

Research Questions

To what extent are the forests in fantasy fiction accurate depictions of forest ecology?

How might imaginary forests in fantasy fiction alter people's perception of real forests?

How might fantasy fiction intellectually, emotionally, and ethically engage people in real forests?

What might the practical implications in forest management and public engagement be of this research?

William Morris (1834-1896)

... and the sun's rays fell aslant through the boughs of the noble oaks, and the scent of the grass and bracken trodden by the horse-hoofs of that company went up into the warm summer air. A while he sat musing but awake, though the faint sound of a little stream in the dale below mingled with all the lesser noises of the forest did its best to soothe him to sleep again.

The Well at the World's End (1896)

J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973)

Many green trees grew there, planted long ago, falling into untended age amid a riot of careless descendants; and groves and thickets there were of tamarisk and pungent terebinth, of olive and of bay; and there were junipers and myrtles; and thymes that grew in bushes, or with their woody creeping stems mantled in deep tapestries the hidden stones; sages of many kinds putting forth blue flowers, or red, or pale green; and marjorams and new-sprouting parsleys, and many herbs of forms and scents beyond the garden-lore of Sam. The grotts and rocky walls were already starred with saxifrages and stonecrops. Primeroles and anemones were awake in the filbert-brakes; and asphodel and many lily-flowers nodded their half-opened heads in the grass; deep green grass beside the pools, where falling streams halted in cool hollows on their journey down to Anduin.

The Two Towers (1954)

Ursula K. Le Guin (1929-2018)

'... A single cell is capable of mechanical response to stimulus. No more. Are you hypothesizing that individual arboriformes are "cells" in a kind of brain, Mannon?'

'Not exactly. I'm merely pointing out that they are all interconnected, both by the root-node linkage and by your green epiphytes in the branches. A linkage of incredible complexity and physical extent. Why, even the prairie grass-forms have those root-connectors, don't they? I know that sentience or intelligence isn't a thing, you can't find it in, or analyze it out from, the cells of a brain. It's a function of the connected cells. It is, in a sense, the connection: the connectedness...'

'Vaster than Empires and More Slow' (1971)



1. Escape

- Forests are often conceived in the cultural imagination as places disconnected from human society to which one might **'escape'**. Likewise, fantasy is pejoratively described as **the 'literature of escapism'**.
- Far from escaping or compensating for the social and political complexities of the 'real world', fantasy helps dispel the **fantasises of anthropocentrism** so that we may face the ecological realities of **deforestation**.
- The fantastic mode shifts our attention towards the more-than-human and enables readers to **envision alternative ways of understanding, perceiving, and living with forests**.



2. Estrangement

- I will explore the way fantasy fiction represents, reveals, or even anticipates the **strange realities** of forest ecology.
- The fantastic mode relies on a symbiotic relationship between the real and unreal at the creative junction between the **scientific and fantastic imagination**.
- The naturalistic detail in which fantasy forests are described invites a greater attentiveness to real forests, while defamiliarising or **estranging** readers from normative ways of perceiving forests.

4. Sentience

- Fantasy fiction offers a corrective to anthropocentric ways of seeing forests and especially trees as resource or aesthetic objects. In the fantastic mode, they become **intelligent, agential, and actively entwined within our lives**.
- Far from being a blur of greens and browns to the backdrop to narrative and character development, **forests become characters** in their own right with their own stories and voices to speak with.
- Fantasy fiction may solicit our attention to forms of **nonhuman ontology** in order to cultivate a more ethical relationship with forests.



3. Enchantment

- Fantasy fiction models powerful psychological experiences of **awe, wonder, and enchantment** in forests.
- I will explore the **ethics of enchantment**, asking how these experiences might shape the way readers perceive and interact with forests.
- I will also investigate the relationship these states of enchantment to a more secular, rationalist perspective of forests in order to explore the ways in which they might **contradict, coexist, or overlap**.



5. Engagement

- The literary critical hypotheses around the efficacy of fantasy fiction to engage readers in forests discussed in sections 1-4 will be tested in this final section which utilises an **'empirical ecocritical'** methodology. This involves conducting qualitative research in Ruskin Land (see below).
- I will invite participants (a mix of urban fantasy readers and local forest naturalists) to join me in a series of **'reading walks'** in the forest where extracts will be read aloud in situ. I will then gather participants into the Dragon's Nest (see photo bottom-right) and conduct **focus groups** where participants will be encouraged to discuss their experiences on the reading walks.
- Both will be filmed and turned into a short **documentary film** which I can then show to various stakeholders in order to discuss the wider implications of this research in engaging the public in forests.

Ruskin Land

Ruskin Land is an area of the Wyre Forest in Worcestershire cared for by the Guild of St George set up in the 1870s by the Victorian social and environmental critic and William Morris's mentor, John Ruskin, whose aims were 'to take some small piece of English Land, beautiful, peaceful and fruitful', in order to provide opportunities for working people to cultivate land and reconnect with nature.

Today the Guild manages the land in collaboration with the Wyre Forest Community Land Trust, which reinterprets incorporates Ruskin's ideas to create a people-focused, biodiverse, and economically viable forest for the 21st C.

