

A GUIDE FOR NOVELISTS AND TEACHERS OF FICTION

THE LITERARY FANTASY NOVEL

*Market, Length, Craft, Plotting, and the Query Letter, with a Guide to
Novel Lengths across Genres*



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Silver Current Press · Philadelphia

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HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide brings together practical information for conceiving, writing, plotting, positioning, querying, and submitting an adult literary fantasy novel. It is written for the novelist who wants the imaginative scope of fantasy alongside serious prose, psychological depth, moral complexity, and a fully achieved literary design, and for the teacher who wants to show students how such a book is made.

A literary fantasy need not be an epic trilogy, a battle-centered quest, or an encyclopedia of invented lore. It may be a novel of ghosts, miracles, folklore, dream logic, an impossible object, a changed natural law, a haunted house, a historical mystery, a sacred intrusion, or an invented world. The essential criterion is that its fantastical material is necessary to its human meaning.

The guide opens with a short reference on novel lengths across the major genres, so that a writer working in any form can see where a manuscript stands.

NOVEL LENGTHS ACROSS GENRES

Word count is the first thing an agent or editor checks. The ranges below are those given in two widely consulted guides for writers seeking agents. They are guidelines, not rules, and they apply most strictly to first novels.

CATEGORY	MANUSCRIPT ACADEMY (2026)	WRITER'S DIGEST (CHUCK SAMBUCHINO)
Adult literary fiction	80,000–95,000 for debuts; over 100,000 meets resistance	80,000–89,999 is “a 100% safe range”; 71,000–109,000 possible
Commercial and mainstream fiction	80,000–100,000; debuts at the lower end	80,000–89,999; 71,000–109,000 possible
Contemporary romance	70,000–90,000	Within the adult range above
Historical romance	80,000–100,000	Within the adult range above
Mystery and thriller	80,000–90,000	Within the adult range above
Science fiction	90,000–110,000	100,000–115,000 “an excellent range”
Fantasy	90,000–120,000; over 130,000 must be extraordinary	100,000–115,000; 90,000–124,000 probably acceptable
Young adult	60,000–80,000	55,000–79,999
Middle grade		20,000–55,000, depending on age and subject

At roughly 250 to 350 words per typeset page, a 90,000-word novel runs about 260 to 360 printed pages. For the boundary between novel and novella, see the Nebula and Hugo definitions: a novel is 40,000 words or more, a novella 17,500 to 40,000.

THE MARKET FOR LITERARY FANTASY

What literary fantasy is

“Literary fantasy” is a useful broad term for fiction that joins the pleasures of the fantastic with the priorities of literary fiction. It tends to foreground voice, atmosphere, character, implication, form, psychological and spiritual pressure, and thematic resonance.

The same novel may also be positioned as:

- Literary fiction with fantastical or supernatural elements
- Literary speculative fiction
- Fabulism or fabulist fiction
- Mythic fiction
- Magical realism, where the magic is integrated into an otherwise recognizable reality
- Gothic fiction or folkloric fiction
- Historical fiction with supernatural elements

The term should clarify rather than conceal the manuscript. In a submission letter, a precise description is often stronger than a broad genre label. For example:

“An 92,000-word literary novel with fabulist elements ...”

“An 88,000-word literary fantasy about grief, faith, and memory ...”

“A Gothic literary novel with supernatural elements, set in contemporary New England ...”

The market opportunity

There is a real readership for literary fantasy, but it is not identical with the broad commercial market for fantasy, romantasy, or long-running epic series. Its strongest books cross categories: literary readers come for prose and emotional seriousness; fantasy readers come for imaginative consequence, atmosphere, and wonder; book-club readers come for a clear emotional premise and matters worth discussing.

Who may read it

Literary-fiction readers look for memorable sentences, psychological and ethical seriousness, emotional complexity, a compelling sense of place, and a deliberately shaped narrative.

Fantasy readers look for wonder, an intelligible imaginative premise, coherent consequences, atmosphere, and a convincing sense that the extraordinary has been fully imagined.

Book-club readers often respond to an accessible emotional question: What does the protagonist stand to lose? What old wound, inherited secret, guilt, grief, or family rupture is being reopened? What does the impossible condition reveal about ordinary life?

Readers of folklore, Gothic fiction, myth retellings, and historical fiction often seek atmosphere, cultural specificity, setting, inheritance, and older stories made newly urgent.

The central artistic task

A literary fantasy must answer two questions convincingly:

1. Why is this a literary novel rather than a story with decorative magic?
2. Why is this fantasy rather than realist literary fiction with an arbitrary strange event?

The strongest answer is the same for both: the extraordinary premise makes possible the novel's central inquiry into memory, death, desire, faith, guilt, power, history, love, inheritance, violence, family, or redemption. Remove the fantastic element, and the book should lose something essential—not simply scenery.

What can make a manuscript stand out

- A concise, unusual premise
- A protagonist with clear human stakes
- A setting with local, historical, cultural, or spiritual specificity
- A fantasy element that creates danger, cost, and choice
- Polished but readable prose
- A complete stand-alone story, even if the world can sustain further books
- A clear thematic and emotional promise rather than a catalog of lore

A useful comparison

Less distinctive: “In a vast realm of nine provinces, an exiled order of magical historians confronts an ancient darkness.”

More distinctive: “In a dying mill town, a parish archivist discovers that every confession spoken beneath the old church becomes a physical object—and that someone is using the congregation's sins to resurrect the town's dead.”

The second premise creates place, vocation, rule, conflict, and thematic territory: religion, guilt, communal memory, mortality, and redemption.

HOW COMMON IS LITERARY FANTASY?

There is no reliable industry statistic for the percentage of all published novels that are literary fantasies. Publishers, retailers, ISBN databases, and sales trackers generally do not count “literary fantasy” as a separate category. The relevant books are dispersed across overlapping labels such as fantasy, literary fiction, speculative fiction, magical realism, Gothic fiction, historical fiction, and horror.

For that reason, no precise percentage should be stated as fact.

A cautious market inference is that literary fantasy represents a small crossover segment—probably well below one percent of all novels published in a year—but this is not an audited or official measurement. It is best understood as a positioning description rather than a rigid bookstore category.

Why the count is difficult

CATEGORY	WHY IT COMPLICATES THE COUNT
Literary fiction	A ghost, miracle, myth, or surreal premise may be sold simply as literary fiction
Fantasy	Reporting often combines epic, romantic, urban, dark, comic, YA, middle-grade, and literary work
Speculative fiction	This umbrella includes science fiction, fantasy, dystopia, fabulism, horror, and slipstream
Historical fiction	A historical novel with fantasy elements may be marketed principally as historical/literary fiction
Gothic fiction	A supernatural literary work may be treated as Gothic, horror, domestic suspense, or magical realism

Practical implication

The lack of a clean category can be an advantage. A strong manuscript can be pitched to more than one kind of editor: literary fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, historical fiction, Gothic fiction, or book-club fiction. In a query, call the novel “adult literary fantasy” if that is accurate, but also describe its more particular reading experience.

HOW LONG LITERARY FANTASY NOVELS USUALLY ARE

For a first adult literary fantasy novel, a strong practical target is 85,000 to 105,000 words.

This range generally allows room for setting, character development, a layered plot, and thematic resonance while showing editorial control. Current agent- and author-industry guidance commonly places adult fantasy in a broad 90,000-to-120,000-word range and literary fiction in a broad 80,000-to-110,000-word range. For a debut literary fantasy, staying below approximately 110,000 words is usually the more marketable choice unless the scope clearly requires greater length.

TYPE OF NOVEL	SENSIBLE TARGET RANGE
Literary fantasy or fabulist stand-alone	80,000–100,000 words
Literary fantasy with an invented world	90,000–110,000 words
Epic literary fantasy	105,000–120,000 words
Magical realism or light literary speculation	70,000–95,000 words
Established-author epic fantasy	120,000 words and above

The most useful practical target

For many first novels: 90,000 to 100,000 words.

This is not an iron law. A compact, intense, mythic novel may work at 75,000 words. A genuinely expansive novel may require 110,000 words. But the length should emerge from dramatic necessity—not from the belief that fantasy automatically needs a very long manuscript.

Guiding principle:

Make the novel as short as the complete artistic experience permits.

At 120,000 words, every major plot strand should earn its place. At 140,000 words or more, a debut author should expect agents and editors to ask whether the manuscript can be cut, tightened, or reconceived as a more focused stand-alone book.

EXAMPLES OF LITERARY FANTASY

Piranesi, by Susanna Clarke

A compact and mysterious work in which an impossible world becomes an exploration of memory, innocence, exploitation, solitude, and spiritual wonder. It shows how a small cast and concentrated setting can carry immense imaginative force.

The Buried Giant, by Kazuo Ishiguro

An Arthurian, dreamlike novel about collective forgetting, marriage, national violence, and forgiveness. It shows how fantasy can serve philosophical and historical reflection.

The Night Circus, by Erin Morgenstern

A lyrical, immersive fantasy built around a seductive setting and atmosphere. More commercial in design, it remains useful as a model of beauty, sensory detail, romance, and spectacle.

***The Golem and the Jinni*, by Helene Wecker**

Historical fantasy shaped by immigrant experience, community, religious and cultural texture, and intimate character development. It demonstrates the value of a fully particular social world.

***The City & the City*, by China Miéville**

A speculative detective novel whose impossible urban arrangement becomes an inquiry into borders, politics, perception, and social denial.

***The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, by Neil Gaiman**

A brief, mythic, emotionally direct novel that joins childhood terror, memory, family instability, and fairy-tale archetype.

***Lincoln in the Bardo*, by George Saunders**

An experimental historical ghost novel about grief, attachment, national trauma, and the difficulty of releasing the dead. It illustrates how formal innovation can deepen the emotional effect of the fantastic.

***The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue*, by V. E. Schwab**

A readable crossover fantasy about art, identity, solitude, memory, and the cost of being forgotten. It is a useful example of book-club accessibility.

***The Spear Cuts Through Water*, by Simon Jimenez**

A formally adventurous epic fantasy whose unusual narrative architecture supports questions of storytelling, empire, family, violence, and resistance.

***The Water Dancer*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates**

A historical novel with fantastical elements in which extraordinary power is intertwined with memory, ancestral trauma, and the legacy of enslavement.

HOW TO WRITE A LITERARY FANTASY

Begin with a human wound, not a magic system

Before inventing a kingdom, map, pantheon, magical vocabulary, or dynastic history, identify the human pressure that drives the novel. Your protagonist may be grieving a parent, betraying a friend, losing faith, confronting family shame, returning home, facing a moral debt, or discovering that a life rests upon a lie.

Then ask: What impossible condition would make that pressure visible, inescapable, and dramatic?

Examples:

- A woman who cannot mourn discovers that the dead appear only to people who have lied about them.
- A priest loses his faith just as prayers begin to produce material miracles with ruinous consequences.
- A historian can enter old photographs, but every visit alters the memory of someone still living.
- A town's abandoned houses retain the voices of former inhabitants—and one voice is not dead.

The fantastic should not replace emotion. It should enact or intensify it.

Build one governing metaphor into the premise

The strongest literary fantasy premises usually contain both a literal rule and a metaphorical charge.

If memories can be bought and sold, the plot can investigate grief, class, complicity, and the desire to escape responsibility.

If a city physically rearranges itself around residents' secrets, the setting can dramatize repression, communal fear, corruption, and self-deception.

If the dead visit on a particular holy day, the novel can investigate faith, ritual, bereavement, and the borders between the sacred and profane.

A governing metaphor gives imaginative material depth and keeps its magic from becoming detachable ornament.

Choose the scale deliberately

Literary fantasy can be intimate, civic, historical, or mythic. For a first novel, a deeply realized house, parish, town, island, school, family, estate, hospital, or mill community may be more memorable than a generic continent of kingdoms.

Make the rules dramatic

A literary fantasy does not need a dense technical magic system, but it needs rules that make events intelligible and decisions costly.

Determine:

- What can the strange force, being, object, or condition do?
- What can it not do?
- What does it cost to use, accept, resist, or conceal it?
- Who benefits, and who suffers?
- What does the protagonist misunderstand at the beginning?
- What irreversible consequence follows from the wrong choice?

Limitations make better drama than powers. A miracle that solves every problem is dull. A miracle that saves one person only by endangering another creates plot, moral pressure, and theme.

Worldbuild story-first

Useful fantasy-craft guidance emphasizes beginning with premise and conflict, then inventing the world details your scenes and story actually require. A world bible can be useful, but it should record and support narrative decisions rather than replace drafting.

Build first:

- The protagonist's immediate social world
- The geography that produces constraints or opportunities
- The core supernatural rule
- The past event that makes the present conflict dangerous
- The institution, family, class system, religion, or political order that the story will pressure

Reveal the world through character experience. Rather than explain a law, history, or ritual in a block of exposition, let a character fear it, violate it, benefit from it, misunderstand it, or pay for it.

Let prose do more than decorate

In literary fantasy, style establishes the terms on which the reader accepts the impossible. Use image, rhythm, recurring motif, sensory precision, and meaningful omission to create authority. But literary quality does not require opacity. The reader should be able to identify who wants what, what blocks that desire, what changes after a choice, and what the extraordinary element means in the character's life.

HOW TO PLOT A LITERARY FANTASY

The story compass

Before outlining chapters, write a one-page story compass. Answer each question in a sentence or short paragraph.

1. Who is the protagonist before the story begins?
2. What does that person consciously want?
3. What deeper wound, fear, false belief, or moral evasion prevents wholeness?
4. What is the fantastic disruption?
5. Why can the protagonist not ignore it?
6. What will be lost if the protagonist fails?
7. What truth must the protagonist face?

8. What final choice proves whether that change has occurred?

The external and internal plots must meet at the ending. The protagonist should not merely defeat an enemy or close a portal. The final action should require confrontation with the moral or emotional failure established near the beginning.

A flexible four-part structure

Part I: Ordinary world and rupture, about 20–25 percent

Establish life, wound, relationships, place, daily pressures, and the first unsettling indication of the fantastic. By the end, the protagonist makes a choice that commits him or her to the central problem.

Part II: Investigation, temptation, and deepening cost, about 25–30 percent

The protagonist pursues a goal, learns rules, gains allies or uneasy companions, and begins to obtain a partial success. The fantasy's promise is explored, but it also makes demands. At the midpoint, a revelation changes the meaning of the conflict.

Part III: Reversal, consequence, and moral crisis, about 25–30 percent

Earlier choices come due. An alliance breaks, a history is exposed, a belief fails, a secret becomes public, or the supernatural rule proves worse than expected. The protagonist usually tries to solve the problem through the old false belief and makes matters worse.

Part IV: Final choice, climax, and altered world, about 20–25 percent

The protagonist acts with new understanding—or tragically fails to do so. The climax resolves the outward danger and inward question. A literary ending may preserve mystery, but it should complete the central emotional action.

SCENE-BY-SCENE PLOTTING

Use a table, notebook, or sequence of index cards. Every scene should contain most of the following elements:

- Viewpoint: Whose experience organizes the scene?
- Desire: What does the viewpoint character want immediately?
- Obstacle: Who or what resists that desire?
- Change: What new fact, loss, commitment, reversal, or consequence results?
- Cost: What is risked, concealed, surrendered, or damaged?
- Image or motif: What recurring sensory or symbolic material can carry thematic force?

If a scene produces no change, it may be background rather than drama. Cut it, combine it, or give it a turn.

A practical 24-chapter outline

- Chapters 1–3: Establish voice, setting, ordinary world, and central wound.
- Chapters 4–6: Introduce the disruption; the protagonist first resists it.
- Chapters 7–9: The protagonist commits to investigation, escape, rescue, recovery, or concealment.
- Chapters 10–12: Complications; rules become clearer; a relationship deepens or fractures.
- Chapter 13: Midpoint revelation or irreversible action changes the true stakes.
- Chapters 14–16: The protagonist tries to exploit, deny, or control the new knowledge.
- Chapters 17–19: Costs rise; hidden history emerges; apparent success collapses.
- Chapters 20–21: Crisis and lowest point; the protagonist sees what must be surrendered or confessed.
- Chapters 22–23: Climax; the protagonist makes the defining choice.
- Chapter 24: Aftermath; the altered world is shown through a concrete, emotionally resonant image or action.

This is not a formula. A novel may be nonlinear, use alternating viewpoints, unfold in framed documents, or contain only eighteen or as many as forty chapters. What matters is a developing pressure, a meaningful turn, and a final reckoning.

MODEL PREMISE AND PLOT SKETCH

Premise

In a New England coastal town, a widowed archivist discovers that parish records begin rewriting themselves each time a resident denies an old wrong. The altered records erase the dead from collective memory, including his late wife.

Beginning

The archivist wants only to preserve the church collection and to live quietly with his grief. He notices a baptismal entry has disappeared and that no one else remembers the child it records.

Middle

He learns that records alter when people publicly deny guilt. A local developer, whose family history is bound to a century-old disaster, wants the archive destroyed. The archivist discovers that he himself has concealed a truth about his wife's death.

Crisis

Restoring his wife to memory will expose the secret and destroy another person's protected reputation. Remaining silent will allow the town's dead to vanish permanently.

Climax

He speaks the truth in the church, knowing that the records will restore what has been erased but that his own life will be morally and socially remade.

Resolution

The archive survives, not as a clean monument, but as a difficult record. Its restored pages show a community beginning to remember its losses and harms.

QUERYING A LITERARY FANTASY

A query letter is a short, professional request that a literary agent consider a completed manuscript. It is normally around 250–350 words, though an agency's instructions always govern.

A good literary-fantasy query makes five things clear:

- The manuscript's category and word count
- The protagonist
- The destabilizing fantastic premise
- The central conflict and personal stakes
- Why the book may appeal to a defined readership

The query is not a synopsis, jacket copy, an explanation of every magical rule, or a chapter-by-chapter account. It is a one-page argument that the novel offers an original premise, a compelling character, meaningful consequences, and a recognizable market position.

Standard sequence

1. Personalized salutation and a truthful sentence about the agent fit.
2. Metadata: title, rounded word count, age category, and genre.
3. One or two short pitch paragraphs: character, disruption, goal, opposition, cost, and dilemma.
4. One or two comparison titles.
5. A brief relevant author bio.
6. Professional closing.

Paste the letter into an email body unless an agency asks for a form or attachment. Use normal type, left alignment, and short paragraphs. Do not send decorative graphics, maps, epigraphs, endorsements, or unsolicited attachments.

THE QUERY PITCH

The pitch should answer four questions.

QUESTION	WHAT THE QUERY SHOULD SUPPLY
Who is the protagonist?	Name, role, defining situation, or wound
What does the protagonist want?	A concrete goal
What blocks that goal?	An antagonist, social force, rule, secret, or danger
What is at stake?	A specific loss, sacrifice, catastrophe, or final choice

For literary fantasy, communicate the supernatural through consequence. Avoid explaining every historical war, magical school, royal genealogy, invented language, map, or pantheon. Show the single rule that bears directly on the protagonist's difficulty.

Weak:

"In the kingdom of Aeloria, where nine magical houses govern the provinces after the ancient war of suns, Mira learns that her bloodline descends from the forbidden House of Thorns."

Stronger:

"Every winter, Mira's family must surrender one memory to the river that keeps their valley alive. When the river takes her dead mother's face, Mira breaks the ritual—and brings drought to the town that depends upon it."

The stronger version conveys a rule, emotional loss, active choice, and public consequence.

The literary-fantasy distinction

Do not say, "This novel explores grief and forgiveness," when the query can make those themes visible through action.

Abstract: "The novel explores guilt, grief, and redemption."

Dramatized: "To restore his wife to memory, Thomas must confess the lie that made her death bearable."

A query may lightly reflect the manuscript's tone—Gothic, luminous, wry, mythic, restrained, or elegiac—but clarity must come first.

QUERY-LETTER TEMPLATE

Dear [Agent Name],

[One truthful sentence explaining why you are querying this agent. Refer to a stated interest, represented author, relevant deal, or demonstrated interest in literary, speculative, mythic, historical, Gothic, or fantastical work.]

I am seeking representation for TITLE, a [rounded word count]-word adult [literary fantasy / literary novel with supernatural elements / historical literary fantasy / other exact category].

[PROTAGONIST], a [role, defining situation, or emotional predicament], has spent [brief indication of ordinary life, desired stability, private wound, or central fear]. But when [inciting fantastical disruption], [he/she/they] must [concrete immediate goal].

To [achieve the goal], [protagonist] must [primary pursuit, investigation, flight, rescue, recovery, concealment, or confrontation]. Yet [opposition, revelation, or difficult rule] means that [the action produces a specific cost]. As [the pressure intensifies], [protagonist] must choose between [genuine sacrifice A] and [genuine sacrifice B]. If [he/she/they] fails, [name the personal and, if useful, larger consequence].

TITLE will appeal to readers of [COMPARISON TITLE] and [COMPARISON TITLE] for its [specific shared qualities].

[One or two sentences of relevant author biography.]

Thank you for your consideration. [State that the manuscript is complete and note included materials if the guidelines require them.]

Sincerely,

[Author Name]

[Email]

[Website, only if polished and professionally relevant]

MODEL QUERY LETTER

Dear [Agent Name],

Because you are seeking literary fiction with mythic and supernatural elements, I hope you will consider **THE BOOK OF UNFORGIVEN THINGS**, a 94,000-word adult literary fantasy.

For twelve years, widowed parish archivist Thomas Vale has kept the records of St. Brigid's Church in a failing Massachusetts mill town where he and his wife once planned to grow old. His work is an orderly refuge from grief—until a century-old baptismal entry vanishes from the parish register, and the townspeople cease to remember that the child ever lived.

Thomas learns that each time a resident publicly denies an old wrong, the church records revise themselves. The altered pages erase not only names but the dead person's place in every living memory. When a developer with a connection to a long-buried industrial disaster offers to buy and destroy St. Brigid's archive, Thomas begins tracing the missing entries through abandoned mills, cemeteries, and private shame. Then he finds his wife's name fading from the marriage register and discovers that he has spent years concealing the truth of the night she died.

To restore the vanished dead, Thomas must make the town remember the disaster on which its prosperity was built. But the records demand an equal exchange: to save his wife from oblivion, he must expose a secret that will destroy the reputation of the one person who kept him alive after her death. If he remains silent, the town's dead will disappear one by one, until no witness remains to accuse the living.

THE BOOK OF UNFORGIVEN THINGS combines the intimate, grief-struck supernaturalism of **THE OCEAN AT THE END OF THE LANE** with the historical and moral atmosphere of **THE WATER DANCER**.

[One or two sentences of relevant author biography: publications, awards, affiliations, or professional experience.]

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

[Author Name]

[Email]

[Website]

QUERY-LETTER ANNOTATION

Opening personalization

“Because you are seeking literary fiction with mythic and supernatural elements ...”

This is concise, relevant, and easily customized. Confirm that the agent’s present submission profile supports the claim before using it.

Metadata

“THE BOOK OF UNFORGIVEN THINGS, a 94,000-word adult literary fantasy.”

Title, word count, audience, and category appear early. The word count is rounded to the nearest thousand. At 94,000 words, the manuscript falls comfortably within the common practical range for a first adult literary fantasy novel.

Protagonist and ordinary world

“For twelve years, widowed parish archivist Thomas Vale has kept the records ...”

This supplies character, vocation, place, private wound, and ordinary life. The vocation also naturally connects him to the impossible problem.

Inciting premise

“A century-old baptismal entry vanishes ... and the townspeople cease to remember ...”

The strange premise appears through a concrete alarming event. The query avoids explaining a whole supernatural system.

Escalation

Rules emerge through action: denials cause revision; revision erases the dead; a developer threatens the archive; Thomas’s wife is caught in the same mechanism. Each detail increases both personal and public pressure.

Moral choice

“To save his wife from oblivion, he must expose a secret ...”

The letter stops at an impossible choice, a good place for a query to end its pitch rather than reveal the resolution.

Comparison titles

The comparisons clarify qualities of the manuscript rather than asserting that it is the next work by a famous author.

COMPARISON TITLES

Comparison titles, or “comps,” are a shorthand for readership and market position. They are not claims that a manuscript equals another book’s sales or artistic stature.

Choose one or two comps that are:

- Close enough to clarify tone, audience, premise, form, or setting
- Different enough to preserve the manuscript’s own identity
- Preferably recent, particularly one title from the previous three to five years
- Books you have actually read
- Specific in the quality they are cited to establish

Useful literary-fantasy examples

- *Piranesi*, by Susanna Clarke: compact mystery, philosophical/spiritual atmosphere, strange enclosed world, memory and identity
- *The Buried Giant*, by Kazuo Ishiguro: mythic restraint, memory, collective violence, moral ambiguity
- *The Golem and the Jinni*, by Helene Wecker: historical fantasy, immigrant community, social world, intimate character writing
- *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, by Neil Gaiman: childhood, memory, fairy-tale unease, concise mythic storytelling
- *Lincoln in the Bardo*, by George Saunders: ghosts, grief, formal experimentation, historical conscience
- *The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue*, by V. E. Schwab: memory, art, solitude, romance, book-club crossover appeal
- *The Water Dancer*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates: history, memory, trauma, moral consequence, fantastic power
- *The Spear Cuts Through Water*, by Simon Jimenez: formal ambition, mythic scope, narrative experimentation, empire and family

Useful formula

“TITLE will appeal to readers of [Book A] and [Book B] for its [specific shared qualities].”

Example

“THE BOOK OF UNFORGIVEN THINGS will appeal to readers of PIRANESI and THE WATER DANCER for its intimate supernatural mystery, its concern with memory and moral responsibility, and its haunted treatment of history.”

Avoid describing a manuscript as “the next Tolkien,” “Game of Thrones meets ...,” or “for fans of all fantasy.” These are too broad and do not help an agent place a distinctive literary novel.

COMMON QUERY PROBLEMS AND REPAIRS

Problem: A rhetorical opening.

Weak: “What would you do if the dead could speak?”

Repair: Begin with the protagonist and destabilizing event.

“On the morning his dead wife begins leaving messages in the parish records, archivist Thomas Vale is the only person in town who remembers she ever existed.”

Problem: Excessive lore.

Weak: “After the War of Nine Suns, the Ebon Dynasty divided Aeloria into seven provinces, each ruled by a hereditary keeper of the Vey ...”

Repair: Name only the material that creates immediate conflict.

“In a kingdom where citizens must surrender one memory each year to keep the river alive, Mira’s younger brother offers the memory of their mother’s death.”

Problem: Passive protagonist.

Weak: “Lena is drawn into a dangerous world she never knew existed.”

Repair: Give a concrete goal and action.

“To recover the name stolen from her sister’s grave, Lena bargains with the city’s official collector of ghosts.”

Problem: Vague stakes.

Weak: “If he fails, everything he loves will be destroyed.”

Repair: State what will happen.

“If he fails, the town will forget the children buried beneath the old mill, including his own daughter.”

Problem: Explained theme.

Weak: “This is a moving exploration of guilt, grief, and redemption.”

Repair: Dramatize the theme.

“To restore his wife to memory, Thomas must confess the lie that made her death bearable.”

Problem: Too many names.

Repair: Usually name the protagonist and one essential opposing figure. Refer to others by role: a sister, a developer, a former lover, a magistrate, a dead child, or a parish priest.

Problem: Overlong or irrelevant bio.

Repair: Limit it to one or two sentences of publications, awards, editorial work, teaching, relevant expertise, or a direct connection to the setting.

LITERARY-FANTASY AGENTS

No reputable agent represents only “literary fantasy.” The most appropriate targets are agents whose stated interests overlap in two or more of these areas:

- Adult fantasy or speculative fiction
- Literary or upmarket fiction
- Magical realism, fabulism, mythic fiction, Gothic fiction, folklore, or fairy-tale retellings
- Historical fiction with imaginative or supernatural elements
- Character-driven, atmospheric, spiritually resonant, or voice-forward fiction
- Book-club fiction with an unusual premise

Where to research agents

Agents change agencies, open and close to queries, and revise their interests often, so no printed list stays accurate for long. Build your list from current, first-hand sources:

- **Manuscript Wish List**, where agents and editors post what they are seeking: <https://manuscriptwishlist.com/>
- **QueryTracker**, a searchable database of agents with query-response data: <https://www.querytracker.net/>
- **Poets & Writers Literary Agents database**: https://www.pw.org/literary_agents
- **The acknowledgments pages** of recent literary fantasy novels you admire, where authors often thank their agents and editors.
- **Each agency’s own website**, which is the final authority on who is open to queries and how to submit.

PUBLISHING HOUSES

The imprints below are named as starting points for research, not as recommendations of fit for any particular manuscript. Ownership, editors, and submission policies change; check each publisher's current guidelines.

For major traditional publishers, the normal route is through a literary agent. An agent submits the manuscript to the appropriate editor and imprint. Direct submissions should be used only when a publisher's own current guidelines expressly accept unagented adult novels.

Major speculative-fiction imprints

Tor / Tor Books

One of the leading English-language science-fiction and fantasy publishers. Strong for ambitious adult fantasy, literary crossover work, and distinctive speculative voices. Novel submissions are normally agented.

Orbit Books

A major fantasy and science-fiction publisher with global distribution. Good for fantasy with substantial narrative momentum and a broad readership; literary fantasy needs a clear premise as well as prose quality.

Del Rey

A major commercial SFF imprint. Good for accessible adult fantasy, epic work, and crossover speculative novels with a strong hook.

Saga Press

Simon & Schuster's science-fiction and fantasy imprint. A particularly promising target for literary-minded genre fiction, historical fantasy, imaginative stand-alones, and ambitious speculative work.

Harper Voyager

HarperCollins's science-fiction and fantasy imprint. Potentially strong for high-concept adult fantasy, crossover fiction, and accessible mythic or historical work.

Ace / Roc

Penguin Random House's major speculative-fiction imprints. Good for commercial and crossover fantasy, provided the manuscript has a strong clear premise and readership.

DAW Books

A long-established SFF publisher and a worthwhile target for traditional fantasy, including high fantasy and character-led speculative work. Its current submission policy must be checked before submitting.

Tordotcom Publishing

A prestigious speculative imprint, particularly known for select, innovative projects and novellas. Potentially strong for elegant, unusual, literary speculative fiction; its procedures are selective and may change.

Erehon Books

An independent publisher focused on speculative fiction and literary-adjacent genre work. Particularly promising for inventive, boundary-crossing, unusual, or literary fantastical projects.

Angry Robot

An independent SFF publisher known for distinctive “genrefluid” projects. Worth considering for strange, high-concept, contemporary, dark, or cross-genre speculative novels. Check for any current direct-submission window.

Titan Books

An international publisher with lists in fantasy, science fiction, horror, and media-related fiction. Worth considering for more overtly commercial or genre-forward literary fantasy.

LITERARY AND CROSSOVER PUBLISHERS

A literary fantasy may fit best with a literary imprint, especially when the fantastic material is intimate, understated, historically grounded, or embedded in a recognizable social world.

Riverhead Books

A literary publisher with cultural reach and room for high-concept, voice-driven crossover novels.

Knopf

A major literary house known for ambitious mythic, historical, and formally distinctive work.

Farrar, Straus and Giroux

A leading literary publisher, potentially relevant for intellectually ambitious, formally challenging, or artistically original work.

Pantheon

A literary and internationally minded imprint with intellectual, historical, and imaginative range.

Hogarth

A literary imprint with a broad readership orientation; useful for intimate character stakes, book-club potential, and accessible literary fiction.

Algonquin Books

A literary publisher particularly associated with strong human stories, regional texture, and book-club readership.

Graywolf Press

A highly selective independent literary press. Potentially relevant to formally original or stylistically exceptional fabulist work.

Coffee House Press

An independent literary press open to experimental, hybrid, and boundary-crossing work.

Soho Press

An independent publisher with literary, commercial, international, and genre-flexible interests. Investigate the current imprint and submission route.

SUBMISSION STRATEGY AND FINAL CHECKLIST

A disciplined submission strategy

1. Identify the manuscript's dominant mode: intimate fabulism, Gothic supernatural fiction, historical fantasy, mythic literary fiction, or secondary-world literary fantasy.
2. Build two research lists:
 - Agents and publishers specializing in fantasy or speculative fiction
 - Agents and publishers specializing in literary/upmarket fiction with a demonstrated openness to the fantastic
3. Query agents in controlled waves of approximately eight to twelve, personalizing only where the match is genuine.
4. Use comparison titles to clarify exact crossover territory.

Examples:

- PIRANESI + THE WATER DANCER: lyrical, philosophical, haunted literary fantasy concerned with memory and history
- THE GOLEM AND THE JINNI + THE NIGHT CIRCUS: historical atmosphere, accessible imaginative storytelling, intimacy, and romance
- THE BURIED GIANT + LINCOLN IN THE BARDO: meditative, formally ambitious, morally serious fantasy

5. Pursue direct publisher submissions only where the publisher's official current guidelines clearly accept unagented adult fiction.

Final readiness checklist

Premise and plot

- Can the book be described in one compelling sentence?
- Is the fantasy premise literal, consequential, and metaphorically charged?
- Does each major plot turn arise from character choice?
- Does the final action resolve both outer danger and inner moral question?
- Is this a satisfying stand-alone novel?

Character

- Does the protagonist want something concrete from the opening chapters onward?
- Does the protagonist's wound, grief, denial, or false belief complicate the external plot?
- Does the opposing force exert genuine moral and dramatic pressure?
- Do major secondary characters have their own desires and complexity?

World and magic

- Are core rules clear through action and consequence?
- Do magic, myth, haunting, or impossible conditions impose cost and limitation?
- Does the setting possess particularity of climate, labor, religion, history, class, food, speech, landscape, and institution?
- Has the author built only what the story needs?
- Is exposition dramatized whenever possible?

Query and submission

- Is the manuscript complete and its word count rounded to the nearest thousand?
- Does the query foreground character, disruption, conflict, cost, and choice?
- Are comparison titles accurate and useful?
- Is each agent personalization truthful and current?
- Have the agency's official guidelines been followed exactly?

FINAL STANDARD

The strongest literary fantasy is not simply “a fantasy novel that happens to be literary.” It is a compelling literary novel whose central emotional, spiritual, historical, or moral problem can only be told through fantasy.

Its query should create the same impression: Here is a distinctive imaginative premise; here is a character forced into a meaningful moral or emotional choice; here is a world in which the impossible matters; and here is a manuscript whose prose and ambition invite close reading while its plot and stakes make the next page necessary.

SOURCES

- Manuscript Academy, “Word Count by Genre: What Literary Agents Want (2026 Guide)”: <https://manuscriptacademy.com/word-count-by-genre-literary-agents-2026>
- Chuck Sambuchino, “Word Count for Novels and Children’s Books: The Definitive Post,” *Writer’s Digest*: <https://www.writersdigest.com/whats-new/word-count-for-novels-and-childrens-books-the-definitive-post>
- Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association, “Nebula Rules”: <https://nebulas.sfw.org/about-the-nebulas/nebula-rules/>
- Manuscript Wish List: <https://manuscriptwishlist.com/>
- QueryTracker: <https://www.querytracker.net/>
- Poets & Writers, Literary Agents database: https://www.pw.org/literary_agents