



BOOK REVIEW:
*Magic Words, Magic Worlds:
Form and Style in Epic Fantasy*

Jayden King

Oliver, Matthew. *Magic Words, Magic Worlds: Form and Style in Epic Fantasy*. McFarland, 2022. ISBN 978-1-4766-4588-9.

Magic Words, Magic Worlds is an ambitious and timely contribution to fantasy studies, distinguished by its commitment to close reading and attention to stylistic nuance. Oliver argues that academic criticism has largely ignored questions of language and form in epic fantasy. In a lengthy preface and introduction, he expresses frustration with the scarcity and quality of existing work on the topic, identifying only two previous book-length studies focused on form in fantasy: Farah Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008) and Susan Mandala's *Language in Science Fiction and Fantasy* (2012), which he refers to throughout the text. He also credits *The Shape of Fantasy* (2021) by C. Palmer-Patel, which was released while he was completing this volume and has been retroactively incorporated into his research. His own work differs from these predecessors by emphasizing close reading – which he describes as a neglected and underutilized method in fantasy scholarship.

The lack of close reading in the field is understandable: epic fantasy is often composed of lengthy, complex texts. Nonetheless, Oliver sets out to engage in precisely this kind of deep analysis, focusing on authors known for their expansive work, such as Stephen R. Donaldson, Brandon Sanderson, Steven Erikson, and Robert Jordan. He argues that, despite what the New Critics proposed, close readings need not be divorced from political context, as demonstrated by critics such as Isobel Armstrong and Caroline Levine, and that fantasy texts, like all literature, speak to fundamental questions of history.

The introduction outlines the theoretical frameworks that underpin the study. References to Derrida's semiotics quickly give way to more genre-specific

thinkers such as Brian Attebery and Farah Mendlesohn. Oliver critiques what he sees as an overreliance on Attebery's concept of fantasy as a "fuzzy set," which he claims is often used to avoid the difficult task of defining the genre with precision. Mendlesohn's taxonomy, particularly her classification of portal-quest fantasy, Oliver also engages with primarily in a critical light, although he acknowledges her contributions. He also offers his own working definition of epic fantasy, drawing in part on Stefan Ekman's work—an insightful addition that deserves more attention in the field. Oliver links the "epic" dimension of epic fantasy to classical epics via the temporality of narrative, suggesting that features such as deep time and communal identity have made the form particularly attractive to conservative writers. These same features, however, also open epic fantasy to the interrogation of stable historical narratives.

The body of the book is divided into four sections, each composed of two chapters. Each section addresses a specific stylistic or formal element through comparative close readings of selected texts. The first section addresses syntactic complexity. Oliver begins with one of the most common critiques of epic fantasy: its tendency toward prosaic excess. Through analyses of Stephen R. Donaldson and Steven Erikson – two writers frequently criticized for florid prose – Oliver argues that elaborate, highly descriptive writing can serve a valuable function. By defamiliarizing the world and foregrounding characters' interiority, excessive description can cultivate empathy for situations that may be otherwise inaccessible to readers. In contrast, the chapter that follows examines minimalism in the prose of R. F. Kuang and Ursula K. Le Guin. By reducing the descriptive focus on violence while keeping it central to the plot, Oliver finds that these authors modulate the reader's psychological response. However, he also notes that this restraint carries a risk: it may inadvertently silence victims by censoring their experience in an attempt to avoid voyeuristic appropriation. Ultimately, Oliver contends that both approaches engage and subvert genre conventions to evoke empathy in distinct ways.

The second section considers narrative perspective, with one chapter on third-person narration and another on first-person. Third-person narratives dominate epic fantasy to the extent that first-person entries are seen as formal outliers. Drawing on Genette's distinctions between heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narration (though he does not pursue this vocabulary beyond the introduction), Oliver argues that third-person narration in epic fantasy democratizes narrative authority by granting visibility to a broad array of characters. Comparing Donaldson and R. Scott Bakker, he identifies a contrast: Donaldson's narration, though controversial – his protagonist commits rape upon entering the fantasy world – nonetheless affirms human agency and subjectivity. Bakker's third-person narration, by contrast, reflects his background in philosophy and neuroscience, constructing what Oliver calls "an entire system of semantic meaning-making" (112) devoid of agency.

The first-person chapter focuses on Glen Cook's *The Black Company* and N. K. Jemisin's *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*. Oliver shows how Cook uses fragmented syntax and narrative gaps to undermine the genre's typical good-versus-evil binary, thereby "subverting epic essentialism" (128). In Jemisin's work, on the other hand the first-person perspective heightens the disruption of linear temporality, which Oliver argues destabilizes one of the key features of epic: the depth of time.

The third section addresses the evocation of wonder, specifically how authors use the delayed release of information to produce cognitive estrangement – an effect typically associated with science fiction. Oliver draws on Darko Suvin's concept of cognitive estrangement to argue (despite what Suvin himself might have asserted at the time) that fantasy can provoke similar responses when it integrates the scientific with the mythic. This argument is explored through readings of Sanderson's *Mistborn* and Michael Moorcock's *Elric Saga*. Although the religious and philosophical differences between Sanderson and Moorcock are noted – Mormonism versus atheism – the contrast is not fully developed. Still, Oliver shows that both authors cultivate wonder through gradual revelation, encouraging the reader to remain cognitively flexible. On the other side of the spectrum, he contrasts the blunt, action-driven prose of David Gemmell with the ironic, genre-aware writing of Fritz Leiber. Together, these case studies suggest that even the most fantastical fiction must maintain a tether to rationality and coherence.

The final section examines framing devices, especially paratexts and frame narratives, and how they construct a text's authority. Epigraphs are explored across several authors, with particular attention paid to Sanderson and Jordan. In his discussion on Jordan's *Wheel of Time*, Oliver examines how epigraphs create an illusion of external authority, reinforcing secondary belief while simultaneously inviting scrutiny of the nature of historical knowledge. The final chapter analyzes how Steven Erikson and Samuel R. Delany use frame narratives to introduce irony into their worlds. Challenging the assumption that fantasy must always aim for immersive sincerity, Oliver argues that framing devices can destabilize binaries between literal and metaphorical truths. Erikson's florid speech is rendered ironic through its attribution to an in-world narrator, while Delany uses the device of an academic debate to blur the boundaries between myth and scholarly discourse.

Overall, *Magic Words, Magic Worlds* is well structured and offers a wealth of detailed textual analysis, drawing from both commercially successful and critically acclaimed works. However, one weakness lies in the engagement with Mendlesohn's taxonomy. While Oliver criticizes Mendlesohn's portal-quest model, most of his chosen texts (with the exception of Donaldson's *Thomas Covenant*) align more closely with the immersive fantasy mode. This inconsistency undermines the theoretical coherence of the book but does not significantly detract from the insights produced through close reading.

This book does not present exhaustive close readings; rather, it models the critical value of close attention to style in fantasy fiction. Therefore, *Magic Words, Magic Worlds* fills a crucial gap in fantasy scholarship by modelling the kind of stylistically attentive reading typically reserved for canonical literature. By bridging popular appeal with academic rigour, Oliver's work opens new avenues for discussing epic fantasy's formal complexity – even as it occasionally overreaches in its theoretical assertions.

Biography: Jayden King is a professional military flight instructor with a special interest in fantasy literature and creative writing. He holds a BA in Creative Writing and a BA (Hons) in English Studies from the University of South Africa, an MA in Creative Writing from the University of Hull and a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Pretoria.