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The Conversation: Novelists Adam Sternbergh and Lev Grossman on Genre Fiction and Theories of Nerd-dom

By **Vulture Editors**



Photo: Courtesy of Jonathan Saunders and Marvin Orellana

A hit man in the hard-boiled style — terse, efficient, sarcastic, a guy with a code — wanders around a postapocalyptic New York City in which Times Square is off limits owing to a dirty bomb attack and the rich have retreated into a virtual reality existence. His name is Spademan and he's the main character in Adam Sternbergh's debut novel, *Shovel Ready*. Sternbergh, an editor at *The New York Times Magazine* (and a former editor at *New York*), was excited by the idea of smashing together two types of formerly lowbrow yet equally entertaining scenarios. "So many of my favorite things, from *Star Trek* to *Neuromancer* to *Firefly* to *Inception*, are basically built on taking the conventions of one genre and grafting them on to another." Sternbergh spoke with Lev Grossman — *Time* magazine book critic and author of *The Magicians*, *The Magician King*, and the final book in his trilogy, *The Magicians' Land* (out this August) — about nerd-dom, genre crossbreeding, and why literary fiction is just as conventional as fantasy books.

Sternbergh: Let's start with my thoroughly untested but undoubtedly groundbreaking Grand Theory of Nerd-dom. It's pretty simple: There are essentially three kinds of nerds: Sci-Fi Nerds (e.g.

Star Trek, *Star Wars*, etc.); Superhero Nerds (e.g., superheroes and comic books), and Fantasy Nerds (e.g. Tolkien, D&D, etc.). My theory is: You can't be all three. You can be one, you can be two, but never all three.

Grossman: I tend to be leery of theories of nerd-dom. It's always been my experience that nerd-dom in general is inherently resistant to theorization. I don't think we like to be nailed down in that way — we like to think of ourselves as weirder and less predictable than that. To paraphrase (I think) *Godel*, *Escher*, *Bach*, the nerd-dom that can be spoken is not the true nerd-dom.

Sternbergh: Growing up, I was always deeply, DEEPLY into *Star Wars* and comics, but fantasy stuff like Tolkien left me cold. Never played D&D. Didn't really get into C.S. Lewis (despite encouragement from my parents, who thought it was much more wholesome than reading *X-Men*).

Grossman: I like to think of myself as a three or even a four-quadrant nerd: SF, fantasy, comics, and video games. Though, granted, my obsessiveness about them isn't very equally distributed. Especially since becoming a dad, I have nowhere near enough time to keep up with games or, really, with comics either. I might suggest a refinement along the lines of, one's nerdiness is a fixed quantity, a non-expanding pie, which can only be allocated to one genre/medium at the expense of another?

Sternbergh: I like that — the Quantity Theory of Nerd-dom. There's only so much individual enthusiasm to be allocated, yet the potential objects of allocation keep multiplying. As a new dad myself (as of 5 days ago!) I'll be interested to see where my precious nerd-dom resources are allocated. This year I went to New York Comic-Con for the very first time, and I, in my dotage, could I.D. only about 30 percent of the cosplay costumes. It reminded me how many galaxies of enthusiasm there are out there to be enthusiastic about: *Doctor Who*, Manga, Bioshock Infinite, and on and on and on. Which felt kind of wonderful: so many gardens of imagination in full blossom.

Grossman: There is certainly a weird fractal quality to the fandom. The closer you look at a fandom, the more hidden complexity reveals itself. For instance, I consider myself a fairly serious *Venture Brothers* fan, but even I was surprised at Dragon-Con at the depth and complexity of the fan obsession JUST with Sergeant Hatred. Not that he's not a complicated guy.

Sternbergh: I wonder if this biodiversity of enthusiasms has contributed to the explosion (I've decided it's an explosion) of literary-genre crossbreeds — which is to say, novels that take seriously both the pleasures of genre and the pleasures of literary fiction? Discussion of these books — like Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policeman's Union* or Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* or your books, *The Magicians* and *The Magician King* — often focuses (probably correctly) on the reader experience: the notion that highly plotted genre books offer a kind of pleasure to readers that's hard to resist. But what about the appeal to writers? It seems to me that if you can write a thoughtful coming-of-age campus novel about a tight-knit group of friends, or a thoughtful coming-of-age campus novel about a tight-knit group of friends who are also learning to cast spells and eventually fight with fox-headed creatures and talking rabbits in a faraway kingdom (to choose an example entirely at random), that just from a pure imaginative possibilities standpoint, there's a real allure to the second one, particularly for the writer.

Grossman: The whole genre-crossbreeding topic is one I have lots of thoughts and feelings about, some of which are probably not yet fully matured into non-ranty form. It's a weird phenomenon, which I think, like Sergeant Hatred, is more complex than it appears from the outside. I mean, it's

interesting to note that a lot of critical writing about genre fiction focuses on the “constraints” and “predictability” of “genre tropes and conventions” (I don’t know whom I’m quoting here but just go with it). But then when you have (legitimately awesome) literary writers like Michael Chabon or Kazuo Ishiguro or Philip Roth doing alt-world or alt-history or cloning or whatever, suddenly those very same tropes/conventions magically become liberating!

Of course, deploying those tropes/conventions comes with a price — you sacrifice the cultural authority of realism, for example, which has been the dominant literary mode since oh about *Robinson Crusoe* or so. But I’m wondering about your experience with that, deploying (as you do in *Shovel Ready*) conventions of both postapocalyptic SF and hard-boiled mysteries. It’s like you’re dual-wielding

Sternbergh: So many of my favorite things, from *Star Trek* to *Neuromancer* to *Firefly* to *Inception* are basically built on taking the conventions of one genre and grafting them on to another. *Star Trek* was supposedly pitched as “Wagon Train in space.” *Inception* is a classic heist film, except the heist takes place in your mind. *Blade Runner* is basically Philip Marlowe versus the robots.

One of my favorite things about the *Magicians*’ books is that the characters are themselves aware (just as the readers likely are) of the existence of fantasy novels. For example, not only does the book make jokes about *Harry Potter*, but the characters in the book make jokes about *Harry Potter*. This not only adds several extra layers of enjoyment for the reader, but I imagine it adds several extra layers of possibility for you, as the writer — this suddenly becomes a much richer world for the characters to play in.

Grossman: One of the key ideas of *The Magicians* was to write a fantasy novel in which the hero had read other fantasy novels. At the time, it just seemed like realism: Why write an otherwise realistic contemporary fantasy in which, for some reason, *Harry Potter* did not exist? But it wound up giving the book an extra level of self-awareness. It became a way to ask questions, like: Why do we read fantasy? And how is it different from reality?

Sternbergh: I was thinking about this a lot while writing *Shovel Ready*, which I wanted to read not as an homage to genre conventions, exactly, but as a book that’s aware that those tropes exist — and more so, knows that the reader knows they exist. It’s kind of like the moment in the movie when the computer becomes self-aware. I was interested in the idea of a genre book that is, to some extent, self-aware.

Grossman: I actually have a private name for this idea (or actually it’s not private, I’ve used it in public, it just hasn’t caught on with anybody else): a literary singularity. Futurists use “singularity” to refer to a moment at which technological progress becomes so rapid and extreme it transforms human society radically and irreversibly; it’s often pegged to the arrival of the first human-level artificial intelligence.

I think there are analogous moments in the history of a genre, moments at which it sits up and looks at itself and as a result changes forever. One of the most important reading experiences I ever had was *Watchmen*, the Alan Moore comic. It was a superhero story, but a superhero story endowed with merciless self-awareness. It examined with brutal clarity the most sacred conventions of the superhero genre ... and found them wanting.

But weirdly this did not destroy the superhero genre. In fact, precisely by attacking its conventions, Moore wound up writing the greatest superhero story in history. Every superhero comic that came after *Watchmen* bears its mark; every superhero comic that came before it now reads differently because of *Watchmen*. The whole genre had become self-aware. A singularity had occurred.

Sternbergh: All of which doesn't sound like we're making a very good pitch for the originality and vitality of genre fiction. But these genre-mutts I think we're both interested in (as readers and writers) are free to draw not only on "reality" (most notably the common grist of our shared emotional and psychological struggles, dilemmas, and triumphs) but also on these whole vast galaxies of preexisting mythologies, with all their familiar conventions and metaphorical possibilities. To put it another way: In one story, a woman has her heart broken. In another story, a woman has her heart broken, then sprouts wings and flies away. Both can be enormously affecting. Personally, I'm more drawn to that second kind of story.

Grossman: The older I get the more I'm inclined to reject the kind of critical exceptionalism that literary fiction is allowed to maintain, whereby all other fiction is genre fiction, governed by conventions, and literary fiction just reflects reality. Literary fiction is a genre, too. It is governed by conventions; it just happens to be the case that one of those conventions is that it believes itself to have no conventions. (Also it believes itself to be hierarchically superior to genre fiction, a category to which it actually belongs, I would argue.) Not that there haven't been thousands of great literary novels that have examined their own conventions. But somehow we keep forgetting that. The genre of literary fiction is always waking up and falling asleep again, over and over.

Sternbergh: I reread your exchange with Arthur Krystal from a few years back, about genre fiction as a disruptive technology. I especially like the chess analogy you made: familiar pieces, infinite possibilities, which I think is exactly right. I also think that tomorrow's readers — promiscuously enjoying Harry Potter and *The Hunger Games*, George R.R. Martin and Kate Atkinson, Jonathan Lethem and Margaret Atwood, Gillian Flynn and Jennifer Egan — won't even make the distinction between literary and genre, or know there's a distinction to be made..

Grossman: Weirdly, I am a crusty old stickler for genre distinctions. I love affixing labels to things, and I bristle like a monstrous Gamma World hedgehog-critic hybrid whenever people talk about the boundaries between genres dissolving. Genre distinctions are exciting! It would suck if they dissolved! It wouldn't be fun to cross two genres — like say post-apocalyptic SF and hard-boiled crime, as in *Shovel Ready* — if there were no distinctions between them, and all fiction was just undifferentiated mush. I think the current vogue for crossing genre boundaries, including those between literary fiction and other genres, only makes us more aware of those boundaries.

In a good way.

Adam Sternbergh is the culture editor of The New York Times Magazine. Formerly an editor-at-large for New York, his writing has been featured in several other publications including GQ, the Times of London, and on the radio program This American Life. Shovel Ready is his first novel. He lives in Brooklyn and is at work on a second Spademan novel. (www.adamsternbergh.com; @sternbergh (https://twitter.com/sternbergh))

Lev Grossman is the author of the New York Times bestselling novels The Magicians and The Magician King. Grossman is also the book critic at Time magazine, and he has written about books

and technology for the New York Times, Salon, the Wall Street Journal, Wired, Lingua Franca, the Village Voice, and the Believer, while also making frequent appearances on NPR. He lives in Brooklyn with his wife and three children. He's 44, slightly built, and probably wouldn't last long in a post-apocalyptic, eye-for-an-eye world. ([www.levgrossman.com](http://levgrossman.com/)) ; [@leverus](https://twitter.com/leverus) (<https://twitter.com/leverus>)

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