

## So you want to write a fantasy novel?

So you want to write a fantasy novel, or in the case of many first-time authors—the vaunted “fantasy trilogy.”

That’s how my Raine Benares series started out—a trilogy. It grew, as many fantasy series have a tendency to do. I’m going on six books now, but that’s not why I’m here. I’m here to talk about fantasy and the gazillion permutations and sub-genres thereof.

If you walked up to someone on the street and asked them what fantasy fiction was, you’d probably get the following in some shape or form. Fantasy is when elves, dwarves, humans, and assorted allies are on a quest to find the long-lost magical thingie or elusive sacred whatsit, which the bad guys (evil wizard, mad king, and their menacing minions) will kill, enslave, or obliterate you to keep for themselves.

Yeah, that’s fantasy, but that’s far from all there is. Subgenres include epic fantasy, urban, contemporary, sword & sorcery, dark, historical, alternate history, steampunk, Arthurian, comic, mythic, fairy tales, science, mystery, paranormal, erotic, romantic, and recently I’ve even heard mention of zombie romantic fantasy. (Yeah, I don’t want to go there either.)

Since it’d probably take half the magazine to write about them all, let’s stick with six of the top sub-genres, which as a beginning fantasy novelist, probably include at least one of the pools you’ll be dipping your toes into for your first foray in the worlds of fantasy.

**High Fantasy**—Also called Epic Fantasy, this subgenre is what the general population thinks of as fantasy. At its core is the battle of good versus evil, the stakes are high, with races, civilization, or even the entire world at risk. High Fantasy usually takes place in a quasi-Medieval or Renaissance world. Quests and magic are an integral part of the plot. The classic example of this is Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*.

**Urban Fantasy**—The story takes place in our world in the present or near-future. The setting is usually in a city (hence the name “urban”). Magic and magical/supernatural creatures either exist openly in our world, or covertly with only a select few (the protagonist and their allies) aware of their existence. Just a few of the more popular creatures inhabiting the urban fantasy world are monsters, fairies, vampires, werewolves, ghosts, angels and demons. Two of my favorite urban fantasy series are *The Dresden Files* by Jim Butcher, and *The Cal Leandros Novels* by Rob Thurman.

My favorite quote about the difference between High and Urban Fantasy comes from Scottish fantasy novelist, Alan Campbell: "If *high fantasy* asked you to embark upon a quest to find a magic stone, then *urban fantasy* would be waiting in the shadows, ready to mug you when you got back." Priceless.

**Contemporary Fantasy**—This sub-genre, like Urban Fantasy, takes place in a modern setting, contains magical or supernatural creatures, which either live in our world or crossover from another realm. Also, the creatures and magic tend to remain secret to the vast majority of the population. Great examples of this sub-genre are Emma Bull’s *War for the Oaks* and J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter*.

**Sword & Sorcery**—This is considered by many to be the “granddaddy of fantasy.” Think Conan the Barbarian. In Sword & Sorcery, the quest is the thing, with a small band of adventurers getting in dicey and dangerous situations fighting their way to their goal with plenty of derring-do. Kind of like Dungeons & Dragons in a book.

**Alternate History Fantasy**—Think “what would happen if . . .” For example, what would happen if the Nazis invaded England and the elves helped the Brits kick Nazi butt? The possibilities are nearly endless here.

**Steampunk**—A relatively new addition to the fantasy family, Steampunk is alternate history with a twist. They’re set in the Edwardian or Victorian era and make cool use of steam-powered technology. A great (and fun) example is Gail Carriger’s *Parasol Protectorate* series.

The key when writing any kind of fantasy is to take the expected and turn it on its head. Or take the tried-and-true and make it your own. Find your distinctive voice. You’ll know when you get it; your work will come to life for you. Believe me, if it’s flat on the page (or screen) for you, it’ll be flat and boring for an agent and editor. These folks look at literally hundreds of submissions a day—make sure your work perks them up, not puts them to sleep.

And if the High Fantasy you’re writing starts to veer into Urban Fantasy or Comic Fantasy territory, don’t fight it. That’s one of the great things about fantasy—there are as many successful combinations as your imagination can dream to life.

So, let your muse out to play and have fun!

### **Recommended reading**

*How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy* by Orson Scott Card

*Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy* by Crawford Kilian

*Sometimes the Magic Works: Lessons from a Writing Life* by Terry Brooks

*The Writer’s Complete Fantasy Reference*