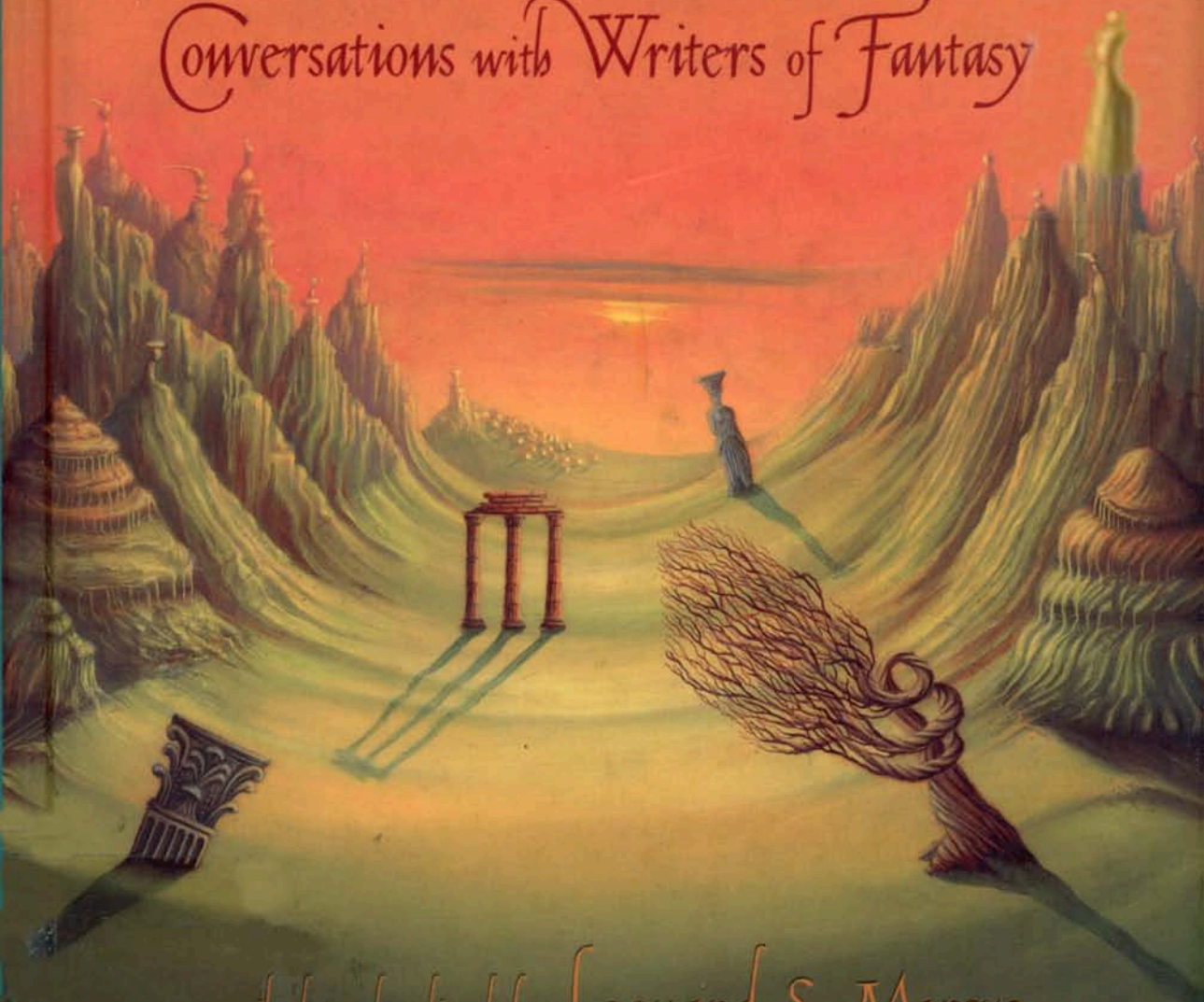


# The Wand in the Word

Conversations with Writers of Fantasy



compiled and edited by Leonard S. Marcus

Lloyd Alexander • Franny Billingsley • Susan Cooper • Nancy Farmer

Brian Jacques • Diana Wynne Jones • Ursula K. Le Guin • Madeleine L'Engle

Garth Nix • Tamora Pierce • Terry Pratchett • Philip Pullman • Jane Yolen

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COMPILED AND EDITED BY

*Leonard S. Marcus*



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*In memory of my mother*

L. S. M.

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# INTRODUCTION

**T**HIS MIGHT SURPRISE you: until quite recently, fantasy writers were an outcast bunch whose work was rarely prized or rewarded. More often than not, fantasy writers of the past had to defend themselves before a doubting world, to explain why it could possibly make sense for grown persons to spend years creating stories about impossible wizards, witches, dragons, and trolls.

In the course of mounting one such defense, J. R. R. Tolkien singled out for praise fantasy's "quality of strangeness and wonder." Here is our world, a fantasy proclaims, and here is this *other* world, or our own world suddenly seen and experienced from a totally unexpected angle. Fantasy is storytelling with the beguiling power to transform the impossible into the imaginable, and to reveal our own "real" world in a fresh and truth-bearing light. It has the

surprising power to make everything it touches upon seem new, unpredictable, and—in Tolkien’s fine phrase—“arrestingly strange.”

But “many people dislike being ‘arrested,’” as the author of *The Lord of the Rings* went on, rather slyly, to observe. While Tolkien immersed himself in writing *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–55), most members of his generation continued to place their hopes for the future in modern science and technology. Tales of elves, dwarves, and tree people? Ha! Critics wondered why an educated person would waste his time on outmoded make-believe. It was not until late in life that Tolkien had his achievement recognized.

When that finally happened, during the 1960s and early 1970s, things became a bit easier for other fantasy writers as well, although not all at once. Several of the thirteen authors you are about to hear from were early, avid Tolkien fans. Three—Susan Cooper, Diana Wynne Jones, and Philip Pullman—actually crossed paths with the author of the *Rings* trilogy, and tell about it. Several began writing when fantasy was still not just unpopular but widely frowned upon as frivolous or even—terrible term!—“childish.” Nobody likes to be called names, but these writers kept on writing anyway. You have to admire their courage.

Tolkien’s triumph had a lot to do with the new, more receptive attitude to fantasy that cleared the way for, among other things, the forest-rattling success of Harry Potter. As I recorded these interviews, I began to wonder whether the experience of World War II had not also played a major part in the change. So many of the writers I interviewed had intense, life-altering memories of that war. Several, it seemed, had turned to fantasy both as readers and writers, not to

“escape” reality, but as the truest way of coming to terms with wartime terrors that for them lay almost beyond words.

I tape-recorded all but two of the conversations in this collection, some in person and others by telephone. The remaining two interviews were done by e-mail. I asked some questions of all thirteen authors and let other questions be suggested by their individual works and lives. A good interview, like any good conversation, is exploratory in nature, with much of the fun and satisfaction stemming from *not* knowing just where the talk will take you.

While writers don't rely on magical formulas, all experienced word people do have certain habits or rituals or tricks of the trade that work for them, at least part of the time. The authors I interviewed each speak about theirs. If you enjoy writing, you may very well find something of value here to help you on your way. All thirteen are passionate, dedicated professionals who know what they're about. All have funny, serious, and surprising stories to tell.

Let's listen together.



# LLOYD ALEXANDER

Born 1924, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

LLOYD ALEXANDER is a thoughtful, disarmingly modest man who is quick to see the humor—or folly—in any situation, especially one in which he himself happens to figure. Heroes-in-the-making who think a little too much of themselves, like young Taran at the outset of the Prydain Chronicles, find themselves swiftly—albeit gently—taken down a peg. That *gently* matters: a concern for the way people act and treat one another lies at the core of the drama—whether epic or more humbly scaled—in each of Alexander’s stories.

“We can push a button,” Alexander once observed, “and light a dozen cities. We can also push a button and make a dozen cities vanish. There is, unfortunately, no button we can push to relieve us of moral choices or give us the wisdom to understand the morality as well as the choices.”

Although he considers himself lazy, Alexander has in fact worked exceedingly hard all his adult life. For many years he held down a day job while also writing book after book, starting with three realistic novels and a memoir for adults. Although he is not entirely sure why, starting with *Time Cat*, he turned to writing fantasy, Alexander does know why it was a good choice.

“Hope is an essential thread in the fabric of all fantasies, an Ariadne’s thread to guide us out of the labyrinth. . . . Human beings have always needed hope, and surely now more than ever.”

---

**Leonard S. Marcus: What kind of child were you?**

**Lloyd Alexander:** I read a lot and I was sick a lot, but I was not the stereotypical bookworm. I also was a good-natured, eager kid. I liked to have fun and to be out exploring. *The Gawgon and the Boy* is absolutely true. The Boy is me at age eleven.

**Q: What are some of your first memories of books and reading?**

**A:** All my relatives, with the exception of my dearly beloved aunt Annie, were devout nonreaders. I never saw one of them open a book—ever.

Annie is the Gawgon in *The Gawgon and the Boy*. That’s the rest of my family in that book, too, exactly as they were. Annie, who was quite old and frail when I knew her, had been a teacher and was widely read. She introduced me to reading, to poetry, to every good thing like that. And she encouraged me to do what I wanted to do in life—whatever that was.

Although my parents were nonreaders, I did get books from them as presents, as well as from my aunt Annie and on occasion from others. I received books of mythology, *Robin Hood*, and the King Arthur tales, all of which I dearly loved. Chivalry, knightly valor, heroism: I loved it all.

**Q: Did you enjoy school?**

**A:** No, unfortunately. I'm very sorry to have to say that. I cannot for the life of me remember any teacher who really encouraged me to do anything. It would be nice to say, "Oh yes, my old high-school English teacher was sure that I would have a glorious career." It didn't happen. I began to write on my own and kept at it out of sheer stubbornness.

**Q: Did you go to the public library as a child?**

**A:** There was a library a couple of miles down the road from where we lived. But, no, I never went there. From my parents, I learned early on to distrust all institutions. Stay away from police stations. Stay away from banks. Stay away from public buildings of any kind. They are always sources of trouble. Go to the library? Oh heavens, no. Don't do that!

**Q: When did you decide you wanted to be a writer?**

**A:** When I was twelve or thirteen, I wanted to be a poet. I also wanted to be a musician, and at one point I wanted to be an artist. I dearly loved history, and for a while I wanted to be an archeologist, too.

**Q: Tell me about your army experiences during World War II.**

**A:** I enlisted because, as a devout antifascist, I felt, This is something I've got to do. I also thought that joining the army would solve all my personal problems. I was at loose ends. I had tried to send myself to college, and I hadn't liked it and quit. I was writing with an enormous

Lloyd Alexander  
in uniform  
during World  
War II



lack of success. So I thought, the army. This answers everything! I suppose there was the illusion of heroic adventure. I had seen too many war movies. I imagined there would be a great feeling of comradeship and brotherhood. Forget it! It was horrible. For the first time in my life, I had come up against real power. Our officers literally



could shoot us, no questions asked. I wanted to get out about two minutes after I took the oath. I didn't like the army for some while.

At first they put me in the field artillery, and when I didn't do well, they put me in the band. I played the piano, and because there are no pianos in a marching band, they gave me my choice of bass drum or cymbals. Not being a total fool, I looked at the bass drum and thought, that's *big*. That's heavy. I'll take the cymbals. So I became a cymbal player. But the cymbals were kind of heavy too, and I didn't much like it.

Fortunately, they decided to send me to specialized training in college. It saved my life. We had expert teachers in linguistics, geography, and European history. A few months later, I was transferred to a secret military training center that was one of the most amazing places anyone could have imagined. That's when I finally made some of the best friends I've ever had. We were a fine bunch. We were being trained in five-man teams to parachute into France. We went on maneuvers. We were even shown a staged reenactment of a Nazi rally. As we sat in the audience, "storm troopers" came marching down the aisles carrying banners. Somebody imitated Hitler giving a speech. "Dissenters" were planted in the audience—and were hauled out by the storm troopers. What they were trying to do was show us the psychological climate in which this kind of mob behavior could flourish. It was a powerful experience. Fortunately, our drop was cancelled. Me jumping out of an airplane? I don't think so.

From this training center, we were sent to England and Wales. It was the first time I had ever been that far from home, and here I was in Wales—King Arthur country! I loved the sound of the beautiful

Welsh accent. And I saw castles—things I had only read about—and realized for the first time that, hey, this stuff is real. The impact on me was enormous.

Finally, we were sent to Alsace-Lorraine, in France—and into the real war. From there we went to Germany, in the late spring of 1945, and then, miraculously, I got orders to report to Paris, which was far from the fighting. I had been in combat for just four months, but it felt like a lifetime.

**Q: Have your wartime experiences found their way into your books?**

**A:** In many ways. At the beginning of the *Chronicles of Prydain*, Taran has a naïve idea about what it means to be a warrior—just as I did at first. In *The High King* there is a winter campaign that comes directly from my memories of the bitter cold of the Vosges Mountains of France. In the Westmark trilogy I consciously drew on my memories of the war. The sight of bombed-out towns, of dead animals everywhere—the backwash of the battlefield. The sight of displaced persons pushing handcarts with everything they had in the world. *The Kestrel* is the strongest antiwar book that I've been able to write. It's a brutal book, as it had to be.

**Q: You often write about cats too — not just as pets but as friends and even teachers.**

**A:** When I was growing up, we had always had dogs. But my wife insisted on cats, and I was instantly converted. What can I say? I've never seen a cat do a stupid thing—and I can't say the same about human beings. So sometimes I write about the cat as a symbol of reason and common sense. But I'm careful not to overdo this because I dearly love cats for what they are.

**Q: Writing the Prydain books must have been an amazing experience.**

**A:** For six years, it occupied almost my every waking thought. I should add that I had a day job at the same time. I worked for a printer, then as a layout artist and advertising copywriter, and finally as an associate editor of an industrial magazine. So I wrote early in the morning and on weekends. Sometimes I would even sneak in a little writing when I had nothing to do at the office.

**Q: Your heroes often demonstrate the value of a job well done — even if the job is a lowly one like assistant pig-keeper.**

**A:** I've come to feel that there is no such thing as a lowly job. It's only lowly if a person makes it lowly.

**Q: It must have been hard to decide what to write next.**

**A:** I was in tears as I wrote the last couple of pages of *The High King*. I was glad that I had come to the end of six hard years, but a part of my life had also come to an end, and it tore me apart. I had no idea what to do next.

I have always made it a matter of principle not to do the same thing twice. I certainly was not going to try another heroic romance. As I thought about what was most important to me, I thought: I love the music of Mozart. I could hear it playing in my mind, and I decided that I wanted to try to write something “Mozartian,” a story set in Mozart's eighteenth-century world. It was a hard thing to do. I completely rewrote *The Marvelous Misadventures of Sebastian* twice.

**Q: The magic of Sebastian's violin isn't all good, is it?**

**A:** That's right. The violin is a gift, but an accursed gift. It plays marvelous music, but it will also drain your life. And so the question for him—as it is for anybody who wants to be a musician or artist

or writer—is, Is it worth it? Of course, my own answer to that question is *yes*.

**Q: Tell me more about the magic in your books.**

**A:** There is usually just one magical element. My principle is the fewer the better. The more magical elements you have, the more likely they are to interfere with each other. If I have a magic mirror, why can't it show me the guy creeping up on me with his magic sword?

Once you have a magical object, the magic has to be limited. If it isn't, you will end up having logical problems. For instance, if you have an invincible weapon, a sword that is completely unbeatable, the story is over. Whoever has it, wins! In the Prydain books, the magic sword cannot be drawn by just anybody but only by someone, as it turns out, who is worthy to be the High King. Otherwise, it's a magic free-for-all.

**Q: Do you do research for your books?**

**A:** I have read a great deal about the history of mythology and comparative mythology, and some of my ideas come from the things I've read and learned.

In *The Black Cauldron*, for instance, I took the image of the cauldron capable of magically bringing people back to life from Welsh legend. But then I added the idea that once brought back to life, the warriors would have no memories of themselves as human beings. No remembrance of happiness, kindness, loved ones. That to me is one of the cruelest things I can imagine.

**Q: Why do you write for young readers?**

**A:** I have never written with a real child in mind, the way Lewis Carroll did, for example. My daughter was grown up and married