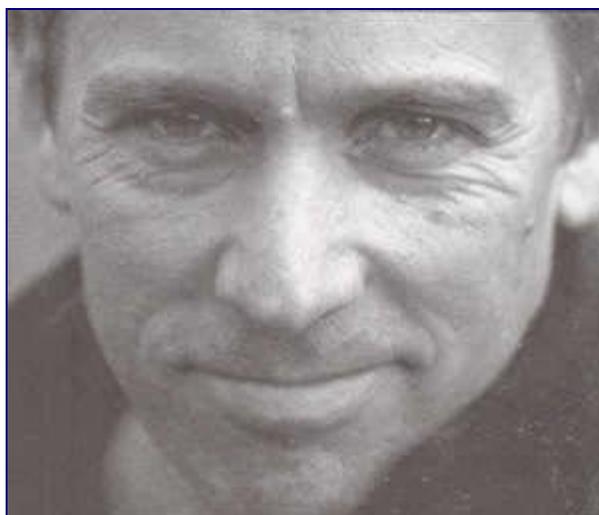


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A READER'S JOURNAL

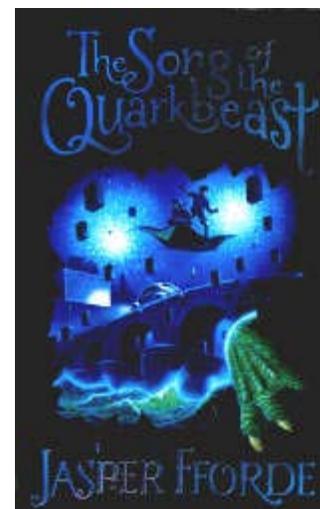
The Song of the Quarkbeast
A Novel

by

Jasper Fforde

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Book Review by Bobby Matherne
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Everyone is sad when a beloved character dies at the end of a novel,

as Jennifer Strange's strange pet, the Quarkbeast, did at the end of [The Last Dragonslayer](#), dying to save Jennifer's life. Okay, Quarkbeast did not talk much, only dropping a pithy "Quark" into a dragging conversation at times. And he did have a few anti-social quirks such as rows of large gnashing teeth which would send people scurrying away and screaming in terror. He had an appetite that could eat through a chest freezer, contents and compressor, in minutes, combined with a gentle disposition which made him an otherwise ideal pet. Plus Jennifer couldn't get rid of him if she wanted to, but was still sad to see him go. With this brief prologue, you may understand why hearts of Fforde readers jumped with delight when they read the title of this book, as it certainly meant the return of at least one Quarkbeast, in addition to hinting at some vocal skills not displayed in the earlier book.

The dark book cover also hints at the major quest for Jennifer in this novel: a bridge needs to be constructed by wizardry in a contest between Blix and Jennifer's wizards for control of the Magic energy reserves. The stones are shown being dropped into place by a wizard on a flying carpet to rebuild the bridge.

The Dragonslayer series of books are classified as Children's Literature, probably because the hero is a sixteen-year-old girl, a foundling who runs Kazam, a large enterprise which controls magicians and wizards who take care of various mundane activities like replacing all the plumbing in a house without disturbing a tea party in progress. Not the usual stuff of kid-lit, is it? Add in the presence of the Quarkbeast and its quantum quirks, and you have enough fictional fodder to satisfy the palette of any lover of literature, of whatever age. Had I not read Fforde's droll adventures of Thursday Next, I might never have found the Dragonslayer series appealing, but now I am hopelessly hooked on his off-the-wall writing style, no matter the genre. If he got into vampires, I might need to turn into a vampire first before reading those books, but lacking a midnight bite and a vampire Fforde novel, I'm a Fforde fan forever! How could one resist an author who could write the following passage which takes place after a lady arrives to ask help in finding a missing ring, and Tiger, the new foundling, is taking Miss Shard to present her request to the Magician Lady Mawgon.

[page 18, 19] 'It's a ring that belonged to the mother of my client,' she said. 'He would be here personally to present his request, but finds himself unavailable owing to a prolonged sabbatical.'

'Has he seen a doctor about it?' asked Tiger.

'About what?'

'His prolonged sabbatical. It sounds very painful.'

She stared at him for a moment.

'It means he's on holiday.'

'Oh.'

The Youthful Perkins had a unique skill among the various wizards at Kazam. One which was problematic because everyone liked him a lot, especially Jennifer.

[page 4] I liked him, too, but since his particular field of interest was remote suggestion — the skill of projecting thoughts into people's heads at a distance — I didn't know whether I actually like him or he was *suggesting* I like him, which was creepy and unethical all at the same time.

When Tiger is expected to go down into a well hanging upside down, he says it's going to be as "dark as the belly of whale down there," and Jennifer hands him a curious source of light.

[page 32] I passed him a glass globe from my bag, just one of the many useful objects that I liked to have with me on assignment.

'It runs off sarcasm,' I said, handing it to him.

'Great,' he replied, and the globe lit up brightly.

'You'll also need this,' I told him as I tied a toddler's shoe around his neck. When done, I spoke into the matching shoe I held in my hand.

'Can you hear me?'

'Yes,' he replied, 'I can hear you. Do I have to go down a well upside down while being sarcastic with a shoe tied around my neck?'

In a footnote, Fforde comments, "The correct term for this is 'sarcoluminescence' and it efficiently converts emotion to power, one of the central pillars of magic. It is one of the first spells to be taught to trainees." (Page 32) Hmmm, I'd never need to carry a flashlight if I had globe like that. Who needs batteries when you're a smart-ass with a never-ending supply of sarcasm?

When the magical devices like microwaves, cell phones, and GPS no longer worked in Jennifer Strange's world, there were only two magical things left working, and I recall when I first discovered the magic of the compass and the bicycle as a pre-teen myself.

[page 58] The only magical technologies of any size still running were north-pointing directional compasses and the spell that kept bicycles from falling over — both of which were so old that no one knew how to switch them off anyway.

The wizard Moobin was a loose cannon as a magician and reminded me of Dr. Emmett Brown in the movie series, "Back to the Future", as Jennifer tells him that Blix is trying to assume the name of "All Powerful."

[page 63] Moobin laughed.

'His arrogance will be his undoing. Right, then,' he continued, clapping his hands together, 'to work. What's the Holy Grail of the Mystical Arts?'

I never saw him so excited as when he was experimenting, and excitement made his wild hair look wilder, and his unkempt manner of dress that much more shabby. He looked less like a person, in fact, and more like an unmade bed with arms and legs.

The unit of power is a Shandar, named after a famous magician, who is reported on the back pages of this book to possibly be returning in the third book of this series, once it gets written. The Dibble Storage Coils can hold four GigaShandars or the equivalent of 26 cathedral-miles, the energy necessary to move a cathedral 26 miles. (Page 73) That's a lot of *crackle*, to use the wizardry term applied the actual use of magical energy as it shoots off the index finger or wand of a magician.

Another useful term is a *passthought*, a wizardry equivalent of our *password* which is a word or series of letters, characters, and number used to unlock some software application. With the advent of new visual-

oriented operating systems on pads of different sizes, *passimages* are beginning to appear, so perhaps *passthoughts* are not very far away. Here's how Fforde describes them in a footnote on page 76, "Very like a password, but infinitely more complex. To share a passthought you really need to have witnessed the event or emotion the passthought was based on." I can think of several *passthought* candidates I experienced which could not have happened to anyone else.

Recently we attended a performance of our Philharmonic Orchestra and sat in the second row with an excellent up close view of the conductor. Each time he pointed his wand, some new set of instruments began adding their voices to the composition we were listening to, as if by magic.

[page 77] Then there followed about five minutes of hand spelling which was almost indistinguishable from the gesticulations of a conductor. Indeed, I am told the skills are interchangeable, and the myth about wands may originally have begun with a conductor's baton.

Perhaps you'd like to know what it's like to be a foundling and a subject of the King; well, Jennifer didn't like it very much, like this time when the King summoned her to him.

[page 113, 114] 'Come here, child,' said the King, and I approached cautiously. The last time we had met he had me put in jail for daring to meddle in his plans to invade the Ducy of Brecon. Thankfully, 'averting a war with pacifist aforethought' couldn't be found anywhere on th statute books so I was released after two weeks of half-rations and a single sheet to sleep under in a damp cell without natural light. To anyone else it might have been unbearable, but after being brought up by the Blessed Ladies of the Lobster, it was really quite relaxing. I'd not slept so well for months.

When Jennifer finds that Quarkbeasts can make exact mirror copies of themselves, she asks why Quarkbeast Q26 and Q28 don't look alike since Q26 mirrored to create Q27 and Q27 did likewise to make Q28. Things suddenly got as strange as Jennifer's last name.

[page 172] No. It's more complicated than that. They create identical copies of themselves in six different flavors: *Up, Down, Charm, Strange, Top, and Bottom*. All are opposite and equal, but all uniquely different and alike at the same time.

As a physicist, I am embarrassed to admit that this scheme was created by my fellow physicists and was not a complete fabrication coming from the strange synaptic connections of Fforde's fertile brain.

It's not fair to have a book entitled "The Song of the Quarkbeast" and not hear the song until the book is nearly over, and for the song to be a mere whine. The song happens as two mirrored Quarkbeasts approach each other. Were they to touch, there would be a huge explosion, and as they get near to each other the low hum increases to a high whine, and then KABOOM! unless they quickly separate to a safe distance.

My first job as a physicist was at Oak Ridge National Lab in the Y-12 plant where uranium was enriched in electromagnetic separators known as *calutrons*. During WWII, brave and foolish technicians were known to place two highly enriched clumps of uranium on a lab top and with long rods, moved the clumps just close enough to reach early critical mass, which was indicated by a green glow and a hum, and then they would quickly move the two clumps away. Anyone who did this was known to have 'grabbed the Dragon by the tail'. One tech waited a second too long and was killed by the radioactive flash which occurred, and afterwards, the whole episode became a myth.

Jennifer does all she can to lure her pet Quarkbeast away from its and her ultimate extinction, and it is not moved by her pleas. But when Tiger offers to take it for a walk, her Quarkbeast pads away from everyone's extinction and offers a curt 'Quark' to Jennifer's 'Welcome back' and drags Tiger outside for their walk. The situation is defused for everyone but me. Me? I wanted a playlist of Quarkbeast songs and

all I got was a high whine. Sure, I was informed that the song was lovely, 'One of lament, of unknown knowledge, a song of resignation, and of love and poetry given and received" (page 257), but, even though listening to the song of the Quarkbeast may have formed a wonderful *passthought* for Jennifer, for me it was only a bunch of words creating more wonder than magic in me. The book ends with a Darth Vada move and a promise of the return of the great wizard, Shandar, in the next book, *The Return of Shandar*.

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If you enjoyed *The Song of the Quarkbeast*, especially the character of Jennifer Strange as she shared her adventures, you might wish to read about the equally strange and fun adventures of Jasper Fforde's character, Thursday Next. Click below to View 3 Books in the *Dragonslayer* Series and 6 Books in the *Thursday Next* Series:

