



## **The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games**

*Ebony Elizabeth Thomas*

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Reveals the diversity crisis in children's and young adult media as not only a lack of representation, but a lack of imagination

Stories provide portals into other worlds, both real and imagined. The promise of escape draws people from all backgrounds to speculative fiction, but when people of color seek passageways into the fantastic, the doors are often barred. This problem lies not only with children's publishing, but also with the television and film executives tasked with adapting these stories into a visual world. When characters of color do appear, they are often marginalized or subjected to violence, reinforcing for audiences that not all lives matter.

The Dark Fantastic is an engaging and provocative exploration of race in popular youth and young adult speculative fiction. Grounded in her experiences as YA novelist, fanfiction writer, and scholar of education, Thomas considers four black girl protagonists from some of the most popular stories of the early 21st century: Bonnie Bennett from the CW's The Vampire Diaries, Rue from Suzanne Collins's The Hunger Games, Gwen from the BBC's Merlin, and Angelina Johnson from J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter. Analyzing their narratives and audience reactions to them reveals how these characters mirror the violence against black and brown people in our own world.

In response, Thomas uncovers and builds upon a tradition of fantasy and radical imagination in Black feminism and Afrofuturism to reveal new possibilities. Through fanfiction and other modes of counter-storytelling, young people of color have reenvisioned fantastic worlds that reflect their own experiences, their own lives. As Thomas powerfully asserts, "we dark girls deserve more, because we are more."

## **The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games Details**

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**the Hunger Games Ebony Elizabeth Thomas**

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# From Reader Review The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games for online ebook

## Julie Bozza says

I came to this book for two reasons. One is that I'm a fan of BBC "Merlin", and I was happy to see the show finally being considered in an academic work. The other is that I'm a writer, and a White person, who is interested in writing non-White characters and mixed-race relationships – and the more I learn, the more I realise I still need to learn.

Back in 2008 when "Merlin" first screened, I was delighted by the ways in which the showrunners mixed things up. Arthur wasn't a noble and just king, but a spoiled brat-prince. Merlin was a naïve youth of the same age as Arthur, and not in control of his magic or indeed anything else. And Gwen was not only a lowly servant but also Black, in a place where the ruling family and most (though not all) of the aristocracy and knights were White.

I loved all of that, and very much enjoyed all the fanworks that celebrated Gwen. While the end of the last series was heartbreaking, I loved that Gwen ended up as Queen of Camelot in her own right.

Ebony Elizabeth Thomas shows me, however, that wasn't enough. While I would quibble with one aspect of her description of Gwen's bleak ending – Gwen is not entirely alone as she has life-long friend Leon and long-time friend Gaius with her, among others – that's not enough either. As Thomas says, if "Merlin" had ended after season four, Gwen would have had a fully happy ending: married to Arthur, crowned as Queen, and surrounded by friends including her brother Elyan. It would have been the sort of happy ending that is so rare or even non-existent for young Black women in our stories. The showrunners mixed things up in terms of the Arthurian legends, and are to be applauded for gifting us with a non-White Guinevere – but they didn't take it far enough when it came to gifting her a happy ending in season five.

It's not enough to point out that the Arthurian legends always end in tragedy. As Thomas shows in her consideration of young Black female characters in "The Hunger Games", "The Vampire Diaries", and the "Harry Potter" 'verse, Gwen is not an isolated case.

It's not enough to claim that many of us fans (I hope the majority of us) enjoyed and celebrated Gwen in all aspects of her identity. While I tried to steer clear of it, I'm all too aware of the hostility that Gwen (and actor Angel Coulby) attracted as a person of colour – and waving the #NotAllFans flag misses the point.

It's not enough that Thomas's young niece is already used to identifying with characters who are White. As a queer woman (and non-American!), I am used to identifying with characters outside my own identities, too. Needs must! But I have also had the privilege of identifying with a few characters who match me very closely indeed, and time and time again I've had that privilege reinforced by the happy endings awarded to White characters. It's not enough.

On one hand, I am (partially) heartened by the fact that we are obviously meant to care about and grieve for all those non-White (and gay and lesbian) characters who are killed off as the stories progress. On the other hand, it's not enough. They deserve their share of fully explored storylines and happy endings, too.

Thomas challenges us with the idea that this lack of full representation in our creative works is due to a lack of imagination. We can do better. We can imagine better. Let's get in there and write better, too!

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The publisher kindly gave me an ARC of this book via NetGalley, and I have also preordered a hardcover copy for myself via Amazon. The views expressed are my own, and are (always) still evolving.

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## Fanna says

- || Reveals the diversity crisis
- || Explores race in popular youth fiction
- || Black feminism and Afrofuturism

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## Alice, as in Wonderland says

I really like both the conceit of the book and the commentary that the book provides. It's a discussion that's needed by fandoms and fantasy fiction in general, and it's greatly satisfying to know that a book like this was published at all. Thomas provides a lot of personal and thoughtful insight to the place of black women in fantasy stories and fiction, and brings her shameless (a word I only use in the sense that being part of internet fandoms seems to often come with embarrassment in general society) connection to internet fan culture and allows those people to be better represented and heard. I've watched Merlin and read Harry Potter, so the discussion of Hunger Games and Vampires Diaries was new to me, and also extremely sad to watch her describe all the misery of wanting best for a PoC character that is underappreciated by fandom and then having that curtailed at every turn. A misery that I'm not unused to. Her connecting the future of these fictions to her niece and the painful cognizance a lot of creators of color have when new art is created and the influence it can potentially have was really well done, not to mention the underlying frustrations when a new work *can* be groundbreaking, but sidesteps its true potential.

The downside is that I wish this book was a lot longer and a bit more broad. It's fair to say that it reads like many academic books do, i.e. like a final essay in book format, which is fine, but I wish there could be a section and a large elaboration on internet fan culture, and more examples than the major four, particularly because a lot of them are mentioned (such as Abbie Mills of Sleepy Hollow) but aren't given their own

sections. In a way, I somewhat wish it wasn't so specific to those characters? Or to use those characters as archetypes of how other black female characters have been channeled into those 4 paths over and over again. I was expecting a little more commentary in the Hermione chapter about racebending - but maybe I just want to shake my fist at Rowling again. I was also expecting a little more about how "darkness" is used in fantasy fiction, starting from Tolkein and used fairly consistently everywhere in fantasy, but maybe another book?

Overall, a book I appreciated reading a lot, but also wish I was reading more of. Maybe in the future! I hope to read so much more!

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### **Kendra says**

I have mixed responses to this book. On the one hand, it's a very important study of how race is used, viewed, and created in children's and YA literature. Thomas discusses various authors' approaches to race in their works and in the adaptations and fan creations made of them, with studies on Harry Potter, The Hunger Games, Merlin, and The Vampire Diaries. This discussion can be nuanced and thoughtful, but at times it is repetitive and superficial, relying on single statements by fans that are cherry-picked to fit Thomas's hypothesis. On the other hand, Thomas's work is clearly influenced by her involvement in HP fanfiction and is still smarting from being criticized for using another writer's texts in her own FF. In any other field this would be outright plagiarism, but Thomas makes the case that in FF, it is acceptable. Her argument is weak, though, especially as now she is a PhD who should have some scholarly and personal distance from her own, younger, naive understanding of how ethics in fiction works, fan or professional. In any case, I found the book to be unready for publication: it needs better-integrated discussions of theory (not just dropping in a useful quote here and there, but real, deep engagement); it needs more clarity and focus in each chapter/case study (these read like student papers that had not been outlined well); and it needs editing, both developmental and copy-. The book feels rushed, unpolished, and rather simplistic. Thomas has a lot of important things to say about race, fantasy, and fanfiction, but this book was a big disappointment,

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### **Marti Dolata says**

In Anya's review <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

She asked "Can you imagine growing up without stories and characters that you can identify with? " AS a 63 year old woman, yes I can. The great majority of stories that I read in elementary school had boys or men as the subjects with girls as supporting characters or door prizes if they showed up at all. Stories about girls usually had as their main goal winning the approval of men, so the sexism can be subtle. But white women have come a long way during my lifetime (but don't think the job is finished!) and now it's time to spread the representation to WOC. They have the double burden of overcoming not just racism but sexism which is also tied up with classism. Just appearing isn't enough, the thoughts and attitudes need to represent their concerns. Stories about real people rather than approved stereotypes. I am so tired of the sassy black best friend, and magic negros. Hopefully more books like this will help writers get there, as it is difficult to identify your own wrong assumptions when the cultural mediasphere has so much unspoken messaging about people's places in the world.

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## **Anya says**

Can you imagine growing up without stories and characters that you can identify with? What if all characters looked different from the way you do and villains and slaves were the ones who had the same appearance as you do? How would that make you feel?

This book was a necessary eye opener and biography that analyzed Pop culture and media and how it affects children and teenagers of color.

An extremely interesting read! Pick this one up if you like Roxane Gay or N.K. Jemisin. I'm looking forward to more black Sci-Fi, fantasy and books in general.

Thank you Netgalley for providing me with an eARC.

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