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Title: Questioning Attebery's 'Bullseye': Interviews with Young Readers of Fantasy May De-Center The Lord of the Rings

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Title: Questioning Attebery's 'Bullseye': Interviews with Young Readers of Fantasy May De-Center The Lord of the Rings

Cover Page Footnote

This paper was presented at Mythcon 53, which was held in Minneapolis Minnesota in August 2024. A video recording of the presentation can be found at the following URL: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythcon/mc53/schedule/21/>

What is fantasy?¹ More specifically, when we talk about the genre of fantasy literature, how do we define it? Certainly, one of the most influential responses to this conundrum was proposed by our esteemed keynote speaker Brian Attebery in his influential 1992 monograph *Strategies of Fantasy*. I want to discuss his definition, how my research into the reading experiences and opinions of young readers complicates it, and one possibility for integrating these observations into a new and more robust definition that builds upon Attebery's to create one that is perhaps more adaptable and sustainable.

In his text, Attebery defines fantasy by using the concept of a fuzzy set that he borrows from logicians. In essence, he contends that a genre is loosely characterized by the texts that are most consistently placed at the centre of the genre, and is then made up of texts that have similar features or techniques to these central texts. This results in genres that have unclear boundaries rather than fixed borders. This definition is helpful to combat many overly-rigid ideas of genre, which are often concerned with presenting characteristics, plot elements, or tropes typical of the genre as watermarks or benchmarks. His definition also creates a method by which genres can be 'defined not by boundaries but by a center' (12); however, there are some complications that arise from this concept when compared with my research.

Initially, allow me to lay some groundwork to make comparisons between Attebery's scholarship and my own. Attebery places *The Lord of the Rings* at the centre of the fantasy genre based on fourteen responses to a questionnaire that he developed for critics of fantasy literature. More specifically, he generated a list of forty titles which included 'novels published as fantasy, as science fiction, and as...mainstream fiction' (13). Then he asked some of his 'acquaintances who have written scholarship on fantasy literature' to rate said titles on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being 'quintessential fantasy' and 7 being 'by no means fantasy' (13). While he does include the caveat that 'my inexact scale of qualifiers, and my highly idiosyncratic list of titles no doubt invalidate any results from a statistical perspective' he proposes that he uncovered 'some striking patterns' (13). The most notable of which was that *The Lord of the Rings* was almost unanimously given a score of 1. This leads him to the conclusion that it 'stands in the bullseye' of the fantasy genre (13).

As a brief overview of my PhD project: I interviewed 30 readers of *The Lord of the Rings* who were between the ages of 7 and 18. The interviews consisted of a survey and two activities. The two activities are not really

¹ This paper was presented at Mythcon 53, which was held in Minneapolis Minnesota in August 2024. I make use of data from my doctoral thesis, completed in 2020, which can be found open access at <https://theses.gla.ac.uk/81312/1/2020SheltonPhD.pdf>.

applicable to our discussion today because one focused on the characters of the story while the other focused on the setting. Therefore, allow me to give more detail about the survey. It consisted of twelve questions which asked participants their opinions on several aspects of *The Lord of the Rings*. They were allowed to take this home and spend as much time as they needed to answer the questions and email it back to me. Most important for our purposes are the three questions that asked about genre or ‘type’.

The first question of this kind simply asked participants ‘what type of story is *The Lord of the Rings*’? The goal of this question was to be as open-ended as possible so that participants could emphasize the aspects of the story that they thought were most important in determining what kind of story the book is. A different approach to discussing how young readers identify the genre or type of story of *The Lord of the Rings* was made in the next two questions of the survey. Question seven gave participants twelve genres and asked them to pick the ‘kind of story *The Lord of the Rings* is’. A follow-up question asked participants to justify their selection of one of the genres. This follow-up was an open-ended ‘what’ question that allowed for a wide variety of feedback. The results from these three questions are what I want to discuss today in relation to Attebery’s definition of fantasy literature.

For comparison, my PhD study had more than double the sample size, with thirty participants. Arguably, the sample in my PhD is a more representative sample in terms of the popular ideas about fantasy literature than Attebery’s. I say this because his sample is one that is highly invested in the study of fantasy literature and, likely, privy to all of the scholarly and academic debates surrounding the genre. My sample, on the other hand, is from one of the populations most influenced by public, popular, and even, dare we say, commercial ideas

A second quibble about the survey that Attebery used is the fact that he gives his participants a closed-ended question. While this certainly has its uses, I would contend that it is not the best format to use when trying to determine what is the most quintessential fantasy text. I would contend that open-ended questions, of a similar format to what was in my own study, are a better way to arrive at this conclusion. This is because closed-ended questions both pigeonhole participants to certain answers by limiting the possible responses, and they prejudice responses if the question does not include a text that the reader may identify as more quintessentially fantasy than the ones provided.

I want to clarify that I am not trying to discredit Attebery. I do not believe that he intended this survey to be the crux of his argument, and he does not actually treat it as such in his text. Instead, this foray into discussing the methodology of the survey is an attempt to highlight the rigor of my own research

as a sample of meaningful qualitative data. After all of these nits have been picked, I still think that Attebery has a very suitable and informed approach to defining the genre and that his text admirably navigates several of the complexities that previous attempts had failed to overcome. As recently as 2012, scholars such as James Edwards and Farah Mendlesohn have cited Attebery's work in their introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* as 'the most valuable theoretical text for taking a definition of fantasy beyond preference and intuition' (1). That being said, I do think that there are some ways that the definition as presented should be interrogated and queried. With these distinctions between research methods in mind, let me give you the data from my research as clearly as I can, and then provide some analysis of the data. I will follow this with a discussion of how the results of my investigation interact with Attebery's fuzzy set.

In this presentation, I will limit my comments only to the two most popularly selected genres: fantasy and quest. I have decided to address these two genres today because they are evenly indicated as the most prevalent opinion for the genre of *The Lord of the Rings* by this sample of readers. By discussing these two genres with you, I hope to share two trends that developed in the study and indicate some of the implications of these trends.

Of the thirty participants in my study, only eight identified *The Lord of the Rings* as a fantasy. It may surprise you that this genre classification was not selected by a majority of the participants. In fact, fantasy doesn't even achieve a clean plurality among participants, having to share that distinction with the quest genre.

In their answers to the follow-up question, many participants who chose the fantasy genre also mentioned the genres of epic or myth in their discussions. For instance, one participant saw the story as 'an epic, high-fantasy tale, and in some ways, it is like a tribute to the mythologies and epics of the past'. Similarly, another participant described the book as 'an epic fantasy story focusing on good versus evil, but also as a part of a whole mythology that Tolkien created'. A couple of these participants also thought the idea of a quest was important; for example, one called it 'a fantasy quest story'. Most of these participants also indicated that the setting played an important role in their decision to classify the story as a fantasy. One participant provided a good overview of this perspective when he explained that 'I chose "fantasy" because, even though it has elements from the other categories, it takes place in a fantastical setting'. How other people classify the story was also a consideration for about half of the participants who consider it a fantasy. One noted how 'it's typically categorized as a fantasy novel or an epic fantasy'. Another went so far as to claim that 'it like literally defines the fantasy genre'. As this small sample of responses demonstrate, the methods

used to determine the genre of the text seem to differ greatly from one participant to the next. It would not be possible to properly discuss these responses without some additional context, though.

Just as Attebery's survey included science fiction alongside fantasy, my participants had the option of placing *The Lord of the Rings* in a different genre. I wanted to include here some discussion of the other genre that participants rated as equally applicable to *The Lord of the Rings*, namely the genre of quest narrative. While the start of this discussion may seem tangential to our purposes today, the fact that participants see this genre as an equal contender shades the ways that we can interpret the results. Diving into the responses for this genre also helps to shape how we understand what drives these readers to categorize the text the way they have. Therefore, the results are inseparable from what we have been discussing.

The other most commonly chosen genre for *The Lord of the Rings*, also being chosen by eight participants, was the genre of quest. Many participants who chose the quest genre initially talked about the story as a fantasy. In fact, six of the eight participants who ultimately labelled the story a quest said something similar to this: '[the book is] an adventure story. And it's obviously very thought-out, too. It's actually kind of like a fantasy history-book'. Most of them suggested that the story is *more than* a fantasy. These observations reflect a complex understanding of genre. Most of these participants demonstrated a preference for discussing the plot of the story *after* they decided that it is a quest. One participant demonstrated this tendency when she described how 'when you break down the story, you end up with the quest to destroy the Ring'. Another participant went a little further than the others. He indicated that there is more than one quest portrayed in the story:

I think the part with Frodo, Sam, and Gollum, to me, it seems more like the main story because it deals specifically with the Ring and that's... more like a quest to go destroy the Ring. I also think a little bit of the part with Aragorn. He's kind of on a quest to regain his mantle of king.

Instead of attempting to find a more inclusive genre for the entire story, like the participants who chose the fantasy genre, these participants focus on a specific element within the text that they perceive to be the most important. In all instances, participants who chose quest as the genre for the story focused primarily on plot elements rather than character elements or setting elements.

The tendency to focus on the plot rather than the characters or setting of the story is well attested in scholarship. One of the first reviewers to become captivated with Tolkien's use of the archetypal quest narrative was W.H. Auden. In his essay 'The Quest Hero' he begins by defining a quest. He claims that 'to go

in quest means to look for something of which one has, as yet, no experience; one can imagine what it will be like but whether one's picture is true or false will be known only when one has found it' (Auden 2004: 31-32). This definition provides the foundation for the remainder of his explication of *The Lord of the Rings* and several other works. To lend more specificity to his argument, Auden enumerates six 'essential elements' of a quest. He then traces how these elements are portrayed over the course of *The Lord of the Rings*, focusing on Frodo as the main character of the quest. Importantly, while Auden mentions characters in this list of essential elements, he discusses them more in the context of narrative function than their actual portrayal. This aligns with the kinds of observations made by participants as they focus more on the plot than the characters or settings.

In *There Would Always Be a Fairy tale: More Essays on Tolkien* (2017), Verlyn Flieger revisits the concepts of journey and quest. She argues that 'in the most general sense, both [*The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*] follow the traditional romance trajectory – a hero's journey and return' (Flieger 2017: 210). She goes on, though, to distinguish between the two texts as illustrating different kinds of journey:

Bilbo had *adventures* – dangerous escapades exciting for their own sake, ending in peace and prosperity for the Elves, Men, and Dwarves, and for Bilbo himself. Frodo goes on a *quest* – a journey as careless for soul as for body – with a fixed purpose, a goal beyond itself. (Flieger 2017: 210)

While her ultimate goal in this section is to illustrate the way in which French romance influenced Tolkien's writing, along the way Flieger expertly explains how the different archetypes to which Tolkien appeals in his two works change the way that readers respond to the texts. The adventure of Bilbo has several contained, discrete episodes which are magnifying in intensity as the book continues, whereas Frodo's journey has a singular mission, but also has to overcome obstacles along the way. The former focuses on the way in which the action changes the character, the latter focuses on the way in which the action changes Middle-earth.

One scholar who expands the understanding of the quest structure employed throughout *The Lord of the Rings* is Anna Caughey. In her essay 'The Hero's Journey' (2014) she claims that 'the text works successfully in both the adventure-story and elegiac modes because *The Lord of the Rings* offers the reader not one quest-narrative or Hero's Journey but several, which run simultaneously in a number of registers and at a number of levels' (Caughey 2014: 404). She argues that the way Tolkien employs these multiple narratives helps the work appeal to multiple audiences, including various age ranges. Not only does Caughey indicate Tolkien's employment of multiple quest narratives, but she also postulates how these narratives function to engage the attention of

readers at differing levels of maturity. Such an analysis helps to reveal one of the appeals that the text has for younger readers. This resonates with some of the findings of my larger study. Caughey's arguments are also reminiscent of the way that participants recognize that the narrative surrounding the Ring represents a quest. A further similarity is how one participant also recognised that both Frodo and Aragorn have their own quests to complete over the course of the text. In all, there are many similarities between the scholars who discuss the theme of the quest and the observations made by this group of participants.

Participants chose fantasy and quest with equal frequency in the study. Between them, these two genres represent the preferred classification of more than half of the participants in the study. There are a few conclusions, then, which seem significant about this group. The most significant trend that arises from this analysis is the tendency for participants to choose whatever genre they perceive as the most inclusive option available to them when they try to categorize *The Lord of the Rings*. This tendency occurs in discussions about almost every genre chosen by participants. It is interesting that this trend developed across the genres, demonstrating that participants often used the same kind of justification to support their decision, regardless of what genre they chose. Participants who chose very different genres all claimed that they selected their genre because it is more inclusive than the others provided.

The other tendency, though it is present far less often, is for participants to choose one element and base their conclusions about the type of story that *The Lord of the Rings* is based on that element. This trend is particularly strong in the genres of threatened homeland and quest. What follows is a brief discussion of these two tendencies and how they either conform to or defy the way that texts are usually classified. The second, and less common, tendency would seem to align more readily with the pre-existing system of categorizing books within genres. Participants find an element that they deem is important to the book, and they find a genre that the element fits within. The largest complication of this tendency comes up when what young participants deem to be the most significant element of a story is different from what older readers perceive to be the most significant element. This certainly doesn't seem to be the case very often with *The Lord of the Rings*, since this process leads many readers to assume that the story follows a quest narrative, which is one of the most discussed topics by Tolkien scholars.

The larger trend in these responses, however, presents a more liberating approach to classifying the story within a given genre than is traditionally used by critics, publishers, and older readers. Perhaps this indicates that, to these young readers, *The Lord of the Rings* is a broad text that defies pigeonholing in a specific genre. When they were forced to choose a genre for the story, most of them simply chose the term that they found to be the most inclusive. Many of the

participants specifically referenced other genres in their discussion as a means of demonstrating that their chosen genre did not preclude the story from being interpreted as fitting into other categories.

This may demonstrate that the preconceived notions that scholars have when they discuss genre are either not universally accepted among young readers or, in fact, that there is an over-eagerness to apply clean labels to a text that defies such an easy categorization. It also indicates that the way *The Lord of the Rings* is perceived as a standard for fantasy literature by older readers may be a disservice to the text and to other books. Since this text is often considered to be paradigmatic of fantasy literature, one would expect a majority of young participants to choose this as the genre for the story; however, that is not what happened. Instead of allowing *The Lord of the Rings* to define the fantasy genre, as many critics, writers, and readers have, these results demonstrate that *The Lord of the Rings* does not hold such a stable identity to this group of young readers.

These responses indicate that we should approach proposals like Attebery's centring of *The Lord of the Rings* within the fantasy genre with trepidation. If critics and scholars build a genre around this text, it appears that the genre will not only have liminal edges, but an unstable centre. Readers are free to interpret texts in a number of ways and to see commonalities that critics may overlook in their classification. Because of this, we cannot state with certainty that *The Lord of the Rings* shares more in common with certain texts than others for all readers at all times. When one considers how young readers may classify books as they are exposed to them, it is entirely possible that they may not perceive the story as fitting within the genre of fantasy as they have experienced it.

When I gave a presentation about these results five years ago, this is where the presentation ended. I could not see a way forward, at that time, to reconcile my results with Attebery's proposal. I had a very good conclusion where I quoted Verlyn Flieger, and I said that we should 'revel in the messiness that great writing can achieve' by celebrating 'the various influences, overlaps, transmissions, and transmutations that we find in this story and in many others'.

While I still believe that it is important to celebrate messiness, in most of its manifestations, I believe I have gained insight since that time and can now posit a new way forward that I lacked the vision to see then.

Since only eight out of the thirty participants in my study rated *The Lord of the Rings* as a fantasy text, this could potentially undermine Attebery's case. It would demonstrate that his definition could potentially hold descriptive power over the genre at the time at which he was writing about it, but that perhaps it has grown outdated and could not be applied to the genre as conceived by new

readers, readers born almost a decade after his definition was given, in fact. This is because the ideas my participants shared often destabilized *The Lord of the Rings*'s position as 'quintessential fantasy' and therefore would make it an unfit 'bullseye' from which to measure other texts. This then leads to the questions of whether Attebery's proposal is 1. sufficient of encompassing the results of my research, or 2. necessary to defining the genre of fantasy as it currently stands.

As stated earlier, Attebery's definition is an important bridge in moving the definition of fantasy forward. It makes blurred edges around a genre possible. In this way, it contributes something necessary to the definition of fantasy as a genre; however, as it currently stands it is insufficient to cover the understanding demonstrated by my study participants. Is there a way to preserve Attebery's approach to defining fantasy (namely, focusing on a center rather than the borders) and simultaneously address the truth about the lived experience of young readers? I believe so, and in fact it is one that is basically just an extrapolation of Attebery's own perspective.

In the final chapter of his monograph, Attebery explains how subgenres within fantasy are themselves fuzzy sets and are capable of shifting and evolving. He says that 'subgenres regularly emerge, merge, or disintegrate' (126). He goes on to describe this process by talking about how new texts are positioned by their author and, thus, force a re-examination of the sets:

They radiate from a few well-known and influential texts, as each new author construes the defining principles of those texts and adapts the perceived type to her own ends. A text that was conceived by its author as a development within one type of fantasy may serve subsequent writers as a model for quite a different variety, if its deviations from type are reinterpreted as a new set of norms. If a subgenre attracts enough attention from readers and writers, it may eventually change the center of gravity of the whole genre' (126).

So Attebery acknowledges that subgenres, and even genres as a whole, can shift over time. His focus seems to mostly attribute this shift to the intentions, attitudes, and actions of authors, though. I believe that it would be a misreading to push too far and say that Attebery's text discounts the influence of readers, and I do not believe it does. Though I would contend that the way that this section is written would lead most of his readers to walk away remembering the power to shift genre as attributed almost exclusively to authors rather than readers.

In a sense, then, what we are actually trying to do here is argue against something that Attebery does not actually propose, but rather an interpretation of his argument that is not true to the original. A sort of fossilization that pins Attebery's definition and keeps it from being fluid. His final chapter, in some

ways, pre-empts this interpretation, but it is never fully incorporated back into his primary proposal at the beginning of the work. Perhaps by revisiting the mathematical basis for fuzzy sets, we can find a way to incorporate this more malleable concept into his original idea.

Fuzzy sets were first proposed by L.A. Zadeh to mathematics in 1965 and from there they became influential in many fields, including logic. In mathematics, however, Zadeh's proposal has been extended in many ways to meet diverse needs that the initial concept could not apply to. Looking at the extensions of Fuzzy set theory in mathematics reveals some insight into how we could build upon Attebery's application of the concept to literary genre. Namely, the use of intuitionistic fuzzy sets, interval-valued intuitionistic fuzzy sets, and neutrosophic sets all reveal ways to consider not only the degree to which something is a member of a given set, but also the degree to which it is a non-member of a set, and the degree of indeterminate value. In other words: mathematicians found Zadeh's initial theory beneficial in many contexts, but they found the need to quantify the indeterminacy of sets in other ways to make the idea work in other contexts for which the original idea was not suited.

In the same way, Attebery's theory is very helpful in positioning the discussion of literary genre around central texts, but is less beneficial for genre that do not have clear-cut central texts or to capture the shifts and indeterminacy around the edges of the genre. Using something similar to neutrosophic sets, which were first proposed in 1998, could be the answer. In this extension of the fuzzy set idea, Smarandache develops separate functions for the states of membership, non-membership, and indeterminacy.

In a similar way, we could use this model to develop a diagnostic process for literature based more on gradation and uncertainty than Attebery's initial proposal. I will also reframe my proposal about shifting genres and subgenres as one that is dependent upon readers, so that the link between this revised definition and the results of my research is more apparent.

If I were to rephrase Smarandache's functions into a more transparent verbiage for us, it would take the basic schema of the fuzzy set which looks like:

$$\text{Nothing} \leq \text{what the candidate book shares with the model book(s)} \leq \text{Everything}$$

And evolve it to include two more functions. Resulting in something like:

$$\text{Nothing} \leq \text{what the candidate book shares with the model book(s)} \leq \text{Everything}$$

Nothing \leq what the candidate book does not share with the model book(s) \leq Everything
 Nothing \leq what the candidate book has that cannot be compared with the model book(s)
 \leq Everything

In essence, this new proposal would take into consideration not only how similar one text is to a book that is accepted by the reader to be in a given genre, but also how dissimilar the text is to the given book. Furthermore, the indeterminacy function could be represented by the ability of the reader to be able to compare the two texts at all. Furthermore, this latter formula could be modified so as to take into account things like prior knowledge and experience, including but not limited to: reading history, exposure to genres through texts, or understanding of genres by means other than reading (like in bookstore classifications, movies, etc.).

One thing that you may have picked up on in my description, but that I want to underscore is that the model book must be determined by the reader performing the comparison. It does the reader no good to have a book that they may not be familiar with chosen as the model. Therefore, the process should follow: ask the reader to name a book or books that they think of as ‘quintessentially fantasy’, and then ask them to compare the candidate book to the model book or books they have indicated. Let me give a practical example.

I walked through a series of questions with one of my colleagues to model this approach. Here is the model and her responses:

1. “What book or books do you consider ‘quintessential fantasy’?” [*Lord of the Rings*, of course.]
2. “Is there a book that you are currently reading, or can you remember one of the most recent fiction books you have read?” [*Hothouse* by Brian Aldiss.]
3. “What aspects does that book share with *Lord of the Rings*?” [World building, environmental themes, moments of whimsy in a generally dark plot, a long journey, strange species, characters working together to survive.]

--This is where the questions would end if we were only using fuzzy set theory. But using the neutrosophic set theory leads us to a couple more questions:

4. “What aspects does that book have that are very different *Lord of the Rings*?” [Science fiction (there is a trip to the moon), the “language building” is very simplistic, it literally is the end of the world, there is no evil lord or any supernatural characters.]

5. “Are there any aspects of the book that you don’t really think you can compare with *Lord of the Rings*?” [Well, there is sex in the book. The mammoth vegetation (mainly trees) really is different from the Ents - it isn't "sentient" beyond instinct, with the exception of the morel, whose species is the basis for human intelligence (a symbiotic relationship). The book is really trippy.]

--After asking questions that correlate to each of our functions, it is time to ask the reader to give a summary of their own assessment.

6. Thinking back over your answers, how much do you think *Hothouse* participates in the fantasy genre as you see it? [It really straddles the line between fantasy and science fiction. There are some very science fiction aspects to it (and some scientists bitch about one very specific piece of the science) but it is very fantastical as well. It is a piece that really shows how the dichotomy SF/F is problematic.]

The important thing in this exchange is that the consideration at the end does not just look at the similarities between *The Lord of the Rings* and *Hothouse*. Instead, it very intentionally also considers differences and things that cannot be readily compared. Notice how this allows my colleague to make a judgement not only on how much the text aligns with the fantasy genre, but also how it relates to other texts or genres as well. This is precisely the kind of reflection that keeps the boundaries of genres fuzzy, but at the same time enables readers to place books somewhere along the margins.

A second way that this revision of Attebery’s proposal brings the definition more into alignment with the result of my study is exhibited in this example as well. It not only demonstrates an ability to account for the results of the study (the basic fact that fewer participants selected the fantasy genre than was anticipated) but it also accounts for the way that participants reasoned in order to reach their conclusions. As noted earlier, participants predominantly used two approaches when attempting to place *The Lord of the Rings* into a genre. The less common approach was to define the story using a discrete element that the participant thought was the most important. I noted how this impulse seems to mirror the way that such categorizations are often made by publishers, bookstore owners, librarians, etc. in an effort to find a place where the book ‘fits’.

The second impulse, the desire to find the most general label for the story, is not taken into account by such a traditional approach. Attebery’s definition comes closer to codifying this kind of holistic approach. My revision would align even closer to the way that participants reasoned through their answers, because it would allow for an even broader perspective on how readers classify a text.

Furthermore, by reframing the definition around readers, it empowers this often-overlooked part of the meaning-making process.

I can anticipate a few objections to my proposal. What about consensus? How can scholars write about a field that they cannot actually define? Is everyone's genre of fantasy different? If we think more commercially: what about marketing? What about the libraries? To many of these questions, the answers are already apparent. Yes, everyone's genre of fantasy is different, and it always already was. Scholars write about things they do not fully understand all of the time, we usually do so in an effort to further understand something. I would counter the question about consensus with a couple of my own: is consensus the point of scholarship, or is insight? And which is more valuable? As far as the commercial questions, I have to admit a bias in that I am unconcerned with those.

In short, my proposal is less concerned with prescriptively classifying texts and more interested in understanding and describing the process by which texts are classified by readers already. I prioritize the insight of understanding how texts are labelled by readers in the real world instead of trying to create a scaffold that critics and others can use to classify a text. As described above, this emphasis has the two-fold benefit of being able to sufficiently cover the results of my study, but also affords researchers insights into how readers categorize texts. I want to take a moment to enumerate other potential benefits that arise from the use of neutrosophic sets.

First, this approach allows for texts to be placed along a spectrum of membership and non-membership in a way that is demonstrated in the example interview. Namely, a book can be identified as belonging to or rejecting the standards of one genre; however, this is only part of the application. If a researcher were to have a participant repeat the same set of questions with a model text from a differing genre (for instance, if I had had my colleague also select a model text from the science fiction genre in addition to the questions about fantasy), then the interview could incorporate the membership, non-membership, and indeterminate functions for a second genre. This additional data could then be used to understand not only the extent to which the reader sees the candidate book fitting within two genres (or not), but also could highlight areas of overlap or disagreement between the genres themselves. This comparative process could also be used for different subgenres after the reader has chosen a genre for a specific text.

A different application could be to have a longitudinal study in which readers are asked the neutrosophic set questions over several years. This would allow a researcher to identify several elements and their shifting relationship over time, including:

1. What readers deem as ‘quintessential fantasy’
2. What readers are reading
3. How differing texts relate to others within a given genre
4. How trends in genre or subgenre have shifted over the course of the study

In short, the use of the neutrosophic set, when coupled with another research method, like that of a longitudinal questionnaire, could lead to data that helps not only give a snapshot of a given genre at a given time, but also could illuminate some characteristics of how genres change and evolve or remain stable. These are just a couple of the uses that could be made of neutrosophic sets in order to better understand genre.

To conclude this talk, I want to go back to the guiding question and then summarize our findings from today: how does my research interact with Attebery’s categorization of *The Lord of the Rings* as the ‘bullseye’ of fantasy literature. On the surface, it quite explodes the theory if one were hoping to find a framework for understanding the popular definition of fantasy literature. Though it does not impact the truth that those who study fantasy as a genre still continue to see *The Lord of the Rings* as a central text (after all, see my colleague’s response to question 1).

An examination of my results and a careful consideration of the impact of Attebery’s model on our definition of fantasy leads to the conclusion that what is needed is not an explosion, but an expansion. This leads us to the idea that, like mathematics, we need to revisit and enhance the idea of fuzzy sets to better address a broader range of contexts. Mathematics gives us a model that we can adapt for this purpose: neutrosophic sets. Accepting an updated model lets us not only be able to understand the results of my study, but better anticipate the ways in which future readers will classify texts and give us a means of understanding how they make their classifications. The updated theory also allows for further extension that will open up our understanding of genre even further.

Even though Attebery’s reference to *The Lord of the Rings* as the ‘bullseye’ of fantasy literature has been destabilized, this process has illuminated a different aspect of his work that could become known as ‘Attebery’s bullseye’. Namely, his conceptualizing fantasy as a fuzzy set creates a definition that is itself still the bullseye of defining the genre of fantasy. The adoption of neutrosophic sets broadens rather than replaces his work, and demonstrates the indebtedness still afforded his pioneering vision.

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