

THE *BAG* OF **Holding**

BY NANCY HOLDER



Unless your homeworld lies across the 8th

dimension, you probably know that young adult literature is currently very hot, with lots of NYT hits and movie sales. I'm a member of the Enchanted Inkpot YA fantasy writers group blog, and I queried my fellow Inkies for help with this "YA Fantasy 101" round robin column. Seven Inkies took the time out of their crazy schedules to answer my questions. My questions and their answers appear below, in some cases edited for the sake of space. Thanks, Inkie sisters!

I am also planning a column on YA fantasy editors, and another on YA fantasy agents. Hopefully we'll also cover YA horror and YA SF. If you have thoughts or topics you'd like to discuss, please email me at buffnan@aol.com and let me know.

Our featured YA fantasy writers: (Many of these authors have multiple forthcoming books:)

- EB: Ellen Booraem, *The Unnameables* (Harcourt Children's Books, 2009)
- LC: Leah Cypess, *Mistwood* (HarperCollins, May 2010)
- DF: Deva Fagan, *The Magical Misadventures of Prunella Bogthistle* (Holt, May 2010)
- KH: Kiki Hamilton, *The Faerie Ring* (Tor Books, Macmillan, Spring 2011)
- PH: P. J. Hoover, *The Forgotten Worlds Trilogy: Book 3: Necropolis* (CBAY Books, Fall, 2010)
- ML: Malinda Lo, *Ash* (Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, Sept 2009)
- CP: Cindy Pon, *Silver Phoenix: Beyond the Kingdom of Xia* (Greenwillow Books, April 2009)

Please define young adult fantasy.

EB: Oh god. My book, *The Unnameables*, is a good example of how vague this term can be. My publisher says it's for ages 10-14, which seems to be older middle grade/younger young adult. Amazon has it ages 9-12, firmly middle grade. The ALA has it on the Best Books for Young Adults list.

Regardless of the reader's age, a protagonist in a YA fantasy usually is trying to make sense of the world and determine where he/she fits in it, and then decide how to act on that information. In some recent books, he or she is figuring the world out just before or just after leaving it to become a ghost, zombie, or bit of ether, which has been a very interesting new take.

LC: Fantasy that's marketed to young adults.



YA characters are just as complex as those in adult fantasy; the themes can be just as dark and the voices just as cynical. Nobody dumbs down the writing for teens. (Ellen Booraem)

DF: Fantasy is (for me) fiction that invokes the numinous, the magical, the fabulous. Defining YA is a bit trickier. In my opinion, the average YA fantasy is indistinguishable from the average adult fantasy in terms of the reading level. I think it's the content and the themes that really define YA: teen protagonists, coming-of-age stories, etc.

KH: Directed at readers from age 14 to 114, young adult fantasy is the genre that first cracks opens the doors to teen readers revealing mature, intriguing and often dark fantastical concepts, within real and imagined worlds.

ML: I see young adult fantasy as a sub-genre of the young adult category. So, within YA, which are books marketed primarily to teens, there are several sub-genres: romance, mystery, science fiction, fantasy, etc. Similarly, adult fantasy is a sub-genre within the category of adult fiction.

CP: I would say that most YA fantasy has a teenage protagonist, although this is quite common in adult fantasy as well. In general, I find YA fantasy to be faster paced. But among all the genres, I feel the line between adult and young adult most blurred in fantasy.

How is YA fantasy different from adult fantasy?

EB: I puzzle over this a lot. YA characters are just as complex as those in adult fantasy; the themes can be just as dark and the voices just as cynical. Nobody dumbs down the writing for teens. My best guess is that a YA book may have more plot—or maybe a clearer plot—than some adult books, and may be slightly more optimistic about the universe. Most of the ones I've read do end, if not happily, at least with a sense of dawn breaking over the desolation.

LC: These days, it's mostly not. The only real difference I can think of is that the age of the main character has to be under the age of 19 or so for a young adult book. Also, you can get away with a shorter book.

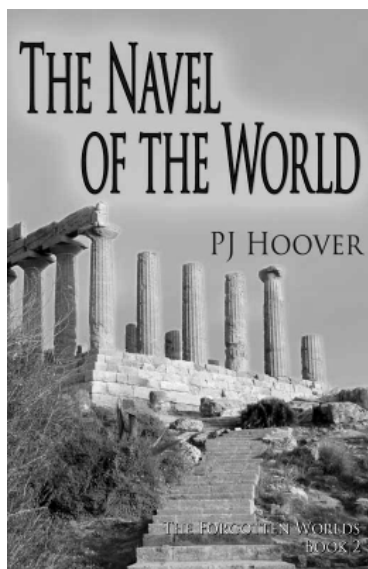
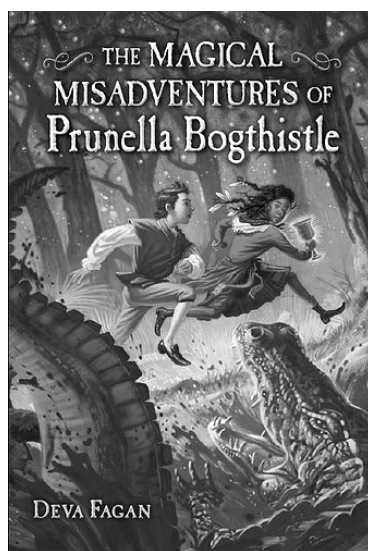
DF: As I said above, I think it's more a matter of content than anything. YA fantasy tends to feature teen protagonists, coming-of-age stories, and other themes that are likely to appeal to young adults. In terms of the actual writing level, I don't think there is a clear difference. When I write, for example, I don't intentionally avoid big words or complicated concepts. On thing

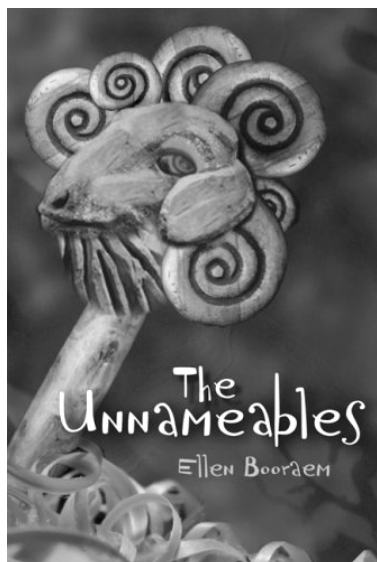
I have observed, however, is that YA fantasy novels often seem to be more fast-paced than adult fantasy, perhaps because YA readers have less tolerance for slow pacing. Then again, I'm not teen, and I don't have a lot of tolerance for slow pacing either!

KH: The difference lies primarily in the age of the protagonists as well as the graphic / sexual content. Young adult tends to have characters that are age 19 and under, and the content includes age appropriate sensitivity to sexual content. However, there is discussion of a new genre referred to as "New Adult" that would be targeted to more college level age of 20 to 25, though one would anticipate significant crossover.

PH: Sometimes I'll read a YA fantasy, and it will feel more like an adult fantasy. Why is this? Sometimes it's hard to put my finger on what the exact reason is. It's not explicit subject material. There are many edgy elements in YA books; not much is held back. So when I try to name what it is, the main differentiation I can come up with is emotions. In general, YA books have very intense relationships with the erratic emotions of teens mixed in. (I use erratic in the best possible sense of the word.) As readers of YA, we come to expect these emotions on the page, and when the pages are void of them, the books feel more adult in nature.

ML: I think the primary difference is a marketing one. Adult fantasy is marketed primarily toward adults; young adult fantasy is marketed primarily toward "young" adults, aka teens. As many fantasy readers know, protagonists in fantasy are often teens, so there is a lot of crossover in terms of readership. I do think there can be a difference in style of writing, though. Young adult as a category tends to be more focused on emotional





immediacy and a rapidly developing plot than adult fiction is, so those characteristics can also be found in YA fantasy. And I think there's more of a focus on whimsy and wonder in YA fantasy than in adult fantasy.

What kinds of young adult fantasy are there? Sub-genres?

DF: It's a huge, incredibly rich spectrum right now! You've got straight epic fantasy,

you've got fairy tale retellings, you've got vampires and werewolves and fairies. And then you've got cities that eat one another, and killer unicorns, and girls who grow up in magical theaters surrounded by characters from every play that ever was.

KH: The beauty of fantasy is that if you can think it up and sell it, then it exists, but the categories are similar to those in an adult fantasy genre:

Historical fiction
Urban Fantasy
Steampunk
Epic Fantasy
High Fantasy
Science Fiction

ML: Just like in adult fantasy, there are sub-genres in YA fantasy. For example, urban fantasy is hot in both adult and YA. Fairy tale retellings are also an enduring theme in YA fantasy. High fantasy is another sub-genre.

Why do you write young adult fantasy?

EB: I guess because of that sense of optimism about the universe, which I share. Although I know I'm writing for kids or teens, I don't have an age-group in mind when I write. My editor decides who will want to read what I've written. For reasons I haven't figured out, anytime I set out to write specifically for adults I assume an unpleasantly snarky voice, which even I can't stand for more than a chapter.

LC: I think of myself as writing just "fantasy." In fact, I originally wrote *Mistwood* with an adult audience in mind. But when the book was done, I realized it could sell as a young adult book just as easily.

DF: The short answer is: because those are the stories inside me. I've never sat down and said "Now I will write a YA fantasy! Begone, adult world!"

The longer answer is: I love fantasy (and science fiction) because I think they have the potential to open our minds and expand our horizons and make us dream, yet also to ground us in what truly matters. I love YA because there will always be a part of me trying to find my place in the universe, a part that stands poised between one thing and another and is trying to see clearly who I really am.

KH: It wasn't a conscious decision. I began writing with the intent to pen a story for my young daughter. But the characters told me a different story than what I had intended to write, so I wrote that instead and it was a young adult story.

PH: When I write YA fantasy, it reminds me of how powerful all the emotions of being a teen can be. Everything is so immediate to teens. Time passes slowly. Every second, every look, and every word matters. Teens can build entire scenarios out of a single piece of dialogue, and being able to do this in YA books with the added element of fantasy is powerful. We, as writers, can make these unbelievable actually come true.

ML: Honestly, the YA part was kind of an accident. I set out to write a fairy tale retelling with *ASH*, and initially I gave no thought to whether it was YA or adult. It was only after I finished it that I realized it seemed to fit well into the YA market. Now that I'm working on a second YA fantasy, though, I have to say I really enjoy it. I like the focus on plot and emotion.

CP: Like many other new authors, I fell into the YA genre quite by accident. I had originally written *Silver Phoenix* thinking it was straight adult fantasy. It's a pleasure to find myself as a young adult author. I think it's the most exciting one to be in, a genre that is expanding and pushing boundaries, willing to take risks. And I've said it before, but young adult novel fans are the best fans out there!

Why do you think it's so popular right now?

DF: I think YA fantasy is particularly popular right now for three reasons. Firstly, because the success of *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* brought YA fantasy into the public eye in a big way. Secondly, because there are some really, truly phenomenal books on the shelves right now. And thirdly, because a lot of us have realized that growing up doesn't mean giving up on dreams, and that turning 20 is no guarantee that you'll know who you are and what to do with your life.



KH: Because the stories are compelling and interesting, and include characters that the reader cares about and can empathize with.

ML: I think that people like escapism and fun in their reading, and YA fantasy can certainly be fun and escapist. It's easy to get sucked into Harry Potter's world, for example, because it begins in our own world. The same can be said for urban fantasy, which I think is one reason it's so popular now, too, in both adult and YA. Sometimes adult fantasy can be a bit heavy on the world-building and politics—subjects which are of course interesting, but aren't as lighthearted as, well, Fizzing Whizbees or Quidditch.

Do you also write for older readers?

LC: Of my current projects, there's only one that would have to be for older readers, because it breaks what I think is the one rule of YA fantasy—the heroine is in her late 20s.

DF: I haven't yet, but if the right story comes along I'd happily do so.

KH: Not yet, but I can imagine penning an adult novel at some point.

ML: Currently I'm focusing on writing my next YA fantasy, but I've written for adults in the past (when I was a reporter), and I plan to write adult fiction in the future, too.

Do you use a pseudonym or other way of keeping your young adult readers "away" from your adult fiction?

DF: Since I haven't published any adult fiction this hasn't come up, but I don't think I would want to use a pseudonym. I think readers of all ages are pretty good about self-censoring, and there are plenty of young readers who are quite capable of reading and appreciating adult books. I do always encourage younger readers to go to their parents, teachers or librarians for guidance though.

ML: No.

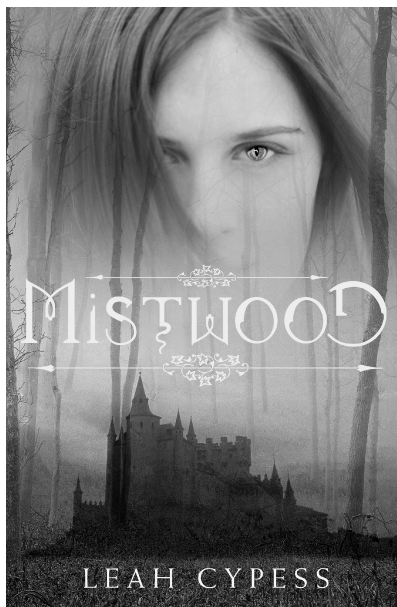
Would you share the name of your young adult editor or editors?

EB: My editor is Kathy Dawson, associate publisher of Dial Books for Young Readers at Penguin.

DF: I've worked with the fantastic and insightful Reka Simonsen (Senior Editor, Henry Holt Books for Young Readers) on all three of my books.

KH: I am thrilled to share my editor's name: Susan Chang, Senior Editor, Tor Books / Macmillan. She has been an absolute dream to work with and I count myself very fortunate to have this opportunity.

PH: The editor for my trilogy is Madeline Smoot of Blooming Tree Press. She is especially interested in fantasy and sci-fi.



ML: My editor is Kate Sullivan at Little, Brown Books for Young Readers. FYI, Little, Brown does not accept unsolicited submissions.

CP: I'm fortunate enough to have Virginia Duncan of Greenwillow Books as my editor. It's an imprint of Harperteen and celebrating its 35th year!

If you have a YA fantasy-friendly agent, would you share his/her name?

EB: My agent is Kate Schafer Testerman.

DF: I'm honored to be represented by Shawna McCarthy of the McCarthy Agency.

KH: My agent is a top YA fantasy agent and very knowledgeable about the marketplace. Her name is Kate Schafer Testerman of ktliterary.

PH: I am represented by Laura Rennert of the Andrea Brown Literary Agency. Based on her client list, she represents quite a bit of YA fantasy.

ML: My agent is Laura Langlie, but her list is very diverse and I don't know if she's seeking new clients.

CP: Bill Contardi represents me as well as Alyson Noel who writes YA urban fantasy.

That anyone, no matter if they be eight or eighty, can enjoy a well-written story with fantastic characters and great plot. Respect your audience and write the best story you can for them.

[Deva Fagan]

What's the most important thing to remember when writing young adult fantasy?

DF: That anyone, no matter if they be eight or eighty, can enjoy a well-written story with fantastic characters and great plot. Respect your audience and write the best story you can for them.

KH: It's all about story. Breathe life into your characters and make their story compelling.

PH: Pacing. Readers these days expect stories that are paced evenly throughout. If they hit a part that sags in the middle, they are apt to put the

book down and never pick it up again. So it's important as an author to make sure we either add or cut and revise to prevent those sagging middles. You may have the best ending in the world, but if no one ever makes it through the book, they'll never know how awesome it really is.

ML: Tell a good story first and foremost, and worry about genre and those marketing limitations later.

CP: I think voice and pacing are very important.

Can you give us some names of other YA fantasy authors?

LC: I belong to two debut author groups, and there are too many YA fantasy authors in those groups to list! Those whose books are already out include Becca Fitzpatrick, Bree Despain, Jaclyn Dolamore, Dia Reeves, Jen Nadol, Julie Kagawa, and Kitty Keswick

DF: Some of my favorites that I think adults would enjoy are Garth Nix (*Sabriel*), Tamora Pierce (*Beka Cooper: Terrier*), Megan Whalen Turner (*The Thief*), Sarah Rees Brennan (*Demon's Lexicon*), and Catherine Fisher (*Incarceron*).

KH: We have lots of great YA fantasy authors on The Enchanted Inkpot: PJ Hoover, Malinda Lo, Cindy Pon, Ellen Booraem, Deva Fagan, Leah Cypress, Kate Coombs, R. L. LaFevers, R.J. Anderson, additionally there's Kathleen Duey, Suzanne Collins, Maggie Stiefvater, Janice Hardy, Melissa Marr, Sally Gardner, Kristin Cashore, Megan Whalen Turner, JK Rowling (of course), Nancy Holder and the list goes on and on.

ML: Kristin Cashore, Cindy Pon, Sarah Rees Brennan, Holly Black, Cassandra Clare, Robin McKinley, Melissa Marr, how many do you want? :)

CP: I'm a big fan of *Eyes Like Stars*, a thoroughly original debut by Lisa Mantchev. *Soul Enchilada* by David Macinnis Gill is so fun and surprisingly touching as well as scary! If you want to learn what it means to have great "voice" in a young adult novel, read this! And

YA Fantasy Agents

Bill Contardi
Laura Langlie
Shawna McCarthy, The McCarthy Agency
Kate McKean, The Howard Morhaim Literary Agency
Howard Morhaim, HMLA
Laura Rennert, The Andrea Brown Literary Agency
Kate Schafer Testerman, kt literary

YA Fantasy Authors

R.J. Anderson	Nancy Holder
Holly Black	PJ Hoover
Ellen Booraem	Julie Kagawa
Sarah Rees Brennan	Kitty Keswick
Kristin Cashore	R.L. LaFevers
Suzanne Collins	Malinda Lo
Kate Coombs	Lisa Mantchev
Leah Cypress	Melissa Marr
Bree Despain	Robin McKinley
Jaclyn Dolamore	Garth Nix
Kathleen Duey	Jen Nadol
Deva Fagan	Tamora Pierce
Catherine Fisher	Cindy Pon
Becca Fitzpatrick	Dia Reeves
Kami Garci and Margaret Stohl	JK Rowling
Sally Gardner	Maggie Stiefvater
David Macinnis Gill	Megan Whalen Turner
Janice Hardy	Debbie Viguié

YA Fantasy Editors

Susan Chang, Tor Books
Virginia Duncan, Greenwillow
Annette Pollert, Simon Pulse, Simon & Schuster
Reka Simonsen, Henry Holt Books for Young Readers
Sharyn November, Firebird imprint, Penguin
Madeline Smoot, Blooming Tree Press
Kate Sullivan Little, Brown Books for Young Readers

Tell a good story first and foremost, and worry about genre and those marketing limitations later. [Malinda Lo]

kudos to David for creating Bug, a biracial (black and hispanic) heroine. I love to see more diversity in YA fantasy!

Was also totally enthralled by *Skin Hunger*, a National Book Award finalist by Kathleen Duey.

And *Graceling* and *Fire* both made the top five of my reading lists these past two years, by Kirstin Cashore.

How do you promote your YA titles?

EB: I have a web site (www.ellenbooraem.com), a blog, and Facebook and Twitter accounts, although I'm not great at posting regularly anywhere. I also am a member of The Enchanted Inkpot, a blog about kidlit fantasy.

DF: There's a tremendous online community of YA readers and writers, and since fantasy is a big subset of the current YA market that means there's a lot of people talking online about YA fantasy. Participating in that community is, in my opinion, one of the best ways to get your name and your books out there. Also, it's fun! The only downside is that my to-read list grows every time I check my google reader.

KH: My book debuts in 2011 so I'm still in the development phase, but I've built a website, a personal blog, belong to two group blogs and have limited participation in social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, (I have to actually have some time to write...) but I'm also planning on contributing to conference panels, doing book signings, contests on my blog, bookmarks, school visits or book tours if the opportunity presents itself, etc.



CP: There are many YA bloggers out there and I did many interviews with them, which was hectic but fun. I've done local library visits meeting actual teen readers which is such a highlight. They are so fun and so smart and I love meeting teens who enjoy reading as much as I do. I also attended my first Comicon panel last year and signed through Mysterious Galaxy, an amazing unforgettable time!

Do you have something else you'd like to tell us about YA fantasy?

LC: That if you love fantasy, you'll find some of the best and most original writers of fantasy in the YA section.

DF: Don't be afraid or embarrassed to try it out!

KH: If you're an adult reading this—give yourself a chance to enjoy the fabulous novels that are available in the YA section of your local bookstore. I bet you'll get hooked.

ML: I think that sometimes adults think that the category of "young adult fiction" doesn't apply to them, that it's just for kids. There's nothing further from the truth! Especially in fantasy, where so many classic "adult" fantasies also contain younger protagonists. YA fantasies have many of the same themes that adult fantasies do—identity, politics, intrigue, romance, adventure, creative uses for magic, saving the world, etc. Don't be afraid to have a little fun with your reading!



Nancy Holder is an New York Times bestselling author. Her next YA horror novel, Possessions: The Evil Within, will be out in June 2010.

