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Stories only have so much space to flesh out entire universes and systems of magic, not to mention delivering a satisfying conclusion, so fantasy writers working with low word counts have to be all the more creative. Of course, when it comes to fantasy, it's not all dragons and hobbits and games of thrones. The genre tales listed below run the gamut from stories about werewolves' daughters attending finishing school, to scenes of magic on the wintry Boston transit system, to at least one look at East African ogres. And all of these short stories can be read on a lunch break or while crammed onto the commuter train, to add just a little more magic to your day. Without further ado, check out some of the best fantasy stories that you can read online, for free, right now. If you're curious about the origins of the genre, check out 19th-century Irish writer Sheridan le Fanu's novella "Carmilla," a lesbian-inflected vampire story. Though le Fanu wasn't the first person to write about vampires — the mythical creature has its origin in European folklore, and the first modern vampire story was written in 1819 by John Polidori — his transgressive tale predates Bram Stoker's *Dracula* by 25 years and has built up a cult following in the 21st century. "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas" exists somewhere between fantasy and speculative fiction. Without spoiling too much, it's a lovely, horrifying story that builds a utopian city of dreams and then asks us to consider the hidden costs of a "perfect" world. Who suffers so that others can live out their fantasies? It's classic Ursula K. Le Guin, and after reading it, you'll definitely want to check out some of her work, including her iconic novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*. If you don't automatically want to read a story entitled "The Smallest Dragonboy," then I just don't know what to tell you. Anne McCaffrey is the undisputed queen of kid-and-dragon fiction (sorry, George R.R. Martin), and this is a delightful short installment of her fantasy/sci-fi series set on the dragon-filled planet of Pern. If you simply need more Anna McCaffrey after reading it, some other famous fantasy authors have recommendations for you. N.K. Jemisin creates strange and beautiful cities in her fantasy novels, like *The Broken Earth Trilogy* and *The Inheritance Trilogy*. But in "The City Born Great," she recreates a metropolis you may have heard of: New York. In this inventive tale, New York City has grown old enough that it is time for it to be "born" — but only if one reluctant midwife can keep its ancient enemies at bay. (Jemisin fans will recognize in this story the seeds of what would become her latest novel, *The City We Became*.) The "three wishes" trope — you know the one — is as old as fantasy itself. Someone is granted three wishes, they inevitably choose unwisely, and everything goes to hell. In "As Good as New", Charlie Jane Anders — author of *All the Birds in the Sky* and *The City in the Middle of the Night* — puts a new spin on the whole genie-in-the-bottle thing with this wholly original story, set after the end of the world. When you're the last human on earth, after all, you have to be careful with what you wish for. Princes, princesses, and true love are all staples of the high fantasy genre, but here, they're remixed anew. In "One True Love," a little princess is born in the midst of tragedy. Even worse, a prophecy at her birth foretells that if she ever finds her elusive "one true love," it shall be the downfall of the king (and if you've ever read a princess story before, you already know that prophecies are not so easily prevented). Malinda Lo, the author of *Ash*, is known for her retellings that challenge the status quo. Some of the best fantasy stories take old fairytales and give them a fresh twist. "Seasons of Glass and Iron" is like that, times two: The story follows Tabitha and Amira, who are both trapped in different tales. Tabitha must march around the world until she wears out seven pairs of iron shoes, and Amira sits atop a glass mountain, waiting for her prince. But when Tabitha accidentally climbs Amira's mountain, both stories go flying off the rails. "The Snow Train" is a departure from kings and princesses in faraway realms. And by that I mean, it's set in Boston. A story about snow and magical transit systems (and a little bit about the American Dream). The Snow Train takes one young boy living in a foster home on a surreal train ride. It'll put you in a very particular mood — one that will stick around for quite awhile. It would be hard to talk about fantasy short stories without including Hugo, Nebula, and MacArthur "Genius" Grant winner Kelly Link. "The Faery Handbag" appeared in her celebrated collection *Magic For Beginners*, and tells the story of Genevieve, a young woman whose grandmother, Zofia, claims to be protecting a community of fairies who live in her handbag. If you like ogres, inventive storytelling formats, or the brilliant mind of Sofia Samatar, then you're going to want to drop everything and read "Ogres of East Africa." It's a story told through an ogre cataloger's notes; as the author observes more about the lives of ogres, the reader gradually learns about his own life, too. Maria Dahvana Headley, who recently earned acclaim for her sublime new translation of the Old English poem *Beowulf*, also writes her own stories and novels. In "Give Her Honey When You Hear Her Scream," the author begins with an image familiar to those who know *Beowulf*: a monster lying in wait for the main characters. In this story, though, it's not kings and warriors, but a witch and a magician who embark on an adulterous romance. Carmen Maria Machado's genre-bending work has been widely embraced by both literary and genre enthusiasts ever since the publication of her debut collection, *Her Body and Other Parties*. This short story displays her trademark ability to play with unusual forms: It's presented as a crowdfunding campaign page that the main character, Ursula, has created to fund her journey to retrieve her sister from the land of the dead. "Godmeat" does literally mean "god meat," so, you know... proceed at your own risk. But if the idea of murdering ancient godlike beasts and then cutting them up into steaks appeals to your fantasy brain, then *Godmeat* is the creepy, weird, wildly imaginative story for you. (Just maybe don't read it while eating.) This Locus Award-winning story from Alyssa Wong melds fantasy and horror in an Old West setting, following an orphan, Ellis, who can — among other things — raise the dead and communicate with the desert. In addition to fiction, Wong's resume includes writing comics for Marvel and DC and video games for Blizzard Entertainment. You may have noticed that many of these stories appeared in the same literary journals. If you're in the mood for more fantasy short stories, you might want to consider buying copies of *Uncanny Magazine* or *Lightspeed Magazine*. This article was originally published on May 16, 2018 Overall Best Subscriptions You needn't even be a sports fan to enjoy these 34 hugely entertaining tales. You needn't even be a sports fan to enjoy these 34 hugely entertaining tales. Ring Lardner, James Thurber, Garrison Keillor, and even the great P. G. Wodehouse all had a swing at our national pastime. From the book: "Throughout the whole country nothing but the approaching series was discussed. Wherever civilization reigned, and in Jersey City, one question was on every lip: Who would win? Octogenarians mumbled it. Infants lisped it." — P. G. Wodehouse Originally Published: April 05, 2012







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