers and set out on a dangerous quest. But that's just me. I wouldn't be brave enough to inhabit most fantasy novels. It's a different kind of challenge to help an author shape those narratives into the most vivid, relatable and exciting novels possible. That's more my speed.

That said, I also love novels that ask, "what if I lived in a world that...?" It's fascinating to see how authors explore that question on both societal and individual levels. How exciting is it to imagine new norms? New beings? New worlds? Sometimes stepping into another world is the best way to gain perspective and truly understand your own. Novels that have some grounding in a recognizable reality are of particular interest to me.

When editors say they want something that is "fresh," what do they mean by that?

JH: "Fresh" simply means the latest/newest take on the timeworn story tropes that will still appeal to readers. The latest zombie craze is proof of this. The simple fact is that there are no new stories—only each individual author's take on the quest or the love story, or the coming-of-age story.

KH: I think they want to discover the next great original writer. That or they have been watching too much *America's Next Top Model*.

AP: Unique and distinct would be good synonyms. When I refer to a novel as "fresh," I usually mean that it stands out from other published books in the genre and feels like it could only have come from that author. More specifically, I use to refer to voice and tone. A "fresh" novel positively distinguishes itself from the other manuscripts I'm reading and the other novels I've read—and is totally engrossing.

What is the one thing you wish you could tell aspiring authors of young adult literature in general, and of young adult fantasy specifically?

JH: (edited out "wish you" and inserted "would"): Never underestimate your audience—when I approach children's/YA fiction, either as a writer or an editor, I assume that the protagonists (as well as my intended audience) are as intelligent, perceptive, and self-aware as any adult. I never speak down to children or young adults, because they'll see right through that, and then you've lost them as a reader.

KH: Write something you can love but learn how to take criticism and be able to identify toxic people who do not have your best interests at heart. Also, read as much as you can and learn good manners. No one wants to work with a drama dork.

AP: While there are many things I might tell aspiring authors of teen literature (like to focus your novel on the teen experience, to create authentic teen voices, to polish, polish, polish the beginning of your manuscript so that there is scene building *and* character development *and* drama in the first few pages), my main suggestion is this: write what you love. If you are passionate about the narrative you are crafting and the characters you are creating, it comes out on the page. A novel infused with an author's energy is a book that will captivate readers.

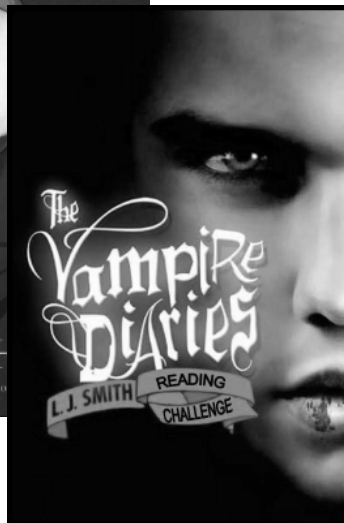
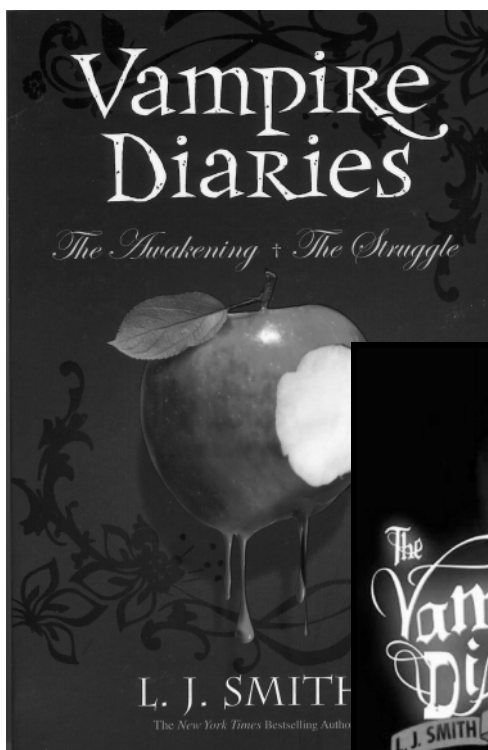
What is the biggest mistake most new authors of young adult fantasy make?

JH: The biggest mistake—and this really goes for any fiction writer—is to try and latch onto whatever craze is shooting up the bestseller lists right at the moment. Don't get me wrong—if it's a subgenre a writer loves to read and write, then they should pursue it. But a writer shouldn't try to subvert their story into something it's not simply because they think it might have a chance of selling better.

KH: Trying to imitate their favorite writer, or writing fan fic type storylines, and thinking that creative writing classes actually teach how to write.

What are some successful ways authors have approached retelling fairy tales?

AP: The retellings that speak to me always have an engaging (and surprising!) twist. They ask "what if" in unusual ways to challenge and broaden a memorable tale. It's fascinating to read tales that are set in a different context or historical period—and especially when these tales are pulled into a contemporary setting and set spinning in a new direction.



Why do you think retold fairy tales appeal to readers?

AP: Retold fairy tales allow readers to spend time with familiar characters and situations, but hear the story from a different perspective or see it unfold in a different context. It's fun to see where a traditional tale and retelling converge and diverge. Charting a new course for a tale or exploring new emotional truths within a known story structure can be liberating for both author and reader—and there is a lot of variety depending on how aligned the retelling is from the original!

Do you have ideas on how some fantasy writers seem to create such compelling worlds that readers can continue to “live” in them long after they've finished reading?

AP: My favorite fiction (and nonfiction) books have complex worlds that fascinate, but don't overwhelm, the reader. In these books, you get the sense that an author knows every single detail about how a place looks, how a community functions, how individuals interact with each other, etc. It feels like an author knows what happened to their characters before the narrative began—and that s/he knows what will happen to these characters long after the novel ends.

It's important to trust an author (even if you can't trust the narrator!) to share these rich details as they are needed. Then a reader can completely relinquish control, suspend belief and occupy an author's world. And when these details are integrated into the text so that a reader experiences the world with a character, it makes a fantastic reading experience. When I'm reading, I'm usually thinking—“Why are you telling me this? And why are you telling me this *now*?” The authors of the most compelling worlds share what needs to be on the page for the narrative to move forward—but hint at all that isn't on the page, which makes for some fascinating imagining after a book is closed.

Would you mind naming 10 seminal works of fantasy that an aspiring YA fantasy author should read?

JH: In no particular order (and in case anyone's wondering why no more recent works are mentioned here it's because I haven't had time to read them yet):

The Hobbit by J.R.R. Tolkien: I haven't revisited Lord of the Rings in years, but I would pick up and reread *The Hobbit* tomorrow, and be just as enchanted by it as I was when I first found it.

The Narnia Chronicles by C.S. Lewis (seven volumes): I suggest readers set aside Lewis's Christian “message” and just enjoy these books for what they are—enchanting fantasy stories

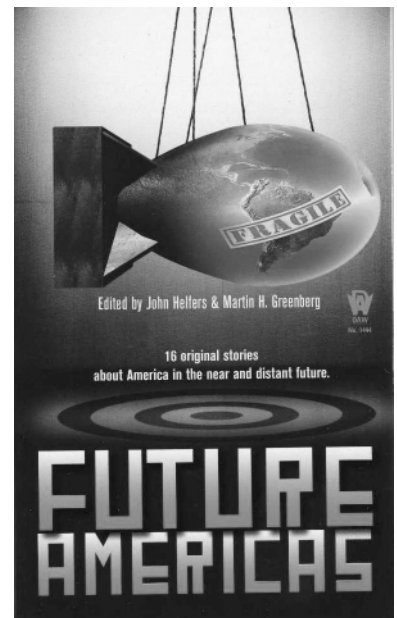
featuring brave boys and girls setting out on incredible adventures in a fantastic land.

The Chronicles of Prydain by Lloyd Alexander (five volumes): Based loosely on Welsh myth and legends, it is one of the few series that never ages, featuring characters who grow, love, lose, doubt, and make very, very tough choices as they mature into young adults.

The Song of Ice and Fire series by George R.R. Martin (five volumes to date): Epic fantasy at its best—an amazing creation of myth, worldbuilding, characters, plot that I hope George will have the chance to finish.

The Dark Tower Series by Stephen King (seven volumes): If you're looking for a blend of fantasy, science fiction, western, and horror genre into something uniquely its own, look no further. And if you think such a combination cannot give rise to amazing characters and an epic plot, you'd be very, very wrong.

A Flight of Storks and Angels by Robert Deveraux: One of the first fantasy novels I acquired during my time overseeing the Five Star SF/Fantasy line, and the one acquisition I am the most proud of in that line. Deveraux writes rural fantasy unlike anyone else, with incisive character portraits of both adults and children, keen insight into human nature, and a plot that gradually unfolds until the reader is swept away by it. A work worthy of being reprinted by a major publisher.



Write something you can love but learn how to take criticism and be able to identify toxic people who do not have your best interests at heart. Also, read as much as you can and learn good manners.

(Kerrie Hughes)

It's important to trust an author (even if you can't trust the narrator!) to share these rich details as they are needed. [Annette Pollert]

The *Sandman* comic book series by Neil Gaiman: A work is a work after all, and Gaiman's reimagining of an old 1940s comic book character into something completely different heralded a new direction is comic storytelling, and in fantasy overall.

Animal Farm by George Orwell: Some might disagree with this choice as a fantasy novel, but I've never seen a complex idea (Communism) expressed in such a simple, effective way, particularly by talking animals.

The *Busytown* books of Richard Scarry: Getting down to children's works now, but still worth it. Scarry's anthropomorphized animals are sometimes more human than we are.

Treasure Island by Robert Louis Stevenson: A historical adventure fantasy, to be sure, but I'm pretty sure that twelve-year-olds really never went sailing for buried pirate treasure in the 19th century. Stevenson kept the action rolling to the very last page, and even made Long John Silver human—a bad human, but human nonetheless.

KH: I don't think of anything as seminal. Sometimes the worst thing a person can do is to follow an intellectual or popular herd instead of their own creativity and interests. Love what you do. Read everything and anything, never stop.

Ten seminal movies or TV shows?

JH: Again, in no particular order:

The Twilight Zone: the first show to push the boundaries of what sf/fantasy television could truly do.

Star Wars, A New Hope: Take away the spaceships and aliens, and suddenly you're on the classic quest to rescue the princess and destroy the evil empire.

Big Trouble in Little China: a true cult classic, John Carpenter unleashed everything he could and threw it on the screen. Fortunately, Kurt Russell knew exactly how to roll with the craziness, giving the character of Jack Burton a larger-than-life presence portraying an ordinary man getting mixed-up in very unordinary things in Chinatown.

The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy: Peter Jackson and his crew created the look and feel of Middle-Earth while paring down the story to fit into about ten hours of film—an incredible feat in and of itself.

Vampire Hunter D: For mature audiences. One of the first anime films I ever saw, the evocation of a post-apocalyptic Earth ruled by vampires 10,000 years in the future and the weirdness that went on from that opening remains with me still.

Ninja Scroll: Also for mature audiences. The tale of warring clans, lone warriors, and freakish assassins during the intrigue of 16th century Japan is simply too mesmerizing to ignore.

Conan the Barbarian: Say what you want about Arnold, he was perfectly cast as the Robert E. Howard's man from Cimmeria. Add John Milius's assured direction (even more amazing considering it was filmed in 1984) a mesmerizing James Earl Jones (I still want to know the behind the scenes negotiations that

brought him on board), one really huge snake, and the incredible score by Basil Poledouris, sit back, and watch the swords flash and the blood flow.

The *Harry Potter* films: The various incarnations of J.K. Rowling's books appear to be the distilled essence of her novels, and are brought to magical life with a talented cast and amazing special effects.

The Princess Bride: Based on the novel by "S. Morganstern" (actually written by William Goldman), the film takes many of the traditional fairy-tale tropes and either skews them or turns them completely on their head. The sly humor throughout the movie only makes it better.

Dungeons and Dragons: The Animated Series: Having been hooked on D&D from a young age, the idea that a national network would actually produce an animated series based on the RPG was music to my ears and candy to my eyes. But even though the characters were stock classes in the game, they were deeper and more complex than typical cartoon protagonists of the time, and knew the value of teamwork, even if they didn't always agree on things.

KH: Again, nothing is truly seminal. So much in life is cultural crossover and personal experience. It's a mistake to think that movies and TV will ever be able to truly provide a foundation for anyone. Creativity is vitally linked to living, learning, listening, making mistakes, perseverance, and resilience.

Is there anything else you would like to say as an editor to a community of science fiction, fantasy, and horror writers?

AP: Thank you for all of your creativity and energy. Writers—and fans!—of science fiction, fantasy and horror are incredibly dedicated to their genres. That enthusiasm is both contagious and inspiring. And I can't wait to read "fresh" new teen novels in those genres....



Nancy Holder's next YA horror novel, *Possessions: The Evil Within*, will be out in June.

