

Worlds So Wide

How DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® Taught Me to Use the Library

by Peter Bebergal

When I was 11, my favorite escape was fiction. The kind of books I liked—*The Hobbit*, *The Martian Chronicles*, and *Animal Farm*—sharpened my appetite for imaginative adventure. Some of my best friends were also readers, but we really didn't discuss novels—that would have been too geeky. Then, magically, DUNGEONS & DRAGONS® entered our lives.

It was the late 70s, a time of split-level houses and wood paneling, when a finished basement den was the preferred teen hangout. This was still the preelectronic era; incredibly, all we needed to have fun were a few books--a *Dungeon Master's Guide*, *Player's Handbook*, and a *Monster Manual*—a set of dice, and graph paper borrowed from my father's office. Light homemade props helped the realism. A torn paper bag stood in for a magic parchment. A piece of my mother's costume jewelry was a queen's ransom.

For weeks before we met, I would map out dungeons with dimly-lit rooms and fiendish traps. I imagined a whole world for the players to inhabit, populated by ancient dragons and armies of orcs preparing for battle. My friends were busy too, dreaming up personal histories for such characters as "Gordrund the Great," and "Mightor the Monk."

A typical game was full of surprises, as I slowly revealed the world I had forged. Depending on how the dice landed, a door might trigger poison darts—or not. Either way, the party was bound to wake the giant spider waiting in the ceiling above. Gotcha!

As our individual temperaments and interests enlivened the games, our friendships deepened. We knew more about each other because we had played out so many dramatic situations in the game. As in life, certain characters (and

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players)—were steadfast and true; others weren't so reliable.

Lore in the Library

One thing for sure: the more we read, the better our games were. Our questions about history, architecture, warfare, and language sent us racing to the stacks, eager for answers. When our party needed to cross a river, books about shipbuilding taught us how we could construct a sail. Books on architecture helped us envision a castle turret up close. Sadly, we discovered medieval taverns rarely had indoor bathrooms. We found that D&D owed a lot to real history, folklore, and literature. It was a small revelation to discover that myths in the game are drawn from collections of world mythology. A great DUNGEONS & DRAGONS game is enriched by each player's knowledge. For example, a player interested in the history of warfare might understand the exact way a knight on horseback would have held a lance. A lover of the outdoors might know something about poisonous plants, which could come in handy when playing a druid. Many teens, however, discover it is the game that exposes them to things they may not have thought about much before playing. A regular DUNGEONS & DRAGONS game in the library can be just a safe place to hang out after school. Players can have a good time simply wandering around a dungeon, fighting monsters, disabling traps, and finding treasure. As a librarian, you can offer more than a big round table. Even a simple game of D&D can draw out the bookworm in the most reluctant reader.

Playing Outside the Box

The basic boxed set provided in this kit is really all you need to play. But the thrill of D&D is thinking and playing outside the box. The most basic elements of any D&D game are drawn from history, literature, mythology, and architecture. Before and after a game, players will likely find themselves hungry to know more about something they may have encountered during a campaign. Below are various aspects of the game and some ways librarians might show players the real world antecedents of these elements. I've also suggested books players may find

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interesting. These lists are by no means exhaustive, but simply offer examples of books readily available in a library.

EXPLORING

Lots of D&D players take it for granted that dungeons appear to be self-sustaining locations, filled with traps and treasures. But a dungeon must have some context. Is the dungeon being explored the subterranean catacombs of a castle? Or is the castle itself the dungeon, long ago overrun by orcs and goblins and left to rot and crumble? Maybe the dungeon is the temple of an ancient religious order, or a monastery that once housed the cult of a strange god. Giving a dungeon a little more context will not only make game play more interesting, but it can offer the players a chance to step outside the game to learn something more about the construction of castles, the development of cities, the architecture of cathedrals.

Even outside of dungeon exploring, the opportunity for enriching game play and nurturing natural curiosity is easy. If a group of players need to cross a body of water, it's one thing to make sure they have enough gold pieces to buy a boat or other seafaring vessel. It's another to talk a little about what really goes into building a ship.

Also, a game can be a place where kids share their own knowledge. In the case of a sea adventure, for example, a particular player might have experience sailing. His or her character may not know how to sail, but the player can still relate what he or she knows.

D&D is also a game of maps; of dungeons, forests, cities, and even whole provinces and continents. Geography is a subject many find dry, but in the game, principles of mapmaking, as well as the history of longitude and latitude are things players might want to know more about.

Suggested books:

A Viking Voyage

In Which an Unlikely Crew of Adventurers Attempts an Epic Journey to the New

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World

by W. Hodding Carter

Ballantine | TR | 978-0-345-42004-6 | 320 pp. | \$14.00/\$21.00 Can.

Norman Stone Castles (1)

The British Isles 1066-1216

by Christopher Gravett

Illustrated by Adam Hook

Osprey | TR | 978-1-84176-602-7 | 64 pp. | \$16.95/\$23.95 Can.

Finding Atlantis

A True Story of Genius, Madness, and an Extraordinary Quest for a Lost World

by David King

Three Rivers Press | TR | 978-1-4000-4753-6 | 320 pp. | \$13.95/\$18.95 Can.

Beyond the Edge of the Sea

Sailing with Jason and the Argonauts, Ulysses, the Vikings, and Other Explorers
of the Ancient World

by Mauricio Obregon

Modern Library | TR | 978-0-679-78344-2 | 144 pp. | \$11.95/\$17.95 Can.

Seaworthy

Adrift with William Willis in the Golden Age of Rafting

by T. R. Pearson

Crown | HC | 978-0-307-33594-4 | 304 pp. | \$24.95/\$32.95 Can.

MONSTERS

The creatures and races that players will meet have their basis in not only fantasy literature, but in mythology and legend from a great variety of cultures. An adventure can be an opportunity to tell the stories where these fantastic denizens were originally found. For example, an encounter with a centaur can present a

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moment to step outside the game and do some storytelling and discussion about Greek mythology. If no one knows the story of the centaur, a book is readily available in the stacks or reference area. Once the original context of the centaur is discovered, many players will be excited to learn about the related stories and in turn encounter the whole spectrum of Greek myths.

Even the obscure creatures have their beginnings in myth and folktale. The often encountered kobold has its origins in German folklore and were believed to live in caverns or hiding in people's homes. Troglydites are actually believed to be ancient or prehistoric people that lived in caves. That these creatures have been given fantastic characteristics for the purposes of the game does not mean that their original context needs to be disregarded. In fact, the game itself might be the first time the player hears about such a creature. To be able to use the resources of the library to further educate and illuminate is a wonderful opportunity.

Shadowing almost every part of the game are the myth and stories of real traditions. When an adventurer enters the lair of a dragon, what kind of dragon is it? Is it a dragon from western stories or eastern fables? What is the difference between a Chinese dragon and the dragon of Beowulf? Steer players towards the books that can draw attention to the richness of these creatures. Turn a generic session of D&D into a seminar on mythology.

Suggested books:

Bulfinch's Mythology

by Thomas Bulfinch

Foreword by Alberto Manguel

Modern Library | TR | 978-0-375-75147-9 | 888 pp. | **\$17.95/\$25.95 Can.**

Also:

Gramercy | HC | 978-0-517-27415-6 | 1040 pp. | **\$14.99/\$21.98 Can.**

Faeries

by Brian Froud

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Edited by David Larkin

Illustrated by Alan Lee

Bantam | TR | 978-0-553-34634-3 | 192 pp. | **\$22.00**/\$30.00 Can.

CHARACTERS

Fighters:

Often imagined as knights or rangers, the fighter character is generally the most common choice for new players, largely due to their recognizable traits: armor, swords, etc. The history of feudalism and the crusades are the cornerstones for these classes. The art of heraldry and the chivalry codes can help players to more fully imagine their own characters while teaching them something about early European history.

Clerics:

Clerics might also inspire a deeper look into Middle Age history. Originally used to mean someone belonging to a medieval religious order, the generic term “cleric” applies to the whole history of religious belief. The player who chooses to be a cleric is likely interested in discovering more about the various religions of the world, beginning with the ancient Near East beliefs with the gods such as Ishtar and Innana. It is not necessary for players to choose alignment with a deity that is “known” in the real world, as the internal mythology of the game offers a whole host of gods. But they still offer an opportunity to learn about all the ways people have worshipped their deities.

Magic Users:

The supposed practice of magic in the Middle Ages is a fascinating period of Western history. Isaac Newton himself wrote more about alchemy than physics, and the men who were considered knowledgeable in magical arts were often themselves experts with medicinal plants and other scientific innovations. There is a great deal of scholarship on the subject, and you can lead players towards a

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wealth of resources on corollary subjects, such as the history of witchcraft, paganism, and even the development of stage magic. Many “magicians” were likely illusionists of the highest order.

Suggested books:

By the Sword

A History of Gladiators, Musketeers, Samurai, Swashbucklers, and Olympic Champions

by Richard Cohen

Modern Library | TR | 978-0-8129-6966-5 | 544 pp. | \$16.95/\$22.95 Can.

English Medieval Knight 1400-1500

by Christopher Gravett

Illustrated by Graham Turner

Osprey | TR | 978-1-84176-146-6 | 64 pp. | \$17.95/\$25.95 Can.

COMBAT

There is no doubt that much of what goes on during a D&D game is fighting. The rules of combat, however, are based on a specific type of fighting, usually involving medieval weapons. Most people are familiar with the standard weapons, but many players will be interested in learning some of the details. What is the difference between a regular bow and a crossbow? What kinds of hand-to-hand combat would a character use? How did siege weapons really work?

D&D, while deeply kin to fantasy, is also cousin to wargaming. And so combat is not just about rolling a die, but learning a little about strategy. Weather and terrain are not only real-world conditions to discover, but can add a level of realism to the game, and the D&D rules for combat found in the sourcebooks covers almost every conceivable situation. If players find they are interested in strategy gaming, there are a number of good resources available.

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Suggested books:

Arthur and the Anglo-Saxon Wars

by David Nicolle

Illustrated by Angus McBride

Osprey | TR | 978-0-85045-548-9 | 48 pp. | \$15.95/\$22.95 Can.

Medieval Siege Weapons (1)

Western Europe AD 585-1385

by David Nicolle

Illustrated by Sam Thompson

Osprey | TR | 978-1-84176-235-7 | 48 pp. | \$15.95/\$22.95 Can.

Battlegrounds

Geography and the History of Warfare

by Michael Stephenson

National Geographic | HC | 978-0-7922-3374-9 | 288 pp. | \$35.00/\$55.00 Can.

The Art of War

by Sun Tzu

Delta | TR | 978-0-385-29985-5 | 96 pp. | \$12.95/\$19.95 Can.

THE WORLD OF D&D

There is no doubt that D&D evolved directly out of the fantasy literature tradition. You can safely assume the people who are showing up to play the game have some interest in the worlds that D&D draws from. J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings is the obvious corresponding book, but there is a history of literature other than Tolkien that can be made known to the players: the legends of King Arthur found in T.H. White and Malory; The Gormenghast trilogy by Mervyn Peake; and Ursula LeGuin's Earthsea books. Surprisingly, even Shakespeare is in many ways a perfect complement to D&D, especially if players want to move beyond the basic set into real world-building. Court intrigues, castles, witches,

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ghosts, and swordfights fill the pages of the Bard's plays. Most players will display a curiosity about the surrounding "culture" of a D&D campaign. A significant opportunity presents itself to introduce literature that might otherwise have been considered boring or merely what is taught in school in a new and exciting way. And otherwise overlooked important fantasy novels, having been overshadowed by Tolkien and his imitators, can be brought to the light.

Suggested books:

The Mists of Avalon

by Marion Zimmer Bradley

Del Rey | TR | 978-0-345-35049-7 | 912 pp. | \$17.95/\$26.95 Can.

Beowulf

Translated by Constance Hieatt

Bantam Classics | MM | 978-0-553-21347-8 | 192 pp. | \$4.95/\$7.50 Can.

The Canterbury Tales

by Geoffrey Chaucer

Bantam Classics | MM | 978-0-553-21082-8 | 688 pp. | \$5.99/\$7.99 Can.

Le Morte d'Arthur

by Sir Thomas Malory

Introduction by Elizabeth Bryan

Modern Library | TR | 978-0-375-75322-0 | 992 pp. | \$14.95/\$20.95 Can.

About the Writer

Peter Bebergal teaches humanities at Simmons College in Boston, Massachusetts and is a book reviewer for *The Boston Globe*.

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