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BOOKS

Fantasy Books Are Not Just for Kids

Experts suggest 10 magical reads grown-ups will love

By Maria Speidel, AARP

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MARÍA JESÚS CONTRERAS

Life is a lot right now, isn't it? Why not escape with a dip into the world of fantasy fiction? From the spicy, romantasy of Sarah J. Mass to cautionary postapocalyptic sagas and the foundational

legends of kingdoms real and imagined, the super-popular fantasy genre is huge with young people — but many older adults are also loving the opportunity for escape that they find within the pages of these imaginative and transporting books.

“Over half of our 25-person book club is 50 or older,” says Andrea Larson, a librarian in the Cook Memorial Library District in Illinois, who leads a fantasy and science fiction book club there. Some started reading fantasy like C.S. Lewis (*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*) as children, while others came to it later. “Something we’ve talked about in our club is that when we revisit fantasy titles we’ve read in our younger years, we see the books in a different light. We notice more complexity in the stories, and can be more attuned to a book’s deeper meaning, instead of just getting caught up in the adventure.”



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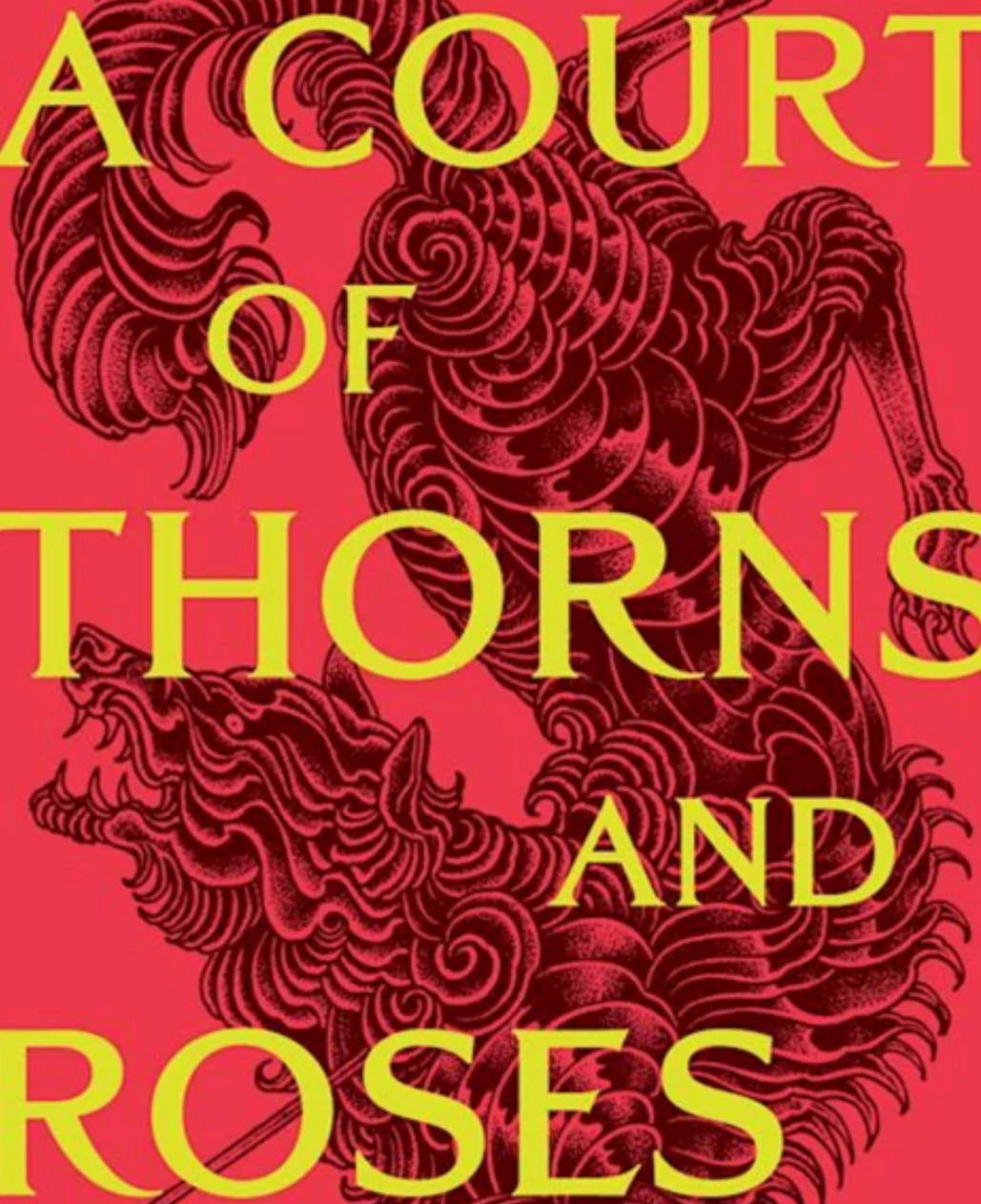
Adult fantasy book purchases are buoying the publishing business these days, with sales soaring more than 85 percent in 2024 compared to the first half of 2023, according to a Publisher’s Weekly report citing Circana data. That’s fueled in part by two wildly popular writers in the genre, Rebecca Yarros and the aforementioned Maas (more on their books below).

We talked to librarians and other fantasy fans for their favorite picks. Please share your own in the comments below.

***Court of Thorns and Roses* by Sarah J. Maas**

This author, who helped popularize the portmanteau category “romantasy,” combining romance with fantasy, is a sensation on BookTok (the book-focused parts of TikTok) and this year has sold millions of books from her three series, *Crescent City*, *A Court of Thorns and Roses* and *Throne of Glass*, according to Circana BookScan. Each series takes a classic fairy tale as a starting point, with *Court of Thorns and Roses* using *Beauty and the Beast*. Maas’ beauty, the human Feyre, crosses into a magical realm while hunting a wolf and her adventure begins.

Also consider: A massive bestseller in the genre, Rebecca Yarros’ 2023 novel *Fourth Wing*, similarly features a human protagonist, Violet, trying to survive among supernatural creatures — in Violet’s case, the dragons at the elite dragon-riding school her military mother forces her to attend.



A COURT
OF
THORNS
AND
ROSES

SARAH J. MAAS

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BLOOMSBURY

***The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien**

Arguably the book whose 1965 paperback edition started our current fantasy craze (not to mention an ever-expanding catalogue of film adaptations), *Lord of the Rings* is an archetypal good-versus-evil tale. Reading the original is the first step in being conversant in one of popular culture's omnipresent epics, which features hobbits, wizards, dwarves and all manner of other magical beings dreamed up by the Oxford professor who specialized in Old English and created his own Elvish language.

Also consider: If you're completely new to the genre, you won't want to miss Tolkien's classic 1937 novel *The Hobbit*. It begins the tales of Middle Earth and "if someone asked me to pick one book that represented the archetype of a fantasy novel, this would be it," says Aimee Harris, who runs the Hoboken Library's Science Fiction and Fantasy book club.

***A Game of Thrones* by George R.R. Martin**

Another seminal fantasy title, *A Game of Thrones* is the ultimate political drama. It pits warring families in the mythic kingdom of Westeros against each other for the Iron Throne. Librarian Harris says, "The TV series is terrific, but I would also recommend checking out the book with its fantastic characters." She adds that it's "lighter than some on fantastic creatures so [it] appeals to some historic fiction fans as well." Obadiah Baird, a bookseller at the Book Bin stores in Corvallis and Salem, Oregon, and cofounder of the stores' Science Fiction and Fantasy book club, gives it another thumbs-up for its relevancy: "*Game of Thrones*' dark view of politics and dynasty reflects modern politics in some concerning ways," he says.

Also consider: Read the other four books in the series, or try *Spinning Silver* by Naomi Novik, a favorite of librarian Larson's book club. This 2018 fantasy follows a faithful daughter whose efforts to get her family out of debt lead to epic clashes with the creatures of the otherworldly Staryk kingdom.

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***The Bright Sword* by Lev Grossman**

Our Anglophone world cannot get enough of Arthur, the proto-English king of the fifth or sixth century, who may or may not have existed. This new novel from Grossman, known for his *Magicians* trilogy, tells the story of young Collum, who sets off for Camelot aiming to serve King Arthur as a Knight of the Round Table, but soon discovers that the king has died in battle, and Excalibur is gone. He and the other Knights now need to find an adequate heir to the throne, and

#1 New York Times bestselling author of
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THE BRIGHT
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A NOVEL OF KING ARTHUR

an elaborate quest begins. *Booklist* gives it high praise, describing the story as “packed with magic, quirky beloved characters, punishing twists and exciting bold action scenes.”

Also consider: Try other books set in Arthur’s world, such as *The Crystal Cave* by Mary Stewart (1970), the first of five in her Arthurian series. Grossman’s childhood favorite was 1958’s *The Once and Future King* by T.H. White.



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***Akata Witch* by Nnedi Okorafor**

Although technically a Young Adult Book, Harris recommends 2011’s *Akata Witch*, for adults too. Sometimes called “the Nigerian Harry Potter,” the story features Sunny, an albino girl with magical powers, who is enlisted to find a dangerous criminal. “Afrofuturism has become a hot genre with the success of Black Panther, but fantasy works [inspired by] African culture also have a lot of interesting material to draw from,” Harris notes.

Also consider: Harris’ group enjoyed 2021’s *The Gilded Ones*, the first book in the Deathless series by Namina Forna. Another popular pick, by Booker Prize winner Marlon James (*A Brief History of Seven Killings*) is 2019’s *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*, set in a mythical Africa. A finalist for the National Book Award, it kicks off the author’s Dark Star Trilogy.

***Mistborn* by Brandon Sanderson**

Producing at least a book a year since 2005, Sanderson has gradually built an interconnected “cosmere” of fantasy planets, each with its own set of outer gods fighting for supremacy. *Mistborn: The Final Empire* is a great place to start, set in a unique world that the “Dark Overlord” figure has already conquered some thousand years in the past, it features the endlessly feuding gods of Ruin and Preservation. Sanderson’s novels often include a fresh and interesting look at religion and scholarship — interests that make all the more sense when you consider his Mormon background.

More like this: If you’re looking for something even meatier, you could start with *The Stormlight Archives*, an ambitious set of novels that will ultimately comprise 10 mainline books, each clocking

in at over 1,000 pages.

***Outlander* by Diana Gabaldon**

Outlander (1991) follows Claire, a young English nurse fresh off battlefield duty in World War II, who accidentally lands in 18th century Scotland. Gabaldon deftly blends romance and historical fiction with time travel, another fantasy genre favorite. Gabaldon says [on her site](#) that she's working on the 10th and possibly last book in this series, which follows Clare and her 18th-century husband through Scotland's Jacobite Uprising, the Court of Louis XV and the American Revolution. You can also check out the sexy Starz series based on the books.

Also consider: Historical fiction fantasy geeks might try the 2018 novel *The Poppy War* by R.F. Kuang, inspired by events in early 20th-century Chinese history. Or, if time travel is your jam, there's the 2020 bestseller *The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue* by V.E. Schwab, whose main character, Addie, makes a Faustian bargain that takes her from 18th century France to modern-day New York.

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***The Fifth Season: Every Age Must Come to an End* by N.K. Jemisin**

[Climate change](#) is another popular (and unsettling) theme for fantasy writers, and these books often lie at the border of science fiction and fantasy. With that subtitle, Jemisin's readers know to buckle up as they follow Essun's search through a postapocalyptic landscape for her kidnapped daughter. *The Fifth Season* is the first in N.K. Jemisin's Broken Earth series, whose books have all won Hugo Awards. It also charted at No. 44 in *The New York Times*' recent list of "100 Best Books of the 21st Century," with writer Rebecca Roanhorse noting, "Jemisin weaves a world both horrifyingly familiar and unsettlingly alien."

Also consider: Emily St. John Mandel's much-lauded *Station Eleven* (2014) follows a Shakespearean troupe traveling through a shattered post-pandemic civilization. [HBO Max](#) premiered a 10-part series based on the book in 2021.

***The Ninth House* by Leigh Bardugo**

Colleges, the older the better, are fertile ground for fantasy writers who like to probe what magic lies latent amid the dusty stacks and ivy-bound buildings. In the first adult book written by bestselling YA author (and Yale alum) Bardugo, Galaxy "Alex" Stern is accepted by Yale for her ability to see ghosts, but that admission comes with a price: Alex must keep tabs on the supernatural doings of Yale's real secret societies. *Kirkus Reviews* praised the "compulsively

readable novel” for its “aura of both enchantment and authenticity.” A 2023 sequel followed this 2019 hit, with one more book and an [Amazon Prime Video](#) adaptation reportedly in the works.

Also consider: Try 2011’s *A Discovery of Witches*, where a Yale (again!) professor doing research at Oxford has her witchy powers unleashed by a manuscript everyone thought was lost. The author, Deborah Harkness, is a real-life history professor at the University of Southern California.

***Legends & Lattes* by Travis Baldree**

Not every fantasy novel takes on the life’s big questions. There is a whole category called [cozy](#) fantasy that places magic amid the mundane, including this 2022 winner. Here Viv, an orc, lays down her sword to open a coffee house. An orc, by the way, is a mythical goblin-type creature popularized by J.R.R. Tolkien. Both bookseller Baird and librarian Harris rank *Legends & Lattes* among their top 10 fantasies. “It is emblematic of the cozy fantasy trend, and for readers looking for something comforting and light during stressful times, it will appeal,” says Harris.

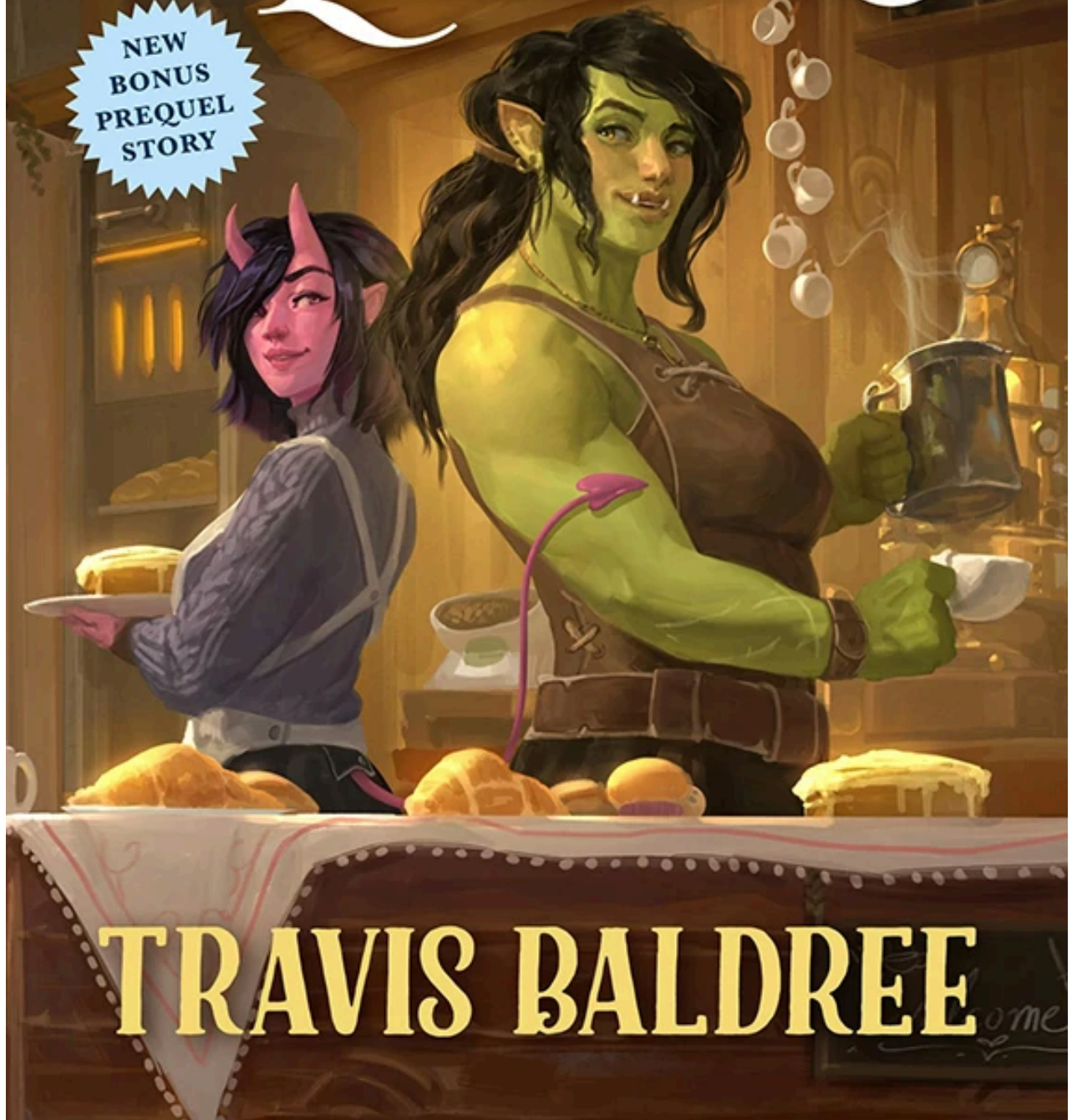
Also consider: Harris recommends *The House in the Cerulean Sea* by T.J. Klune (2020), where an unassuming child social worker is tasked with investigating some highly unusual (read: magical) young people hidden away on a secret island.



"It's sweet, beautiful and, most of all, kind. I hugely recommend this book." **SEANAN MCGUIRE**

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TRAVIS BALDREE

Maria Speidel is a writer who lives in Los Angeles with a house full of books.

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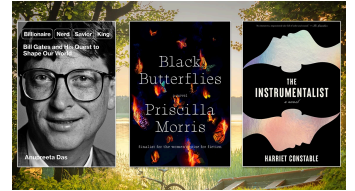
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