



# Finding Fantasy:

## The Genre that Makes Difficult Topics Easier for Students to Discuss

by Robin Fuxa

Since we first read the words E.B. White penned, “Where’s Papa going with that ax?” most of us understood the power of a great fantasy story. Instead of the terrible fate our small pink hero might have faced, he becomes recognized instead as “some pig” in the words of his dear friend Charlotte. Perhaps as a child you visited the Hundred Acre Wood and learned something about being a loyal friend from “a bear of little brain” named Pooh? Or maybe you have delighted with a child in your own life in Max’s “wild rumpus” that begins “where the wild things are.”

Whatever our first encounters with fantasy and its sister genre, science fiction, many of us seem to lose sight of its power along the way in school, first as readers, and, later, as teachers. As a highly feminized profession, however, many elementary teachers were taught as young people to avoid fantasy and science fiction. We forgot how to get back to the place “where the wild things are.” We missed out, and as a result our students have too. We need to get reacquainted with the valuable pedagogical potential of many fantasy and science fiction titles.

### Opportunities for Critical Literacy

Children practice critical literacy, especially when it is systematically modeled with time to practice, as in grand conversations, as an authentic part of their thinking and talking about books (Peterson & Eeds, 2007). That said, there are books that lend themselves to this critical thought more than others. Leland and Harste (2000) lay out criteria for selecting books that can help one’s students in “enlarging the space of the possible” in a critically literate pedagogy. These books should “explore

what differences make a difference” and “help us question why certain groups are positioned as ‘other’” (Leland & Harste, 2000, p. 4).

### Issues Close to Home

In my own teaching, I have found that often those issues that we find the most difficult to discuss—issues that are perhaps a little too close to home—students can discuss more readily through literature that seems to distance the matter. That never-could-be state of fantasy or the none-too-likely nature of science fiction holds a certain power for girls and boys alike. For example, adolescents who might be otherwise reluctant to discuss historical and contemporary discrimination find themselves able to more comfortably look at this issue and draw parallels between the text and their own world when reading Daniel Waters’ *Generation Dead*, an

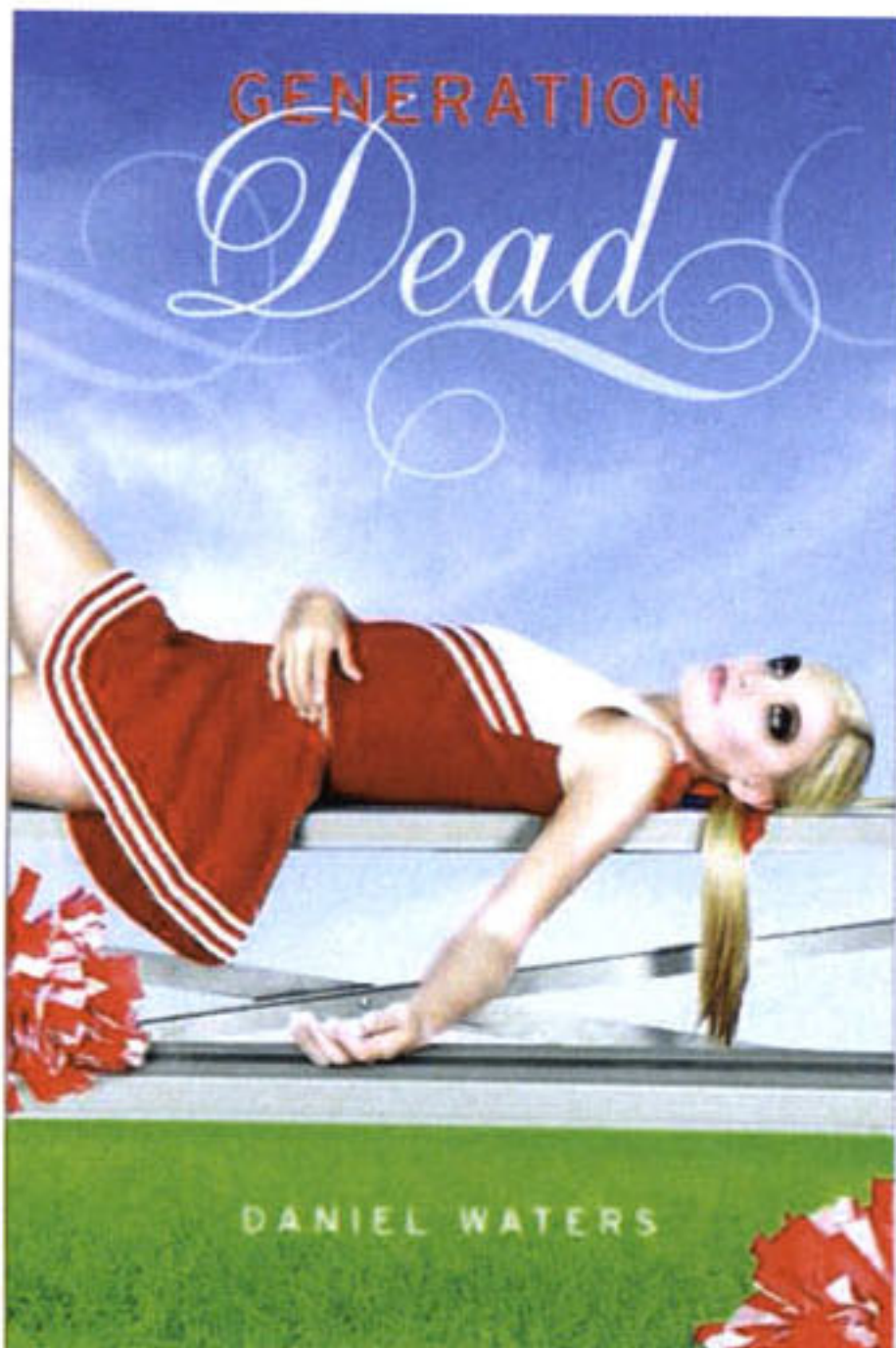
outlandish tale about dead teens coming back to life.

Waters’ book is one in which the reader finds him or herself drawing parallels between marginalized groups in our own society and the hatred faced by the “living impaired” of his fantastical high school setting. My students’ stories surface of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning (GLBTQ) youth at their own high schools wanting to go to prom only to find that the rules have suddenly changed (“No friends allowed”) when a student wants to bring a same-sex date. A scene about peer violence in the text calls another student to recount the way a senior boy was beaten after school because he was gay. Another student notices a strong connection to the Jim Crow era and the fear of the “living impaired” in the text’s Oakvale High.

As the students who’ve returned to life seek to be called “living impaired” while others want to call them “zombies,” a discussion of the othering power of epithets and the importance of naming one’s own identity surface. As romance buds between “living impaired” and the living, the resistance to interracial dating that many experienced historically and some still face comes to the fore. In fantasy texts, the most outrageous details can carry the strongest doses of reality.

### Underestimated Quality, Misunderstood Morality

Some people have a clear religious objection to fantasy and science fiction as genres, and this we must respect as teachers by providing other choices for children and their families, just as we would for any text. That said, many others falsely assume that

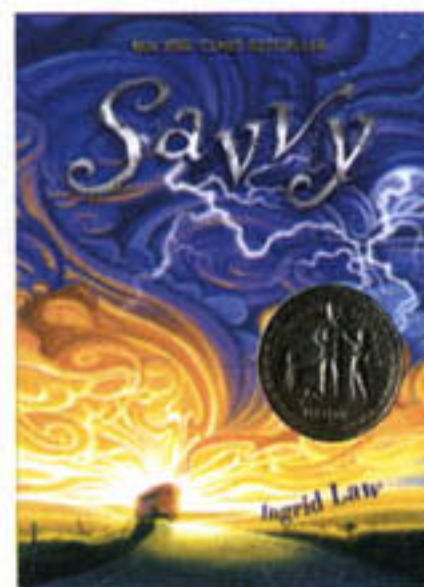


fantasy and science fiction are amoral or are intended to teach children evil or anti-religious concepts. In short, these genres have gotten a bad rap.

While most fantasy and science fiction isn't overtly religious, that does not mean that these works are anti-religion or amoral. On the contrary, many fantasy and science fiction works provide rich opportunities for students to safely use their own moral thought, whether they view their own morality through a religious lens or not, to consider their views on issues large and small. The Harry Potter series, perhaps the most demonized work of fantasy to date, is a story of good's triumph over evil, perseverance in difficult times, and the importance of loyalty and friendship.

The *Hunger Games*, a more recent target, creates opportunities for dialogue around government corruption, abuse of power, desensitization to violence, voyeurism as entertainment, power and oppression and related inequities, abuse of alcohol, and more. In a grand conversation about this book students focused on honesty in interpersonal relationships—did Katniss mislead Peeta about her feelings? Was that acceptable given the circumstances? Perhaps that is one of the greatest roots of the misunderstandings around fantasy works: out of context, a book that creates space for *examining* a social issue may appear to overtly celebrate one point of view at a glance. Great science fiction or fantasy, however, calls the reader to think critically for him or herself about the issue at hand.

To navigate this misconception, communicate with students about why you are assigning any given book (or giving them the option to do so in a small group), keep open the lines of communication with parents who may have questions, and always allow alternatives for students who are not comfortable with the text choices. If the texts you are using are well-reviewed by experts for students with whom you are working, they should be upheld under the Library Bill of Rights (American Library Association, 2012) and the First Amendment. These genres are far too



precious to miss, both pedagogically and for the joy they can bring us all as readers.

Anyone who has read Nancy Farmer's *House of the Scorpion*—so rich in metaphor, swimming in social commentary, and full of complexly rendered characters—couldn't possibly find the quality of science fiction lacking. Farmer takes on issues such as cloning, ableism, and the notion of "order" at the expense of freedom. And she does all of this with a suspenseful pacing that keeps readers from age eleven to one hundred eleven turning the pages.

Ingrid Law's *Savvy* is a book with which any reader can relate. Adolescence is a difficult time in which we are trying to determine what it is that makes us special. In exaggerating this through a difficult-to-control super power, the simultaneous agony and joy of that journey is brought to life with believable characters. Even the artful, old-fashioned speech of near-thirteen-year-old Mibs rings true because of her family's self-imposed isolation. "Once I'd begun to cry I couldn't stop. It wasn't a pretty cry either. It was a full-on snot-dripping, chest-wheezing, jibber-jabber wailing." Indeed, who, at around thirteen, cannot remember having such a moment?

Many fantasy and science fiction books make their way to the top of award lists. This is not a coincidence. This is a thriving genre with demanding readership. So get some fantasy into your teaching list. Great books await you!

## References

1. American Library Association (2012). Library Bill of Rights. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/>

2. Leland, C.H., & Harste, J.C. (2000). Critical literacy: Enlarging the space of the possible. *Primary Voices K-6*, 9(2), 3-7.
3. Peterson, R., & Eeds, M. (2007). *Grand conversations: Literature groups in action*. New York: Scholastic.

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## New Fantasy or Science Fiction Selections

### For pre-school and primary grade readers:

- *Extra Yarn* by Mac Barnett (2012)
- *Gem* by Holly Hobbie (2012)
- *The Man in the Moon* by William Joyce (2012, first in planned series)
- *Red Knit Cap Girl* by Naolo Stoop (2012)

### For elementary or early middle grade readers:

- *Jacob Wonderbar for President of the Universe* by Nathan Bransford (2012, 2nd in series)
- *The Mostly True Story of Jack* by Kelly Barnhill (2011)
- *A Tale of Two Castles* by Gail Carson Levine (2011)
- *Tuesdays at the Castle* by Jessica Day George (2011)
- *Wildwood* by Colin Meloy (2011)

### For upper-middle grade or teen readers:

- *Deadline* by Chris Crutcher (2009)
- *Dragonswood* by Janet Lee Carey (2012)
- *The Drowned Cities* by Paolo Bacigalupi (2012, companion book to *Ship Breaker*)
- *The Future of Us* by Jay Asher and Carolyn Mackler (2011)
- *Going Bovine* by Libba Bray (2010)
- *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children* by Ransom Riggs (2011)
- *The Revenant* by Sonia Gensler (2011)
- *Steampunk! An Anthology of Fantastically Rich and Strange Stories* edited by Kelly Link and Gavin J. Grant (2011)