The Advanced Reader’s Copy, or ARC, occupies a unique place in the book market. Produced cheaply and often in relatively large quantities, ARCs are pre-publication paperback editions of books distributed to reviewing press, booksellers, librarians, and, increasingly, targeted segments of the book-buying market (at New York Comic Con, for instance, publishers will frequently distribute ARCs of upcoming novels by debut Science Fiction and Fantasy authors). Also known as “galleys” or “uncorrected proofs,” ARCs were originally used primarily for copy-editing purposes before a book went to press.

While that is still part of their purpose – labels on ARCs warn readers that the contents may differ from the final work – their function in recent years has been geared more towards marketing. An ARC in the hands of a well-known author could generate a dust jacket blurb that boosts the book’s sales. One in the back room of a bookstore could there find its champion, a bookseller who will enthusiastically place the finished copy, months from now, in the hands of customer after customer. It goes almost without saying that an ARC on the desk of the New York Times Book Review can alter its fate forever, as can its presence on the desk of book reviewers for Time, NPR, Kirkus, and countless others – including hundreds of web publications and blogs. ARCs form an axis between publishers and readers, their circulation directly affecting the path a book takes from one to the other.

Already the object-ness of ARCs is in evidence – they gain their power through being in someone’s hands. Even in our digital age, and with the cost of printing and shipping galleys, it seems unlikely that this will change any time soon. Though e-books of ARCs are frequently available, readers prefer physical copies. What’s more, digital ARCs are more easily shared, and thus threaten the very thing the early copies are meant to drum up – sales. Their intrinsic materiality makes ARCs a natural target for collectors, especially since, despite their necessary physicality, they are also a breath away from ephemerality. Anyone connected to the book business encounters hundreds, if not thousands, of ARCs during the course of their work; the odds that any single one will profoundly connect with its reader are low. Those books that do forge a connection will be lent out and/or stored, and those that don’t will languish in back rooms or in precarious office piles. Even those that are kept do not have a guaranteed future – as previously mentioned, they are produced cheaply, and will fall apart if read too roughly or too many times. Whether recycled, thrown away, or worn out, most ARCs are ultimately destroyed. The survival of an ARC – especially an older one – is a matter of both chance and choice, a Russian roulette of collectability. Contained within the material object “ARC” is a host of contradictions; they are both solid and ephemeral, common and rare, and, most strikingly, a pile of inexpensive paper that somehow holds both a vast, other world within its pages and the future of that other world within our own.
Fittingly, it is their materiality which first drew me to ARCs. As a child, I would spend long hours at my local used bookstore perusing the shelves, pulling out any title that caught my eye. More often than not, what caught my eye were ARCs. These books were sheepishly priced at 25 or 50 cents in the face of bold “NOT FOR SALE” dictums on their covers. In my hours of browsing, I had trained my eye to recognize these books immediately. The paper was strangely white, the covers thin, and the trim size different than most of the other books on the shelf. I didn’t know what an ARC was at that point, but I could identify one without reading the title or pulling the book off the shelf; a quick glance over the top of the books would suffice.

I wouldn’t encounter ARCs again until much later in life. Directly after graduating I spent a brief time working in the publicity department of a children’s publisher, watching how the sausage gets made. I was responsible for galley mailings to both major publications and small bloggers, and I realized that only two things stand between an avid reader and an early copy of a book she wants to read – a book reviewing platform and an intern or publicity assistant. When I moved from publishing to bookselling, ARCs were in more abundance than ever before. I can guarantee there is no balm for the furious sting of an aggravated customer better than retreating to the back room to find an early copy of a book by an author you love, or one you can tell will soon become one of your favorites.

My transition to yet another book-centered job, that of a Ph.D. student in Stanford’s English Department, was probably a good move for the sake of my overcrowded bookshelves (if we’re being honest, a good move for my teetering piles of books and ARCs that stand in front of my criminally full bookshelves). I have been a reader, publisher, bookseller, and now a critic with interests in narrative culture, book history, and the formation of canon – if anything, my interest in ARCs has deepened. Through all of that I have been a collector, which brings us at last to the collection I’m sharing today – my Science Fiction and Fantasy ARCs.

While it’s true that the world-building inherent to any speculative work dovetails nicely with the ARC’s role in connecting the “book world” to our own, there is a far more mundane reason why I collect them – these are stories that I love. Any collector will tell you that the future value of a book can’t be guaranteed, but a book you love will always be one you’re glad you acquired. Beyond that, I have curated this selection from my collection to highlight the social and professional connections among my featured authors. Diana Wynne Jones is probably favorite author of all time; she was also a good friend and mentor of the much better-known Neil Gaiman. Gaiman, in turn, co-authored Good Omens with Terry Pratchett in 1990, after which they became lifelong friends. Garth Nix, too, has ties to Jones – he penned an introduction to a recent edition of her novel Fire and Hemlock and cites her as a major influence on his work. When I collect ARCs by these authors, I am assembling a library not only of uncommon editions of some of my favorite books, but also of artifacts of influential author networks.

Writer Lev Grossman, whose works also feature prominently in my collection, has a fascinating network of his own. As a book critic at Time, Grossman’s is one of the desks where publishers are sure to send their ARCs. In August of 2004, he positively reviewed the weighty Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell by Susannah Clarke, which went on to win the 2005 Hugo Award and was long-listed for the Man Booker prize. Grossman also had the chance to review Harry Potter
and the Deathly Hallows, and interview its author, J.K. Rowling. His 2009 breakthrough bestseller The Magicians draws unabashedly on Rowling’s work – the popular bookseller pitch for the novel is “Harry Potter for adults.” Grossman’s work at Time also connects him to Neil Gaiman through reviews and interviews. It’s lucky for me that I like his books so much – his position as both author and critic casts his web of connections very wide indeed. As far as the contemporary speculative fiction community is concerned, it’s not hard to play “Six Degrees of Lev Grossman.”

Though perhaps not as well connected as Diana Wynne Jones or Lev Grossman, the two remaining authors in my bibliography, Elizabeth Bear and Scott Lynch, nonetheless share an important connection to each other. Bear provided a positive blurb for the dust jacket of Lynch’s debut novel, The Lies of Locke Lamora, in 2006; last summer, she became his wife. If Gaiman, Jones, Grossman, Rowling and the others are more established figures in the fantasy canon – and thus have more elaborate networks of connection – Lynch and Bear are writers whose stars are still on the rise, with many connections still to be made. In the future I hope to broaden the networks my collection encompasses; the space of disconnection between an author like Scott Lynch and Neil Gaiman, seemingly empty, is full of possibilities for the future of my library.
**Bibliography**

In my bibliographic entries, I have used the wording (ARC, galley, uncorrected proof, etc.) featured on each individual book, which accounts for the discrepancies between terminology in the entries. Under each author’s entry, I have listed their works chronologically rather than alphabetically.

I have included photos of a few items from my collection. From these, it’s clear that the condition of many of my ARCs is far from pristine. While this makes my bibliophile heart ache, I also like the way it emphasizes their fragility, and how unlikely it is that they would be preserved at all.


**Clarke, Susanna. Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell. Advance Reading Copy. New York: Bloomsbury, 2004.**

Besides being reviewed by Lev Grossman, *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* also received a positive blurb from Neil Gaiman – though he must have had an earlier copy of the ARC than this one!

This ARC represents the beginning of a great friendship between two behemoths of the fantasy world. I obtained the signature in person at the book launch for Amanda Palmer’s book *The Art of Asking* at Porter Square Books in October of 2015. Gaiman is married to Palmer, and was there supporting her and signing books for fans.

*Neverwhere* isn’t just fantasy supernova Neil Gaiman’s first major novel, it’s also one of my favorite collecting finds. This *Neverwhere* proof – the UK edition, no less! – is one of my exciting in-person finds, uncovered in a London Oxfam shop in the Spring of 2015. One of my priorities on my first trip to London was to scour thrift stores for British copies of my favorite books – I could not believe it when I saw this sitting on the shelf.


*Codex* is Grossman’s second novel, and one of those irresistible books about books. Edward and Margaret (a personal banker and a graduate student, respectively) are hired to search for medieval manuscript. Their search will take them to libraries around the world, and what they discover will cause them to turn on each other before the search is over.


*The Magicians* is Grossman’s big break. The trilogy chronicles the life of Quentin Coldwater after he is accepted to Brakebills University – a college for magicians. Commonly called “Harry Potter for adults,” the series explores what we’d really do with magic: make stiff drinks, have great sex, and become kings in the magical worlds from our favorite childhood books. Part gritty coming-of-age novel, part homage to fantasy literature and its readers, the series is a *New York Times* bestseller and has recently been turned into a television series on Syfy. I obtained the signature in person at a release event for *The Magician’s Land* held at Brookline Booksmith in Brookline, MA in 2014.


One benefit of collecting fantasy series is that it makes it easy to know exactly what you’re looking for. I own ARCs of the first and third books in Grossman’s trilogy, but am missing the second installment: *The Magician King*. I obtained the signature in person at a publisher signing at Book Expo America 2014 at the Javits Center in New York City.

Grossman caught a lucky break in 1996 when a friend started work at a literary agency and agreed to represent his first novel, *Warp*. The book was published the following year and went out of print almost immediately. In fact, it was so unsuccessful that when *The Magicians* was published, *Warp* was not even listed beneath *Codex* as one of Grossman’s previous works. An aimless tale about a twenty-something slacker named Hollis obsessed with *Star Trek*, the book contains early prototypes of characters and themes Grossman would go on to expand in *The Magicians*. When *Warp* was republished in 2016, it was pitched mainly as a curiosity for readers interested in examining the series’ origins. I hope to one day find an ARC of the 1997 edition – if it exists. I obtained the signature in person at *Warp*’s release event hosted by Harvard Bookstore at the Brattle Theater in Cambridge, MA.


As discussed in my essay, most ARCs have long survival odds. This is especially true for older books. That this copy of *Drowned Ammet* has survived nearly forty years in such good condition is practically miraculous, especially because Jones never achieved widespread fame.


This was the book Diana was in the process of writing at the time of her death in 2011. It was finished by her sister and published three years later to little fanfare. Under these circumstances, the arrival of *The Islands of Chaldea* at the bookstore I was working at was especially poignant—an unexpected opportunity to be surprised by my favorite author one last time.


Scott Lynch’s Gentleman Bastards sequence—a mixture of *Ocean’s Eleven* and *Lord of the Rings*—immediately found its audience when the first installment was published in 2006. Publishing delays because of personal circumstances in the author’s life have somewhat diminished the success of the series, but plenty of loyal fans await the fourth installment, *The Thorn of Emberlain*. I obtained the signature in person at the launch event for *The Republic of Thieves* at Pandemonium Books & Games in Cambridge, MA.

I obtained the signature in person at the launch event for *The Republic of Thieves* at Pandemonium Books & Games in Cambridge, MA.


I was able to request and review the most recent installment of Lynch’s series – it’s always exciting when I am able to become a part of the networks I’m tracing, even in a small way. I obtained the signature in person at the launch event for *The Republic of Thieves* at Pandemonium Books & Games in Cambridge, MA.

*Sabriel* is the first book in Australian author Garth Nix’s Old Kingdom trilogy (which has recently expanded to included two companion novels). The series chronicles a young girl who must defeat monsters of Death using seven magical bells. I obtained the signature in person during Nix’s appearance as Guest of Honor at Boskone 53 in Boston, MA.

*Lirael* is one of my earliest acquisitions, found while perusing the shelves of McKay Used Books and CDs in Knoxville, TN, circa 2001. I obtained the signature in person during Nix’s appearance as Guest of Honor at Boskone 53 in Boston, MA.


*Abhorsen* was originally the final book in Nix’s Old Kingdom trilogy, though the trilogy has recently been expanded to a series, with two more installments – *Clairel* (a prequel) and *Goldenhand* – a sequel. I obtained the signature in person during Nix’s appearance as Guest of Honor at Boskone 53 in Boston, MA.


I obtained the signature in person at a publisher signing at BEA 2014.


I obtained the signature in person at a *Goldenhand* book tour stop at Harvard Bookstore in Cambridge, MA, in the Fall of 2016.

With the exception of *Good Omens*, this is the earliest Pratchett ARC I have been able to obtain. Pratchett was remarkably prolific, publishing over fifty novels between 1983 and the time of his death in 2015. I hope to someday find ARCs of some of Pratchett’s earlier works.


*Raising Steam* is significant because it is the last installment of Pratchett’s iconic Discworld series that was published before his death in 2015. Diagnosed with Alzheimer’s in 2007, Pratchett finished several of his later novels by dictation.

No collection of fantasy literature could be complete without the inclusion of *Harry Potter*. I was lucky to come across American ARCs of *Chamber of Secrets* and *Prisoner of Azkaban* online – I imagine the ARCs of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* will remain outside my price range for some time, as will the UK ARCs of the first three installments. No ARCs were produced for books 4 – 7, either in America or the UK.

Links of Interest

The following links elaborate on some of the personal connections between authors mentioned in my essay.


