

If I say fantasy, what do you imagine? Castles, knights, dragons, and different fantasy 'races' (by which one means dwarves, elves and humans, all generally analogous in appearance to the real world white 'race'). Indeed, as an aspiring fantasy author, my own forays into worldbuilding began with a European base, with non-Western cultures treated as foreign—a brown author, did not automatically consider people who looked like me to be fit fantasy protagonists.

This is not natural. Fantasy is not inherently a magical vision of a Western,

coded the dwarves as Jewish, he (likely unconsciously) played into the stereotype of a wealth-obsessed race who are inferior to the more Western, Christian-coded elves and humans. The same man was the opposite of racist when he took a deliberate, explicit stand against white supremacy and fascism. In that sense, he was braver in his personal life than many of his peers, but his work nevertheless betrayed the racist assumptions of his time. And it is his work that went on to create the new mythology from which fantasy would draw henceforth—as

vision of England. His was an English imagination, so naturally those very different from that culture would play the role of the enemy; it is a strange twist of logic that claims the demonisation of the Other as not racist simply because the writer didn't think about it. Tolkien's identity as a white Englishman growing up during a culturally insular period is used to defend his creation of Middle Earth as a white, English world where people who look like me and the bulk of *The Daily Star's* readers are the villains. It wasn't ever written for us. This is similar to the argument used to defend another author whose work is quite blatantly an allegory for English history—George R. R. Martin.

*Game of Thrones* is now down to two people of colour in speaking roles, and they are minor; the rest were nameless cannon fodder. This was not by malicious intent, but an acknowledgement that this was always a white story.

While HBO's *Game of Thrones* and *A Song of Ice and Fire* are distinct entities (to the show's increasing detriment), the TV adaptation's depiction of exotic eastern barbarism in the form of the rape-keen Dothraki, the eunuch armies of the Unsullied, the slave economies, and all the intrigue and sorcery of Essos are right on the money in terms of translating the books' vision. In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Westeros is the place where the more 'normal' story based on the history of the UK—relatable to the unconsciously intended core audience of white, Western readers—plays out, whereas the rest of the world is darkness and exciting mystery. (In fact, the books go even further than the show to exoticise both the East and the South.)

The Anglo-centric point of view of Westeros as the fictional launchpad gives us such things as Daenerys' entire storyline, a white saviour narrative that is arguably the prime reason we even get to encounter the other cultures of GRRM's world. It is a white saviour narrative unconsciously, according to interviews given by GRRM—and we may give him the benefit of the doubt (the famous scene in the TV adaptation where Daenerys crowd-surfs freed brown slaves was, according to him, a consequence of filming in Morocco and hiring local extras). The unconscious nature puts this racism in the same category as Tolkien's: it is made possible because built into the premise of *A Song of Ice and Fire* is an idea of what kind of people the story is for.

GRRM almost certainly holds no more actively bigoted views of non-white, non-Western people than the average person (by 2019 we would have found out if he did.) What he does instead is operate in a genre that not only allows him to exclude and otherise most of the world, but in fact encourages him to. The assumption of the Western, white gaze for the reader allows GRRM to explore the cultures of Essos as strange, wild and exciting compared to the relatively stodgy and predictable places of most of Westeros. To a degree there is an in-universe cleverness to it due to his use of first person point-of-view narration: we see Essos through the eyes of the Westerosi-orientated, principally white cast of characters, and so naturally all that is odd and different takes the foreground (much like Tolkien's caveat of



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# Who is fantasy for?



Anglo-centric historical past starring white characters. Yet it automatically feels that way because of defining works that have operated in that framework, right down to the genre's Bible, *The Lord of the Rings*.

Here's some damning evidence in J. R. R. Tolkien's post-mortem trial for racism. The orcs, a species fundamentally predisposed to mayhem and cruelty, were described in one of his letters as: "...squat, broad, flat-nosed, sallow-skinned, with wide mouths and slant eyes; in fact degraded and repulsive versions of the (to Europeans) least lovely Mongol-types."

For a fan, it's tempting to latch onto the mitigating language—"Mongol types" after all, not actual Mongolians, and the ugliness of the 'least lovely' of these people is filtered through European preferences and not an outright implication that Central Asians are ugly. The statement may be nuanced, but the nuance does not redeem the obvious racism.

It's important to differentiate between structural and personal racism. Tolkien hated allegory, but his work retains unconscious metaphor and shorthand; what we may call coding. When Tolkien

undeniable an influence as the Germanic tales that inspired his own writing. And so, the structural, unconscious racism present throughout Tolkien's work became a part of that bedrock as well.

The 21st century has transformed fantasy from something with niche appeal into a pop culture powerhouse. *The Lord of the Rings* in literature and film, *Harry Potter* in all its forms (including its current zombie-life), *Game of Thrones* (and the *A Song of Ice and Fire* books by proxy), and video games such as *The Elder Scrolls* (more specifically the fifth one, *Skyrim*) and *The Witcher* aren't just influential in their respective media but are unavoidable mainstream phenomena. *Dungeons and Dragons*, portrayed even as recently as in *Stranger Things* as white boy basement geek subculture, is now cool. With the mass consumption of fantasy media, the faults in its foundations become more visible and dangerous.

## Who is fantasy for?

The casting of people of colour as villains in the *Lord of the Rings* has been justified by fans with the argument that Tolkien was an author creating a fantasy