Fantasy Subgenres

No two fantasy literary experts agree on the subgenres of fantasy but listed here are those most frequently referenced.

- Alternate Worlds: Characters enter different worlds through our current one, such as Alice's Wonderland, Peter Pan's Neverland, and Harry Potter's Hogwarts School.
- Arthurian: Specifically set in King Arthur's legendary fictional world of Camelot.
- Celtic: Draws on rich lore of Celtic peoples, mostly, but not always, set in Ireland.
- Christian: Incorporates Christian themes and elements (e.g., good-and-evil, redemption) without directly including biblical characters, such as the C. S. Lewis Narnia tales.
- Comedic: Humorous parodies and satirical tone entertain the reader in titles, e.g., *The Princess Bride* (Goldman, 1973), *Stardust* (Gaiman, 1998*),* and *Carry On* (Rowell, 2015).
- Contemporary: Set in current times but surrounded by magic, often hidden in plain sight, e.g., the Percy Jackson series, 2012–2020.
- Dark: Grimdark gothic realms and horror elements drive the plot, characters are more depraved than other fantasy books, main characters may be an anti-hero, e.g., *War Girl* (Onyebuchi, 2019).
- Dying Earth: End of time, set in dystopian Earth often caused by human folly, e.g., *The Last Cuentista* (Higuera, 2021).
- Dystopian: Cataclysmic end of the earth as we know it, often caused by war/violence or environmental negligence, e.g., *The Giver* (Lowry, 1993).
- Heroic: The conquering hero is key to the story's progression, e.g., *Amari and the Night Brothers* (Alston, 2021).
- Low Fantasy: A conscious opposite of high fantasy; excludes those sweeping vistas, but rather familiar settings and grounded characters are depicted where earthly goings-on impact events as in the *Narnia* series (Lewis). Some set the stage for accompanying video games, e.g., *Wizard for Hire* (Skye, 2018). Harry Potter series is considered by many to be low fantasy where the fantastical intrudes on the real-world setting.
- Magical Realism: Here, magic is part of ordinary life where, for example, levitation, mind reading, mind control, or talking to the dead happen, but in a realistic setting, e.g., *Crenshaw* (Applegate, 2018), *Echo* (Ryan, 2015).

- Media Tie-In: Not considered a subgenre by all fantasy experts, it is fantasy literature made into film such as the Buffy the Vampire series, e.g., *Three Dark Crown* (Blake, 2018).

- Medieval: Set in medieval times where knights, sorcerers, wizards, and dragons dwell, e.g., Dragon Rider series (Funke) and the enchanting *The Bear and the Nightengale (*Arden, 2017).

- Mythic: Storylines draw on the tropes, themes, and motifs from mythology but are set in today's world, e.g., *Wolfish* (Andrews, 2022), *Race to the Sun* (Roanhorse, 2020), *The Aru Shah series* by Roshani Chokshi, and the Percy Jackson series.

- Prehistoric: Stories with elements of fantasy but taking place in prehistoric times as in Michelle Paver's Chronicles of Ancient Darkness series.

- Quest: The protagonist is involved in a perilous all-consuming quest, an overriding feature of the plot. This subgenre usually overlaps with other subgenres, e.g., *Seekers of the Wild Realm* (Ott, 2021), *The Deadly Cavern: Quest Chasers* (Lockhaven, 2024), and *The Quest for the Crown* (Maree, 2022).

- Romantasy: Blending themes of "fantasy" and "romance", romantasy is one of the fastest growing and most popular subgenres. It features romantic relationships set within fantastical worlds, featuring magical creatures, magic, and often high-stakes conflicts, but always with an element of romance. Usually for older readers, e.g., *A Tale of Witchcraft* (Colfer, 2021) and the two Newbery titles: *The Girl Who Drank the Moon* (Barnhill, 2016) and *Ella Enchanted* (Levine, 1997, 2022).

- Speculative: The primary features that speculative fiction explores are possibilities asking the question "What if?" and responding, literarily with "Why not?". It often involves creating totally new worlds ("world building") and overlaps with many fiction genres and subgenres of fantasy. These titles range from 100-year-old titles (*Wizard of Oz*) to the *Magic Tree House* (Osborne) titles, still popular after 30+ years.

- Superhero: From the literary superhero stories of costumed crime fighters came the comic and film industries' superheroes. These typically develop in series, e.g., Miles Morales series by Justin Reynolds, *Shuri: Black Panther* by Nic Stone, and *Diana and the Island of No Return: Wonder Woman Adventures* by Aisha Saeed.

- Sword & Sorcery: For older readers, features include morally ambivalent characters, gritty realism, high action, exotic untamed settings, monsters or monstrous-behaving characters, and high stakes' personal battles, e.g., *Dragon Masters* trilogy (West, 2025) and the Dragonblood series (Wideman).

- Techno Thrillers: Fantasy that involves frightening technological advancements and usually for older readers, techno thrillers may overlap other subgenres, e.g., *The Circle* (Eggers, 2013), *Ready Player One* (Cline, 2011) and *Warcross* (Lu, 2017).

- Time Altering/Time Travel Stories: Stories in which the plot revolves around travel traveling to the past or future, e.g., Magic Treehouse series (Osborne*)*, Time Travel Guide series (Bailey), Ranger in Time series (Messner) and the 2024 Newbery winner, *The First State of Being* (Kelly, 2024). *A Wrinkle in Time*? (L'Engle, 1962) is still the best-selling time travel novel of all time.

- Urban Fantasy: Set in the city around which the plot revolves and usually in contemporary times, urban fantasy stories juxtapose contemporary urban life with the elements of fantasy inherent in fantasy titles, e.g., the Artemis Fowl series (Colfer) and Miles Morales series by Justin Reynolds set in a New York City apartment and the semi-urban setting of *Monster vs. Boy* (Crossing, 2023), which blends elements of realistic urban fiction and fantasy.

- Vampire: Sometimes called "sexy teen" titles, made popular by the Twilight series (Meyer) and *Buffy the Vampire* (Blake), also includes classics such as Stoker's 1897 *Dracula.*

- Zombie Apocalypse: Originating out of Haitian Voodoo religious beliefs, popularized by *The Walking Dead*, current popular zombie apocalypse middle grade novels include best-selling The Last Kid on Earth series (Brailler, 2015-18), *World War Z* (Brooks, 2007), and even a Minecraft MG novel, *Minecraft: The Island* (Brooks, 2019); and *Zombie Elementary* (Whitehouse, 2014) for elementary.

- Wuxia: Imperial China setting with a hero advanced in the martial arts, thematically emphasizes justice and chivalry as well as the main character's personal honor, e.g., *The Poppy War* (Kuang, 2018) for older readers.