

Cultureshock

By Francesca Simon

All right, I admit it, I'm biased. I hate fantasy. All those adjectives and elves and weird names. The moment someone says fantasy, I know I'm in for "The three blood-red moons rose over the dusty sand plains of Ut-Tajik as the bald jackal priest of Sidt placed the sacred silver urn of Caldon on the broken altar of the blind god Fiff." I got bored halfway through *The Lord of the Rings*; why should I endure Tolkien's imitators?

My 16-year-old son, Joshua, adores fantasy. Fantasy books, fantasy computer games, fantasy websites. But the books he loves above all else are Robin Hobb's *Farseer* trilogy. He's nagged me for ages to read Book 1, *Assassin's Apprentice*. He's read it even more times than I've read *The Way We Live Now*.

What mystifies me about Josh's love of fantasy is that it excludes everything else. He lives in a house heaving with classics. But will Josh read *Crime and Punishment*, *Emma* or *Barchester Towers*? He will not. We both love the theatre, and a lot of our taste in music overlaps but we part company when it comes to books.

I love 19th-century fiction, and Anthony Trollope is my favourite writer. I own his complete works in hardback, all 47 novels bound in the Trollope Society's dark brown covers. Anthony - we are on first-name terms - taught this bewildered Yank everything about British society, past and present: its class structure, its passions and its prejudices. His subtle depiction of relationships and the struggle to make decisions is unrivalled. He's so funny, so perceptive, so clear-sighted about the pursuit of money and power and status. Everyone with a pulse should read him.

Instead, Josh's mission in life is persuading unbelievers to read Robin Hobb, and now it seems I am to be his next scalp.

Why, I ask Josh, does he love fantasy so much? "Because they're the most enthralling stories," he says. Well, one person's enthralling is another's big yawn. But as I'm always telling people to read the books their kids love, I can put off the evil moment no longer.

Oh God, I'm trapped. Just me and the adjectives. I pick up Josh's tattered copy of *Assassin's Apprentice*. It's 480 pages long. The typeface is tiny. I delay opening the book as long as I can. Then finally, I start to read.

And I am hooked. Hobb is a remarkable storyteller. There are no elves. Fitz, the assassin's apprentice and the king's bastard son, has quite a good name. Hobb even keeps her adjectives on a tight lead. (Adverbs are more frolicsome.) What particularly gripped me was her exploration of the consequences of magical powers. Fitz's powerful connection with his wolf Night Eyes means that he becomes increasingly dehumanised while the wolf becomes more human, with the result that both are isolated and their nature warped. A really interesting idea, and wonderfully well imagined.

I can't help wondering how much Josh identifies with Fitz and his struggle to survive in a hostile kingdom, or whether his enjoyment is simply the fun of escaping into a thrilling new world. (The latter, Josh assures me.) After all, who wouldn't rather be on a quest than stuck in school taking endless exams?

So I was wrong. Josh isn't crazy. All fantasy can't be lumped into a stodgy heap and dismissed. I confess I've already finished Books 2 and 3 of the Farseer Trilogy. Josh tells me that Hobb's latest, *Shaman's Crossing*, is just out. Hmm. I wonder if Ottakars provide brown-paper wrappers?

Joshua Stamp-Simon: "Trollope's not heavy reading," my mum chirps happily, "it's like a Victorian soap opera." Right. The vast and intimidating works of Anthony Trollope appear anything but a light read. To me fiction should be enjoyable first and "worthy" second. Although it's nice to think that classic literature will enrich the mind and broaden the horizons, this prospect fades into insignificance when faced with hours spent bored rigid.

This is why I've turned to fantasy, the genre unjustly deemed one rung below chick lit. It's therefore my duty to clear up a few misconceptions about fantasy fiction, the genre of kings. *The Lord of the Rings*, although a great example of fantasy fiction, is not synonymous with it. Tolkien's masterworks have spawned many cheap imitations. Of late, my generation has been responsible for this. But the book I chose for my mum to read serves as a magnificent example to counter the widespread misconception that fantasy consists entirely of adjectives and cliches. *The Assassin's Apprentice* is a great story about great characters, set in a fascinating world. This, incidentally, is how fantasy trumps other forms of fiction. While writers of "conventional" fiction can create imaginary settings, they are bound by the physical, geographical and historical laws of our world. Fantasy authors have freedom to invent the perfect environment for the story they want to tell. This can be done badly - but it can also be done oh so well. How would Trollope's *Barchester Towers* compare?

I begin by taking a general overview - a survey of the battlefield, if you will. The lack of cover art or blurb and presence of an introduction and "a note on the text" do not bode well. There is no map. I scan the introduction, by a certain Ruth Rendell, which commences, "If not Anthony Trollope's finest book ..." Not only am I reading a boring Victorian novel, but a bad Victorian novel. Ruthie obviously doesn't have much background in marketing, nor even the GCSE English ability to "write persuasively". Worse, *Barchester Towers* is 476 pages long. The typeface is tiny. Praying for a literary miracle, I begin to read.

The problem is ... nothing happens. The Reverend Obediah Slope gives a sermon that no one likes. The other characters then spend 50 pages discussing this. Trollope (or Anthony, as my mum calls him) writes as if none of his readers have anything better to do - all characters are introduced by means of lengthy and irrelevant description. The basic doctrine of "show, don't tell" was obviously not around in the 19th century, nor the notion that character and plot work best in tandem, rather than in isolation. Trollope constantly interrupts his already boring

descriptions with his own views on various subjects, including the nature of literature, where he discloses that there is not, and will never be, any suspense in his fiction. So my last hope, that the book would suddenly take off after the first few hundred pages, was quashed. I decided to abandon ship.

But it was an interesting voyage. For the first time, I saw the word "ejaculated" used as an equivalent for "said". But the best thing about this experience is that it proves I was right all along. I assured my mum that she'd love the Farseer books, and she does. She assured me I'd love Trollope. I assured her that I wouldn't. Victory is sweet.