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WORKSHOP HELP DESK

A QUICK GUIDE TO

Teaching Reading Through Fantasy Novels

5-8

MARY EHRENWORTH

Workshop Help Desk Series

Edited by Lucy Calkins with the Reading and Writing Project





DEDICATED TO TEACHERS™

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For

Jackson Ehrenworth, Torrin Hallett, and Tanner Hallett, who taught me what powerful reading looks like, and whose knowledge of fantasy inspired this book





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INTRODUCTION

A Note on Why to Read Fantasy, and What to Expect in this Unit

Picture this: three boys, ranging in age from fifth grade to ninth grade. Torrin is explaining why Dumbledore had to die. Tanner agrees then notes how an event in the last *Harry Potter* novel is connected to something that happened almost three thousand pages prior, in an earlier novel. Jackson begins to talk about the different symbols in the novels. Then they begin a fast-paced-interrupting-each-other-chant of their favorite fantasy series. "I *love* that one . . ."

I have observed this conversation in classrooms. But where I see it again and again, is in between kids who are avid fantasy readers. They talk to each other on trains and planes, in hallways and cafeterias. They are *expert*. In some ways, this unit of study is not about teaching avid fantasy readers how to be more powerful—they already read and talk about these books with passion and wisdom. It's more about learning with these expert readers, and bringing their insightful practices to less nuanced readers. They read with a passion

and an avidity and a stamina that we would love to see in all our readers. It would be crazy for us not to tap that passion, and even crazier for us not to try to instill it in all our readers. This is bigger than our own tastes. It's about harnessing the power of literature that is productive for readers. And listen, even reluctant readers will love these books. You can't read *The Lightning Thief* and not fall in love with it. If you get to dystopian literature as part of this study, *The Hunger Games* is an unstoppable force. Get a kid or adult into that novel, and you have created a life-long reader.

There are underlying reasons that fantasy reading may be compelling for adolescents. Kieran Egan, in his study, Romantic *Understanding: The development of rationality and imagination,* ages 8–15, notes that adolescents are peculiarly powerless, and therefore, at this age they experience what he calls "an urge to transcend the conventions that surround us, to remake the world closer to our heart's desire" (1990, p. 111). Or as Laura Miller wrote in her New Yorker article, Fresh Hell: What's Behind the Boom in Dystopian Literature for Young Readers, "the world of our hovered-over teens and preteens may be safer, but it's also less conducive to adventure" (June 14, 2010). Teens yearn for adventure. And they yearn to be different than they are. It's what Michael Chabon calls in his novel, The Amazing Adventures of Cavalier and Clay, 'caterpillar dreams': dreams of fabulous escape and transformation. It is the urge to be transformed, to become like Harry Potter, whose ordinary life becomes extraordinary, whose private problems take on epic meaning. There is something vividly satisfying about fantasy. It fills a yearning, deep within us, the yearning to achieve significance.

If that's what fantasy does for their souls, here's what fantasy does for our students as readers: It lures them into reading epic novels that span, especially across series, hundreds to thousands of pages. These readers will develop thematic understanding, inevitably, as fantasy novels overlay their themes prominently on the storyline. They will practice the highest level of synthesis, as they put together the clues about what kind of place this is, who has power and control, what is at stake, and how the characters fit into it all. And they learn to revise their understanding, to wait and ponder, and rethink and reconceptualize. And then when they go to the next series, they are better readers. They know more. The books teach them. Everything that standards such as the Common Core Standards, and state tests and reading curricular and literature classes emphasize—synthesizing events, characters, and places, interpreting themes and moral lessons, understanding the literary tradition from which a novel emerges, is the natural fodder of fantasy reading. I know that if I can teach kids to be powerful readers of fantasy, they can learn to read pretty much anything—because they'll have learned to tackle dense, long texts with unfamiliar settings and vocabulary, they'll learn to move across complex narratives, nonfiction field guides, accompanying blogs and websites—it's an intertextual, intellectual cornucopia.

The Structure of the Unit

This unit fits within structures Lucy Calkins researched, devised, and describes in detail in Units of Study for Teaching Reading (Heinemann, 2009), including time across the week for instructional read aloud, mini-lessons that teach specific reading strategies, independent reading time in class and outside of class, and partnerships. You'll find the *Units of Study* series, written by Calkins and colleagues, helpful in planning a yearlong reading curriculum. If you're a middle school teacher, you'll want to particularly turn to: *Navigating Nonfiction; Tackling Complex Texts: Historical Fiction in Book Clubs;* and the additional units for experienced readers, in *Constructing Curriculum: Alternate Units of Study*.

Here's how this unit goes. First we launch the kids into fantasy book clubs or partnerships—the kids are going to want to talk about these books, and you'll want to channel this urge to heighten their intensity and stamina for literary conversations. In the first part of the unit, we'll teach the kids to read with deep comprehension and to synthesize across pages. Then we'll move in the second part of the unit to developing their thematic understanding, and finally in the third part we'll develop their expertise of literary traditions so they begin to see the book they are holding as part of a grander, conceptual text set. Across these parts of the unit and the weeks of the unit, the students will read several books—often they will tackle at least one series, and sometimes they'll move across series. If you have enough time for read aloud almost every day, then you can read aloud The Lightning Thief, which anchors these lessons. But you could also read aloud shorter texts such as Dragon Slayer Academy, which is short, engaging, and remarkably complex, or book one of Spiderwick Chronicles, or short stories.

The Structure of the Lessons

Many of the lessons that follow are written out in their entirety. They follow a classic lesson architecture honed by Lucy Calkins in her *Units of Study* series, as a *connection* to introduce the lesson, a *teaching point* that names a reading skill, a *demon*stration in which we actually model that skill, usually naming smaller strategies and steps we follow, an active engagement where the kids get to try the work right there in the lesson, usually on a shared text we've already read together in read aloud, followed by a *link* that launches the kids into continuing the reading work in their own books. To fit all the lessons into this small book, though, sometimes I've given the teaching point—and then I'll give either the connection or link of the lesson, whichever seems more important to the tone and aim of the lesson. Sometimes how we lead into a lesson the connection—really sets ups for kids why we might do this work. And sometimes our link—to their independent reading—really helps them understand when we might do this work and what it looks like. Of course, you can reinvent any of those parts, I simply wanted to give you some models that might help you envision the entire unit of study. Enjoy!

Yours,

Mary Ehrenworth



Analyzing the Setting for Its Physical and Psychological Implications

Getting Ready

- ▶ Have on hand a copy of *The Paper Bag Princess*, or any other concise, accessible fantasy story.
- You may choose to include film clips from fantasy movies or to introduce those in a prior read-aloud session.
- ▶ Read aloud the first chapter of *The Lightning Thief*—or the first chapter of whatever book you are reading aloud—in read-aloud, prior to this minilesson. *Deltora Quest* books are a good, shorter read-aloud. The *Spiderwick Chronicles* is an easier series of books. *Dragon Slayers' Academy* books are much easier and shorter. Riordan's *The Lost Hero* is newer.

The aim of this lesson is to move students past identifying a setting with a word or a phrase (for example, it's the future, it's a place called Narnia) and into analyzing that place for its physical and psychological implications on the characters and the story. We hope that their analysis after this lesson will sound more like: "It's a place called Narnia, where power seems to be held by a White Witch, and everyone is afraid. Fear seeps through the land—and it's cold and wintery, which seems related to that fear." You'll want to practice analyzing and describing the places in the stories you've read, so you can demonstrate on some novels, as you teach and confer with the kids. You may also want to practice with some familiar movies, such as Harry Potter.

Connection

Stir up your readers—share your passion for this genre.

I had around me many gorgeous fantasy novels, their covers adorned with dragons, castles, and symbols. As I spoke, I gestured with these books. "Fantasy readers, today is the day when we start our unit of study in fantasy. Some of you are avid fantasy readers, I know. Others of you are a little unsure about this. You're not quite sure how you feel about dragons and dwarves and epic quests where the world is imperiled. Friends, let's begin, then, by thinking about why we would read fantasy. Here are some reasons. Reason one: because the stories are incredible. These are wild, dangerous, romantic tales, where the fate of mankind may rest on the choices made by the main character. Everything is more important, more intense, more vivid, in fantasy stories. Reason two: because when you study fantasy, really, you are studying the human condition. The stories are never really about elves and hobbits. They're about the struggle between good and evil, they're about how power corrupts, they're about the quest to be better than we are, they're about how even the smallest of us can affect what happens in this world. Reason three: because if you become a powerful reader of fantasy, you're likely to become a more powerful reader of all texts. Fantasy novels are incredibly complicated. You have to figure out where the story takes place, what kind of world it is, who has power there, what the rules are. You'll enter narratives that stretch over many novels; you'll read hundreds and even thousands of pages. You'll emerge, like the characters in these stories, changed."

"It's not accidental, friends, that the most widely read book in our lifetime is a story of a boy who finds he can do magic and how his life becomes an extraordinary quest to rid the world of evil. There is something transcendent about the very notion of Harry Potter. Who doesn't want to feel that your troubles are of extraordinary significance, to measure yourself against the heroes and villains of the ages, to forge bonds of friendship that will be tested by torture and by love? Four hundred million copies, translated into over sixty languages—it's a book that made the whole globe into a book club. If you read all seven novels, you read a story that spread over four thousand pages. You'll be reading in clubs that have

fewer than four hundred million members, and I imagine you'll read fewer than four thousand pages together, but still, you get an idea of the epic quality of fantasy."

You'll see here, that while our intention may be for our students to become adept at reading much more complicated stories, ones with multiple plotlines, complex characters, and unfamiliar settings, what we say is: fantasy! The lure of fantasy is a magical one.

"I want that for you, friends. All of it: I want you to embark, from this classroom, with these friends, on wild adventures that make your head spin. I want you to feel the release that comes when you escape into other, mythic worlds where magic happens. I want you to find stories that spread over many books, that keep you up at night, and that fill the corners of your life with their secrets. You may or may not emerge from this study a fanatic—a Dungeons & Dragons player, a follower of Avatar, a reader of manga. But you will, I am sure, know more about this wild and beautiful genre. You will, I hope, have more insight into the human condition. And you will, I feel sure, emerge with an increased confidence that you can tackle truly complicated texts."

Name your teaching point. Specifically, teach your students that fantasy readers use multiple cuing systems to research the settings of their stories and the impact of the setting.

"Friends, today I want to teach you that fantasy readers understand that their first task is to figure out what kind of setting their story takes place in. Readers look for clues about the time period—and the magical elements, in particular—using the covers, blurbs, and details from the beginning of the story for their research. We know that the setting has physical and psychological implications on the character and the story."

Teaching

Explain some of the common settings of fantasy stories and demonstrate how you use this knowledge to research the setting of a shared text.

"Experienced fantasy readers expect certain kinds of places. Often, fantasy stories are set in a medieval world, full of swords, horses, castles, dragons, and so forth—like The Lord of the Rings, for instance, or Narnia. A second common setting is a futuristic world, full of spacecraft, intergalactic travel, and advanced technology—such as Star Wars. The third common setting is the ordinary world, where it seems at first as if everything is normal, but then gradually you notice an infiltration of magic, a kind of blending of the world we know with magical elements. Harry Potter is like this."

"Knowledgeable fantasy readers know to gather up clues, right away, about what kind of place they are in. Sometimes it's a little tricky, because the story might or might not begin right away in the magical world. The Hobbit, for instance, starts right off in a place full of creatures who grow to be only three feet tall, and they use carts and horses to farm, and there are wizards, so the reader knows that this place is magical. But

other times, the story starts off in an ordinary place, in the here and now, and you think it's going to all happen here, and then the characters are transported. That's what happens in Narnia: Peter, Edmund, Lucy, and Susan all walk through an enchanted wardrobe into the magical kingdom of Narnia. In Harry Potter, Harry also starts off in the ordinary world, but that actual world becomes magical. He doesn't go to another kingdom. He still lives in London, in the modern world. But magic enters that world and transforms it."

■ Teachers, you may show a few film clips from fantasy movies. The scenes give students a way to quickly compare multiple texts, and they bring all our readers, of any level, into this conversation. We can return later to look at issues of representation, gender norms, and critical literacy.

"OK, readers, I've tried to jump-start your reading a bit here, as you can tell, by giving you a little expertise on how fantasy stories tend to start. That means I expect you, from the very first moment you begin reading, to be alert for details about what kind of place you encounter in the story you are reading. Things unfold rapidly in fantasy, and you have to get oriented quickly, before a dragon arrives or you get swept through a portal to another world."

"Watch how I do this work. I'm going to try to name what I do as a reader, as I do it, so you can see the steps I follow. Then you'll have a chance to practice on the story we read together and, of course, afterward in the stories you'll read with your book clubs."

I picked up The Paper Bag Princess.

"OK, so . . . first, before I even open the pages, I look carefully at the covers of the book. I know that with the stories being this complicated, I want to get all the information I can from the covers. I'm looking to see if there's a blurb that might tell me who this story is about and, more important, what kind of world this is. . . . No! There is no blurb on this book. That doesn't seem fair. OK, next I'll look at the cover art and the title, as those can also tell me a lot. So . . . the book is called *The Paper Bag Princess*, and there is a girl with a bent crown, a huge castlelike door, and a gigantic, smoking dragon on the front cover. On the back cover is another image, of the same dragon breathing cataclysmic fire over the head of the girl. Hmm . . . "

I opened the inside of the book. "Inside, the story starts:"

Elizabeth was a beautiful princess. She lived in a castle and had expensive princess clothes. She was going to marry a prince named Ronald.

I looked at the page for a moment, saying, "And there's a picture of a snotty looking prince, with his nose in the air, and a besotted girl, staring at him with hearts flying around her. The room looks like a castle, with arched windows, stone walls, and old wooden chairs. And their clothes are definitely medieval (that's from the Middle Ages, like you'd see in the time of King Arthur). OK, so I definitely see from the furniture, the buildings, and the clothes that this story happens in a place that is medieval. On the next page, it says:"

Unfortunately, a dragon smashed her castle, burned all her clothes with his fiery breath, and carried off Prince Ronald.

"Aha! So there is magic here, too—this is not historical fiction, from the actual Middle Ages. A dragon has entered. That is definitely a magical creature. He has even magically managed to smash Elizabeth's castle and burn all of Elizabeth's clothes without harming her at all."

In more complicated stories, the setting is literally setting up the reader. It incorporates both the mood or atmosphere and often some of the conflict for the character-it is definitely worth paying attention to! It might seem as if the setting in The Paper Bag Princess is simply some kind of place in the Middle Ages where there was a castle and a princess. But if you consider the psychological implications, it's more than that. It's a place where sudden violence happens. It's a place where no one is safe. It's a place where people are isolated and suddenly, often, alone.

I put the book down. "OK, readers, I think I know enough. But what matters is that not only do I know about the physical time and place, but I'm getting a sense of what kind of place this is—its psychological implications. It seems pretty clear that this story begins in a place that is medieval. It has castles and old-fashioned clothes and princesses. And it is magical . . . there are dragons. There are *not* subways or laser guns or spacecraft. And, the story started right away in this magical kingdom. I know all this because I considered carefully what I learned from the pictures and text on the covers, the clues about daily life, and the appearance of any magic. It's also a place of sudden violence, where people's lives are ripped apart, and they can find themselves alone, facing horrid challenges without any support. It's a land that seems charming at first, but turns out to be unsafe."

Active Involvement

Look at your clues together.

"Readers, let's give you a chance to practice this work together. I'm going to return to the first chapter of The Lightning Thief. I saw when we were reading it that your jaws were practically hanging open as the story unfolded. Like me, you were entranced, and shocked, with how much happened and how wild it was. In fact, most of your conversation was simply retelling to each other what you think happened. You seemed as unsure as Percy was about what had really occurred on this field trip to the Metropolitan Museum. It didn't help that at the end of the first chapter, after Percy Jackson's teacher has turned into a demon and tried to kill him in the middle of the museum, that his favorite teacher, Mr. Brunner, apparently denies that any of it even happened."

I picked up The Lightning Thief. "Friends, we dove right into the story, so that everything happened fast and without any warning. When Mrs. Dodds suddenly turned into a demon, it was pretty confusing. This time, let's see if we could have gathered more clues a little earlier. Then we'd have a deeper understanding of what kind of place Percy is living in."

I held the book up so that everyone could see it. "Readers, I'm going to show you the covers, and read you what's on the back blurb. This time, follow my example in using the strategy of really researching the time period and the magical elements within the story by paying extra attention to the covers and the start of the story."

"So, on the cover is an image of New York City, seen from the water. Lightning crackles down past the Empire State Building. It's dark and stormy. Emerging from the ocean, apparently dry even though he comes up out of the deep waves, is a dark-haired boy. He holds in one hand some kind of object."

Turn and Talk

You'll notice, teachers, that I'm giving the kids a couple of opportunities to turn and talk during this session. That's because I want students to notice details and have a chance to analyze them before those details are replaced by the next set of details. So I've broken their partner talks into two parts here. Also, invite readers who have already read the book to partner together, so they'll have new insights. If you're reading a different novel, such as The Hunger Games, that doesn't have such a riveting cover, you can still ponder the possible significance of the title and image—or have on hand a few fantasy novels to practice with.

"Friends, I can tell you have a lot to say already about the clues that a reader could gather here about what kind of place this is, before he or she even opens the book. Turn and tell your partner all of what you might surmise, just from the cover so far."

They did. I jotted some notes. Then I summarized their conversations: "Pause for a moment, friends, and I'll share some of what you are saying. A lot of you spoke about how it is clearly modern times, because you can see New York City landmarks, such as the Empire State Building. Many of you described the kid's clothes as being contemporary, which is another clue that it's here and now. But then you spoke of the glowing sword and the way the kid emerges from the waves as being magical. It's not as if you normally see kids with glowing swords, who can walk through oceans and not get wet, on Fifth Avenue. I love, as well, how some of you said that it seems like a violent place—it's dark and ominous. It seems threatening."

"This is good, you're really researching thoughtfully. I'm going to show you the back cover next, because that would be your next strategy. Let's see how that helps your research. I imagine that you'd want to jot down notes. If you were doing this with your club book or your independent reading book, I'd definitely expect that you'd know to make a quick notebook entry so you'd hold onto your research. When you read harder books like this, you definitely want to use all your strategies to jump-start your reading from a more knowledgeable place."

Students can jot as you read, and you may read it twice. I read the two opening paragraphs, from "Percy Jackson is about to be kicked out of boarding school" to "unravel a treachery more powerful than the gods themselves." This and the start of Riordan's The Last Hero have to be among the most riveting first few pages of any young adult novel.

Turn and Talk

I put the book down. "Whoa, I can't believe how much better prepared we would have been as readers if we had read this first! I could see you jotting furiously. Turn and tell your partner about the research this blurb would help you with."

They did. I jotted what they said.

I pulled them back and shared some of their conversations. "Readers, I heard you say that from the blurb, our research tells us that Percy lives in the modern world. He goes to boarding school, he reads textbooks, and he studies Greek mythology. But you also said that you found out that there is dark magic in this world: it seems that the Greek myths are, in fact, real. Zeus is one of the characters. There is an Oracle. And a magic lightning bolt. And monsters. It's an unsafe place and clearly Percy will be threatened by this dark magic."

I looked at our notes. Then I said, "Well, readers, we certainly found that this research paid off, didn't we? Our next strategy would be to reread the first part of the book and see if there were any clues that we might have picked up, because we now know that there is magic in this modern world."

You can read the first part now, or simply let them retell and recall for a moment. They'll have more ideas about things they should have realized if they knew that this place was magical.

Send your students off, reminding them to research the settings as they begin their stories.

I put down *The Lightning Thief*, saying, "Friends, this work is going to be very important now for you as readers. The novels you're choosing are complicated. The places will be unusual and significant, and you'll want to use the strategies you know to be alert to details about these places and their physical and psychological implications. So, not just today, but whenever you pick up a complex novel, you'll want to research the place carefully, using the covers, the blurb, and all the details in the beginning of the story. Off you go, readers. I'll be eager to see you do this work and listen to your conversations when you'll have a chance to share your research on the stories you are reading."

strategies is that after using them ritualistically for a time, you may move to a stage where you think you don't need them so much, as you become more confident with some levels of text. Most of my teen readers now ignore the information from the covers, beyond how it entices them to choose the book. But the truth is that often, as you tackle even more complicated texts, you need those strategies again. That's what I hope we convey to students in this lesson as well: their repertoire will be cyclical in terms of how much and how often they use various strategies. It's not that you learn one strategy,

master it, use it all the time, or then never need it as you learn new strategies. It's more that you turn to your repertoire depending on what kind of reading work you're doing and what your relationship to the book is.



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