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Writing the feminist fantasy I never had

5 I was ten years old when I saw *The Fellowship of the Ring* in 2001. I had read *The Hobbit* when I was little and loved its infusion of cosiness and adventure — but as a much darker Middle-Earth unfolded before my eyes, I was transfixed. Not only was this imagined world immense in a way I had never seen in a film before, but it had *women* in it.

10 Not many, admittedly — two named ones — but seeing Arwen Undómiel confront the Nazgûl lit a fire in me. As soon as the credits rolled, I made an excited dash for to the nearest bookshop and bought *The Lord of the Rings*, then spent the evening leafing through its pages in search of the scene that had made my heart leap. If Arwen was that brilliant in the film, she had to do even more in the book.

15 The scene was there, but it was different. Arwen didn't face the Ringwraiths. I did eventually read *The Lord of the Rings*, but I was so disappointed by that scene being 'taken' from Arwen — it really felt like theft, even though I knew the book had come first — that for a long while, I didn't want to read fantasy at all.

20 The fantasy I discovered growing up never seemed to centre on women. I was forever scratching for more of them in the stories I loved, whether that was in films or video games or books. Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia Butler, Robin Hobb, Tamora Pierce, Anne McCaffrey, all that great female-authored fantasy and sci-fi of the seventies to nineties — somehow none of them reached me. I'd written since I was a young child, but it wasn't until I heard about J. K. Rowling and her publication story that I fully understood that women really were out there building these imaginary worlds. And it wasn't until I discovered *Sabriel* by Garth Nix that I
25 first saw a young woman front and centre in an epic fantasy — to the point that her name was the name of the book.

Before that, I was on a never-ending hunt for fleshed-out female characters. They were there, but there was never *enough* of them for me. Something was missing. In hindsight, I realise 'something' was
30 representation that was both abundant and good. With a few exceptions, the women I saw were usually on the side lines, seldom vital to the action. Rarely were they women of colour, and rarely were they queer.

I've always written about women and their experiences in my books. In my ongoing *Bone Season* series, both the protagonist and the major antagonist are female, as are many of the secondary characters. (It's
35 surprising how many people still note that there are female police and cab drivers in the futuristic setting of the books. Male is still the default.) I did that almost unconsciously. It was natural to imagine female leaders, female politicians, female mob bosses.

But when I set out to write *The Priory of the Orange Tree* — my first epic fantasy — I was specifically
40 writing, in part, for my younger self, the girl who wanted more of Arwen and who never found Alanna. I wanted to write a tome that hit all the classic hallmarks of fantasy — the enemy awakening from the dead, the magic sword, the realm in need of an heir — but with diverse and complex women as essential parts of the machine, and with a casual acceptance of female empowerment and gender equality. I knew I might be criticised for following the familiar pattern of a quest narrative like *The Lord of the Rings* — but a trope
45 should not be labelled cliché just because one group of people has overused it.

The Priory of the Orange Tree, I've noticed, has already been described as feminist in a way *The Bone Season* wasn't at the beginning, even though the former has an equal gender split in its narration

50 (while *The Bone Season* is narrated only by a woman). It's made me ask myself how we should judge whether a fantasy book is feminist. The Bechdel–Wallace test is perhaps our best-known touchstone for assessing the way women are represented in media in general. The test is simple: there must be two women who are named characters, and they must speak to each other about something other than a man. Only about half of all films meet this criterion.

55 Alison Bechdel believes her friend Liz Wallace, to whom she credits the idea, was probably inspired by Virginia Woolf. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf reflects on relationships between women: "So much has been left out, unattempted. And I tried to remember any case in the course of my reading where two women are represented as friends. There is an attempt at it in *Diana of the Crossways*. They are confidantes, of course, in *Racine* and the Greek tragedies. They are now and then mothers and daughters.
60 But almost without exception they are shown in their relation to men. It was strange to think that all the great women of fiction were, until Jane Austen's day, not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex."

65 When it comes to fantasy, the question is internal and external. One must consider not just how a book should be considered by real-world standards, but how the author has chosen to build their imagined world. Take *Game of Thrones*, a modern fantasy phenomenon. It's populated with a spectrum of complicated women who rise above their circumstances to seize power and autonomy. Right now, in the TV adaptation, the main players — the two sides of the board — are Daenerys Targaryen and Cersei Lannister. Neither of them is defined purely in terms of their relation to men; both claim the position of queen regnant. The show also passes the Bechdel test. Externally, therefore, it appears unquestionably
70 feminist.

75 Yet nobody could say that of the fictional realm these women occupy, where rape is often treated as little more than window dressing and women are belittled and dismissed as a matter of course. This might make us root more strongly for the characters, because we've witnessed the institutional sexism they've had to hurdle — or it might suggest that a woman must always suffer before she rises. *The Lord of the Rings* is less openly misogynistic, but only eighteen percent of characters Tolkien described are female. Does that make it more or less feminist than *Game of Thrones*? Can *Game of Thrones* be called feminist at all when its feminism is largely non-intersectional?

80 We are still reckoning with questions like these. The road goes ever on. But we are in an era of sea-change, where fantasy, to quote the late Ursula K. Le Guin, is no longer "self-contentedly, exclusively male, like a club, or a locker room." Even before Mary Shelley, there was Margaret Cavendish, author of *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing-World* (1666). Women invented speculative fiction, and now
85 the genre is starting to reflect that.

90 There are female heroes driving the action. Controlling their own destinies. Existing for themselves. Working together. We're finally breaking away from the Strong Female Character blueprint and embracing the idea that women can be brave in many ways. Fewer girls will grow up not being able to see themselves slaying the dragon, holding the sword, fighting the forces of evil. Fewer women will feel pressured to abandon their own names when they write, for fear their dreaming will be judged to be lesser.

95 And maybe — just maybe — we're a few steps closer to a world where a major film will attain as much success and status as *The Lord of the Rings*, but where all nine members of a new fellowship are women and no one bats an eyelid.

It speaks volumes that out of all the worlds I've imagined, that one still seems the most distant — but we'll get there, and we won't need eagles. Our words will give us wings.

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