Gods who make worlds

By definition, epic fantasy involves a world with a creator. Tad Williams’s Osten Ard is the best since Tolkien’s Middle-earth.

by Brad East in the October 2024 issue
Published on September 16, 2024

(Illustration by Allan Deas)

Three decades ago, Tad Williams published the final volume in the best epic fantasy trilogy written in English since *The Lord of the Rings*. Called *Memory, Sorrow, and Thorn*, the series ran from 1988 to 1993 and totaled over a million words. Half of those words came in the final book—one of the longest books ever to make it onto the *New York Times* bestseller list.

There is no overselling the significance of Williams's achievement: the biggest names in fantasy in the intervening decades all acknowledge his influence, from Brandon Sanderson to Patrick Rothfuss to *Game of Thrones* creator George R. R. Martin. (There is no Westeros without Osten Ard, Williams's fictional world.) Yet, although Williams is hyper-prolific and widely admired, he has never had the success or name recognition of these other authors. No streaming service has yet broken the bank in adapting Williams's magnum opus.

Why have these books sold well but never set the world on fire?

Three reasons come to mind. First, while Williams may mark a certain transition away from the never-ending half-lives of J. R. R. Tolkien imitations, his stories do not belong to the grimdark turn of contemporary fantasy (a turn recently pilloried by Sebastian Milbank as "grimdull"). They are not gritty. Whether the topic is sex or violence, there's nothing pornographic on display. Williams is a romantic at heart. His stories are not sadistic. Subversion, when and where it happens, is subtle, thematic, and stylistic; the narratives are not oedipal, with Tolkien or C. S. Lewis or Christian morals as the fated father. For readers or viewers exhausted by the teetering nihilism of *Game of Thrones* and its many peers, Williams is a breath of fresh air.

Second, Williams puts the "slow" in "slow burn." He is a master plotter, and you may be confident that every single narrative thread, no matter how small, will come together by the end. But there's no hand-holding and no artificial fireworks to keep your attention. I know only two kinds of people who have picked up *Memory, Sorrow, and Thorn*: those who put it down after about 200 pages, bored to tears and wondering what all the fuss was about, and those who kept going all the way to the end, falling in love in the meantime. There is no third group.

Finally, the world and history and happenings of Osten Ard are colored by a deep melancholy. (One character is startled to find a timeworn but intact statue: "She had

never seen an ancient city of her people that was not in ruins.” A different character wonders to himself: “Is all we have—all we are—only a memorial of what we failed to save?”) Williams’s prose is among the best in fantasy, and its distinguishing character is a kind of plangent lyricism. In the dedication of the third volume, he calls the book “a little world of heartbreak and joy.” Like the psalmist, Williams believes that “weeping may tarry for the night, / but joy comes with the morning” (30:5, ESV). Yes, joy comes, but not before much weeping and heartbreak—enough to make you wonder whether daylight will ever truly pierce the darkness.

Yet when it does, it is magnificent. For my money, no epic finale has ever proved so satisfying, so emotionally cathartic, so perfectly fitting as this one. Williams earns his H.E.A. (“happily ever after”) as much as his FINIS. In a time when fantasy authors suffer from either graphomania or writer’s block, this trilogy is that rare genre Goldilocks: just right.

You may be mildly intrigued, patient reader, but also curious why I am writing any of this in the first place. Besides the obvious—convincing a publisher to hand over advance galleys of a beloved author’s forthcoming book—there are two answers. First, modern fantasy calls for theological reflection: Christians have a vested interest in this popular genre. Second, after 25 years, Williams decided to return to Osten Ard with a new series.

I’ve avoided plot and characters so far. On one hand, I want to entice you to pick up these books and thus I don’t want to spoil them; on the other hand, every work of fantasy looks the same from afar. But let me say a little about the original series to contextualize the new books before turning to the theological questions they raise.

Osten Ard is an alt-medieval world of kings, knights, castles, swords, horses, and scrolls. In fact, it is a cracked-mirror reflection of European Christendom. There is an ancient Christ figure (Usires Aedon) who was executed upside down on a tree and a Rome-like power, formerly pagan, that trains monks, priests, and bishops. Throne and altar vie for influence, but there are no postmoderns placed anachronistically among the peasants: everyone is recognizably premodern. They are pious folk who take God or the gods for granted, even as they trust regional lore about dragons and trolls and fair folk in the woods.

The protagonist is a teenaged orphaned kitchen hand named Simon. Although Williams puts you inside others’ minds, especially the princess Miriamele, *Memory,*

Sorrow, and Thorn is Simon's story from the first page to the last. As you meet fantastic creatures and travel thousands of miles, you see the world through his eyes.

That world is marked by peace, the final days of an 80-year reign of a just and much beloved king who dies in the opening chapters. Williams frames his story with two implicit questions that may occur to readers of Tolkien. When the ring is destroyed and Aragorn claims his throne, what happens next? Moreover, what if Aragorn wasn't who he said he was? More philosophically phrased, if secrets form the basis of one's rule, is the deceit worth it when the effect is peace? In short, what if Aragorn adopted Plato's doctrine of the noble lie? Would the truth be worth the discovery, even if the price was high? Shakespeare could have provided the trilogy's epigraph:

> It is a wise father that knows his own child.
> Well, old man, I will tell you news of your son:
> give me your blessing: truth will come to light;
> murder cannot be hid long; a man's son may,
> but at the length truth will out. (*The Merchant of Venice*, 2.2)

Memory, Sorrow, and Thorn is Williams's massive narrative exploration of these themes—a fantasy *War and Peace*, as some have called it. Both he and readers were content with his answers, such as they were. No one expected a sequel.

Two factors led Williams back to Osten Ard. The first was his own fault: twins are born to a major character late in the original story, and another character intones a prophecy over them:

> They will be as close as brother and sister can be . . . although they will live many years apart. She will travel in lands that have never known a mortal woman's step, and will lose what she loves best, but find happiness with what she once despised. He will be given another name. He will never have a throne, but kingdoms will rise and fall by his hand. . . . Their steps will carry them into mystery.

Irresistible, no?

The second factor was a nagging sense that the trilogy's happy ending, though far from a cop-out, raises its own questions about royal rule, justice and peace, lies and the truth. Instead of a false Aragorn, this new series would be about a *failed* Aragorn: a noble and wise king and queen who mean to rule fairly yet nevertheless suffer intrigue, mistrust, betrayal, failures of communication, and long grudges repaid. Osten Ard is postlapsarian: it is neither utopian nor dystopian. It is like our world, which is to say, fallen. Happy endings are not false, but they cannot last so long as they are bound to time. Sin inevitably rears its head. And death comes for all.

The result is what Williams calls a "four-book trilogy." (His ambition tends to outstrip his planning, but he does always finish the thing.) Titled *The Last King of Osten Ard*, the quartet takes place about 35 years after the events of *Memory, Sorrow, and Thorn*. Some characters have died, many remain, and among the new characters are children and grandchildren of the originals. (Two companion novels have also been published: *The Heart of What Was Lost*, a bridge between the two series, and *Brothers of the Wind*, a prequel set in the distant past.) The fourth and final entry in the new series, *The Navigator's Children*, comes out in November.

All in all, the books of Osten Ard total around two and a half million words, spanning a thousand years, hundreds of characters, and more than one apocalypse. It is an impressive achievement and a triumph of genre storytelling. This reader, once again, finds himself content, filled to the brim, and grateful.

The world of Osten Ard, like ours, is fallen but redeemed. Like ours, it has a maker and sustainer.

Fantasy requires no apology, even if critics still relegate it to the genre shelf somewhere beneath literary and highbrow fiction. It's more popular than ever. The classic authors of the past century—whether Christians like Tolkien, Lewis, and Madeleine L'Engle or others such as T. H. White, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Stephen R. Donaldson—remain in print.

Fairy stories and other fantastical literature are a human universal. But Anglophone fantasy as we know it—the stuff of George MacDonald, E. R. Eddison, Lord Dunsany, and (again) Tolkien—is only a century or two old. As a theologian and not a literary scholar, I lack the bona fides to defend the claim that modern fantasy is uniquely or necessarily Christian. But the genre bears the unmistakable imprint of Christian

doctrine, tradition, and history. Like Western philosophy and politics, fantasy has proven unable to exorcise what at least some of its authors and adherents see as an unwelcome demon.

Perhaps, to switch metaphors, they might come to see that the church's faith is not a bug but a feature of the genre, and thus ineradicable. In 2010 Michael Weingrad wrote an essay for the *Jewish Review of Books* with the provocative title "Why There Is No Jewish Narnia." His explanation is thoughtful and layered, but at one point he makes the concise claim that "fantasy grows naturally out of Christian soil." For present purposes, let's assume he's right.

Here's a rough taxonomy. The novel is a secular art form: it treats the human world as though that's all there is. It's a disenchanted genre. Enchantment therefore migrated in one of two directions—either to fantasy, where gods and spirits populate the cosmos and haunt the lives of mortals, or to science fiction, where a godless future is filled instead with technological marvels and terrors. All three types of fiction (and there are more, such as horror) transmit a Christian legacy, but it is fantasy, with its deities and feudal society, that most closely resembles a world like ours, at least in historical memory. In his 2014 essay "Fantasy and the Buffered Self," Alan Jacobs points out that Christian authors disbelieve in their own creations but do not disbelieve in their earthly analogues. Sauron isn't real, but Satan is.

Jacobs's larger thesis is that secular readers visit fantasy worlds because it allows them the pleasures of inhabiting a porous world without the risks of surrendering their buffered selves here in this one. Let me add a complementary proposal to his, which reconnects us with Williams as well as Tolkien, Martin, and the nihilist temptation of popular fantasy today. Because fantasy as we know it is essentially Christian, the trappings of the genre cannot finally be subverted. There is a reason no one has attempted a fantasy version of Sartre's *Nausea*; and if they have, they were bound to fail in any case.

Fantasy depends on two things above all: world-building and plot. A world implies a builder and a plot a storyteller. In short, every fantasy world has a creator by definition. This presents a conundrum for the author of a godless world, or even for a world in which characters wonder whether their lives have a source beyond themselves, whether an unseen hand guides the course of events to their inexorable conclusion, whether an inner rationale or logos holds their reality together. Whether, that is, they are right to believe in God.

In every case, the reader knows, they are, because there is a God: the author. Perhaps he is malevolent, but he exists. There's no denying it. Hence every attempt by the selfsame author to undermine his own existence is self-defeating. Godless characters in fantasy are fools, and authors who attempt to make them seem wise are fools twice over.

The genre as a whole is therefore one great exercise in demonstrating, by imitating, divine providence. Tolkien called it "sub-creation." You could equally call it theodicy. Fantasy is theodicy because, no matter an author's intentions, she cannot erase herself. Her world and its story "justify the ways of God to men," as Milton put it in *Paradise Lost* (itself a kind of theological fantasy).

Likewise, fantasy is a comedy. And because there is a sovereign creator of the fantasy world, it is a divine comedy. What I mean is that the intricate plots spanning millions of words *go somewhere*. In general modern fantasy avoids tragedy in the colloquial sense; rarely if ever does it qualify as tragedy in the classical sense. That's what makes it Christian, even when it's not. Both providence and eschatology are baked into the pie. Only the rare master can separate, much less eliminate, the ingredients.

This goes some way to explaining why grittier and darker fantasy series seem so incapable of groping their way to a finale; and why, when some of them do, they are so disappointing. Even if the handsome prince dies early and unexpectedly, no one wants to finish the tale with his murderer on the throne and a smile on his face. Martin's celebration of "cripples, and bastards, and broken things" is no subversion of Lewis and Tolkien: it's an extension of Christian fantasy by other means. What could be more Christian than rebuking the trappings of worldly power for the sake of the overlooked and powerless? If Shakespeare was my chosen epigraph for Osten Ard, then let Paul's words serve for Westeros:

> And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence. (1 Cor. 1:28–29, KJV)

If Williams remains unsurpassed, it is because he does not run from these dynamics but embraces them.

Even more so than the first trilogy, this new quartet is a meditation on providence. As one character remarks,

> Happenstance will not take young Morgan's life. Only a destiny greater and more potent than his own could do that. At least, that is what I feel. We are all part of a tapestry, under the hands of some unknown weaver who creates a pattern too vast and intricate for us to see.

Or as an elf-like sage says to a human monarch:

> Yes, you believe in a king who lives in the sky called God. We Zida'ya are here for the very reason that we know the Garden existed, and part of it landed here. But if I say "Garden," you can say "God."

Or consider this exchange between two characters who have lost much:

> "Perhaps God believes that if we knew what awaits us, we would never find the strength to finish living our stories."
>
> "Or perhaps even God doesn't know how things will end."
>
> [She] looked at him, then tipped back her head and swallowed down her wine in a single gulp. She wiped her lips. "Perhaps not," she said.

It is this marriage of realism and romance that permits Williams to interrogate the strictures of the genre without torturing them. Under his care, fantasy bends but never breaks.

The world of Osten Ard, like ours, is fallen but redeemed. Like ours, it has a maker and sustainer. It has a plot, however difficult to discern for those living in the middle of it. Some unknown weaver creates a pattern. For mortals here on earth, it makes for lovely reading. It's also a reminder that neither world is ultimately tragic; each is a comedy in its own way. If they weren't, we would have given up on stories like this one a long time ago.