What if you discovered a magic spring that would keep you forever as young and vital as the day you drank from it—would you choose to partake? You may recognize this as the premise of Natalie Babbitt’s classic *Tuck Everlasting* (1985). Fantasies allow the reader to consider and speculate about central and sometimes painfully realistic themes in a way that is more palatable than in realistic fiction or fact. The fantastic nature of the characters and the setting provides readers with emotional distance that gives them room to consider sensitive and important ideas more objectively than in other genres. An irony about fantasy is that despite the fanciful characters, strange imaginary worlds, and bizarre situations encountered, it has the power to help us better understand reality.

In *Tuck Everlasting* readers have the opportunity to consider the relationship between death and life, and perhaps even their own mortality, in a nonthreatening way. Fantasies can help us consider profound ideas, to speculate, hypothesize, and ask “what if” kinds of questions that are integral to our lives. In addition, fantasies lend themselves to interpretation on a variety of levels. They can be enjoyed for the pure escapism they provide, and at the same time they can be understood and experienced as allegory, political satire, or even a spiritual journey.

Modern fantasy includes a combination of motifs such as magic, use of special character types, fantastic objects, time shifts, the supernatural, imaginary worlds, and the hero’s quest (see Figure 1; Jacobs & Tunnell, 2003, p. 91). A descendant of traditional literature, the fantasy genre shares these qualities and others such as the use of talking animals and a fast-paced plot, combined with universal and moralistic themes that match good against evil. Unlike traditional
literature, however, the settings are key to the integrity of the story, and characters sometimes change and grow. Figure 1 presents an attribute chart that demonstrates the ways in which features of fantasy play out in particular books that can be used with students to teach them qualities of fantasy. Figure 2 helps to differentiate between the sometimes-hard-to-distinguish genres of modern fantasy and traditional fantasy.

In this column we review recent modern fantasy books in light of some of the characteristics of this genre. We are delighted and honored to

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Note. Adapted from Jacobs & Tunnell, 2003, p. 91.
include an eloquent essay on fantasy by Avi as he considers his newly published books *Poppy’s Return* (2005) and *The Book Without Words: A Fable of Medieval Magic* (2005).

**Good and evil collide**

The 9-year-old genius antihero, Artemis Fowl, is back in *Artemis Fowl: The Opal Deception* by Eoin Colfer (2005). After his last experience with the fairies, Artemis Fowl’s mind was wiped clean of all memories of fairies, elves, and pixies. Now the people of the belowground world could use his help as the diabolical pixie, Opal Koboi, has been replaced in prison with a clone. Opal seeks revenge against all those responsible for her incarceration. Even worse, she plans to destroy the entire fairy world forever. Is it possible for a fairy police captain, a flatulent elf, and Artemis to keep the human and fairy worlds from colliding? Has an enemy finally outsmarted the brilliant criminal mastermind, Artemis Fowl?

Pulitzer Prize–winning humor columnist Dave Barry and best-selling author Ridley Pearson worked together to create an excellent and engaging novel, *Peter and the Starcatchers* (2004). Peter and other orphan boys find themselves onboard a rickety old ship, the *Never Land*, taking them to Rundoon where they will become servants to a cruel king. After Peter learns of a powerful substance hidden on the ship, he joins forces with Molly Aster, who is dedicated to keeping the substance from becoming a tool for evil. Together Peter and Molly battle many wicked characters who seek their potent treasure. The book is the prequel to the popular *Peter Pan* by J.M. Barrie (2003) and explains many aspects of the original tale such as how Peter developed his flying ability, why he never grew up, how Tinkerbell came into existence, how Captain Hook lost his hand, and how their refuge was created.

In *Diary of a Fairy Godmother* by Esmé Raji Codell (2005), Hunky Dory is voted “Most Likely to Be the Wickedest Witch” by her classmates at Harbinger’s Charm School for Young Witches. Yet in her heart Hunky really wants to be a Fairy Godmother. Her interest in “wishcraft,” not witchcraft, results in Hunky’s expulsion from both school and home. Hunky Dory interacts with well-known characters from “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Cinderella,” “Goldilocks and the Three Bears,” and “Rumpelstiltskin” to weave a very satisfying tale.
Let’s speculate

What if fairy tales were stories based on truth? And what if everything you thought was true about what is real and what is not got all turned around? *The Sisters Grimm: The Fairy Tale Detectives* by Michael Buckley (2005) is the first book of a new series about sisters Daphne and Sabrina who find themselves in a world that is disrupted and turned upside down. After the mysterious disappearance of their parents, the sisters get shuffled to an orphanage and then from one foster home to another until they are placed with Grandmother Grimm. As the story unfolds, the lines between reality and fantasy become blurred. The sisters, descendants of the Grimm brothers, take on their predestined role of keeping the peace in a credible and intriguing fairy tale world of eccentric and familiar characters known as the Foreverafters. Readers who are interested can learn more about the Grimm brothers and find text-only online versions of their stories at http://childrensbooks.about.com/cs/fairytales/a/grimm.htm.

What if you were given the chance to have your dearest wish granted? What might that be? Would it be to experience what life is like as a bird flying freely in the sky? Would you like to have the chance to be a fish swimming in the Great Barrier Reef? In *The Genie in the Book* by Cindy Trumbore (2004), Will and his sister, Maddy, are packed off to Grandma’s for summer vacation. While Will loves spending time there, he is worried about his mom and dad, whose coffee shop business is in jeopardy because of some unneighborly competitors. Then the Genie in the Book appears and livens up Will’s summer vacation. Genie does “everything by the book,” especially if that book is *1001 Arabian Knights*. This fantastic tale is one that offers a lighthearted escape and wish fulfillment to those of us who may enjoy a little break from our everyday concerns.

Magical objects

Avi’s latest, *The Book Without Words: A Fable of Medieval Magic* (2005), immerses the reader into a decaying and putrid 11th-century world fraught with evil and mystery. In this tale Thorston, an old man who is deathly afraid of dying, tries to cheat death by using *The Book Without Words*, a magical object that can only be read by those with green eyes and whose desire for something has totally consumed them. Thorston is so desperate to avoid dying that he uses the evil magic from the Book to prepare a potion that will renew his own life. Unfortunately this could come at the cost of the lives of his talking raven, Odo, and an orphaned servant girl, Sybil. As Sybil and Odo work together to save themselves they meet memorable characters who are consumed by desire and greed, and others whose existences have been so horrid that one might say that they have never really experienced life. The tension is broken by humor that will make the reader laugh out loud during the direst of circumstances. This masterpiece invites the reader to consider connections between death and life, how desires and fears can destroy us, and what it means to be alive.

On the lighter side, *Fenwick’s Suit* by David Small (2005) gives a new twist to the old saying that “the suit makes the man.” This is the silly tale of Fenwick, a completely unremarkable office worker, who is sad because he is totally ignored by his office mates. Fenwick’s life races out of control when he purchases a snazzy suit that takes on a life of its own. Is it Fenwick the office mates enjoy or is it his vivacious suit? Fenwick finds out the sad truth when the suit goes to work without him. This story is reminiscent of the *The Hungry Coat: A Tale From Turkey* recently retold by Demi (2004). The illustrations for *Fenwick’s Suit* convey the frenetic personality of the suit that will make you “pant” as Fenwick discovers that he is not “suited” to the exuberance of his new duds. This is a very funny story with a lesson to be learned about the relationship between people and their clothes.

The magical object in *Ella the Elegant Elephant* by Carmela and Steven D’Amico (2004) is Grandma’s good-luck hat, a floppy bright orange hat with flowers on it. Ella and her mom are new to their town on the Elephant Islands. When Ella sports Grandma’s good-luck hat on her first day at her new school, she becomes an object of ridicule among her uniform-clad classmates. When Ella tries to rescue “show off” Belinda from where she is stuck on a wall, they both fall. That is when we find out that the good-luck hat is magic as it transforms itself into a parachute and floats the girls safely to the ground. Both the story and illustrations are evocative of H.A. Rey’s Curious George books.
If you fancy fantasy, these are halcyon days. Publishers—and writers—feel Harryied and are Lording over all, with a Fellowship that centers on multivolume epics that provide eager, youthful readers with multiple alternate worlds. Not just children, but adults, too. Is not The Da Vinci Code (Brown, 2003, Doubleday) a fantasy? And why shouldn’t these tales be appreciated? My morning newspaper reveals a real world that’s not looking too good. In the world of fantasy, at least, the good guys—eventually—win.

Of course fantasy, as a genre, has an ancient literary lineage. Check your Aesop’s Fables. But at this literary moment, there is a fascinating blend of the electronic image and the word. Consider the narrative structure of video games—endless challenges, unexpected (often irrational) events, escalating levels of complexity—and you have the basic narrative structure of many of these contemporary literary fantasies—Harry Potter included.

At first glance, fantasy seems to provide an alternate universe. Actually, I think fantasy provides a parallel universe. We read Gulliver’s Travels (Swift, 2005, Candlewick) as a charming fantasy. In its own time it was understood to be bitter political satire.

After all, we live in a time when it’s hard for children (and adults) to tell what’s real and what is not, be it TV reality shows or Weapons of Mass Destruction. (Same scriptwriter?) I think fantasy has become more meaningful because it acknowledges it is not real. As a savvy book editor once suggested to me, “For fantasy to be successful it must be akin to historical fiction.” In other words, for fantasy to be successful it must feel real. Indeed, at its best, it must be real.

Note that fantasy has a particular attraction for boys. Sure they love the adventure, but good fantasy always provides a foundation of rational information. Are not our young male readers greatly attracted to information, to facts? Fantasy works best in a context of rationality. Fantasy does not work if it is illogical.

It fascinates me that my 16-year-old boy spends a good deal of time—when playing fantasy video games—in choosing the real kind of car (including types of hubcaps, car color, or exhaust pipes) his heroes (whom he clothes realistically like paper dolls) will drive.

My recently published book, The Book Without Words, is a fable about life and dying. Heavy going? Not really. It derives its suspenseful energy from the words of Odo, the book’s talking raven, that, “Farce is but tragedy in excess” (p. 82). Indeed, I think the funniest moment in the book is the burial of Thorston, Sybil and Odo’s unpleasant alchemist master. That Thorston keeps coming back from the dead—younger and younger—is surely fantastical. However, by doing so the fable gives life, if you will, to the book’s preamble proverb, “A life unlived is like a book without words.” I like to think that while the premise of The Book Without Words is fantastic, its underlying theme is real. I’m not suggesting that death is palatable to my middle school readers. But I am spinning a fable that, I hope, suggests that life is worth living—and yes, death is part of that life.

Keep in mind fantasy is not just magic. My Poppy books are fantasy, insofar they are tales about animals—mice, porcupines, foxes, skunks—who live as animals, even as they live as characters. They think. They talk.

When visiting schools I love to ask my readers who their favorite child character is in the Poppy books. The kids start to lift their hands, but puzzled looks cause hesitation. Hands drop. It dawns on them; there are almost no child characters in these books! The characters are—good heavens—mostly adults! (Please don’t go reminding them!)

This fall [2005] the latest Poppy book, titled Poppy’s Return, will be published. Consider the plot: Poppy, now a matronly mother, is having trouble with her (teenager) son, Ragweed Junior—the first real child character in the series. Poppy, wanting to work out their tensions, takes him along when she visits her aging parents—with whom she did not get along. Horrors! It’s intergenerational conflict! Parent–child relationships! Edgy young adult confessional! Not on your mouse whiskers. It’s funny fantasy about adults for upper elementary readers. Yet I think Poppy’s Return is the most realistic (and funniest) of the series. Hint: I don’t need to write an autobiography—it’s all there in the Poppy books. (But please, it is fantasy.)

The animal fantasy allows me to write about adults. Could I have written these stories about adult humans and engage the kids? Not me. To repeat myself: fantasy, must feel real.

I’ve often quoted Paula Fox as wisely saying, “The writer’s job is to imagine the truth.” Let me suggest that when it comes to fantasy, the task is to find the truth, then write about it as if it were imagined. In short, in a world where the truth is often hidden, fantasy reveals reality.

Strange characters

Award-winning author and illustrator David Shannon has created another unforgettable character in Alice the Fairy (2004). Alice is a temporary fairy who needs to pass a lot of tests before she can become a permanent fairy. And she does just that—changing frogs into princes and oatmeal into cake, and performing other useful magic. The whimsical illustrations convey more of the story than the words, and the magic is often more real than Alice or her parents wish it to be. Younger readers will laugh at Alice’s attempts to
become a permanent fairy and enjoy every page of this book.

*Strange* is a good word to characterize the Great Elastic Marvel, a.k.a. The Man with Rubber Legs and the Jumping Master, as he accidentally bounces off his trampoline and out of the window of his apartment. *Boing!* by Sean Taylor (2004) is a story that reads like a tall tale that chronicles the exaggerated ups and downs of the Jumping Master as he bounces from one dangerous and silly scenario to another. The illustrations provide perspective from the character’s point of view. We see what he sees as he plummets into various settings, such as when he is about to be skewered by apartment antennas but boings back up into the sky. There is an ironic and amusing twist of fate at the end of the story when the Great Elastic Marvel miraculously bounces back into the apartment from whence he came.

*The Magic Rabbit* (by Richard Jesse Watson, 2005) has the ability to jump out of a hat and perform such tricks as pulling frogs, birds, and even mice out of *his* hat. Unfortunately these animals jump, flutter, or scurry away, leaving rabbit in need of a friend. Youngsters will have fun with the repetitive text, the colorful illustrations (the frog looks like he is jumping right at the reader), and the ending where the rabbit finds the best magic is some you can share with a friend. This book will be great for a read-aloud and read-by-myself in kindergarten.

Lil Fella, the baby in Lynne Bertrand’s *Granite Baby* (2005), is not as strange as his five colossal sisters from the state of New Hampshire. Em, Jade, Golda, Ruby, and Beryl each have special powers. As the sisters marvel at one another’s accomplishments, Beryl, the stone cutter, takes it upon herself to carve a real-life baby—“he was as dear as any backwoods baby—if not a mite heavier than most” (unpaged). This is where the fun begins as the sisters and little Nellie, a girl from Franconia Notch, try to get Lil Fella to stop crying. It seems that his carrying on is creating a major disturbance for his neighbors from Maine and Vermont and even up into Canada. In this tall tale from New England we learn that common sense rules the day and bigger is not always better. The illustrations clearly convey the emotions of the characters. The difference in size between the baby and the sisters evokes sympathy for Lil Fella, who can fit in the palm of his sisters’ hands.

Fantasy as satire

Martin Jenkins and Chris Riddell abridge and illustrate Jonathan Swift’s classic political satire *Gulliver’s Travels* (1999) and succeed in creating a book that is both appealing and comprehensible to many young readers. Like the original, *Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver* (2005) is written in a journal format in which the main character, Lemuel Gulliver, recounts his travels to various fantastic nations. We accompany him to places like Lilliput, peopled by the tiny Lilliputians, and to Brobdingnag, inhabited by giants. We experience a society where rational and superior horse-like characters reside, as well as that of the savage Yahoos who resemble primitive human beings. Traveling with Gulliver through each of these societies and then back again to his own world provides the reader with insights about politics and the foolishness and sometimes mean spiritedness of some societies, despite sophisticated technological know-how. This satire is as relevant today as it was when it was first written in 1726. The format of the book invites the young reader to handle it and enjoy the exaggerated illustrations depicting the many adventures that Gulliver experiences. This book is a great entrée to classic satirical fantasy.
The Search for Delicious by Natalie Babbitt (2005) is also a satirical tale, about how a dispute over a seemingly little thing can sow the seeds of discord that may ultimately lead to war. This story takes place in a far-away, long-ago kind of kingdom in which there is a raging dispute over how the Prime Minister describes what the word delicious means in the dictionary he is composing. The problem is that delicious means many things to many people. Twelve-year-old Gaylen, the assistant to the prime minister, is sent on a quest to survey the people in the kingdom about what they think delicious means. The people of the kingdom feel threatened by and fearful of his search to determine the one correct, privileged definition. These circumstances lay the groundwork for Hemlock, the brother of the queen, to use these disagreements to usurp power. The story is told with humor and irony. There are elements of magic in which parallel fantasy worlds intersect and include characters that are indifferent to, if not disgusted by, humankind. We meet Ardis, a bereft mermaid who has lost the magic key that opens the door to a house under the sea where her beloved doll resides. We meet ancient forest creatures and dwarfs residing in underground mines who go about their everyday business aware of, but indifferent to, the events around them. The story explores aspects of human nature and pokes fun at our foibles, and like other satires it can be read on many different levels or can be enjoyed in its own right.

Literary folk tales and their adaptations

Modern fantasies are sometimes called literary folk tales because they are stories that often read like traditional literature but with talking animals, eccentric characters, strange worlds, and magical motifs. Unlike traditional literature, however, these tales have not been passed down by word of mouth. Instead they have been written by particular authors, usually for children. Hans Christian Andersen is an author of some of our favorite literary folktales such as *The Ugly Duckling* and *Thumbelina*, as is Kenneth Grahame, author of *The Wind in the Willows* and *The Reluctant Dragon*.

Amy Lowry Poole (2005) writes and illustrates a retelling of the literary folk tale *The Pea Blossom* by Hans Christian Andersen. This retelling takes place in Beijing and incorporates Chinese mythology. In the story we follow the journey of each of five sweet peas in a pod. The first four peas have lofty aspirations while the last one comments, “I shall go wherever it is that I am meant to.” This touching story helps us to consider and appreciate the importance of a patient and caring life. The illustrations are paintings on rice paper and incorporate cultural information with a quiet ambience that complements the theme of this sweet story. Readers can find the original *Pea Blossom* along with 150 other stories by Hans Christian Anderson posted at www.pacifcnet.net/~johnr/aesop/aesophca.html.

*The Reluctant Dragon*, authored in 1898 by Kenneth Grahame, is a literary folk tale that has two new versions, one of which is an abridged
version illustrated by Inga Moore (2004). The other is retold by Robert D. San Souci and illustrated by John Segal (2004). In the story, a variant of the legend of St. George and the Dragon, we meet a very wise little boy who is a shepherd’s son; a poetry-writing and very cultured dragon who, contrary to opinion, does not want to wage war and lay waste to villages; and a quite agreeable St. George who feels the need to keep up appearances and to do what is expected. Each version provides a unique take on Grahame’s story. Moore defines the setting in greater detail by virtue of the text and illustrations, and inserts dialogue that at times seems true to the setting and at others uses more current vernacular. The charming version by San Souci and Segal reads like a folk tale and is comically illustrated, including vertical trios of small, captioned cartoon-like panels that depict various significant events.

_Sir Gawain and the Green Knight_, retold by Michael Morpurgo and illustrated by Michael Foreman (2004), was originally written in the late 14th century by an anonymous poet. This is the legend of the chivalrous Sir Gawain, a Knight of the Round Table and nephew to King Arthur. During a New Year’s celebration Sir Gawain defends King Arthur’s honor by taking up a dare made by a menacing Green Knight who bursts into the festivities. The Green Knight dares Sir Gawain to kill him with his battle ax on the condition that if he fails to do so, he will be bound by honor to seek out the Green Knight in a year’s time in order to subject himself to the same treatment. Although some aspects of the story can be interpreted as risqué (such as when the wife of his host pursues Gawain’s attentions), one is compelled to find out how Sir Gawain will fare on his mysterious quest to come to terms with the Green Knight. The language is rich and etches unforgettable images. Forman’s luxurious illustrations effectively create the medieval setting in which the story takes place. To read more about the original poem visit [www.luminarium.org/medlit/gawain.htm](http://www.luminarium.org/medlit/gawain.htm).

The tale of _The Hero Beowulf_ is adapted from the oldest surviving epic poem in English literature. This version, written by Eric A. Kimmel and illustrated by Leonard Everett Fisher (2005), is retold in vivid text and dialogue that will surely appeal to older readers. Beowulf defends the Danish king and his warriors from the terrors of the vile monster named Grendel—a classic confrontation between good and evil. The well-written story is enhanced by Fisher’s impressive artwork depicting characters, setting, and mood. Readers also may wish to enjoy _Don Quixote and the Windmills_ by the same author/artist team (2004), who create a funny, loving portrait of Cervantes’s hero and his squire.

**Variations**

Variations of traditional tales are often strongly associated with particular authors. For example, _The True Story of the Three Little Pigs_ (1990) undeniably has its roots in the traditional, yet this alteration is clearly associated with its author, Jon Scieszka, and illustrator, Lane Smith. The books that follow are variations of some favorite traditional tales with innovative twists.

In _Never Cry Woof!_ Jane Wattenberg (2005) writes and illustrates an inventive variation of Aesop’s fable of “The Boy Who Cried Wolf.” This version features two main characters who watch over their flock. There is Bix Bix, an exuberant rule-breaking and “woof crying” canine, and Hunky-Dory, a responsible and careful rule-following hound. As in the traditional tale, the
shepherd, Bix Bix, cries “woof” too many times and, as you can guess, help is no longer forthcoming: “‘Hogwash!’ spat Hunky Dory. Who would believe that mutt? Twice wasn’t nice, but a third is absurd. No one moved a paw” (unpaged). Unlike in the traditional tale, the story is laced with puns, wisecracks, and rhythm and rhyme. The illustrations are in the form of collages that include photos, drawings, and varied placement of print. One of the most striking illustrations is the centerfold spread featuring a startled Bix Bix on the left page coming nose to nose with the wolf on the right page. Readers will enjoy this book best if they are familiar with the original fable. Readers can find out more about Jane Wattenberg’s books at her website, www.janewattenberg.com, where they can send her a postcard telling their favorite joke or sharing their ideas for how to fix the world.

Whoever heard of a Cinderella story in which the main characters are fashion entrepreneurs who happen to be chickens? Mary Jane and Herman Auch do it again in Chickerella (2005), an “egg-ceptional” Cinderella story. In this variation, Chickerella, a glass egg–laying chick and an excellent seamstress, makes it to the Fowl Ball with a little help from her Fairy Goosemother. As in the traditional version, Chickerella gets to fly the coop, and not without ruffling a few feathers. Unlike the traditional Cinderella, Chickerella and the Prince have other plans aside from getting married. Mary Jane and Herman worked together to create the hysterical illustrations. Mary Jane made mannequins of the chickens and designed their very chic wardrobe. Herman created miniature sets in which the chickens were posed. Using digital photography, Herman composed each of the striking double-page-spread scenes.

If you love to read other people’s mail, you will enjoy With Love, Little Red Hen by Alma Flor Ada with illustrations by Leslie Tryon (2001). In this variation of “The Little Red Hen” we meet many familiar fairy tale characters including Goldilocks, Little Red Riding Hood, The Big Bad Wolf, and Peter Rabbit. Through correspondence between characters, the story unfolds as we learn how the Little Red Hen and her chicks adjust to their new digs in Happy Valley in spite of some not-so-neighborly neighbors. For those readers who would like to send a letter to the characters in the story, their addresses are available in the Hidden Forest Directory on the last page of the book.

A variation of the French folk tale Stone Soup, Hammer Soup by Ingrid and Dieter Schubert (2004) includes aspects of “The Three Little Pigs” as well as the fable “The Grasshopper and the Ant.” In this story Kate, who keeps a tidy house, wakes up one morning to find a giant named Bruce building an eyesore of a shack right next to her house. As we learn about each character we find that while they are both nice people, they are opposite in every way. Kate is tidy, Bruce is sloppy; Kate plans for the future, while Bruce lives for the moment. When Bruce’s hastily built house blows away in a storm, Kate takes her neighbor in, and that’s when Bruce convinces Kate to make hammer soup by adding some of her own ingredients to the pot. It seems that Bruce’s way of life enhances Kate’s, and we see that very different styles can complement each other. For a Mexican variation of the tale, see Eric Kimmel’s Cactus Soup (2004), the story of a group of hungry soldiers that come to a village where all of the food is hidden. The clever soldiers offer to make a soup from water and cactus thorns.

Here is a familiar tale of a poor tailor’s son who becomes a wealthy prince with the help of a magic lamp found in an enchanted cave. However the retelling of Aladdin and the Enchanted Lamp by Phillip Pullman with illustrations by Sophy Williams (2005), adds something new to the old story. Beginning with the boy’s mischief-making childhood and then his finding of the magic lamp, readers will enjoy the story of how Aladdin beheld an enchanted garden, found the lovely princess, and then nearly had it all taken away. The illustrations, often double pages, are as wonderful as the story. This is a “must read aloud” for children of all ages.

Have you ever wondered what happened to Aladdin’s lamp after Aladdin? In Wishing Moon by Michael Tunnell (2004), Aminah, an orphan living on the streets, appeals to the princess for help but the blackhearted wife of Aladdin throws an old lamp at her head. The lamp holds a jinni who informs Aminah that she can make three wishes after each full moon. With this magic she regains security and comfort; however, she cannot achieve true happiness until she helps the people she has left behind. Meanwhile, the princess is hunting Aminah and the lamp. This fanciful yarn will enchant readers who relish adventure, fantasy, and humor.
**Talking animals**

*Poppy’s Return* (2005) is Avi’s fifth animal fantasy chronicling the life and times of the deer mouse Poppy, her family, and her friends. In *Poppy’s Return*, she is worried about her rebellious teenage son Ragweed Junior. Not only does Ragweed Junior belch on demand, he is often quite surly and sports a dyed black stripe down his back to look like his best friend, Mephitis, who happens to be a skunk. Things get even more complicated when Poppy’s snooty sister, Lilly, shows up in Dimwood Forest begging Poppy to rescue the family homestead, Gray House, from demolition by a bulldozer. As Poppy, Ragweed Junior, and Mephitis embark on this adventure they learn about friendship, family, and self-acceptance. The dialogue is hilarious, and the language is rich with imagery. The characters and their complicated family relationships ring true to life for anyone who has grappled with figuring out who they are and where they fit within their family.

Is there more to life than being a royal? In *The Nothing King* by Elle van Lieshout and Erik van Os with illustrations by Paula Gerritsen (2004), King Bear discovers that “nothing is really something” when he leaves the palace to live in a modest apartment without any of the trappings that go with being king. At every turn, however, King Bear meets people who are uncomfortable with this situation and urge him to go back to the palace. In each of these ironic encounters, the king gives up more and more of what it means to be king. He gives up his royal carriage, the power of the throne, and even living with the queen, who refuses to move out of the palace. When his neighbors ridicule him and call him the Nothing King, King Bear realizes that what people call nothing is the joy of freedom, the ability to take in the beauty of the world around us, and the pleasure of basking in the sun. And there is a happy ending in regard to the queen as well.

Lore Segal and Sergio Ruzzier do it again in *More Mole Stories and Little Gopher, Too* (2005). The charming short stories capture how hard it is for children to be “good” given many of their natural inclinations. In “The Thursday Cookie” Mole only wanted to look at the bag of chocolate chip cookies that he placed next to his dinner plate of ants, but he just couldn’t resist. In “Mole and Little Gopher,” Mole wanted to play nicely except for his urge to say, “Mine” and “I want it.” And in “Mole and the Whole Bag of Pretzels,” sharing with Grandma Mole posed a major challenge. In each of the stories we learn more about the history and bond between Mole and Grandma Mole, and this is especially true in “When Grandmother Mole Got on the Telephone.” It seems that when Grandma was talking on the telephone she was not thinking about Mole. These tender tales are reminiscent of Lillian and Russell Hoban’s Frances books and Alfred Lobel’s Frog and Toad series. Each story will evoke a chuckle and a note of recognition from anyone who knows and loves young children.

**The hero’s quest**

Susan Cooper’s latest book, *The Magician’s Boy* (2005), has all the classic elements of the
fantasy motif, the hero’s quest. The story seemingly starts out in a familiar world. There is a boy in the story who works for a magician. He takes care of the magician’s props, and at each performance he works the puppets for the story of St. George and the Dragon. The boy wants to learn magic, but the magician rebuffs him by telling him that he is not ready. Reality turns into fantasy on Christmas Day, when the St. George puppet cannot be found. At this point the magician (in the role of the someone who launches the hero on a journey) sends the boy on a quest to the Land of Story to find St. George. While there, the magician’s boy meets a signpost that guides the boy in the right direction. After getting involved with favorite story characters, including The Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe, The Pied Piper of Hamelin, and even Pinocchio, the boy enters the story of St. George and the Dragon. He learns that his quest requires that he must become St. George and face down the dragon. True to the story’s form of the hero’s journey, the boy changes and grows from this experience and returns to reality having discovered his inner strength and become ready to learn magic.

In *Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief* by Rick Riordan (2005), life seems to go from bad to worse for 12-year-old Percy Jackson. Burdened with both attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder and dyslexia, he struggles in school and has a record of expulsions. Percy goes to a special summer camp, which appears to be only a strawberry farm. Is it possible that the ancient gods of Olympus live in the 21st century? Percy is sent on a dangerous quest to find Zeus’s lightning bolt. On his journey, Percy encounters mythological creatures who seek to destroy him. Through his perilous adventures, Percy learns his true identity, meets the father he has never known, and learns the meaning of the Oracle’s warning.

**The supernatural**

Ellen Potter has written a book that is both moving and laugh-out-loud funny. In *Olivia Kidney and the Exit Academy* (2005), Olivia and her father live in a brownstone building that includes a totally submerged living room complete with snapping turtles, bobbing furniture, and boats. But there is even more that is odd; Olivia wonders about the complete strangers and ghosts that show up each night. And what about Ansel Plover—is he as mad and dangerous as he seems? The veil between this life and the next world becomes quite thin as Olivia discovers that things are often very different from how they appear.

**Reference**


**Children’s books cited**


