

Reading Guides

INTRODUCTION

Brilliant, restless, and possessed of a GPA “higher than most people even realize it is possible for a GPA to be” (p. 5), Quentin Coldwater is on the fast track to an Ivy League college and a lifetime of enviable if predictable successes—or so he thinks. The seventeen-year-old high school senior also has an obsession with magic and a series of children’s books set in a fantasy land called Fillory that will soon transport him into a hidden world that at once vindicates and challenges his wildest dreams.

It’s a cold, windy afternoon in November when Quentin is en route to his Princeton admissions interview in the company of his best friends, James and Julia. As usual, he is unhappily nursing the resentment and lust he respectively harbors for them. But his brooding is interrupted when they arrive at the alumnus’s well-appointed home and discover his would-be interviewer dead. Within moments, Quentin is forced to realize that nothing is what it seems, and that reality itself is suspect.

A disarmingly sexy paramedic, a plain manila envelope, and a whipping wind lead Quentin from a chilly Brooklyn twilight to the warmth of a summer day in the country. Has he been whisked away to Fillory? No. But Quentin has entered a secret world so exclusive that even though geographically located in upstate New York, it is invisible to the uninitiated. After a rigorous, if somewhat peculiar, afternoon of tests and interviews, Quentin is offered admission to Brakebills, the only college of magic in North America.

At first, Brakebills’ hyper-exclusive education offers Quentin much of what he longed for: the camaraderie of like-minded misfits, challenging academic pursuits, and the confirmation that magic is very, very real. Along with his new friends—foppish and acerbic Eliot, competitive and thin-skinned Penny, and the preternaturally gifted Alice—Quentin studies the art of sorcery. But with power comes risks, and a practical joke gone awry invites “the beast,” a malicious entity from another world, into all their lives.

However, like students at more pedestrian institutions, Quentin finds that both the joys and fears he’s discovered at Brakebills have palled and he is again restless and dissatisfied. After graduation, Quentin joins a group of similarly jaded fellows in Manhattan, where he embraces a nihilistic bacchanalian lifestyle that threatens to destroy the one relationship he cherishes most.

Just as Quentin commits his worst act of betrayal, Penny appears with astonishing news: he’s been to Fillory and can take them all. Galvanized by Penny’s discovery, the coterie of young magicians mobilizes for adventure in the land of talking animals, nature spirits, and old gods. But while the landscape is just as fantastic as his worn paperbacks have described, the journey is more perilous and the hand that governs Fillory more malevolent than Quentin could ever have imagined.

Exploring universal issues of adolescent angst and alienation through a prism of magic, *The Magicians* is a brilliantly imagined fantasy adventure that is as mesmerizing as it is intelligent. Using the beloved novels of C. S. Lewis, T. H. White, and J. K. Rowling as a springboard, bestselling author Lev Grossman unspools a riveting coming-of-age tale in which magic is as fallible and mercurial as the humans that wield it.

ABOUT LEV GROSSMAN

Lev Grossman is a senior writer and the book critic for *Time* magazine and the author of the bestselling novel *Codex*. His writings have appeared in *Lingua Franca*, *The Village Voice*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Time Out New York*, *Salon*, and *The New York Times*. He holds degrees in comparative literature from Harvard and Yale. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.

A CONVERSATION WITH LEV GROSSMAN

Q. Your previous novel, *Codex*, is a thriller about a fourteenth-century manuscript and a sinister high-tech computer game. What is it that interests you about the intersection of contemporary life and fantasy?

I think I’ve always been interested in that intersection, even before I had any kind of proper vocabulary for talking about it. Which implies that I have one now, probably wrongly. But let me try to explain what interests me about fantasies and, really, stories in general. When we read books and watch television or movies, we’re seeing representations of people’s lives. And I always wondered, even as a little kid, why does my life, which superficially resembles a life in a story, feel so different from a life in a story? Lives in stories are exciting and vivid and meaningful. Real lives are chaotic and disorganized and frequently boring, and that feeling of meaningfulness comes and goes, out of your control. It’s hard to hang on to. Why doesn’t life feel more like a story? Like a fantasy? I don’t know. But now, at a time in history when we spend so much of our waking life being entertained by stories, I wonder that even more.

Q. Is *The Magicians* a critique of or an homage to our collective need for fantasy worlds?

Definitely not a critique. That sounds a bit scoldy. Especially coming from somebody with as active a fantasy life as mine. If it’s between critique and homage, I’ll go with homage. But I think the appropriate book-reviewing cliché would be that it’s “a meditation on” our collective need for fantasy worlds. I am in love with fantasy and fantasies of all kinds, I always have been, but it’s a bittersweet romance, because when you try to really consummate it—when you try to take the fantasy out of the realm of the imaginary, and really live it—very bad things can happen. As they do to poor Quentin.

Q. How do you think being the son of two English professors affected your relationship with literature?

Oh, in every possible way. My parents were a bit like those tennis parents who start drilling their kids on the court when they're about two, with the idea of creating some kind of inhumanly precocious tennis prodigy. Mine were very aggressive about exposing me to the finer sorts of books early on, with the idea of turning me—and my brother and sister—into teenage super-literati. Then my father made the mistake of reading me *The Hobbit*, and at a stroke all their careful work was undone. From then on I made a point of immersing myself in anything and everything that annoyed and disappointed them: fantasy, science fiction, comic books, video games. But the funny thing was, I learned from them a lot about how to read a book carefully and respectfully and critically. And I think I brought that critical scholarly approach to my reading. I just read all the wrong things.

Q. You have a degree in comparative literature from Harvard but dropped out before getting your Ph.D. from Yale. What made you decide not to become an academic yourself?

I can't even remember what made me decide I wanted to be one in the first place. Except that I was unemployed and wanted to read books and talk about them as much as possible. Which I did get to do, and I loved it. But I knew from watching my parents that the life of an academic was not a glamorous one. It is frequently an underpaid and inglorious one. Except for the superstars, and it quickly became apparent that I wasn't going to be one of those.

Q. What was your inspiration for *The Magicians*? Were you, like Quentin, the kind of "nerd" who's read and re-read *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Once and Future King* multiple times?

Is there any other kind of nerd? There were a lot of inspirations for *The Magicians*. Of course, I did all those things, and still do them. I suppose on one level I was trying to bring together the literary sensibilities of the Modernist writers I studied in graduate school, and the glorious escapism of the fantasy novels that I love, and mash them up together into one perfect book, where they would be forced to sit down and talk to each other. On another level I was going through a difficult time personally (divorce) and having a lot of fantasies about other, better worlds that I might possibly escape to. On still another level, it was 2004, and we were in the long two-year trough between *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* and *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, and I badly wanted something new to read. So badly that I decided to write something myself.

Q. How would you compare the C. S. Lewis and T. H. White books to those by J. K. Rowling and Philip Pullman?

Very broadly speaking—very very broadly—I think the shift from Lewis and White (and for that matter Tolkien) to writers like Rowling and Pullman has to do with the gradual separation of fantasy from religion, specifically from Christianity. In Lewis and White, most of your supernatural power comes from God. There may be magic in the picture—Digory's uncle Andrew is a magician, and of course there's the White Witch—but the mightiest power is a mystical, spiritual Christian force. In Pullman and Rowling magic is the only power we see. There is no divine force. In Pullman's universe magic comes from dust. Rowling's understanding of magic is more difficult to theorize, but it is evidently tied in closely with human emotions like love and hate, rather than any deity. God may or may not exist in Harry's world, but if he does he has withdrawn, and doesn't interfere directly. Magic is a secular power. One of the ambitions of *The Magicians* is to crash these two world-views, the secular and the divine fantasy, into each other with maximum force.

Q. Do you think today's young readers are very different from the first generation of readers to discover Narnia?

Probably? But I'd rather not speculate about how. My daughter is five, still too young for Narnia, but I plan to watch her closely as she starts to read fantasy. I've tried to explain about Harry Potter to her, but she keeps insisting she wants to be in Slytherin.

Q. *The Chronicles of Narnia* are superbly written but thinly veiled Christian parables. Did you intend to convey any similar lessons with *The Magicians*? Is Alice Aslan?

Well, I think it's a bit of a red herring to call the Narnia books Christian parables. They exemplify some Christian virtues, certainly. But they're pretty thickly veiled. And to me the veil is the most interesting part. As for *The Magicians*, it's not a parable of any kind. You could probably (I've never tried) divide novels into two camps, those that try to build up theories and lessons, and those that explore the way that life is often too messy and difficult and cruel to fit any theories or lessons. *The Magicians* is in the second camp. Now that I've said all that: there is a character in *The Magicians* who teaches Quentin a very hard lesson about self-sacrifice. But you'll notice that unlike Aslan, she hasn't quite mastered the trick of coming back to life afterwards.

Q. "Some of the student body went into public service. . . . A lot of people just traveled, or created magical artworks, or staged elaborate sorcerous war games. . . . Some students even chose to matriculate at a regular, non-magical university" (p. 184). What would you do if you had a degree from Brakebills?

I could see myself getting involved in environmental causes. I like the idea of using magic to save, for example, tree frogs. But I love the idea of a massive global sorcerous war game, too. I hope I would have time for both. Even if I were a wizard, I'd still be a huge nerd.

Q. You never reveal what Penny and Quentin's disciplines are. Why is that? What do you imagine they are?

Not quite true. Penny's being truthful when he says his discipline is interdimensional travel. It's downplayed in the novel, but it was really quite a feat on his part to get to the Neithers without a button. As for Quentin—I'll be honest, I like a novel to have a dangling thread or two in it. I always allow myself at least one. Quentin's discipline is my one for *The Magicians*.

Q. What are you working on now?

The sequel to *The Magicians*. I'm not done with Fillory yet, it's a big world. Or with Quentin. He was just getting interesting.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In many ways *The Magicians* depicts and amplifies the quintessential adolescent experience: depression, ennui, emotional carelessness. Would magic be a gift or a curse for the typical teenager?
2. Would Quentin ultimately have been happier if he had chosen not to attend Brakebills?
3. Which character best typifies your vision of what a true magician would be? Explain.
4. What does Quentin's encounter with Julia in the cemetery say about him?

5. During their time at Brakebills South, the aspiring magicians take the shape of a number of different animals. If it were a part of every human's general education to spend some time as a particular animal, what animal should that be and why?
6. After the Brakebillians discover that Martin Chatwin is the beast, Alice tells Quentin, "you actually still believe in magic. You do realize, right, that nobody else does?" (p. 179). How does his faith differentiate him from his friends?
7. What do you make of Emily Greenstreet's condemnation of magic, asserting "nobody can be touched by that much power without being corrupted?" (p. 399).
8. Jane Chatwin specifically chose Quentin for the task of vanquishing the beast, yet he isn't the one who winds up killing him. Why?
9. Quentin says, "The problem with growing up is that once you're grown up, people who aren't grown up aren't fun anymore." (p. 197). Has Quentin grown up at the end of the novel or is he, like Martin and Jane, frozen in a chronological netherland?
10. Quentin seems, at times, to be a more potent magician than most of the Brakebills crew, skipping ahead a year in his studies and successfully making the journey to the South Pole. But his cacodemon is puny and he himself absolutely crumples once in Fillory. How powerful is he, really?
11. Janet is neither "the most assiduous student . . . nor the most naturally gifted" (p. 121). She's also a troublemaker and a bit of a coward but it is Janet—and not Alice—who will return to be a queen in Fillory. What does her survival say?
12. Have you reread any of your favorite childhood novels as an adult? How did your understanding of the book change?

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BIOGRAPHY

I was born in 1969, the son of two English professors, and grew up in Lexington, MA, a suburb of Boston where the first battle of the American Revolution was fought and absolutely nothing has happened since. I graduated from college in 1991 with a degree in literature and spent several aimless years wandering around reading and temping and trying and failing to learn various foreign languages while my cleverer classmates accumulated money and houses and such. Then I spent three years in a Ph.D.



program in comparative literature before I realized that it was totally not working out, and that a career in comparing literatures was not going to happen for me.

So I moved to New York City and, being totally unqualified for anything else, I did Web production work for five years. On the side I was writing magazine articles, mostly about books and technology. In 2002 I was hired by *Time* magazine to write about books and technology full-time. The *New York Times* very nicely said that I'm "among this country's smartest and most reliable critics." I've also written for *Salon*, *The Village Voice*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Wired*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *The Believer*, *Lingua Franca*, the *New York Times*, and a lot of other places. Once in a while I even show up on NPR.

I published my first novel, *Warp*, in 1997; my second, *Codex*, came out in 2004 and became an international bestseller. My third novel, *The Magicians*, was published in 2009 and became a *New York Times* bestseller. The *New Yorker* named it one of the best books of 2009. The sequel, *The Magician King*, which came out in 2011, was a *Times* bestseller as well. In August of 2011 I won the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer.

I live in Brooklyn with my wife and two daughters, in a creaky old house.

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Lev Grossman interview – June 2009

Posted on June 10, 2009 by Leo

LEV GROSSMAN, THE SON OF TWO ENGLISH PROFESSORS, GREW UP IN A SUBURB OF BOSTON. HE GRADUATED FROM HARVARD WITH A DEGREE IN LITERATURE AND WENT ON TO THE PH.D. PROGRAM IN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AT YALE. HE WORKED FOR A STRING OF DOT-COMS WHILE WRITING FREELANCE ARTICLES ABOUT BOOKS, TECHNOLOGY AND CULTURE IN GENERAL FOR NUMEROUS MAGAZINES, NEWSPAPERS AND WEBSITES UNTIL HE WAS HIRED BY TIME IN 2002. HIS FIRST FANTASY NOVEL, THE MAGICIANS, WAS PUBLISHED ON MAY 21, 2009 AND LEV KINDLY SPOKE TO FANTASY BOOK REVIEW THE FOLLOWING MONTH.



***The Magicians* has been available online and through bookstores for a few weeks now. What has the reception been like from readers and critics?**

So far so good. You think of the publication of a novel as an instantaneous event, whereas in fact it is an excruciatingly prolonged, gradual process. Like one of those super-slo-mo videos of a balloon popping that reveal it to be, on a micro-level, a long, drawn-out catastrophe.

Fortunately the reception so far has been very very positive. I think the mainstream press in the UK aren't quite sure whether this is a fantasy novel – and hence to them radioactive and virtually unreviewable – or a literary novel, so fair game. But I understand they're coming around. The Guardian, at any rate. And the f/sf press have been amazing – there's a great review coming out in SFX.

The book won't be published in the U.S. until August — it was delayed here, long boring story — but there have been trade reviews and reviews on blogs and sites like Goodreads.com, and they've mostly been very very good. Really gratifying. Only a few complaints, and those were that it was too much like Harry Potter, which is a complaint I'll take any day.

Many readers will believe that your fictional world of Fillory is based on CS Lewis's Narnia. Was this intentional?

Of course! Very much so. Though "based on" ... not exactly the words I would use. I think there's a level on which *The Magicians* is reacting to C.S. Lewis's work, honoring it but also critiquing it — like Pullman did in the *His Dark Materials* trilogy.

Fantasy novels share so much DNA with each other anyway, because the convention of the genre are so firmly established, that you're almost always reworking an idea somebody worked before you. As C.S. Lewis well knew — he was an incorrigible borrower. No one remembers it now, but you couldn't be a fantasy fan then and read *The Magicians Nephew* and not think, oh, right, this is all based on William Morris's *The Wood Beyond the World* ...

Those who read the Narnia books as youngsters find them magical and charming. Those who return to them as adults, hoping for the same nostalgia-fuelled experience often find aspects of racism, misogyny and religion that they missed first time around. Passages in *The Magicians* have Quentin taking issue with the Fillory books, finding holes in the narrative, and realising that the magic had dimmed. Are these experiences in anyway related and did you read the Narnia books as a child, then as an adult, and have similar feelings?

Like a lot of readers, I went through three well-defined phases with Narnia. Childlike Wonder, when I was around 8. Oedipal Rage, when I was in my 20's, and thought Aslan was a heartless irresponsible god who is always off playing peek-a-boo with Lucy when he should be saving his worshippers. And now — in my late 30s, after huge tranches of therapy — I've arrived at something in between. I realize my differences with Lewis and Narnia are never going away. But they don't eclipse my love of the books, and my ongoing amazement at how great they are. I think Quentin's still stuck in phase 2.

How important was the time that you spent at Harvard and Yale in creating a realistic and accurate Brakebills academy (a school that housed only the most gifted)?

You know, I didn't think about this until I was several drafts into *The Magicians*. But of course, obviously, the Brakebills parts are connected to the experience of going to Harvard, both of them being hyper-exclusive educational institutions. (Though there's no way I would have gotten into Brakebills.) When I was in high school, lacking any other sources of self-esteem, I was completely mental about getting into a good college. Which I finally did, and of course it wasn't everything I hoped for when I finally got there. I think Brakebills isn't based so much on what Harvard was like as what I dreamed it was going to be like before I actually went there. Even now, that's a very vivid dream to me.

The Beast is a nightmare character that enters the story and destroys the docile life that the students are enjoying. A branch, hovering in front of its face, keeps its identity hidden. Is there any special significance in the use of a branch? It is certainly a unique disguise, most fantasy authors are happy to settle for a hooded robe.

The origins of the Beast are quite obscure to me. He was the very first of the novel's characters to arrive — he showed up in 1996, about 8 years before anybody else — and he stays almost to the end. The branch ... it is odd, isn't it? At the time I worried that it was too much like that Magritte painting. You know, the one of the man with the apple in front of his face. But once the image of this face obscured by a leafy branch arrived, it refused to leave. Like a bad house guest.

Sexual tension is a constant throughout *The Magicians* and anybody who is, or has been a teenager will fully identify with the feelings, thoughts and behaviour of the characters. How did you manage to recreate this period in both boys and girls life so accurately?

Because I never left it? I'm 39, and I hope to any day now. In all seriousness, middle age is turning out to be very disappointingly like adolescence in that respect.

I will just add that one of the things I loved about Pullman's books is that he didn't shy away from sex, and he has no patience with Lewis's kind of fetishization of childhood innocence. When you hit puberty you don't lose your powers — like Susan does in *The Last Battle* — you're just starting to get them. Except when you get them, they're too much — they're amazing, and incredible, but they're also crazy and out of control and damaging.

Fantasy Film time! Hollywood wants to make your book into a film and says that you can pick any actors you wish to play the roles of Quentin, Eliot and Alice. Who would you pick, bearing in mind that money and availability is no object?

Can time and space be no object too? This is one of my favorite games, but I'm so not up on the current crop of teen actors, which is what you'd really need, so I'm going to draw freely from other filmic periods.

For Quentin, I'm thinking a mid-1990's Peter Sarsgaard. Or maybe Giovanni Ribisi. Or Edward Norton. You know, one of those actors who can project a really active intelligence, and isn't too pretty.

For Eliot you'd need somebody rather tall and pretty, then give him some prosthetic make-up to rough him up. And you'd need somebody who can play haughty and really mean it. Early Jeremy Irons? Or Rupert Everett? John Malkovich? Or wait, got it! *Withnail*-era Richard E. Grant.

And for Alice, no question: *Ghost World*-era Thora Birch.

If pushed, what would you say is the best fantasy book you have ever read?

What a hideous question. Honest answer? T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*.

Have you ever read an author and thought – “One day I want to be able to write as well as that”? If so, who was it?

Are you kidding? That happens to me every day. Most often with Jonathan Franzen. Except I know that day will never come.

What does the remainder of 2009 hold for Lev Grossman and will there be a sequel to *The Magicians*?

The remainder of 2009 looks a lot like the part of 2009 that already happened. Except: I'll be going to every con I can get invited to, and I'll be touring, giving readings and talks and such, in August and September. After that the remainder of 2009 holds writing the sequel to *The Magicians*.

For more information on Lev Grossman and his work, visit <http://levgrossman.com/>. You can also follow Lev on Twitter <http://twitter.com/levorus>.

[Lev Grossman biography](#)

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THE MAGICIANS

Quentin Coldwater is brilliant but miserable. He's a senior in high school, and a certifiable genius, but he's still secretly obsessed with a series of fantasy novels he read as a kid, about the adventures of five children in a magical land called Fillory. Compared to that, anything in his real life just seems gray and colorless.



Everything changes when Quentin finds himself unexpectedly admitted to a very secret, very exclusive college of magic in upstate New York, where he receives a thorough and rigorous education in the practice of modern sorcery. He also discovers all the other things people learn in college: friendship, love, sex, booze, and boredom. But something is still missing. Magic doesn't bring Quentin the happiness and adventure he thought it would.

Then after graduation he and his friends make a stunning discovery: Fillory is real.

The Magicians was a *New York Times* bestseller in both hardcover and paperback. It has now been published in 22 countries, and screen rights have been optioned by Fox. You can order it at any of these online bookstores:

- [Amazon](#)
- [Barnes & Noble](#)
- [Borders](#)
- [IndieBound](#)
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You can buy official *Magicians* t-shirts and other merchandise [here](#).

PRAISE FOR *THE MAGICIANS* FROM CRITICS:

"Exuberant and inventive ... Fresh and compelling ... *The Magicians* is a great fairy tale."

—*The Washington Post*

"Lev Grossman's novel *The Magicians* may just be the most subversive, gripping and enchanting fantasy novel I've read this century."

—Cory Doctorow, *Boing Boing*

"This is my ideal escapist fantasy read, a Harry Potter book for grown-ups ... I can't imagine any lover of well-written classic fantasy, from C. S. Lewis's Narnia books to the works of Diana Wynne Jones, who won't absolutely adore it."

—Lisa Tuttle, *The London Times*

"*The Magicians* is the best urban fantasy in years."

—*The Onion AV Club*

"This gripping novel draws on the conventions of contemporary and classic fantasy novels in order to upend them, and tell a darkly cunning story about the power of imagination itself ... An unexpectedly moving coming-of-age story."

—*The New Yorker*

"Funny, suspenseful and sad, *The Magicians* ranks as one of the year's best fantasy novels."

—*The San Francisco Chronicle*

"Upon reading *The Magicians*, the first thing you want to do is shake Grossman's hand and congratulate him for his courage ... *The Magicians* blooms with grace and wit and imaginative brio. Grossman has a sense of humor as well as a sense of wonder."

—*The Chicago Tribune*

"*The Magicians* is Harry Potter as it might have been written by John Crowley... This is one of the best fantasies I've read in ages."

—Elizabeth Hand, *Fantasy & Science Fiction*

"*The Magicians* by Lev Grossman is a very entertaining book; one of those summer page-turners that you wish went on for another six volumes ... Grossman is at the height of his powers."

—*The Chicago Sun-Times*

"Long ago, while in high school, I read two coming-of-age novels that stayed with me for the rest of my life ... I'd not found another voice so rich in describing the adventure and confusion that is growing up in America until now. *THE MAGICIANS*, like those earlier books, tells that same journey; only its route is one of magic and fantasy."

—Ron Fortier, *The Denver Times*

"Sly and lyrical ... *The Magicians* is an homage to both J.K. Rowling and C.S. Lewis, as well as an exploration of what might happen if troubled kids were let loose in the supernatural realms they grew up reading about. Grossman captures the magic of childhood and the sobering years beyond."

—Jeff Giles, *Entertainment Weekly*

"*The Magicians* is a triumph. It's the real deal, guaranteed."

—Michelle Kerns, *The Examiner*

"*The Magicians* is angst-ridden, bleak, occasionally joyous and gloriously readable. Forget Hogwarts: this is where the magic really is."

—Jayne Nelson, *SFX*, 5 star review.

"I felt like I was doing peyote buttons with J.K. Rowling."

—Mickey Rapkin, *GQ*

"For readers who have long since finished their seven years at Hogwarts, *The Magicians* is where higher education starts."

—The *Miami Herald*

PRAISE FOR *THE MAGICIANS* FROM OTHER AUTHORS:

"These days any novel about young sorcerers at wizard school inevitably invites comparison to Harry Potter. Lev Grossman meets the challenge head on... and very successfully. *The Magicians* is to Harry Potter as a shot of Irish whiskey is to a glass of weak tea. Solidly rooted in the traditions of both fantasy and mainstream literary fiction, the novel tips its hat to Oz and Narnia as well to Harry, but don't mistake this for a children's book. Grossman's sensibilities are thoroughly adult, his

narrative dark and dangerous and full of twists. Hogwarts was never like this."

—George R. R. Martin, author of the *A Song of Ice and Fire* series

"Stirring, complex, adventurous ... from the life of Quentin Coldwater, his slacker Park Slope Harry Potter, Lev Grossman delivers superb coming of age fantasy."

—Junot Diaz, author of *Drown* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

"*The Magicians* ought to be required reading for anyone who has ever fallen in love with a fantasy series, or wished they went to a school for wizards."

—Kelly Link, author of *Magic for Beginners* and *Stranger Things Happen*

"Remember the last time you ran home to finish a book? This is it, folks. *The Magicians* is the most dazzling, erudite and thoughtful fantasy novel to date. You'll be bedazzled by the magic but also brought short by what it has to say about the world we live in."

—Gary Shteyngart, author of *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* and *Absurdistan*

"Grossman explores the boundaries between fiction and reality with great imagination ... This is a dark, well-written book that takes the wizard genre into thoughtful places."

—Audrey Niffenegger, author of the *The Time Traveler's Wife* and *Her Fearful Symmetry*

"*The Magicians* brilliantly explores the hidden underbelly of fantasy and easy magic, taking what's simple on the surface and turning it over to show us the complicated writhing mess beneath. It's like seeing the worlds of Narnia and Harry Potter through a 3-D magnifying glass."

—Naomi Novik, author of the *Temeraire* series

"Absolutely wonderful. Honestly. Do yerself a favour."

—Eoin Colfer, author of the *Artemis Fowl* series

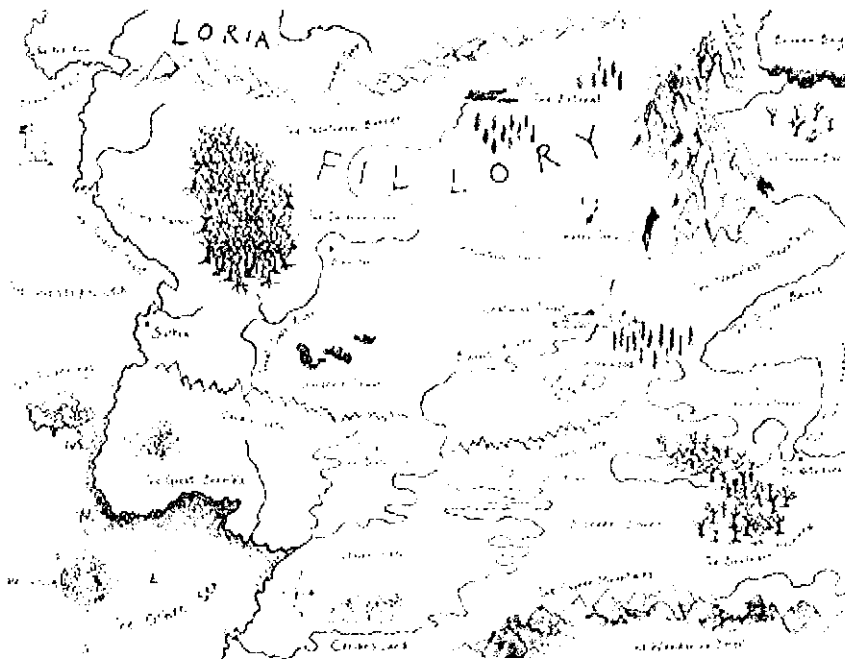
"*The Magicians* is a spellbinding, fast-moving, dark fantasy book for grownups that feels like an instant classic. I read it in a niffin-blue blaze of page turning, enthralled by Grossman's verbal and imaginative wizardry, his complex characters and most of all, his superb, brilliant inquiry into the wondrous, dangerous world of magic."

—Kate Christensen, author of *The Epicure's Lament* and *The Great Man*

"Anyone who grew up reading about magical wardrobes and unicorns and talking trees before graduating to *Less Than Zero* and *The Secret History* and *Bright Lights, Big City* will immediately feel right at home with this smart, beautifully written book by Lev Grossman. *The Magicians* is fantastic, in all senses of the word. It's strange, fanciful, extravagant, eccentric, and truly remarkable—a great story, masterfully told."

—Scott Smith, author of *A Simple Plan* and *The Ruins*

The artist Roland Chambers has prepared this map of Fillory, showing the country's major landmarks:



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A teen-turned-king finds his way in dark fantasy world

August 09, 2011|By Anthony Domestico, Globe Correspondent.

THE MAGICIAN KING: A Novel By Lev Grossman Viking, \$26.95, 416 pp.

Lexington native Lev Grossman serves as the book critic for Time magazine, so it seemed fitting that his 2009 bestseller, “The Magicians,” was as much a work of literary criticism as it was a novel. In it, Grossman reimagined two of the most popular fantasy series of all time, J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter books and C.S. Lewis’s “The Chronicles of Narnia,” in a darker key. He replaced Hogwarts with Brakebills, a magical college where students drink, curse, and sleep around. Instead of Narnia, he gave us Fillory, an otherworldly kingdom terrorized by the Beast, a magician who, when a young, earthly boy, was the victim of sexual molestation. Grossman delighted in pointing out the realms of experience ignored by traditional fantasy, and his irony appeared at times to border on hostility.

At the center of “The Magicians” was Quentin Coldwater, a mopey teenager from Brooklyn, N.Y., who one day discovered that all the things he had read about in his beloved fantasy novels were real. Grossman’s new book picks up two years after “The Magicians” left off. When “The Magician King” opens, Quentin has apparently achieved his dream, reigning alongside three of his friends as kings and queens of Fillory. With the Beast defeated, though, there isn’t much for a king to do, and Quentin soon becomes bored, unhappily enveloped in “the heavy warm lard of palace life.”

Luckily for Quentin and for us, things don’t stay boring for long. The Neitherlands, the portal that enables travel between worlds, begins to fall apart, and a force soon emerges that threatens to drain the world of magic and wipe Fillory out of existence. In order to prevent this, Quentin and Julia, his one-time crush from Brooklyn and now queen of Fillory, must find the mysterious seven keys that wind up the world. Things become even more complicated when the pair is unexpectedly transported to Chesterton, Mass., the epitome of anodyne, unmagical suburbia (probably inspired by Grossman’s hometown, which he has described as “a suburb of Boston where the first battle of the American Revolution was fought and absolutely nothing has happened since.”).

“The Magicians” is full of casual sex, excessive alcohol, and hip dialogue, as if Grossman is trying to persuade readers that fantasy can be edgy. “The Magician King” is a more assured creation. In this sequel, there are still allusions to other works of fantasy, from Lewis’s “The Voyage of the Dawn Treader” to “Doctor Who” to “Highlander,” but these seem to be less satirical jabs than a fanboy’s acknowledgment of his precursors. Grossman is now content to tell his own story. In one particularly inventive scene, Quentin journeys to Fillory’s underworld to find that it resembles a recreation center, where shades listlessly play badminton and other dreaded games from high school gym class. Grossman mines the scene for both humor and pathos.

At one point, a character warns Quentin against passing outside of Fillory, saying, “You’re not king of any of that. Out there you’re just Quentin. Are you sure that’s going to be enough?” This novel is largely about learning limits. Quentin must come to the realization that, as the Aslan-like

ram god Ember tells him, the hero is not the one who “gets the reward,” but rather the one who “pays the price.” This is an idea familiar to anyone who has read “The Lord of the Rings” or “Harry Potter,” and it is a sign of Grossman’s growing strength as a novelist that he is willing to invoke in his revisionary work this most traditional lesson. “The Magician King” is a rare achievement, a book that simultaneously criticizes and celebrates our deep desire for fantasy.

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http://articles.boston.com/2011-08-09/ae/29868692_1_traditional-fantasy-lev-grossman-quentin-coldwater Accessed 05/24/2012

TUESDAY, AUGUST 9, 2011

Writing The Magician King

some involved calculations I concluded that I was going to have to re-engineer my creative process to run approximately 2.5X faster.

For no good reason, I believed that I could do this. One always begins a new novel believing that this time, *this time*, it will be different. One will write an outline and one will stick to it, and one will get everything right the first time, and it will all fall into place, and it won't hurt a bit.

All abrim with dewy naiveté, I started by setting up two bins. (Metaphorical bins. They were really Word documents.)

One bin had to do with mood. I threw into it everything that *felt* the way I wanted *The Magician King to feel*. It didn't matter if it all fit together, I just threw it in. I'd connect the dots later.

So in went: *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. *The Big Sleep*, by Raymond Chandler. *Ronin*. *The Bourne Identity*. *Cryptonomicon*. *Ubik*. *Fafhrd and/or the Grey Mouser*. Neil Gaiman's run on *Miracleman*. The Polanski movie *Frantic*. Beckett's *Endgame*. *Watership Down*. *Total Recall*. *Dangerous Liaisons*. *The Corrections*. Joe Abercrombie. Iain Banks. *The Venture Brothers*. Daniel Suarez's *Daemon*. Bits from Enid Blyton's *The Magic Faraway Tree*. Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*. *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed*. (Look, it's my bin, I can put what I want in it.)

It didn't matter if I could explain it, even to myself. If it felt right, it went in the bin. When you're starting a novel, it's not a good time to second-guess yourself.

The second bin had to do with the book's actual plot. There were certain sorts of things that I wanted to have happen in the new book, certain scenes I knew I wanted to write. For example, I wanted to do a descent to the underworld à la Homer's *Odyssey*. I wanted swordfighting – there was no swordfighting in *The Magicians*, and how can I call myself a fantasy writer if I haven't written a damn swordfight? I wanted a mystery. I wanted a magical boat. I wanted a dragon – I'd had to cut a dragon out of *The Magicians*, and you can't have a homeless dragon wandering around your subconscious at loose ends, setting things on fire. I wanted a talking sloth and a genius mapmaker. I wanted seven keys. I wanted a little girl who draws, and I wanted a sexy Customs Agent, and I wanted a tropical island. I wanted heartless, wordless silver gods. I wanted the End of the World.

I can't tell you why I wanted these particular things, but when you're in a certain phase of novel-making, you're like a magpie: when something gleams at you funny, you swoop down and grab it and take it back to your nest, because you know, you just know, you're going to need it later.

There were also some characters I wanted to bring back from *The Magicians*, like Julia, Quentin's friend from high school. She went in the bin too.

Once the bins were full, I had a pretty good idea of the kinds of feelings I wanted the book to create in its readers (Bin #1). The trick was to use the stuff in Bin #2 to build a machine that would make people feel the feeling in Bin #1. The machine would be the novel.

Of course a novel isn't a machine. A novel is a story. All this business with bins was a funny, backward way of figuring out how to tell the story I wanted to tell, which I knew a lot about but couldn't quite write yet. I knew it was a quest story, something like a hero's journey, but I knew I didn't want to tell it the way it's usually told. I wanted to make it feel somehow more like the way our lives -- real lives, modern lives -- feel. In your classic quest story, if you're brave enough and pure of heart enough and clever enough and kill enough monsters, you generally end up with what you were looking for. In my experience, anyway, life isn't like that at all. Often you don't understand what you're looking for till long after you've found it, and being brave and good and handy with a sword aren't always enough in the end to guarantee a good outcome. Sometimes they have nothing to do with the outcome.

But how do you make that into a story – one that's exciting and wonderful the way quest stories are supposed to be, but that's also true to the way life feels? I knew that story could be told, because I knew what it felt like. It felt like Bin #1. The actual details came out of Bin #2.

The way I thought about it – and I apologize for the arcane quality of this analogy but bear with me – was like that puzzle Indiana Jones has to beat in the third movie, *Last Crusade*, when he's trying to get to the Holy Grail, and he has to cross the invisible bridge, and he throws a bunch of a sand across it so he can see where bridge is. All that

Books by Lev Grossman

Warp, New York: St. Martin's Griffin/Macmillan, 1997.

Codex, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004.

The Magicians, New York: Viking/Penguin, 2009.

The Magician King, New York: Viking/Penguin, published August 10, 2011.

Sequel to *The Magicians*

The Magician King by Lev Grossman

Read-Alikes

Little, Big by John Crowley

Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell: A Novel by Susanna Clarke

Background Reads

Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling

Chronicles of Narnia series by C.S. Lewis

Additional Resources

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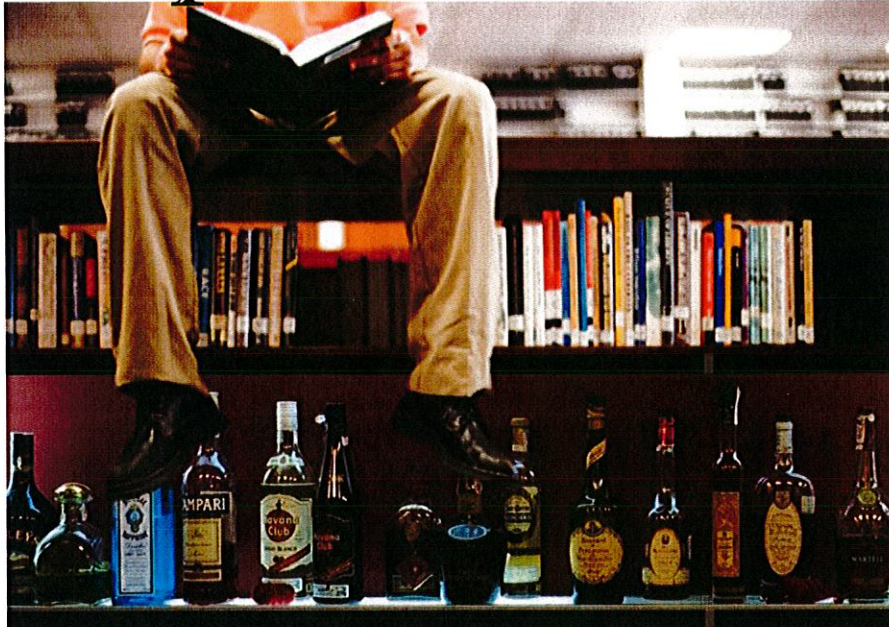
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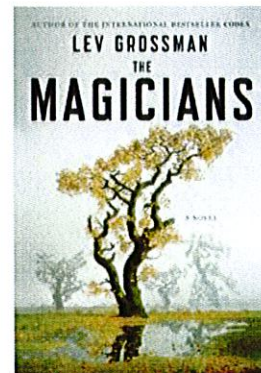
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