



Great Stand-Alone Fantasies

While You Wait for *Game of Thrones*

BY JESSICA TEISCH

In the fictional land of Westeros, a medieval land with long, harsh winters and hedonistic summers lasting lifetimes, dynastic power struggles occupy several noble families as a rising supernatural threat in the north threatens the kingdom. George R. R. Martin first introduced Westeros in *A Game of Thrones* (1996, ♦ LOCUS AWARD). Five books to date, the epic fantasy series of which this is part—*A Song of Ice and Fire*—is intricately plotted, brutally bloody, and mammoth in scale, filled with sex, romance, incest, exile, civil war, court politics, betrayal, adventure, violence, and death.

Fantasies like *A Song of Ice and Fire*, which inspired the hit HBO series *Game of Thrones*, depart from the accepted rules by which we perceive the world around us; they presume the impossible—the magical, the supernatural, the mythical—in a universe that requires a reader's suspension of disbelief. Fantasies often present world-changing struggles between good and evil; some draw on the quest

genre or the coming-of-age genre to solve menacing problems (such as a dark lord); others rely on ancient, epic storytelling to combine legend and history. This diverse genre thrives on the creation of new worlds, some modeled on our own.

Fantasy series require commitments—you could be in for one, five, or a hundred books, and you may be waiting years for the next volume. Unless, of course, you pick up a stand-alone.

Below we recommend some stand-alone fantasy fixes while you wait for the eighth—and reputedly final—season of *Game of Thrones* or, even better, the next two volumes of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, *The Winds of Winter* and *A Dream of Spring*. We've loosely organized our stand-alone fantasy selections into subgenres; please note that these categories, even to long-time enthusiasts, can be somewhat blurry—and arbitrary.

EPIC FANTASY

Often interchangeable with high fantasy, epic fantasy combines history and legend, often involves a grand quest or focus on large-scale politics and war, and is concerned with world-endangering events. (Think *A Song of Ice and Fire* or, going back some years, Homer's *Odyssey*.)

Tigana

By Guy Gavriel Kay (1990)

The author of the neo-Arthurian trilogy *The Fionavar Tapestry*, Kay creates a world with flavors of classical Greece and medieval Italy—a two-mooned world of brutality, beauty, patriotism, conquest, and rebellion. Warrior sorcerers Brandin of Ygrath and Alberico of Barbadior have taken over eight of the nine provinces of the Peninsula of the Palm as rebels try to overthrow this tense alliance. Though the plot can initially be confusing, stick with it: As *Tor* noted, Kay “is a master at taking a recognizable setting from our world—a place or a culture—and transforming it into something otherworldly, while still retaining that sense of the familiar, that sense of having been there.” See also *The Lions of Al-Rassan* (1995), a largely political fantasy based on the crumbling empire of medieval Spain.



Warbreaker

By Brandon Sanderson (2009)

Sanderson's towering achievements include *The Mistborn Trilogy* and *The Stormlight Archive* series, but here he creates a complex, beautiful world in one (admittedly large) package. In a world in which the magical energy of Breath can bestow mortals with godlike qualities, the king of Idris sends the wrong princess daughter to marry the heretic God-King of her neighboring, warring nation, torn asunder by political and religious differences. The king's marriage-by-treaty deception endangers his eldest daughter, who must avoid conspiracies, betrayals, dangerous magic, and more to bring her sister home safely. In this novel about cultural misunderstandings, the ways histories are understood, and the politics of magic and divinity, “Sanderson melds complex, believable characters, a marvelous world and thoughtful, ironic humor into an extraordinary and highly entertaining story” (*Publishers Weekly*). See also *Elantris* (2005), Sanderson's first published book and an acclaimed epic fantasy.



Further Reading

THE EYES OF THE DRAGON | STEPHEN KING (1987)

THE LIONS OF AL-RASSAN | GUY GAVRIEL KAY (2011)

THE BROKEN SWORD | POUL ANDERSON (1954)

TALION: REVENANT | MICHAEL STACKPOLE (1997)

HIGH FANTASY

The defining element of high fantasy is its setting, one characterized by a system of magic or sorcery, fictional humanoid races (such as elves and fairies), and mythical creatures (like dragons). The subgenre is generally rooted in medieval European legends and classical mythology, with a focus on the battle between good and evil.

The Last Unicorn

Peter S. Beagle (1986)

In 1987, *Locus* ranked *The Last Unicorn* number 5 among the 33 “All-Time Best Fantasy Novels.” Beagle's haunting, quest-based fantasy perfectly balances elegiac prose with intriguing plot twists. The premise is simple and heartfelt: a unicorn, living peacefully in her forest, learns that there are none of her kind left in the world. Determined to find any remaining unicorns, she sets out into the larger world and experiences a series of misadventures. She acquires two companions on quests of their own, and as the trio searches for her species, they encounter evil and undergo personal transformations. “It's one of the most lyrical, resonant, and charming fantasy novels ever written,” wrote *Strange Horizons*. “And this is the story's greatest virtue: that despite the dreamlike nature of the premise and setting, truth and humanity shine out of the book as brightly as any of Beagle's unicorns.”



The Neverending Story

By Michael Ende (1979, translated from the German in 1983)

What list is complete without one of the best coming-of-age fantasy tales-within-a-tale? Transported via the pages of an ancient book called *The Neverending Story*, the bullied Bastian Balthazar Bux finds himself in the magical land of Fantasia. The plot fluctuates between Bastian reading in an attic and the tale of a young hunter sent on a quest to save Fantastica and its ruler, the Childlike Empress, from the terrifying Nothing. As he performs deeds both evil and courageous, Bastian realizes that only he can jump in (the book) and save the day. “A fantasy epic with all the requisite elements of the genre: chimerical creatures, exotic forests and mountains, unpronounceable proper names, a picaresque plot predicated on a Great Quest, magical swords and amulets, chivalric protocol, high melodrama, a virtuous empress, a heroic little fat boy and a moral vision of Manichaeism simplicity,” wrote the *New York Times*. “[It] combines some of the better features of Tolkien, *Peter Pan*, *Puff, the Magic Dragon* and *The Little Engine That Could*.”



The Forgotten Beasts of Eld

By Patricia A. McKillip (1974)

◆ WORLD FANTASY AWARD

The Forgotten Beasts of Eld is one of the most unforgettable stand-alone fantasies. The cold, enchanting, young sorceress Sybel lives alone on Eld Mountain with a menagerie of magical beasts. When a distant kin, Coren, arrives with a newborn baby, Tamlorn, Sybel reluctantly starts to raise the infant—and experiences newfound emotions. As years pass and the child matures, Sybel becomes enmeshed in conflicts with the outside world. When Coren returns, Sybel embarks on a destructive, vengeful quest. In gorgeous prose, McKillip writes about adventure, romance, war, revenge, isolation, memory, captivity, and friendship, all the while revealing powerful truths about human nature. As the *SF Site* wrote: “This has the feel to it of a tale that has come down from some ancient dawn, a day long gone, but it is bright with the ancient magic and it feels ageless, eternal, light and perfect like a star.”



The Princess Bride

S. Morgenstern's Classic Tale of True Love and High Adventure

By William Goldman (1973)

Readers familiar with the film version of this classic fantasy may find it difficult to look past the saccharine romance between Buttercup and Westley. But the film offers only a slice of Golden's magical storytelling. Taking place in 1941, *The Princess Bride* is framed as a retelling of an age-old tale set in Florin, home to “Beasts of all natures and descriptions. Pain. Death. Brave men. Coward men. Strongest men. Chases. Escapes. Lies. Truths. Passions.” We'll add: A Spanish sword wizard. The Zoo of Death. A gentle giant. The beautiful Buttercup falls in love with Westley, the farm boy. After she professes her love, he leaves to seek his fortune in America, where is reputedly killed. A relentless new suitor soon lurks in the wings—Prince Humperdinck—and misadventures and battles against evil ensue. “In bending narrative expectation,” wrote the *Los Angeles Times*, “Goldman captures an evolving American mind, taking the best parts of old-world stories and remixing them into something quick, uncomplicated and digestible. ... *The Princess Bride*, more than anything, is about the joy of telling a story.”



Further Reading

THE HOBBIT | J. R. R. TOLKIEN (1937)

THE SILMARILLION | J. R. R. TOLKIEN (1977)

THE GOBLIN EMPEROR | KATHERINE ADDISON (2014; ◆ LOCUS AWARD)

UPROOTED | NAOMI NOVIK (★★★★ SELECTION Sept/Oct 2015;

◆ NEBULA AWARD)

THE WORM OUROBOROS | ERIC RÜCKER EDDISON (1922)

CONTEMPORARY/MODERN FANTASY

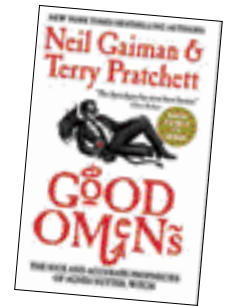
Tales of magic and wonder set in modern times and in our (recognizable) world, the stories in this subgenre often include some dark fantasy and urban fantasy (works by Neil Gaiman, for example). Magic exists in the interstices of our world or leaks over from alternate ones.

Good Omens

The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch

By Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman (1990)

In this brilliant, morbidly comedic collaboration, the end of the world is near. But thanks to a mix-up in a London delivery room 11 years earlier, no one—good or evil—knows where the Antichrist is. This marks just the start of the comedy of errors in preventing the long-planned war between Heaven and Hell, as a disorganized group of demons and angels (one of whom doubles as a rare-book dealer), witches and witch hunters, fortune tellers, and horsepersons of the apocalypse, attempt to find the son of Satan—before it's too late. “Pratchett and Gaiman have managed to create a story that weaves together large doses of satire, cynicism, slapstick and wacky unconventional humour into a cohesive yet surprisingly accurate observation of human life all over the world,” wrote *Fantasy Book Review*. “The characters ... bring a lot of charm and humour to the book by managing to be both unique yet stereotypically British at the same time.”



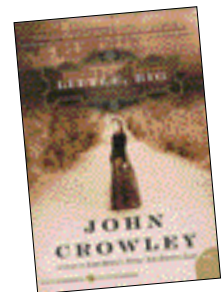
Little, Big

Or, the Fairies' Parliament

By John Crowley (1981)

◆ WORLD FANTASY AWARD

Harold Bloom included this work, which straddles both literary and fantasy fiction, in his *Western Canon*, calling it, “A neglected masterpiece. The closest achievement we have to the Alice stories of Lewis Carroll.” The magnificent novel, nominated for all of the major fantasy awards, is for those who enjoy slow, meandering narratives. Spanning four generations, the story takes place primarily in and around Edgewood, an eccentric country house (or shifting set of houses with various facades) north of “the City.” Through its portal to the realm of Faerie, the Drinkwaters

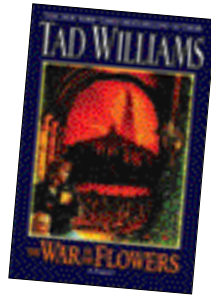


grapple with their relationship with a magical hidden world. A poignant story of love and loss, childhood and fantasy, failure and redemption, and the nature of storytelling, *Little, Big* departs in wonderfully unexpected directions. “*Little, Big*,” opined NPR, “is that very rare book that manages to be both immensely imaginative and completely sincere. Despite the sprawling nature of its storyline and themes, it feels surprisingly intimate.”

The War of the Flowers

By Tad Williams (2003)

After being dumped by his girlfriend, Theo Vilmos, a washed-up, 30-year-old singer in a California garage band, discovers a manuscript in his late mother’s cabin. Written by an eccentric relative, it describes a fairy world visited by the author. When he is chased by a spirit into that world, Theo discovers a kingdom that is a distorted, dangerous, urbanized, and technologically advanced version of our own world, with repressive fairy lords, ogres, sprites, pixies, goblins, and magic—as well as urban decay, class warfare, and prejudice. Worse, certain factions in Faerie are planning the destruction of the mortal world. “Even as he weaves his ‘make-believe’ world, afflicted by rank bigotry, blackouts and even magic e-mail, Williams simultaneously delivers moments of grandeur and potency that fit snugly into a Tolkienesque tradition,” noted *Salon*. “While readers will relish a fantasy novel that belongs in the top tier of those currently being produced ... they will also become absorbed in Theo’s real quest ... to become, basically ... a stand-up mensch.”



Neverwhere

By Neil Gaiman (1996)

The Seven Sisters, the sequel to *Neverwhere*, was announced last spring, so we’ll be quick about it. In this richly imagined novel, the cocreator of the graphic series *The Sandman* invents “London Below,” a pseudo-feudal society paralleling the city above. Richard Mayhew, a young, goodhearted businessman living in London Above, becomes involved with Door, a girl on the run from assassins. Ushered by Door into the strange, menacing, and magical world of London Below—a subterranean labyrinth of sewers, tunnels, and abandoned subway stations populated by angels, killers, and people who talk to rats—Richard engages in a war between good and evil. He “must plumb his own dark crevices while navigating a labyrinthine microcosm that both crushes and expands the very notions of time and place,” wrote the *SF Site* critic. “Gaiman beautifully orchestrates scenes, fraction-



ally unveiling psychological and physical terrors until the unwary reader totters as unsteadily as Richard on the brink of this terrifying world.” See also *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* (★★★★ Sept/Oct 2013).

Further Reading

- THE BALLAD OF BLACK TOM** | VICTOR LAVALLE (2016; ♦ SHIRLEY JACKSON AWARD)
SIGNAL TO NOISE | MORENO-GARCIA (★★★★ July/Aug 2015)
WAR FOR THE OAKS | EMMA BULL (1987; ♦ LOCUS AWARD)
SUNSHINE | ROBIN MCKINLEY (2003; MYTHOPOEIC FANTASY AWARD)
IRON COUNCIL | CHINA MIÉVILLE (★★★★ **SELECTION** Jan/Feb 2005)
AMONG OTHERS | JO WALTON (★★★★ **SELECTION** May/June 2011; ♦ HUGO AWARD, HUGO AWARD, BRITISH FANTASY AWARD)
FEVRE DREAM | GEORGE R. R. MARTIN (1982)
ZOO CITY | LAUREN BEUKES (2010; ♦ ARTHUR C. CLARKE AWARD)
MOONHEART: A ROMANCE | CHARLES DE LINT (1984)

DARK—AND GRIMDARK—FANTASY

Many describe *A Song of Ice and Fire* as grimdark fantasy—a subgenre that is distinctly anti-Tolkien in its absence of idealism and its depiction of the dark side of human nature. Dystopian, amoral, and violent, it often overlaps with the subgenre of urban fantasy (as in, for example, the novels of Neil Gaiman, which we’ve shelved under Contemporary Fantasy).

The Heroes

By Joe Abercrombie (2011)

In this stand-alone, Abercrombie makes ample connections to his First Law universe. Several years have passed since the events of the First Law Trilogy, and Black Dow, the warlord who reigns in the North, struggles to maintain power. Logen Ninefingers and the Union champ at the bit, and the Gurmish and others stir in the background. Over three brutal days, they will determine the fate of the North, fighting for power and glory. But in Abercrombie’s world, survival is often enough. With his morally complex heroes and razor-sharp dialogue, Abercrombie asks what it means to be a hero—or not. “Alongside inappropriate humor, violence exquisite in its explicitness, a natural gift for character building comparable to Stephen King’s and a taste for the tasteless, brutal body counts are among Abercrombie’s trademark touches. ... Those who prefer their fantasy classy needn’t wonder whether Abercrombie’s latest marks some about-face in favor of high magic, noble men, and other such dignified doings. It doesn’t” (*Strange Horizons*). (★★★★ **SELECTION** March/April 2012)



Further Reading

THE BARROW | MARK SMYLLIE (2014)

GODBLIND | ANNA STEPHENS (2017)

KING RAT | CHINA MIÉVILLE (1998)

GASLAMP FANTASY

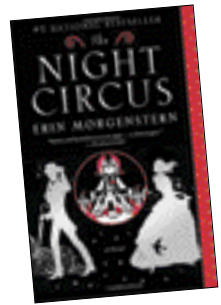
Featuring stories set in a magical version of Victorian or Edwardian locale, **Gaslamp fantasy** (also known as **gaslight fantasy** or **gaslight romance**) is a subgenre of both fantasy and historical fiction.

The Night Circus

By Erin Morgenstern (2011)

A mysterious 19th-century circus, Le Cirque des Rêves, appears without notice, leaves without warning, operates only from sunset to sunrise—and serves as the ultimate chessboard for two rival magicians locked in deadly battle. While spectators are mesmerized by such wonders as a blooming garden of ice, two young illusionists, Marco and Celia, compete as stand-ins for their mentors, bound since youth to partake in a final battle that will leave only one survivor.

When they fall in love, however, they jeopardize the circus and defy their destinies. Narrated from multiple perspectives, this suspenseful, surreal novel, filled with wizardry and wonder, celebrates the power of myth and storytelling. “With echoes of Alice Hoffman (fairy tale magic), Audrey Niffenegger (teleporting) and J. K. Rowling (young wizards, here magicians), Morgenstern’s debut is lifted by its poetic writing, winking literary allusions and thematic cohesion” (*Kansas City Star*). (★★★★ Nov/Dec 2011)



Further Reading

JONATHAN STRANGE AND MR. NORRELL | SUSANNA CLARKE (★★★★ SELECTION Nov/Dec 2004; ♦ HUGO AWARD)

THE PRESTIGE | CHRISTOPHER PRIEST (1995; ♦ WORLD FANTASY AWARD, JAMES TAIT BLACK MEMORIAL PRIZE)

THE TROUPE | ROBERT JACKSON BENNETT (2012)

TERRITORY | EMMA BULL (2007)

THE ANUBIS GATES | TIM POWERS (1983; ♦ PHILIP K. DICK AWARD, SCIENCE FICTION CHRONICLE AWARD)

TOOTH AND CLAW | JO WALTON (2003; ♦ WORLD FANTASY AWARD) ■

