

The New York Times

How “Game of Thrones” Failed Fantasy

The show embodied the reasons for the genre’s appeal — and then forgot them.



By Ross Douthat
Opinion Columnist

May 21, 2019

When I started reading George R.R. Martin’s “A Song of Ice and Fire” novels, it was the late 1990s and obsessing over fantasy novels was (if painful memory serves) a *super*-nerdy thing to do. Now that geek culture has carried all before it, the fantasy genre will probably never again be quite as uncool as it was in my youth — but with the end of “Game of Thrones” as a TV phenomenon, it’s also unlikely to remain this chic for long. So this might be my last, best chance to offer an answer to a question that people cooler than myself have always been inclined to ask: *Just why do people like fantasy novels, anyway?*

Better yet, I’ll offer two answers — one metaphysical, one political — and use the successes and failures of “Game of Thrones” to help illustrate them.

The metaphysical answer is that the fantasy genre, in many of its most successful manifestations, depicts worlds caught between enchantment and disenchantment, between a magic-infused or god-touched premodernity and an emerging secular dispensation.

As Alan Jacobs suggested in an essay for *The New Atlantis* several years ago, fantasy stories are concerned with the transition that the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor described in his immense and daunting tome, “A Secular Age”: the movement from a premodern world in which human lives and societies are understood to be permeable to supernatural forces (dark and light, divine and demonic) to a modern world in which both civilization and the individual psyche are “buffered” against angels and devils and fairies and the like.

In this sense fantasy novels are creative retellings of our own society's origin story. But because they assume the reality of magic, they are also stories that embody a certain anxiety about whether that transition is permanent, or whether it might someday be reversed.

Sometimes the magical world they depict is still fully present, but foredoomed to diminish, like the elves going into the West at the end of "The Lord of the Rings." But many effective fantasy stories — Martin's novels included — are set a little later in the transition, in a more disenchanting landscape where disenchantment turns out to be provisional, and the magic that has been forgotten or dismissed is actually poised for a return. And sometimes the question of *whether* magic should vanish is the hinge on which the story turns.

This kind of storytelling necessarily involves an ambivalent look backward; fantasy is caricatured as nostalgic and reactionary for a reason. But it also involves an uncertainty about the postmodern, about the possibility that the old powers might return in attractive or terrifying new guises. Thus fantasy villains are sometimes fusions of premodern and postmodern forces — the demonic industrialist Saruman in Tolkien, the technological deities in Neil Gaiman's "American Gods," even Martin's White Walkers, part Faerie and part climate change.

This reality prompted Jacobs to conclude that the success of fantasy "may best be taken as an acknowledgment that the great problem of the pagan world — how to navigate as safely as possible through an ever-shifting landscape of independent and unpredictable powers who are indifferent to human needs — is our problem once more."



Fans at a viewing party reacting to the finale of “Game of Thrones?”
Robyn Beck/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

But this problem, however interesting, doesn't explain why HBO's Martin adaptation lured in so many viewers who don't give a fig about disenchantment and its discontents. For that answer, you have to turn to the political appeal of fantasy, the way that the genre's world-building offers a way to tell historical fictions in which the ending isn't determined in advance.

For this part of fantasy's allure, the magic is interesting but secondary. It's there to create interesting “what if ...” scenarios, to raise the narrative stakes, to make the world feel a little more exotic, or to explain (in cases where the fantasy world is explicitly ours, except with more dragons or more fairies) why this version of history is different from our own. But the important thing is the political storytelling and the sociological invention — the machinations of statesmen and soldiers and queens and cutthroats, under the weight of particular institutions and traditions, in a world more violent and extreme and death-shadowed and therefore (let's be honest) more narratively interesting than our own.

As a generalization, fantasy writing has leaned more on political storytelling the more it's tried to escape the inevitable influence of Middle-earth, and revise the Eurocentric and Christian tropes that Tolkien's particular worldview bequeathed. Fantasists

who aim for a maximally gritty or violent vision, fantasists who conjure a not-Africa or a not-Asia instead of the predictable northern-European setting, fantasists with a particular ideological purpose — in these cases, the political and sociological elements are likely to be stronger, the metaphysical element reduced.

But this generalization has its limits; to pluck one now-classic example, Ursula Le Guin's "Earthsea" novels are revisionist in some of the ways I've just described, but far more concerned with the life and death of magic than with an Archipelagan game of thrones. And ultimately, if you read widely enough, it becomes clear that the genre rewards the combination of the two purposes, the successful integration of the political and the metaphysical in a single world-building complex.

Two of the most successful completed sagas of the last 20 years, Robin Hobb's Farseer novels and Tad Williams's "Memory, Sorrow, and Thorn," balance political machinations that would be at home in Shakespeare's histories and larger world stories about the death and life of magic. And the promise of George R.R. Martin's saga was that it might, in its somewhat pulpy way, offer the most successful integration yet, with a political and social world rich enough to feel like a piece of 14th- and 15th-century history they forgot to teach in school, with a chivalric order breaking down and a commercial and technological order waiting to be born ... except that in this world, the dragons and the prophecies and fair folk won't go gently into the good night.

Martin has not delivered on this promise, of course, because he hasn't delivered a new novel in his saga in eight long years. But now, in the disappointment with the show's finale and final seasons, he has an example of what not to do.

In its rush to finish, the show effectively lost sight of both reasons for fantasy's appeal. The showrunners, David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, seemed bored with and embarrassed by the magical element of the saga, hustling through the supernatural stuff and declining to explain crucial motivations and purposes, in order to get back to the political material ... but then their haste also deprived the political plot of its sociological complexity, its ripped-from-the-pages-of-history plausibility, that was necessary to make the horror and catharsis of the early seasons work.

They either didn't understand what made Martin's books distinctive, or they found the synthesis of genre elements too difficult once they went beyond his finished books. And so the show's ending embodied many of the dismissive clichés about fantasy, rather than representing the genre come of age.

Which is too bad for the viewers, both casual fans and giant nerds like myself. But not, perhaps, for Martin, who now has this last chance to make his own work, rather than the adaptation, a standard against which future fantasies are judged.

MORE ON “GAME OF THRONES”

“Game of Thrones” Comes in for a Crash Landing May 21, 2019

Opinion | Annalee Newitz: Why We Need “Game of Thrones” April 10, 2019

“Game of Thrones” Season 8 Finale Recap: All Hail King Who? May 19, 2019

The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here's our [email: letters@nytimes.com](mailto:letters@nytimes.com).

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook, Twitter (@NYTOpinion) and Instagram, join the Facebook political discussion group, Voting While Female.

Ross Douthat has been an Opinion columnist for The Times since 2009. He is the author of several books, most recently, "To Change the Church: Pope Francis and the Future of Catholicism."

You can follow him on Twitter: @DouthatNYT