

TEEN FANTASY FICTION WITH ADULT APPEAL

There is a certain amount of fantasy fiction written specifically for teens that doesn't transcend its teen audience. Then there are works that probably should have been released as mainstream fantasy, rather than under the YA banner, because they would appeal to anyone who like the fantastical, the speculative, the magical, the offbeat and quirky. Here is a list of some authors and works that have appeal for adults who read fantasy and should be sought out by all who love it!

BARDUGO, LEIGH: *Six of Crows and Crooked Kingdom*

Although many adults do read Bardugo's first series about the Grisha, I found it fatiguing because of the paranormal parts and all the angst-y teen pseudo-romance. But this duology stars a good old-fashioned gang of thieves with skills and exploits attributable for the most part to themselves and not to paranormal powers. And while there is attraction among the characters, it's subtle and doesn't take over the story. The world-building and plotting are amazing, particularly in the second book, and things keep getting more interesting, more desperate, more insurmountable, with a big build-up that makes you want to finish but also to savor the nuance. The book is set in an alternate universe much like a slightly medieval Amsterdam, in its alley-ways, bordellos, warehouses, and other haunts of the city's outcasts.

CASHORE, KRISTIN: *Graceling Realm* books

Graceling is the story of the five kingdoms, where children who are born with eyes that are two different colors are recognized as possessing some exceptional skill or Grace. For some it's as mundane as being able to curl your tongue, while for others it's a power akin to magic. In one of the five kingdoms, the ruler requires that any child who has a gift revealed by the two-color eyes be given up by their parents and delivered to his service. This is how Katsa, who displayed an extraordinary ability to defend herself against sexual abuse as a tiny child, becomes the king's assassin: her Grace is killing. But the darkness of her gift casts a heavy shadow over Katsa, so when the opportunity comes to stop killing but nonetheless put her associated skills to good use, she takes it, embarking on an adventure that will require all her resources. This is an odd grouping of books; *Fire*, the second in the series, features another protagonist from a different one of the five kingdoms and with a peripheral relationship to the first book, and *Bitterblue*, the third book, is the actual sequel to *Graceling*, but takes place some years later. I enjoyed them all, but the first the most. They remind me of the books of Robin McKinley.

FFORDE, JASPER: *The Last Dragonslayer* series

This series has been promoted (although I'm not sure the author had that intention) as reading for children. In fact, the content is filled with satire, parody, and sly, inside jokes about the British Empire that no child reading it will ever perceive. And while some teens like the series well enough, I have found it to be much more popular with adult readers who can appreciate its subtleties. The story is about a 15-year-old foundling named Jennifer Strange, who runs Kazam,

an employment agency for magicians. The problem is, magic is fading, and where magicians used to take on major projects, now the guy with the magic carpet tends to deliver pizza. The magicians who live at and work from Kazam (an old hotel) rely on faded glory rather than actual present talent, and it takes an ideal combination of tact and motivational speaking on Jennifer's part to keep the agency going. But then a precognitive vision starts circulating the land, predicting the death of the world's last dragon at the hands of an unnamed Dragonslayer. If the visions are true, Big Magic is on its way. There are currently three books in the series, with a fourth promised "sometime soon" (I have this direct from Fforde himself, in an email).

HARTMAN, RACHEL: *Seraphina, Shadow Scale, Tess of the Road*

If you are an aficionado of dragon books and dragon lore, you must read Hartman's take on them. The story is set in the kingdom of Goredd, a medieval world where there has been an uneasy truce between dragons and humans for about 40 years. The dragons, shapeshifters who can take on human guise, bring their gift of rationality and mathematical expertise to humans as scholars and teachers at the universities. Seraphina Dombegh, a gifted musician who plays in the court orchestra, has become aware of tensions between humans and dragons, and when a member of the royal family is murdered in a specifically draconian fashion, she is drawn into the investigation. But Seraphina herself has a secret, and she struggles to protect it as she teams up with the captain of the Queen's guard to discover a sinister plot to destroy the interspecies treaty. Original, thought-provoking, with sly humor and dark moments. The third book is not a direct sequel, but takes place in the same "universe" with a few of the same characters appearing in minor roles.

MARCHETTA, MELINA: *The Lumatere Chronicles*

This is a trilogy that is harder than it should be to promote because, although the first book is good, it's not far beyond the ordinary. (I shouldn't downplay it *too* much—it consistently receives five stars on Goodreads.) But the second and third books in the trilogy are so amazingly conceived of and written that I am on a constant quest to convince people to read the first so that they can benefit from the others! In *Finnikin of the Rock*, a false king has taken over a kingdom, slaying the entire royal family; he has also put to death the high priestess of one of the goddesses worshipped there. As she dies, she curses the kingdom so that all still in it are trapped inside, and all outside its borders are exiled. The story starts 10 years later, as Finnikin, best friend of the young prince of the true ruling family, meets Evanjelin, a strange novice from a religious retreat house who claims that they both have a role in restoring the kingdom. *Froi of the Exiles* and *Quintana of Charyn* pick up with characters we met in the first book, about three years after those incidents. The richness of the world, the depth and versatility of the characters, the emotion infusing everything make this a magnificent series worthy of much more attention by fantasy readers.

McGUIRE, SEANAN: *The Wayward Children series*

Among all the old tales are those of children who have disappeared, who have departed through the back of a wardrobe, jumped down a rabbit hole, walked through a mirror, and have arrived somewhere else. But nobody ever talks about what happens to those children who return from their alternate worlds. How do they adjust to being regular people in a mundane

life? And what happens to those who just can't? Eleanor West runs a home for those wayward children, and their parents believe Eleanor is attempting to bring the children back to a sense of their place in the real world. But Miss West's actual intentions are to enable them to return to the worlds where they truly feel at home. *The series is five books so far, with a sixth promised for next year. They are little jewels, more novella length than full novels, but fully realized, beautifully imagined, and skillfully written. The first book is Every Heart A Doorway.*

PIERCE, TAMORA: The Beka Cooper trilogy

Most of Tamora Pierce's books about the kingdom of Tortall, a semi-feudal land populated by knights and ladies, craftspeople and thieves, commoners, and some supernatural creatures, are written specifically for middle-school readers. But one trilogy from all the Tortall "cycles" stands out as something quite different. Beka Cooper is a young woman, but she is more woman than girl, and virtually everyone else in the books is an adult. The series fluidly combines medieval fantasy with mystery and police procedural, using a memoir format. The characters are engaging, the themes are sophisticated (how many other YA novels expound on the effects of counterfeiting on a nation's economy?) and the mysteries are well paced and satisfying. Beka is a "Dog," which is the nomenclature used to refer to police officers in the Provost's Guard. In the first book, *Terrier*, she is in her trainee year, assigned to two veteran officers. In *Bloodhound*, the second book, she ends up with a canine partner, a scent hound she rescues from an abusive handler. She, the hound, and one of her former training partners are sent undercover to another city to research the spread of counterfeit silver destroying its economy. The third book, *Mastiff*, pairs Beka with the other of her training officers, on an assignment critical to the fate of the Tortallan royal family and government. The supernatural element is the hardest to accept for some readers—Beka gets messages from the recently dead by listening to their voices, which are carried by pigeons, and she also gathers clues by standing in the middle of dust devils, picking up conversation the dust devil has absorbed. But these details, plus the made-up dialect for the Tortallan lower city inhabitants, gives a more special cast to this already compelling series. One warning: The books start out with a flash-forward to the journal of one of Beka's descendants, and this element is completely confusing (and somewhat off-putting) in reference to the rest of each book. I would skip these prologues and perhaps return to them after reading the rest.

TAYLOR, LAINI: *Strange the Dreamer*, and *Muse of Nightmares*

At the center of these two books is Lazlo Strange, a foundling, a librarian's assistant with his head full of stories. He never believed, while growing up as an orphan with the priests, and later becoming a fixture in the fairy tale section of the great library, that his adventures would extend beyond his current world. But humans, gods, and monsters all conspire to make Lazlo the protagonist of this fascinating tale, luring him across the great desert Elmuthaleth to the city now known as Weep, which cowers in the shadow of a giant metal seraph in the sky with nightmares at its heart. Lush language, complexities of emotion, and conflicts of conscience characterize this sophisticated fiction that simultaneously manages to deal with larger issues but still be a whale of a good story, with conflicts and twists and gripping love.

TURNER, MEGAN WHALEN: The Queen's Thief series

This series suffered from two unfortunate circumstances:

1. It was billed for some reason as a series for children, which it emphatically is not; and
2. Because of this fact, the cover art on the original book was juvenile in appearance and served to sink the series into the realm of unread 5th-grade fiction.

In reality, while the writing is deceptively simple, the story line is sophisticated, sly, and engaging to the most adult of readers. This is one of those series (and I have another appearing on this list as well) whose first book is good but maybe not great, but in which each subsequent book grows in interest, in style, in sophistication, until by the end there has been an exponential increase in enjoyment. The first book is *The Thief*, narrated by a rather mysterious young man named Gen, who has gotten himself into hot water through his daring thefts and now must serve as a guide to a hidden treasure for the king's mage and his companions. The journey (and the story) seem fairly commonplace until the ending, when everything you know gets turned upside down and makes you immediately want to reread the book with this additional knowledge. The second book is narrated by the queen of an adjacent kingdom; the third by a soldier who serves that queen; the fourth by the heir to a perilous heritage he is being prevented from achieving; and the last to date by a slave of a great power across the ocean. There is one more book promised in the series, which will probably be out in 2021. The series is set, unlike most fantasy, in more of a Greek islands type theme, with the islands being ruled by various royal houses who are all threatened with conquest by the Medean Empire.