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SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY – The Real Escape Lies Within...

I often wonder why people condemn SF/Fantasy as 'escapism'. All fiction is escapist in some sense, taking the reader into an imagined world even if only to one set in Manchester. So what sets SF/Fantasy apart from other writing? Given it ranges from space opera to alternative history to heroic fantasy to cyberpunk, the common link I see is the basic question 'what if....'

So what questions does Fantasy ask? Quests certainly feature; think of Frodo's journey to destroy the One Ring, exploring moral responsibility along the way. That aspect of the genre is as old as Arthurian legend. Tolkien was the Merton Professor of English at Oxford University and much fantasy is based on eminent scholarship and detailed research. Alternate histories rely on the reader's basic knowledge of past events, otherwise they are pointless. The Fantasy reader is encouraged to look outside their own culture, taken to a spectacular array of different realms, where societies defy easy assumptions, often to be challenged by the same questions on race, sex and tolerance that perplex the world we live in.

Writers such as Melanie Rawn and Robin Hobb ask what if magic really existed, how would societies and governments function? What if there really be dragons? Anne McCaffrey has woven an intricate and intriguing world around that idea. What if people from our world find themselves caught up in the stuff of legend? Alan Garner's *Weirdstone of Brisingamen* rests on that notion, so does *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

What if all the grey compromises of modern living could be cut through, with a broadsword for preference? Heroic fantasy, often with a hard edge all its own in writers like David Gemmell, pursues those ideas and their unforeseen consequences. Much of heroic fantasy is highly virtuous; simple tales where evil is punished and right triumphs. This may well be a welcome escape from the grim reality of news bulletins but unconsciously absorbing the teachings of Aslan as a child makes aggression and injustice all the more intolerable for the adult.

At its best, SF/Fantasy offers answers to all of these questions but more than that, the genre gives us superb stories. Characters leap off the page and grab you by the throat, vivid description transports you with no need for 24th century technology, plots keep you turning the pages long past lights out. Celebrated modern writers such as Iain Banks find their talents equally at home in the best of mainstream fiction and of SF/Fantasy.

And then there is the nonsense. We have the surreal imaginations of Tom Holt and Robert Rankin, the inspired comedy of Terry Pratchett. Laughter is certainly an escape, but aren't we all refreshed by that release? For satire and parody to work, the reader also has to share the author's piercing eye for the absurd in the everyday world. When mainstream fiction can be inclined to take itself rather too seriously, SF/Fantasy gleefully sends up the ridiculous within the genre with titles such as *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland*.

So is SF/Fantasy an escape for people who can't cope with reality? Not as far as I'm concerned. Reality is a refuge for those who can't handle the challenge of SF/Fantasy!