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INTRODUCTION

Imagination is more important than knowledge.

—Albert Einstein (1929)

[I]magination, in our schools, is still treated like a poor relative in comparison with attention and memory.

—Gianni Rodari (1973)

Creativity is as important as literacy and we should afford it the same status.

—Ken Robinson (2006)

I've spent many hours of my life in imaginary lands. I didn't travel there through rabbit holes or wardrobes. Instead, the pages of fantasy books have taken me to magical places.

When I was a child, J. R. R. Tolkien's words were my portal to Middle Earth in *The Hobbit* (1938) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954, 1955, 1956). Norton Juster's writing took me to the Lands Beyond in *The Phantom Tollbooth* (1961). As an adult, authors such as S. K. Chakraborty, N. K. Jemisin, Robert Jordan, Ursula LeGuin, Phillip Pullman, Brandon Sanderson, and many others have invited me into the fantastical worlds they've created.

Why do I love reading fantasy? I think it's because fantasy stories have had deep personal meaning for me. For example, I returned to the Lands Beyond so many times as a child because I identified with its quiet, sad main character, Milo, who goes on a quest to rescue the Princesses Rhyme and Reason so they can heal the Kingdom of Wisdom and, in the process, becomes a happier, more engaged person. As someone whose family lacked both rhyme and reason, reading about Milo and his quest helped me begin to imagine that even though my family of origin wouldn't ever have those qualities, that didn't need to be true of my entire life.

I've also spent many hours of my life in the real world of classrooms during the last thirty-five years, first as a teacher and then as a visiting staff developer. It didn't take me long to realize how much children today share my love of reading fantasy, and I've happily recommended many great books to them.

But in most classrooms—including my own as a teacher and those in schools I've visited around the world since—I've rarely seen children write fantasy.

For most of my career, I didn't give this much thought. After all, this seemed like the normal state of affairs, as I didn't get opportunities to write fantasy in my own

schooling and didn't write a fantasy story myself until I was in my thirties. (It was a script for *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* that I co-wrote with my wife, Robin. We tried to sell it to Paramount Television, alas unsuccessfully.) Also, almost all of the professional development I had as a writing teacher and the professional books I read prioritized the teaching of true stories—personal narrative—not imaginary ones.

I realize now that I was like Dorothy, who lived in a Kansas that was, as Frank Baum (1900) describes it, “colourless and grey.” And, just like it took a tornado for Dorothy to get to the Land of Oz, which Baum describes with a full palette of colors, it took a world-historical tempest—the COVID pandemic—for me to fully realize the value of teaching fantasy writing to children and the necessity that teachers add this brilliant, colorful, and above all else, *meaningful* genre to their curricular repertoires.

During the pandemic, I taught an online writing class to children in upper elementary and middle school grades who attended international schools in Shenzhen, China. For the first part of the course, we studied personal narrative and nonfiction writing. My students were reasonably engaged and dutifully wrote true stories and feature articles. For me, and for my students, it was business as usual in writing workshop.

Then I decided to try something different: I launched a study of fantasy writing. Very quickly things changed, *dramatically*. First, student engagement went sky high. And as I read through my student's writing—the world-building work they did in their writer's notebooks and the stories that grew out of this work—I was struck by a level of creativity that I had rarely seen in student writing throughout my career.

This book has its beginnings in that online course. Since then I've continued to study the teaching of fantasy writing in grades K–6. I've found homes in local Brooklyn schools, where I've done fantasy residencies. I've done online collaborations with teachers across the United States. And I've also continued to teach my own students in online courses.

I've seen dramatic increases in student engagement in all of this work. Teacher after teacher has said that the study was their students' favorite of the year. Emily Callahan, a third-grade teacher from Missouri, describes the fantasy writing unit we collaborated on as her *all-time-favorite* unit of study to teach.

Teaching fantasy has unlocked student creativity in stunning and remarkable ways. It has also helped students improve their skills as writers. You'll see plenty of examples of this in the book as we examine stories from students in kindergarten through sixth grade.

Here's what you'll find in this book:

- In **Chapter One**, I set the stage by making an argument for teaching fantasy writing, as well as discussing what gets in the way of teaching fantasy.
- In **Chapter Two**, I'll give you an overview of a writing unit of study, naming and describing each of the important teaching moves you'll make when you teach a fantasy writing unit of study.
- **Chapter Three** provides a unit of study for students in grades K–1 called Introduction to Fantasy. This unit is also appropriate for students in second grade who don't have a lot of writing experience.

- **Chapter Four** details a unit of study for students in grades 2–3 called Magical Relationships. The unit is also appropriate for students in fourth grade who don't have much writing experience.
- **Chapter Five** offers a unit of study for students in grades 4–6 I call Magical Worlds. With a few adjustments (that I discuss in Appendix A), this unit could be done with students in grades 7 and 8, too.
- In the **Appendixes**, you'll find answers to frequently asked questions, a discussion of how to assess fantasy writing, and a guide to revising the units in this book.
- And in the **Online Resources**, you'll find additional lessons, student writing samples, teaching tools, and assessment forms.

I've written this book in the hope that it will help you feel comfortable—and excited—to teach fantasy and to equip you with the tools you'll need to travel in the Lands Beyond the usual units of study that are in your writing curriculum. And, most important, I hope the book will make it possible for your students to have the experience of writing fantasy in school and that it helps them unlock their creativity, exercise their imaginations, develop their writing skills, and bring brilliance, color, and meaning to the writing they do.

