

Mysterious worlds

The Magical Realms issue captures worlds far from our own, populated by the very best and worst of characters. Dare you enter?

SINCE THE DAWN OF TIME, the natural wonders and supernatural possibilities of life have inspired mankind to imagine stories of mystery and legend. The human mind is drawn to the contemplation of a world beyond the physical, and so extraordinary tales have been created, with the power to enthrall audiences over centuries as they are passed from generation to generation in many forms – from the spoken word to the podcast, from folklore to blockbuster novel, from cave paintings to cinematic CGI.

These epic grown-up versions of fairy tales provide us with escapism and allow us to imagine what life might be like with magical forces at play. In magical realms the battle of good versus evil usually takes centre stage, but that does not make all tall tales the same. Folklore consists of ancient, locally pertinent stories such as Robin Hood, Jack the Giant Killer and Tom Thumb. Myths, whose tradition goes back to the ancient Greeks, are similar to allegories and usually concern sacred narratives thought to have been devised to influence human behaviour. And legends concern important stories which are believed by the listener and reciter to have actually happened, even if this includes supernatural events such as miracles.

In tribute to such timeless feats of the imagination, a new special issue called *Magical Realms* follows narrative themes from legend through to contemporary fantasy. Today's magical realms are the domain of Pratchett





and Rowling, modern-day storytellers who have taken the principles of the old works and woven in contemporary influences, beliefs and concerns. You don't have to know your Hagrid from your Vortigern to recognise that there's something beguiling about the elaborately imagined worlds and characters represented on the stamps released on 8 March.

An embarrassment of riches Research conducted by Professor Miranda Aldhouse Green (author of *Boudicca Britannia*) into the stories and characters most loved by enthusiasts threw up a veritable galaxy of material, and this was whittled down to the four areas thought to best demonstrate the breadth and variety of the genre in our time, when there has been a resurgence in interest in the fantastical. There were hundreds of characters to consider and those finally chosen were deemed to best represent not only the individual works they sprang from but the overall theme of Magical Realms. Whether they send a shiver down your spine or raise a wry smile, these powerful images are likely to spark a response.

Direct from *Discworld* Two of the 1st Class stamps feature characters from prolific fantasy author Terry Pratchett: Rincewind was the first protagonist of *Discworld*, a wizard with no skill, no wizardly qualifications and no ►

First class characters: above, clockwise from top left – Rincewind and Nanny Ogg from Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* books; Dumbledore and Lord Voldemort from JK Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. Far left: Merlin's Bridge pictorial postmark. For other postmarks and technical details of stamps, see February *Bulletin* page 167



The 60p stamps show Morgan Le Fay and Merlin from Arthurian Legend and the 97p stamps feature the White Witch and Aslan from CS Lewis's *Narnia*

interest in heroics but a very good grasp of language. He is a cowardly underdog, something of an everyman, who is thrust into danger at every turn yet manages to survive. Occasionally he even saves *Discworld* itself. Rincewind is, essentially, a very human non-human.

The aesthetically challenged Gytha Ogg, also known as Nanny, is a popular witch from the *Discworld* series. She is the head of the Lancre coven and the giver of very good advice. She is also an archetypal matriarch, having produced 15 children and hordes of grandchildren. But to add a Pratchett-esque twist to the proceedings, Nanny Ogg subverts her type by being a distinctly *kind* witch.

Hero and villain Two more 1st Class

characters come from the world-famous tales of Harry Potter. Dumbledore is headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry (played in the films by Sir Michael Gambon since Richard Harris's death in 2002). His creator describes him as 'the epitome of goodness', and thus he is forever pitched in a battle against evil. Joining him is the dark wizard, Lord Voldemort – an unrecognisably ghoulish Ralph Fiennes features on the stamp in character from the film adaptation.

Arthurian gravitas For the 60p stamps, we delve further back in time to meet Merlin, the most famous wizard of all. Our version of Merlin appeared in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, written in the 12th century – a work of fiction which was credited as real for centuries. He was the amalgamation of many folkloric and historical characters. Also from the Arthurian legend, Morgan le Fay is a sorceress, healer, shape-shifter and witch who trained in magic under Merlin but had much less honourable intentions. The legend of Morgana is one that permeates many European cultures and she became prominent in the later cyclical prose works as an antagonist to King Arthur and Queen Guinevere.

Narnia's battling legends The 97p stamps take their inspiration from *Narnia*. Aslan, the talking 'Great Lion', is the central character in CS Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and the eponymous beast of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. He is also the only character to appear in all seven books of the series, and is wise, gentle and kind. In wicked contrast comes the White Witch Jadis, the main villain of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Forcing Narnia into a hundred-year winter, this cruel Amazonian sorceress (pictured on the stamp sporting Aslan's mane) was played by Tilda Swinton in the film *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* ●