

## Books of Magic

### The Series

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*Still to be reviewed:*

The Books of Magic: The Names of Magic

*all reviews by [jen](#)*

What would you do if four creepy guys in trench coats emerged from a dark alley and asked if you believed in magic? You'd probably do what Timothy Hunter, the young hero of **The Books of Magic**, does: you'd run. 12-year-old Tim is no fool, and he's naturally suspicious when four mysterious men appear one day to offer him experiences beyond his imagination. Tim, it transpires, has the potential to become the greatest wizard of his age--a potential he may fulfill for good or for evil.

Despite a superficial resemblance to another magically gifted young boy with dark hair and glasses, Tim's story has little in common with Harry Potter's (for one thing, his glasses are significantly dorkier). Created by master storyteller Neil Gaiman and continued by John Ney Rieber, **The Books of Magic** reflect a grittier, more ambiguous, and quintessentially Neil Gaiman take on fantasy. As he did in **Sandman**, Gaiman takes characters from the DC universe and mixes them with older mythological figures to people a wonderfully eclectic world.

Like any good piece of speculative fiction, **The Books of Magic** are as much about the human experience as they are about magic. As John Ney Rieber writes in his introduction to **The Books of Magic: Summonings**, "Tim and Molly actually live in a realm that has never been mapped by the Royal Geographic Society...people who've lost touch with the place call it 'Adolescence.'" Tim's journey through this strange and dangerous land is the journey of a teenager struggling to find an identity: questioning his parents, questioning his world, questioning himself. The various people in **The Books of Magic** who would like to control Tim's destiny are neat metaphors for the forces vying to shape our identities every day.

Artistically, the series recalls **Sandman**; it shifts back and forth between a traditionally "realistic" comic book style, a more impressionistic use of elongated figures and limited color palettes, and delicate Charles Vess fairy tale illustration (Vess contributes several covers to the series and draws the fairyland scenes in the first book). Gaiman's original volume uses a different artist for each story, while Peter Gross and Peter Snejbjerg trade off for most of the rest of the series. Readers will react differently to different takes on the characters, but all the artists preserve the skinny awkwardness of Tim. Another common thread is Sherylin van Valkenburgh's use of color to emphasize the bleakness of Tim's modern-day London and his sense of disorientation as he moves through different worlds (the sickeningly pink color scheme of Hell is particularly memorable).

The **Books of Magic** series is ongoing, and further collections are planned. Fans will want to read **The Books of Fairie**, which explore the fairy characters from **The Books of Magic**. There's also a series of

novels, based on the comics stories, by Carla Jablonski. Despite the "mature readers" warning on their covers, **The Books of Magic** are quite appropriate for young adult and high school collections. They do feature some gore, used mainly to underscore the evil of various villains. Despite a drop in the quality of storytelling in the later books, the series deserves a place in libraries for the strength and relevance of its story.

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### **Books of Magic**

Written by Neil Gaiman

Art by John Bolton, Scott Hampton, Charles Vess, Paul Johnson

ISBN: 1563890828

DC Comics (Vertigo), 1993

Despite his initial distrust of the afore-mentioned mysterious men, Tim Hunter's life could use some magic. Our hero lives with his widowed father, who barely seems to know Tim is there. His would-be magical mentors, who include an endearing version of **Hellblazer's** John Constantine, take him on a tour of the magical universe that includes heaven, hell, fairyland, various comics, and the end of time. At the end of the journey, Tim must decide whether to accept his magical gifts or return to his previous ignorance. First, however, he must survive the trip.

Each chapter of this original volume features a different artist, giving it a rich variety of styles. Gaiman explores some of his favorite themes: the nature of good and evil, magic as a double-edged sword, and the importance of looking beyond your own reality. While readers will want to know what happens to Tim afterwards, the story can also stand alone.

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### **The Books of Magic: Bindings (1)**

Written by John Ney Rieber

Art by Gary Amaro, Peter Gross

ISBN: 1563891875

DC Comics (Vertigo), 1995

Reeling from the revelations of the the first volume, Tim Hunter is finding it hard to cope; on top of his normal adolescent angst, he has to contend with his magical destiny as well as doubts about who his real parents are. His quest for answers leads him back to fairyland, and into a host of new dangers. A visit with Death, the sympathetic and frank figure from **Sandman**, helps Tim see that finding himself is more important than unravelling the past. John Ney Rieber handles Gaiman's characters well, and Gary Amaro and Peter Gross create one of the more artistically cohesive volumes of the series. **Bindings** introduces characters and storylines that will appear throughout **The Books of Magic**, and features Tim's first attempts to use his powers. Jane Yolen provides an inspiring introduction.

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### **The Books of Magic: Summonings (2)**

Written by John Ney Rieber  
Art by Peter Gross, Peter Snejbjerg, Gary Amaro, Dick Giordano  
ISBN: 1563892650  
DC Comics (Vertigo), 1996

In **Bindings**, Tim traveled beyond the confines of the ordinary world. In **Summonings**, characters and beings from other realms intrude on Tim's world with a vengeance. The king of the fairies, a woman who had a child with a somewhat fallen angel, and a sympathetic succubus named Leah are just a few of Tim's unexpected visitors. What's more, Tim discovers that imagination can be a dangerous thing when you have unheard-of magical powers. **Summonings** introduces one of the series' most compelling characters: Molly, long-time friend and potential girlfriend of Tim. It also introduces another Tim--someone Tim might become if he makes the wrong choices about his power. This future Tim, his mind twisted by a deal with a demon, would like to make sure that his future comes true. Since he's the world's most powerful magician, who's to stop him? **Summonings** may confuse readers at first with its multitude of new characters, but the series regains its footing when it focuses on Tim and Molly's growing relationship.

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### **The Books of Magic: Reckonings (3)**

Written by John Ney Rieber  
Art by Peter Snejbjerg, Peter Gross, John Ridgeway  
ISBN: 1563893215  
DC Comics (Vertigo), 1997

Tim wants to introduce Molly to the world of magic, but doing so exposes her to dangers she had never imagined. Trapped by the demon Barbatos, Molly discovers a dark plan to turn her into the "perfect" woman for the future Tim. **Reckonings** contains some of Rieber's funniest and most inventive ideas, particularly his wonderfully bureaucratic Hell. While Molly fights to avoid being turned into a living fashion doll, Tim must survive various trials (including navigating a Hell that's "remodeling to serve you!") before he's reunited with his love.

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### **The Books of Magic: Transformations (4)**

Written by John Ney Rieber  
Art by Peter Gross  
ISBN: 1563894173  
DC Comics (Vertigo), 1998

After Tim and Molly's unscheduled jaunt to Hell and back, the adults in their lives become concerned about their behavior. Forbidden to see Tim, Molly tries to come to terms with the fact that her boyfriend may become an evil villain. Meanwhile, Tim and his father have a chance to rebuild their relationship (if magic doesn't get in the way). Mr. Hunter has finally emerged from his grief and found a new love, but Tim's future step-family includes a boy who may be dangerously unhinged.

**Transformations** brings Tim face to face with the consequences of the magic in his life. Desperate to avoid hurting Molly, Tim accepts help from the sorceress Circe. But can any outside force really prevent him from making the wrong choices? **Transformations** is perhaps the most moving installment of the

series, as Tim and Molly do some painful growing up.

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### **The Books of Magic: Girl in the Box (5)**

Written by John Ney Rieber

Art by Peter Gross and Peter Snejbjerg

ISBN: 1563895390

DC Comics (Vertigo), 1999

When **Girl in the Box** opens, Tim is running away from home. Struggling with the tattoo Circe gave him, Tim travels to America. He hopes to find Zatanna, the only sane mage he's ever met, and convince her to teach him. Meanwhile, Molly finds herself trapped in fairyland in a contest with the vicious Amadan (the fairy court jester). On his arrival in the U.S., Tim runs into the succubus Leah (who's enjoying a modeling career) and is tempted away from his goal for a bizarre sojourn in the desert. While Molly struggles for survival in the jealous Titania's realm, Tim and Leah encounter a hip hop Cupid and Psyche and a kitchen-sink collection of magical happenings.

With **Girl in the Box**, Rieber's grasp on the story seems to slip. Tim drifts through this installment, paralyzed by uncertainty, while the story's other characters offer shallow psychological insights into his behavior. The L.A. sequences don't serve Tim's story very well--it's very hard to pull off pop culture riffs like the ones Rieber attempts here. While **The Books of Magic** have always mixed magical and mythological elements from all over the world, **Girl in the Box** and the volumes that follow suffer from too many new ideas that never seem to develop.

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### **The Books of Magic: The Burning Girl (6)**

Written by John Ney Rieber and Peter Gross

Art by Peter Gross and Peter Snejbjerg

ISBN: 1563896192

DC Comics (Vertigo), 2000

In **The Burning Girl**, Molly finds that her stay in fairyland may be extended indefinitely. Tricked by Titania into making a classic mistake, Molly's fury sparks an all-out war for the future of the fairy realm. The struggle between fairyland and Hell, in which Rieber and Gross throw some light on fairyland's origins, is the focus of the sixth volume. The conflict eventually reaches Tim, although his powers prove unnecessary. Tim's attempts to learn about his magic by using it continue to be frustrated, as Zatanna is reluctant to take him on as a student. As Tim gropes for a purpose in life, Molly returns to the human world only to find herself irrevocably changed. Tim's confusion makes him oblivious to her anguish, and he risks driving away the one person who can keep him grounded. All Tim's friends and mentors seem to have decided to let him flounder, and the end of **The Burning Girl** finds him no closer to understanding his powers.

Artistically, **The Burning Girl** is one of the loveliest and most inventive chapters in the series. It has moments of cleverness--Rieber and Gross create an interesting back story for fairyland with some elements of British Isles lore, and there's a fascinating (if disappointingly unresolved) sequence with a group of children raised by a rebel librarian in the American west. Unfortunately, the writing is still not up to the

standard of the first books. Tim's story continues to advance slowly, if at all, and the characters we have come to love seem robbed of the satisfying resolutions we've come to hope for. Librarians will want to be aware of a slight increase in the use of profanity in this volume, as well as a few panels of sensuality.

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### **The Books of Magic: Death After Death (7)**

Written by John Ney Rieber

Art by Peter Gross, Jill Thompson, Temujin, and Richard Case

ISBN: 1563897407

DC Comics (Vertigo), 2001

**Death After Death** brings Tim home to London to find his place usurped by a changeling and his future step-brother Cyril crazier than ever. While he's happy for his dad and Holly, Tim is still hurting after the climatic events of the last book. Meanwhile, there seems to be no rest for the young magician; on his way home, Tim finds himself caught up in yet another war. This time, Heaven is at war with itself; while the noble Araquel fights to protect Tim, less benign forces conspire to use Cyril against him. Rieber, Gross, and Temujin conceive a hilarious sequence in which Cyril, advised by some talking toys, is convinced he's a saint. Some entertaining visuals and the return of the tough but sympathetic Circe are the redeeming features of **Death After Death**. The angelic war storyline is somewhat gruesome, with a resolution that may leave readers scratching their heads. Tim's story does finally advance in the seventh volume, as he tries to renounce his magic in the hopes of protecting his loved ones from the chaos it seems to bring. Leah reappears in the final pages to teach him a lesson about his power, but the closing revelations are somewhat vague. **Death After Death** offers some hope that future volumes will see Tim actually learning what it means to have magic, but readers will be left without any clear idea of where the story is going next.

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