



# Phantastes

*George MacDonald*

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## **Phantastes** George MacDonald

"I was dead, and right content," the narrator says in the penultimate chapter of *Phantastes*. C.S. Lewis said that upon reading this astonishing 19th-century fairy tale he "had crossed a great frontier," and numerous others both before and since have felt similarly.

In MacDonald's fairy tales, both those for children and (like this one) those for adults, the "fairy land" clearly represents the spiritual world, or our own world revealed in all of its depth and meaning. At times almost forthrightly allegorical, at other times richly dreamlike (and indeed having a close connection to the symbolic world of dreams), this story of a young man who finds himself on a long journey through a land of fantasy is more truly the story of the spiritual quest that is at the core of his life's work, a quest that must end with the ultimate surrender of the self.

The glory of MacDonald's work is that this surrender is both hard won (or lost!) and yet rippling with joy when at last experienced. As the narrator says of a heavenly woman in this tale, "She knew something too good to be told." One senses the same of the author himself.

Newly designed and typeset in a modern 6-by-9-inch format by Waking Lion Press.

## **Phantastes Details**

Date : Published July 30th 2008 by Waking Lion Press (first published 1858)

ISBN : 9781600964015

Author : George MacDonald

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# From Reader Review Phantastes for online ebook

## John says

Very good. Now if only I could understand more of the symbolism....

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## Laura says

Free download at Gutenberg Project.

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## matthew says

This is an interesting book. C.S. Lewis cites MacDonald as his guru of types (note his role in the book "The Great Divorce"). Lewis further said that Phantastes "baptized [his:] imagination". Those are strong words and citations from an author that I love reading. So I decided to try out Phantastes. It is a "fairy romance", but really it is in the vein of Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress"--an extended allegory about life and philosophy. Except, in this version, none of the characters are explicitly named is an Pilgrim's Progress. It had a lot of beautiful language and some interesting ideas. However, parts of it I am not sure still what MacDonald was trying to say. I wish I understood more of his imagery. I need to go back and read it again. some day (it is a short read anyways).

The tale is of a man who wakes up one day in fairy land. There, he wanders aimlessly until he finds a woman of marble that he brings to life by his song. He spends the rest of the book seeking her and learning along the way. It is a tale of innocence lost, humility found.

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## Cindy Rollins says

The first time I read this I was a newly married 18 yo. My husband was taking a class at college titled Oxford Christians and I may as well have taken the class myself because I read every single life-changing book Dr. Kay Ludwigson assigned. And of all the books by all those wonderful Inklings and hangers-on, this book, Phantastes, captured my imagination and began my love of George MacDonald in a unique way.

I loved this book. Ordo Amoris.

They say the brain has definite patterns of nostalgia so that they can predict your age by what you listen to on the radio. I wonder if that is also true of returning to old book loves?

I find myself, more and more, returning to those old loves to see if they are still the bright baubles of my youth.

Phantastes still holds up. George MacDonald is still a good man who writes good books and those books still make me want to be good. I am not the passionate 18 yo ready to fix all things wrong anymore. At 18 I was

fascinated with the statuesque lady. Perhaps I wanted to be loved like that. This time around I barely noticed her. I deeply understood and was encouraged by the place Anodos had to come to in order to lose his shadow, his self. I long to get to that place where my shadow, my self, taps me on the shoulder and I brush her away without a thought. What care I for her?

I finished this book up as I sat in the emergency room with my husband. I was completely sheathed in my self as I hunkered there trying not to notice the horribleness of the humanity around me. Yes, it seemed horrible to me. Those sick, sick people. I wanted to just be me sitting somewhere safe and warm drinking coffee and eating cookies, watching the hummingbirds and listening to Bach. True, good, beautiful ME. But George MacDonald stripped that bare and showed me what the ugliness of my own vision for my own self. I had thought I had made progress in the brushing her aside but there she was in the emergency room hunkered down trying to ignore the back of the tapestry-the place Christ always is. The place where humanity roils and smells and writhes. Christ was there even when I was trying not to be. Forgive me, Father. Forgive me for underestimating the sinfulness of my own self.

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### **Amber says**

On his twenty-first birthday, Anodos entered his father's study and opens a drawer where a little woman that claims to be his grandmother grants his wish to go to fairy-land. With many tests to pass, will he pass them all to make it into Fairy-land or is all just a fantasy? Read on and find out for yourself.

This was a pretty good read and my first ever read by George Macdonald. It was full of action, adventure, prose and was a very whimsical fantasy. Look for this book at your local library and wherever books are sold.

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### **Oria says**

“But Love is such a Mystery  
I cannot find it out:  
For when I think I’m best resolv’d,  
I then am in most doubt.”  
(Sir John Suckling)

I have just finished Phantastes and was immediately compelled to put my thoughts to paper. What attracted me to the book was, beside the title, the blurb at the back which said the story is a “fairy tale for adults” and I needed no more persuasion.

The book relates the story of Anodos, a young wealthy man who, on his 21st birthday receives the keys to a mysterious secretary which belonged to his father. He opens it and so begins his journey into adulthood. It is really the story of his coming of age through challenges he has to overcome, of joy and love and sadness and despair, for he must go through all of that.

His journey takes him to a fantastic land – he meets a birch-tree that is not really a tree, statues that are not really statues, giants and knights and kind old ladies. He is imprisoned but escapes, he fights for a noble cause and wins, he meets all sorts of creatures, good and evil, all meant to make him understand and learn life’s lessons. Learn that sometimes we do harm and are forgiven by those whom we have hurt, that love can

be of many ways, that beauty does not equal purity of soul, and friendship has wonderful rewards. Each adventure is meant to teach him something and he comes out of this experience changed, an adult.

Although the language was not very easy to read (the book was, after all, published in the mid 1850's) and I found myself going back to re-read certain passages, the story had a melody which made me want to keep going. Imbued with wonderful bits of poetry and very vividly described scenes, it took me to another world where everything was possible and nothing was left to chance, to a land where beauty goes hand in hand with ugliness and where weeping is the companion of laughter. In other words, life.

“Fight on, my men, Sir Andrew sayes,  
A little Ime hurt, but yett not slaine;  
Yle but lye downe and bleede awhile,  
And then Ile rise and fight againe.”  
(Ballad of Sir Andrew Barton)

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### **Douglas Wilson says**

I know that I read this once before, many moons ago. But my only recollection of it consisted in the fact that I had read it. I recently decided to read it again because of the impact it had on Lewis. Having done so, I can only conclude that Lewis saw a great deal more in it than I was able to, although I did enjoy it -- particularly the last third. There are some great moments. But it struck me as kind of a fairy land hodge podge, only with the hodge parts and the podge parts packed closely together by hand. Anyway.

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### **Werner says**

While I read this book several years ago (the 2006 date is a "best guess"), I'd actually started it back in 1990 and didn't finish it at that time. It gets off to kind of a slow start, and one element in the storyline was initially off-putting to me (but no spoilers here!). However, I'm glad I decided to give it a second and fairer chance; it proved to be a solid three-star fantasy that I enjoyed. Basically, it's a coming-of-age tale in a fantasy setting; and it's perhaps the first example in the modern tradition of a child/youth from the real world finding his way into a fantasy world. (Knowing that MacDonald was a favorite author of C. S. Lewis, it isn't hard to see the influence of this work on the idea behind the latter's Narnia series.) There are actually no explicit Christian references in the book, but the author's Christian worldview underlies the strongly moral tone and messages here. Of course, this is a 19th-century work, with Victorian diction throughout; readers who find that problematic will probably enjoy the book less than those of us who don't mind that!

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### **Jacob Aitken says**

In many ways this really isn't a good book. The style borders on choppy and dense. The story doesn't always flow. MacDonald routinely makes excursions without telling you. But...

The "mythopoeic" prose is its redeeming quality. MacDonald bathed the book in sacramentality. Every leaf, grove, and spring reflected redemption--and MacDonald is a talented enough artist that he can show redemption without telling you redemption (usually).

The story line is simple enough. The protagonist finds himself in "faerie land" and must navigate through trials and temptations, with all the self-discoveries.

CS Lewis mentioned this book spoke of a "good death." Seems odd that a Christian (even a heterodox one) like MacDonald would be so preoccupied with Death when most of MacDonald's works ooze "Life." What Lewis means is that MacDonald uses the medium of "death" to kill the old element and make way for the new (Life). This is none other than the Christian story of Baptism, a Baptism that our hero must undergo.

Some things I learned about Fairie Land:

- \*Fairy wisdom is sounder than anything we moderns have come up with.

- \*The Arthurian legends are reliable guides to the human conditions and are "true" on more than one level.

- \*Giants prefer to use maces in battle.

- \*Adventures usually happen in Forests.

Final thoughts:

Sometimes the beauty was so intoxicating that I felt my heart would stop. Accepting what I now do about Plato and Carl Jung, MacDonald plucked an archetypal chord in my soul.

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## **Megan Fritts says**

Absolutely the most incredible book I've ever read. I'm pretty sure it will stay my favorite forever. You know those things in life (books/paintings/scenery/etc) that are just so beautiful that you know you couldn't accurately describe them? That is what this book was, to me. I know that you're not supposed to "over-sell" books, because then everyone's expectations will be high, or whatever. I don't care. This book changed how I view the world. C.S. Lewis was spot-on in his opinion of MacDonald, and especially of this book. By the time the book ended, I was transfixed in a sort of solemn reverence for life. And for death.

Just read the book, ok?

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## Michaela says

Sometimes it seems like because we're kept in suspense throughout a book and we're still excited and caught up in the story when we finish the last chapter, we immediately give it five stars just for that, and then we either forget about it, or later realize it wasn't all that good after all. In other words, it was fun while it lasted, but not worth a second read or even a second thought.

And then there are those that seem slower while we're actually reading them, we're tempted to quit halfway through, not everything seems to connect very well, we're not sure what the author is trying to say... And then we reach the end. And we sit there a few minutes trying to piece it all together. And months later we're still thinking about some of the things the book said.

Phantastes by George MacDonald is the latter kind.

I've read some other George MacDonald books, and when I looked up reviews this always seemed to me to be the one most well-known of his fantasy works, so when I found it at a used bookstore I was excited. But one chapter in I was thinking, "Who is this guy and why is he wandering through... Fairyland?" But it was well worth every minute spent reading!

In my opinion, Anodos is an extremely lucky person. He's given a spiritual preview of what life is going to be like, starting when he wakes up one morning to find a stream flowing through his bedroom. He follows it into a strange land where many very odd things happen in seemingly no particular order, with even stranger people, some of whom are on their own journeys. I particularly love Sir Percival in his armor that will only shine again when the blows of enemy swords have chipped all the rust from it; and the strange house with the three doors - the door of grief, the door of sighs, and the door of dismay, from which the only door leading away is that of the vault of a tomb. And indeed, Anodos journeys through all kinds of fears and sorrows until his eventual painful death - but "The veil between, though very dark, is very thin." And he finds himself soaring above all the sorrowful world below, and experiences more peace than he ever had before.

His sudden return to life (in his own world) seems rather "to correspond to what we think death is, before we die."

He commences his ordinary life again, but with new hope: "I know that good is coming to me - that good is always coming; though few have at times the simplicity and the courage to believe it. What we call evil, is the only and best shape, which for the person and his condition at the time, could be assumed by the best good."

I've listed only a handful of the lovely parts of this book. It's one that really calmed me down. These stories that don't seem to make sense right away are always the best because I think so many of our thoughts seem incomprehensible even to our own minds, and it's comforting to recognize them when they're made just a little bit more coherent in someone else's work. 5 stars, highly recommended.

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## Joaquín Garza says

A veces pienso en las canciones que, por sus letras, me remiten de inmediato a mi idea central de lo que es la fantasía. Algún día diré cuál es el top de esas canciones, pero me voy a quedar con la que es mi favorita:

'Ahorra una pequeña vela: guarda algo de luz para mí  
Hay figuras allá delante, moviéndose por entre los árboles  
piel blanca cubierta de lino, perfume en mi muñeca  
y la luna llena que cuelga por sobre los sueños entre la bruma'  
(...)

'Es capa y espada, puede ser primavera o verano  
camino sin cortarme a través de un vitral  
más débil de la vista, aferrándome a la vela  
y palabras que no tienen forma caen de mis labios'  
(...)

'La canción más dulce es el mayor silencio que he escuchado  
en tus sueños es curioso ver que tus pies no tocan la tierra  
en un bosque lleno de príncipes un beso es la libertad  
pero el príncipe tiene su rostro oculto por los sueños entre la bruma'

La canción es These Dreams, de Heart. Y perdón por poner las tres estrofas, pero quiero remarcar con fuerza la imagen mental que me causa esa idea onírica de desplazarme por un mundo ajeno y misterioso, donde el peligro se da la mano con el asombro y los sentimientos más sublimes al contemplar la belleza y el asombro inefables.

Es curioso tener que regresar a una novela de 1858 para acceder al núcleo de la idea de la fantasía. Todo lo que le ha caído encima al género a lo largo de tantos años ha añadido 'awesomeness' (o 'genialidad' en el sentido dude del término) muchas veces a costa de cerrar como un capullo este centro de lo fantástico. Ese centro, por supuesto, es el provocar asombro a través de cosas que nos son ajenas.

Voy a empezar por el aspecto más literal, que quiero que olvidemos pronto. Es un libro plagado de metáforas, que si uno se pone a investigar, resulta ser no más y no menos que una visión y un alegato del autor para oponerse a la idea calvinista de la predestinación, y a contrarrestarla con ideas propias sobre cómo conquistar la idea de la muerte y adquirir la gracia (y quiero creer, lo que mis maestros de filosofía llamaban 'la vida lograda'). Pero como dije, dejemos eso aparte.

Donde me quiero enfocar es en que entendamos la importancia de MacDonald (y de esta novela) como un puente entre el Romanticismo puro y la fantasía central de los Inklings -Tolkien, Lewis et. al-. Porque Fantastes es una especie de 'Los Himnos a la Noche' redux en forma de cuento de hadas. Tuve la suerte de que me hicieran leer a Novalis en la escuela (y digo suerte porque en aquella época ya me fascinaba la idea de lo romántico), así que reencontrame con alguien tan profundamente imbuido de las ideas místicas de Novalis, tan dispuesto a hacerles un homenaje y tan gozoso de juntarlo con tradiciones folclóricas de cuentos de hadas fue algo que no esperaba. Y me encanta encontrarme con libros que no esperaba.

No voy a decir mentiras: uno tiene que tener algo de kilometraje en fantasía (y repito: de preferencia haber leído a Novalis) para disfrutar y apreciar Fantastes al 100%. MacDonald tiende a hacer digresiones contemplativas sobre todo lo que Ánodos, el protagonista, observa y vive mientras corre toda suerte de aventuras en Fata. También tiende a usar canciones, que no son muy buenas que digamos. Pero si uno está



entrenado encontrará lo profunda e increíblemente maravilloso que es este libro y podrá, espero, ser movido como yo lo fui. Y de al final sentirse agradecido por hallarse con algo que desgrana belleza, asombro y fascinación con ideas poderosas sobre la vida lograda.

Si al final tengo que ponerle un adjetivo a esta novela, es: 'la fantasía irrestricta'. Una fantasía que no fue afectada por los artificios de tener por fuerza que tener un 'gran worldbuilding', 'una moralidad gris' o personajes que sean 'badass'. Gracias a Dios.

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## **Cora says**

A friend and I decided to have "family story time" each evening as a new bedtime routine to help us fall asleep more calmly in the midst of interpersonal and academic stress. We chose this classic tale, picked up by C.S. Lewis at a train station (he later said that it influenced his writing greatly).. it's a fabulous read-aloud story because the writing is just so darn good, especially in the introductory chapters. We have at least a dozen notecards with quotes from the book scattered about the room now.

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## **Heideblume says**

Atmosfere ottocentesce, romantiche, evocative, oniriche. Molte descrizioni e poca azione. Molta “esperienza sentimentale” e poche avventure.

Le idee ci sono (Es. metaletteratura: la fiction permette di sperimentare e immedesimarsi in situazioni che non abbiamo vissuto in prima persona nella vita reale ma che comunque ci hanno trasmesso-insegnato qualcosa), gli sviluppi un po' meno. E' una materia acerba, ma già si sapeva - l'autore è diventato famoso con altri romanzi. In compenso questo libro ha di buono l'aver segnato indelebilmente sia C.S. LEWIS che TOLKIEN.

- Everywhere in Fairy Land forests are the places where one may most certainly expect adventures.

- Oh, to be a child again, innocent, fearless, without shame or desire!

- I learned that it is better, a thousand-fold, for a proud man to fall and be humbled, than to hold up his head in his pride and fancied innocence. I learned that he that will be a hero, will barely be a man; that he that will be nothing but a doer of his work, is sure of his manhood. In nothing was my ideal lowered, or dimmed, or grown less precious; I only saw it too plainly, to set myself for a moment beside it. Indeed, my ideal soon became my life; whereas, formerly, my life had consisted in a vain attempt to behold, if not my ideal in myself, at least myself in my ideal.

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## **Susan Budd says**

It's like a dream: You just  
find yourself somewhere  
and you wander on.  
Not like a quest,  
with a destination  
and obstacles along the way.  
No. You just find yourself walking  
without a destination  
and when you get somewhere  
someone was expecting you,  
someone who had sent you somewhere,  
although you don't know  
why or where or how  
and it doesn't bother you much  
that you don't know.

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### **Larissa says**

Like many of the other reviewers, I am certain that a second reading would reveal much more of this story to me. Many times throughout the reading I wished I could just jump into MacDonald's mind and find the key to much that I am sure is allegorical! This book is so beautiful it almost hurts. I loved and was confused by it. I know now why C.S. Lewis thought him a master; if Lewis looked up to him you know that most of the rest of us would see him as brilliant!

The story begins with this young man's 21st birthday and continues through a meeting with humans and others who inhabit the world of faerie land into which he awakens. He travels through forest and caves, sea and river eventually making a great sacrifice for the purpose of revealing truth to a beloved friend who had been deceived. The man eventually awakens from his visit and is reminded to use all he learned in faerie land to help him live his life in reality.

Not a difficult book to read, but definitely a book that bears much more study and thought than most!  
Recommend without reservations!

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### **Chad Gibbons says**

What an excellent book. This is my favorite George MacDonald book by far. There is a palpable sense of danger as the narrator Anodos tells of his travels in Fairy-Land. Along his journey, he encounters sinister Ash trees, mischievous kobolds, women who only appear in the reflection of mirrors, Sir Galahad, and a host of other fairy-folk. It's written in the classic George MacDonald surrealist tone, which at times will make you gape with wonder and at others cringe in horror. If you take any delight in serious Fairy tales, then you must read this. It's the grandfather of them all.

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## El says

I like a good faerie story, a nice romp in fairy lands. I especially like reading older fantasy novels to help this graph I have in my head showing the progression and evolution of fantasy in literature. MacDonald's book here, published in 1857, seemed like a good one to pick up - it's an early fantasy novel with an introduction by C.S. Lewis, possibly the world's first MacDonald fanboy (and OMG he drooled all over MacDonald in that introduction), and this MacDonald guy inspired not only Lewis, but also Tolkien, and I like him, so.

Here's something I'm not always that great at, and especially right now when I'm sickly: ALLEGORIES. I often *suck* at reading allegories. When I read Narnia the first time? I was all, "Oh, hey, Aslan the lion is super cute." And then I learned what Narnia and Aslan represented and I was all, "No freaking way!" I had to read it all again to make sense of it all, and even then I was a little skeptical.

I went into reading this knowing a bit about MacDonald and that he wrote these allegorical type things. I was a little hesitant, but open to the idea - so many of these writers (like Lewis) write fantastical allegories and somehow in my head I'm trying to make sense of it all because that's just not how my brain works, I'm too scientific or something. I think there are religious stories and then there are fantasy novels, and I don't always get how they can be one and the same without likely getting into an argument with someone. So it's better to just keep my mouth shut.

Okay, so the story is fine, but man, it really dragged for me. I don't feel it ever really picked up, and maybe that's because I knew that I was being (for lack of a better word) tricked by MacDonald. I knew that what he was writing was not what he was *saying* and that made me sort of irate. So I tried to put that aside and just focus on the imagery because MacDonald wrote incredible imagery. But that trickery was beneath it and I couldn't get over it.

Plus, there are a lot of songs. Remember Tom Bombadil's songs in Tolkien? Exactly.

Whatever, this just didn't work for me. It's not without merit, though, and clearly a lot of writers I do appreciate, respect, or even enjoy were into MacDonald. I have more of his books that I will eventually read, but I'm not particularly looking forward to it.

Let's put it this way - this book wasn't worth the overdue library fees I accrued by holding onto it longer than I should have. It's just... it was so *short* that I thought it would read *faster* and that was definitely not the case.

You can put cheese on broccoli but it's still broccoli, y'know?

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## Jeslyn says

Lyrical, mesmerizing "faerie romance for men and women", thus far this story focuses on Anodos and his epic journey through the dreamlike Fairy Land - but if the reader is looking for tiny winged creatures, he will find them only briefly; Fairy Land is populated with numerous inhabitants who are in fact human, and others appear so but with supernatural qualities. Though society (and rampant marketing) have oversold the idea of a benign parallel world of beauty and frolicking sprites, make no mistake - the world McDonald has created is far more than pan flutes, babbling brooks and laughter, and much of the main character's adventure

involves the grotesque and disturbing; Anodos definitely has his work cut out for him here.

A wonderful, wonderful, story, with some of the most beautiful imagery I've read, and a glorious finish. Regarding the back-cover reference to a "faerie romance" - this is without question a love story, but not in the blushing, eyelid-fluttering sense of the word. Boys and men would do well to read this book, and will have plenty to rivet their attention.

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### **Alex says**

This is a neat little book. It's a bit episodic, and a little flowery, but it's really *vivid*; there's some terrific imagery in here.

It's the story of some dude who goes to fairy land and wanders around mooning after some lady. There are giants and goblins. It's considered one of the first fantasy novels, and a big influence on CS Lewis and Tolkien. It makes for a nice bridge between medieval fantasy precursors like Morte D'Arthur and Beowulf\* and the later official fantasy genre.

*\* what? There are knights and monsters, what did you think fantasy was?*

It changed CS Lewis's life, judging from his fawning introduction, but it didn't change mine. I don't even like fantasy. But it's pretty cool.

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