

# **The Magicians Study Guide**

## **The Magicians by Lev Grossman**

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## Plot Summary

“The Magicians” is a young adult fantasy novel by Lev Grossman which follows the life of Quentin Coldwater as from the age of 17 through his early 20s. When the novel begins, Quentin is a resident of Brooklyn, New York, and though he has a comfortable life, he is unhappy with it as well. Listless, he is looking for something more, but he doesn’t know what, and he doesn’t know where to find it. Quentin has a crush on his friend Julia, who is dating his friend, James.

Quentin is soon after accepted to Brakebills, a school of magic along the Hudson River in upstate New York. There, Quentin befriends and later dates the bookish-but-pretty Alice, and befriends the punkish-but-kind Penny. At Brakebills, Quentin learns the craft of magic. His teachers remind him that magic is neither an art nor a science, but a craft which must be constantly practiced and honed. Quentin, who has for a long time felt unhappy and without purpose, does feel temporarily happy and as if he has a purpose during his time at Brakebills.

After graduation, Quentin becomes listless once more. Even though he is in a committed relationship with Alice, he feels as if there is still something missing in his life. Quentin begins using drugs copiously, parties all night, and ends up cheating on Alice, which breaks Alice’s heart. As a result, she breaks up with Quentin. Nevertheless, Alice, Penny, and their friends learn that interdimensional travel is possible with use of a magic button, and so they decide to travel to the land of Fillory, the setting of their favorite novels as children. What they hope will be a lighthearted adventure turns out to be much more real – and terrifyingly so – than they had anticipated.

In Fillory, they are confronted by the Beast. The Beast, formerly Martin Chatwin, a child and character in the Fillory novels, has turned into an evil man. Martin, who is determined to rule over all of Fillory, is seeking the magic buttons that make interdimensional travel possible, and will allow him to control Fillory and what goes on inside its environs. Quentin and his friends battle the Beast, which leads to Penny having his hands bitten off, Quentin very nearly being killed, and Alice sacrificing herself to defeat the Beast.

Afterwards, Quentin and the survivors return to Earth. Back in New York, a heartbroken Quentin reforms his ways and commits to a steady, paying job in consultancy, though he again becomes listless and unhappy. Months later, three of Quentin’s friends return to visit him, and convince him to go back to Fillory to be kings and queens with them.



# Book I, Broolyn – The Beast

## Summary

Brooklyn – High school seniors Quentin Coldwater, James, and Julia, all 17, walk through Brooklyn. Quentin is jealous of James and Julia holding hands, wanting to be alone with Julia instead. Quentin likes to do magic tricks. Quentin's mother is a commercial illustrator, his father is a medical textbook editor, and his family is middle-middle class. Quentin is tall, thin, and slightly-hunched, but has a good GPA and a good life – yet he is unhappy. He thinks there must be more to life. He reflects on his favorite series of five books, Christopher Plover's "Fillory and Further", published in England in the 1930s, and about the lives of five Chatwin children in a land of magic as they holiday in Cornwall while their father is away fighting in World War I.

Quentin, James, and Julia arrive at an old house where they are to interview for college with a Princeton alumni. James tells Quentin that no one else understands Quentin like he does. Quentin and James go in while Julia goes to the library. Inside the house, Quentin and James find a dead body on the floor. The responding paramedics say the dead man died of a cerebral hemorrhage. A pretty paramedic in her mid-20s hands Quentin and James two manila envelopes as they leave, saying that the dead man probably left the envelopes for the boys. Only Quentin takes his.

After James heads over to the library, Quentin looks in the envelope, in which there is a notebook with what is claimed to be "Book 6: The Magicians" of Fillory and Further. A note whips out in the wind, and Quentin goes after it, working his way into a park hedge. When he leaves the hedge, he is on a massive green lawn. A young man on the lawn tells Quentin he is now in upstate New York.

Brakebills – Eliot, the young man, brings Quentin across the lawn to a large house. The entire place is referred to as Brakebills by Eliot. At the house, Quentin is officially welcomed by Dean Henry Fogg and brought in to take a preliminary examination with dozens of other kids of every kind. He meets a male teenager named Penny, who dresses like a punk and has many tattoos. He then goes through a series of exams with other professors, who ask him to do everything from magic tricks to making a map of the school grounds. He is then called before Fogg and all the professors, who tell him to do some real magic. Quentin becomes angry, and is able to build a house of cards without using his hands and send a sword flying around. Fogg says Quentin passes, and everyone claps.

Eliot – Quentin feels exhausted, but Professor Van der Weghe tells him this is normal for having performed a first Minor Incantation. Quentin has breakfast the next morning with Fogg. Fogg explains that Quentin is at Brakebills College for Magical Pedagogy, and he has been accepted to attend for five years. He has been selected because he has an aptitude for magic. His parents will not be given all the details. Quentin agrees



so long as he can start immediately. He meets up with Eliot who shows Quentin around the grounds. The school is on the Hudson, kept hidden from view by spells.

**Magic** – Magic, explains Professor March, is a craft. He teaches a practical magic course, with a minimum of theory. Quentin and a girl named Alice are invited to try some magic, and the class is assigned homework. Quentin learns quickly that real magic is nothing like Fillory magic.

**Snow** – Quentin, Penny, and Alice are selected by March and Van der Weghe to advance a year in classes. To do this he is tutored by young, pretty Professor Sunderland. Quentin quickly develops a crush on her. Quentin also becomes quick friends with the brainy Alice and the punkish but serious Penny. Alice's older brother attended Brakebills, but has died. Alice has discovered Brakebills House on her own while searching for it. Quentin also discovers that Eliot is a homosexual. When the term ends, Quentin and Alice pass to the next year, but Penny fails.

**The Missing Boy** – For Christmas break, Quentin meets up with James and Julia back in New York. Julia is now a heavy smoker, and even James seems put off by this as well as Quentin. Quentin returns to Brakebills for second year classes. He befriends his old lab partner, Surendra, as well as a pretty second-year blonde girl named Gretchen who has a limp. They decide to play a game of welters, a game which resembles chess, where teams try to capture squares on the grounds.

Quentin learns from Surendra that Eliot is a part of the Physical Kids group, who do physical magic for their Disciplines. Penny suddenly appears and punches Quentin the face, and the two boys fight. As Quentin recovers, he meets the pretty paramedic, who tends to him. Penny comes to Quentin, saying he was angry at failing and Alice and Quentin going on without him. Both boys are punished and put on probation.

**The Physical Kids** – Quentin and Alice begin their third year at Brakebill's in September. They are both grouped as Physicals –Alice for her ability to handle light (phosphoromancy) and Quentin because they need more Physical kids. Eliot brings Quentin and Alice into the fold, which includes Janet and Josh.

**The Beast** – Quentin gets to know the Physicals. Josh is casual and large, but excels at spellcasting. Janet's parents are rich lawyers, and Janet is bad at picking men, though she is very loyal. Quentin also gets to know the Physicals' unofficial faculty advisor, Bigby, an older but incredibly powerful pixie. In Professor March's class, during a spell he accidentally bungles, a strange man appears and then disappears. Fogg later reveals that there are other worlds beside the magical world, and that the strange man is a Beast from another such world. The Beast's motivations are unknown, but seems to have been looking for someone or something. It turns out the beast has eaten a student named Amanda Orloff alive.



## Analysis

“The Magicians” is a young adult fantasy novel by Lev Grossman which follows the life of Quentin Coldwater from the age of 17 through his early 20s as he becomes a magician. When the novel begins, Quentin is an average 17 year-old, who, though he has everything going for him in his life, is not happy with his life. Here, the theme of coming of age is given an important starting point, as Quentin is clearly unappreciative for what he does have. Indeed, he spends a lot of time complaining to himself in his own mind that James is dating Julia instead of him, and this seems to be his primary problem with life. In general, and apart from Julia, however, he cannot quite understand why he is so unhappy. It feels to him as if something is missing from his life, but what that is, he cannot say, either.

Quentin is also different from his friends in one other way as well. While he and all of his friends have read the Fillory fantasy books when younger, Quentin continues to love them to this day. This will be immensely important as the novel unfolds, for the dual theme of reality and magic will become crucial. Quentin understandably believes that the world of magic is nothing more than fantasy, and the streets of Brooklyn are reality. There is no connection between the two, Quentin believes – until he comes across the manuscript for the sixth Fillory novel, and through the hedge emerges on to the grounds of Brakebills magical college. The reality of the world of fantasy and magic is nearly overwhelming for Quentin, who looks at everything almost a dream because it seems too good to be true.

Here, the theme of magic enters the novel front-and-center. Magic, originally believed to be the stuff of fantasy, is embraced by Quentin as part of the overall real world. It does exist, and he endeavors to learn the craft of magic at Brakebills. Indeed, Quentin is reminded that magic is not an art or a science, but a craft which requires practice and honing of skills. Indeed, Quentin becomes so enmeshed in the world of magic that the other real world, in Brooklyn, seems more surreal than real. Interestingly enough, the real world of magic is nothing like the world of magic in Fillory, Quentin learns. Quentin also comes to discover that there is a dark side to magic, and this occurs with the appearance of the Beast, who eats Amanda Orloff alive before he disappears. As is explained by Fogg, there are other worlds beside the magical world of Fillory, and not all of these worlds are good.

Early in the novel, the theme of friendship also becomes incredibly important, and integral to the way that things will turn out. Quentin, in the real world of Brooklyn, seems to have few friends, and the few that he does – Julia and James – are dating one another. However, James mentions to Quentin that no one else knows him the way that James does – and this statement the reader should pay attention to, for it is a specious statement. James never learns that Quentin is studying magic, and what appears to be a close friendship is truly not a close friendship – or seemingly so. At the same time, Quentin makes friends with other kids quickly at Brakebills, including Eliot, Alice, and Penny – all of whom will prove invaluable as friends in the coming chapters.



## Discussion Question 1

In the world of magic, there appears to be both real and fantasy elements. What in the world of magic is real? What in the world of magic is not?

## Discussion Question 2

When the novel begins, Quentin is unhappy with his life. Why? What do you believe this says about his character?

## Discussion Question 3

Why do Quentin, Penny, and Alice become friends with one another so quickly? How does their friendship with Quentin differ from Quentin's friendship with James and Julia? Why?

## Vocabulary

sulky, innumerable, limned, bureaucracy, nonchalantly, lucidly, illegibility, superficially, camaraderie, iridescent, sangfroid, matriculating, insouciance, malingering, preternaturally, zealous, anamorphically, eidetic, rarefied



# Book I, Lovelady – Graduation

## Summary

Lovelady – The school goes through a cleansing purge of the grounds and effects changes to attempt to prevent a repeat occurrence of the Beast with new concealments. Fourth year begins. A welters tournament is announced. Everyone has to play to elevate the morale of the school. Quentin, Eliot, Alice, Janet, Josh, and the others begin to practice.

They continue to practice in the coming weeks. Games begin soon afterward, and championships are set for November, and the Physicals make the game. Just before the game, Josh goes missing. Quentin goes to find him speaking to Lovelady, a type of traveling salesman of magical charms and relics. Josh says he is hoping to buy a charm to help him be less of a screw-up. They then go to the game and win.

Marie Byrd Land – During Fourth Year, half the Fourth-Years disappear and return at the beginning of the year, and the other half at the second part of the school year. No one knows why. Quentin and the others go in January of their fifth year instead, for the Beast's appearance has ruined the schedule. During the night, Professor Van der Weghe brings all the intended students up to the roof where they strip naked. They are then transformed into geese.

They fly past New York City. They fly all the way down to South America. They fly to within 500 miles of the South Pole, where they attend Brakebills South, in Marie Byrd Land. There, they will truly come to understand magic, not just learn it. It is headed up by Dean Mayakovsky. As the weeks pass, the students try more and more complicated magic, as well as perfecting its practice. They transform into arctic foxes one afternoon, during which time Alice and Quentin have sex. Other students follow suit, and in the weeks that follow, they continue to have sex as people, sometimes in orgies. But Quentin and Alice never join these. They think they might be in love with one another, but are not sure. As a final test, the students must rely on themselves to return to Brakebills in New York. Everyone makes it.

Alice – Quentin's parents move to Boston. Quentin reads through the Fillory series over the summer. Julia, dressed like a goth, suddenly appears one day and demands to know if Quentin got into the magic school. Julia explains she was rejected from the school, and demonstrates that she can do some magic. She wants to go to the school, and says she is no longer seeing James. He tells her the school is somewhere along the Hudson.

Back at school, Quentin and Alice talk about how much they enjoyed the Fillory novels. He tells her there really was a Chatwin family, but tragedy struck two of the brothers. One was killed in World War II, and the other vanished. Likewise, there are elements of magic in the novels that Plover wasn't altogether incorrect about. Quentin and Alice then





have sex, and begin to have sex whenever the chance arises. Eliot, Josh, and Janet all graduate from school that year.

Emily Greenstreet – Over the summer, Quentin, Eliot, Josh, Janet, and Alice get together. Janet tells the story of Emily Greenstreet, the first person to leave Brakebills voluntarily in 150 years. Emily attended school eight years before. She was quiet, kind, mousy, and studious. Janet explains that Emily fell in love with one of the professors, and another boy fell in love with Emily. The professor begins and ends an affair with Emily, which devastates Emily. Emily begins to converse with a being from another realm, Doris, through fountain water. Doris teaches Emily a spell to change her appearance –but it makes Emily look worse. In the attempt to help Emily, the boy in love with her turns himself into a niffin. Only the professor manages to restore Emily. The professor is Mayakovsky, ordered to transfer to Brakebills South or be fired. Emily went to work in Manhattan. Alice believes her brother was the niffin, who had to banish himself for what he had become. Alice also thinks Janet is in love with Eliot, but obviously can't have him.

Fifth Year – Quentin goes to see Dean Fogg and tells him what has happened to Julia. He says he will handle it. Quentin, Penny, Alice, Gretchen, and a girl named Beatrice all become Prefects, and are tasked with watching over the younger students. It also makes it easier for Alice and Quentin to have more sex. Quentin also learns more about Alice, including that she is from Illinois.

He spends a vacation with her there. Her parents are magicians, too. They live like Romans. Alice explains that magicians out in the world need to find a cause or something to believe in, or they lose it mentally. The loss of her brother led to Alice's parents losing it. She makes Quentin promise they will never end up that way, and they have sex.

Graduation – Quentin and Alice travel around the world to other magical schools playing their welter teams. Back at school, the year goes by quickly. He and Alice graduate. They are given pentagram tattoos on their backs with loyal cacodemons devoted to defending their owners that can be summoned in distress. Janet, Josh, and Eliot are there to congratulate them. Josh tells Quentin and Alice they are going to bring them away from Brakebills.

## Analysis

Quentin continues his education at Brakebills, and magic and fantasy become important themes as he progresses through his studies. Hoping to elevate the spirits of the students at the school after the encounter with dark magic by way of the Beast, a welter tournament is organized. The world of reality and magic continues to blend, the reader will note, by the travel of the Fourth Year students to Brakebills South at the South Pole as geese – and by the unusual memories Julia has of having spent some time at Brakebills, even though she was not accepted as a student.



The reader should pay attention to this unusual circumstance – that a rejected student's memory has not been totally erased with respect to Brakebills. This is not a normal occurrence. That Julia is able to perform magic on her own – rudimentary though it is – is not normal, either. This serves as an omen for future events, but whether the omen is good or ill is yet to be seen.

In this section of the novel, friendship blossoms into something like romance, as Quentin and Alice have sex and begin a relationship which then truly does turn into romance. Quentin's relationship with Alice means that Penny's own feelings for Alice are unrequited, and Penny is in the same place as Quentin was a few years before. Unfortunately for Quentin, Penny does not handle the situation in the same way, as Penny punches Quentin in the face as seen in the first section of the novel.

Likewise, Quentin is callous and flippant about his relationship with Alice, almost flaunting it. This demonstrates that Quentin still has much growing to do, for he himself was in Penny's place not long before – and he should be more sensitive and empathetic to Penny's feelings about everything that happens. Penny seems to have been marginalized the way Quentin was with James and Julia.

Quentin also comes to see more about the dark side of magic, both with respect to Fillory, and to what goes on in the world of magic itself. Quentin – together with his friends – learns that Plover must have at least known something about magic and the magical world, for there is enough in his novels to provide evidence to this fact – and the real world Chatwins, obviously also characters in the novel, demonstrate there is more truth to the novels than previously anticipated. In real life, one of the Chatwin brothers was killed in battle, and the other disappeared. Time and time again, everything Quentin believes to be mere fantasy turns out to be reality – including the people in the Fillory novels.

There is also one more mark of darkness to magic in this section of the novel. Quentin, visiting Alice's parents, sees two magicians who have lost their way in life. They have magic, money, and everything they could ever want, but are listless and unhappy. They are reflective of Quentin, who promises Alice that the two of them will never be that way. However, given Quentin's relative lack of character growth, this seems unlikely to the reader. Indeed, Quentin's coming of age seems to be marginally slow at best.

## Discussion Question 1

Despite the rising darkness around Brakebills, Dean Fogg organizes a welters tournament at the school, and with other schools. Why?

## Discussion Question 2

Why do Quentin and the other students travel to Brakebills South? What is it they are supposed to learn there? What ultimately happens as a result of the time they spend in Brakebills South?



## Discussion Question 3

Not everything in the magical world is light. Elements of magical darkness are creeping into the plot. Describe three such areas of darkness, and how they affect the plot.

## Vocabulary

compulsory, transmute, equilibrium, palladium, incongruous, minutiae, interminable, impervious, avuncular, sacrosanct, docent, epoch

# Book II

## Summary

Manhattan – It is November. Quentin and Alice are living in New York. Brakebills already seems a lifetime ago. All graduated magicians have their financial needs taken care of, courtesy of a slush fund at Brakebills. Quentin and Eliot hit up the night life, doing drugs and partying until dawn. Each time Quentin gets home, he feels horrible about what he has done, but knows he would be bored otherwise. Alice does not participate in, or approve of Quentin's lifestyle. At a dinner party, a man named Richard appears – the only one of them to have successfully moved into professional wizardry, in the financial community. He is also a committed Christian, rare among magicians. That night, Quentin sleeps with Janet.

Penny's Story – Penny shows up the next morning, having unset the defensive spells around the apartment. He explains he has dropped out of Brakebills and moved to a small town in Maine, Oslo. He has become listless, lonely, and unproductive. At a night club in Bangor, he runs into Lovelady. Lovelady had come into a truly powerful magical object, well beyond Lovelady's expertise. Penny then shows a pearl-white-colored button of about an inch across inside which resonates with magical power which he bought for \$80,000 in gold and diamonds from Lovelady.

Penny announces they are all going to Fillory. At the end of the Fillory novel "The Wandering Dune", Helen and Jane Chatwin receive a gift of five magical buttons which allow them to transition to the world of Fillory. Helen ultimately hides all the buttons in her aunt's house, for she feels their power is too strong, and wrong, because a trip to Fillory had to be earned, not taken like a bus. Penny explains that, although much of Plover's writing is fictional, he is correct about interdimensional travel.

Penny explains he has spent the past three years in the Neitherlands – with Professor Melanie Van der Weghe making Penny's dimensional travel a unique, and first-time Discipline of study. Quentin denies this is all possible. Alice calls him a pussy, grabs his wrist, and then grabs the button and Quentin. All three vanish.

The Neitherlands – Quentin, Penny, and Alice appear in a city fountain, with the city empty and quiet around them. Quentin is stunned to discover he has been wrong about everything. Alice then suddenly attacks Quentin, slapping him and calling him a whore for having slept with Janet. Penny tells them they need to pay attention, or they'll be in danger. This applies to travel. Penny always marks his route with orange spray paint. He also tells them they were his only friends at Brakebills. He goes on to explain that light spells do not work in the Neitherlands. There is no way to get into the buildings in the city, each one of which is full of books.

Penny says that he, Quentin, and Alice are going to Fillory, and that it will change everything. Time does not change in Fillory, Penny explains, saying they could be gone



for an entire semester and no time would have passed on Earth at all. Penny thinks Fillory needs them. They return to the apartment.

Upstate – Everyone decides to embark on an adventure to Fillory: Quentin, Alice, Penny, Josh, Anais, Richard, Janet, and Eliot. They spend several days preparing what they'll need – from food to clothing to supplies to gold. Penny believes they will be given a quest in Fillory, or might be made kings and queens like the Chatwins. They also practice defensive spells. The entire time, Alice avoids Quentin, and sleeps with Penny.

## Analysis

Quentin's promise to Alice that the two of them will never end up like Alice's parents has already been broken, mere months after graduating. Quentin has everything he could possibly want: the use of magic, a beautiful girlfriend, and endless money, but rather than doing something important or productive with his life, he indulges in parties, drugs, and infidelity. Any character growth that Quentin may have undergone has been eradicated by his selfishness and his carelessness. He has something beautiful with Alice, and he throws it away because he can't get his own act together.

Penny, previously marginalized, reappears with force. He brings more evidence to the fact that Plover must have known something about magic because there is much in his novels that reflect reality. Here, the theme of reality and fantasy again comes to the fore, as what everyone perceives to be fantasy is, in fact, reality.

The five magical buttons that make interdimensional travel possible that Plover wrote about in his Fillory novels actually exist. The reader should pay careful attention to the symbolic use of buttons as a means for travel. Buttons open and close seams – and open and close the seams between dimensions. The buttons are considered to be too powerful by Helen Chatwin, because they allow travel between worlds that is far too easy, when travel to places like Fillory should be earned. The reader should also note that Penny says that traveling to Fillory will change everything, but the others have no idea how correct Penny's prediction will be.

Indeed, the theme of friendship becomes crucial at this stage in the novel as Penny demonstrates to his friends that interdimensional travel is possible. He does not share this knowledge beyond the teachers at Brakebills, but chooses his friends above all others outside the school to tell. What is considered real – one world, and one world only – is now seen to be false.

Interdimensional travel is truly possible, and Penny brings Alice and Quentin to the Neitherlands as proof of this. It is stunning to the reader at this point that Quentin should still harbor any doubts about what is real and what is possible, but he does. This is certainly the case with Fillory. Quentin still has doubts as to whether or not travel to a place like Fillory is possible, but Penny proves him wrong.

The theme of friendship also becomes important here as the group of individuals that decide to journey to Fillory are all friends – important due to the loyalty between them,



though this loyalty has been strained to a degree by Quentin's cheating on Alice. How this will play out remains to be seen.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why does Quentin cheat on Alice despite promising her that he will never allow them to fall apart the way that Alice's parents have? How does Alice respond to Quentin's infidelity? Why?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Why does Penny come to see his friends? What does he reveal to them? What does he suggest they do? Why?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why does Penny suggest that he and his friends travel to Fillory? What could possibly be gained from this?

## **Vocabulary**

loll, aloof, consummate, accosted, obscenely, nether-world, transitional, interdimensional, benevolent, epiphenomenon, enumerate



# Book III

## Summary

Fillory - Quentin, Alice, Penny, Josh, Anais, Richard, Janet, and Eliot travel to the Neitherlands, and then to Fillory. It makes Janet weak, but nobody knows why. They travel through the woods and near a stream, where they find a water nymph. The nymph tells the group they are cursed, the war is not theirs, and gives them an ivory horn to use if needed when all hope seems lost.

They continue on, nearly being shot by a crossbow wielded by a praying mantis in a horse-drawn carriage. They begin to wonder who is on whose side, and what war is going on. Richard thinks they should leave Fillory. Alice says they should stay and piece together clues as to what is happening. They decide to follow a female tree.

Humbledrum – The walking birch tree leads them to an inn. There, an old man, a woman in her early 30s, and a young girl are seated at a table. They meet a bear named Humbledrum. The inn fills up as the evening comes on. The silver birch sapling introduces itself as Farvel. Farvel explains that everyone fears the Watcherwoman, a witch supposedly killed by the Chatwins, but rumored to be back. Farvel says that Fillory truly needs are kings and queens, the stout of heart, to rule from Castle Whitespire. The thrones must be won, and have been empty for too long. Only children of Earth can hold them.

The next morning, the eight friends meet Dint and Fen, a man and woman in their 40s who will act as guides to Ember's Tomb to retrieve a fallen crown. They are experts in battle magic. Richard stays behind when the group sets out. Dint and Fen explain that the payment they require will be new rulers to bring order and goodness back to Fillory.

Ember's Tomb – The group arrives at Ember's Tomb – though it is not Ember's tomb, and Ember is not dead. Each generation, each age, finds a different use for the place. At the Tomb, person-sized woodland creatures attack, and Dint and Fen fight them off. Anais uses a sword to kill a mortally-wounded hare.

The group then goes into the Tomb. They battle through some Black Elves and bees. Alice lets loose her cacodemon which finishes them off. They then face down a hideous creature called a grimling. Janet kills it. In a moment to themselves, Alice explains she slept with Penny because she was drunk and she didn't think how much it would hurt Quentin. Quentin doesn't want to hear it. Alice is angered that Quentin doesn't see how good his life is, and how nothing is ever enough for him. They end up kissing. The group then fights off killer monkeys. Fen is killed in the fight.

The Ram – The group comes to a chamber. They are exhausted. They meet Ember the Ram, a god who welcomes them. Penny offers Ember their fealty, for the crown is with Ember. Ember explains there are laws beyond their comprehension that guide things.



All hope seems lost, so Quentin blows the ivory horn. The Beast then appears. The Beast slaps Ember into unconsciousness.

The Beast says that Fillory is his now, and the old gods will all die. The Beast reveals himself to be none other than Martin Chatwin, who found a way to stay in Fillory by consorting with friends in the Darkling Woods. Martin demands to know who has the button, and bites Penny's hands off at the wrists. Martin explains the buttons are the only things that could force him to return to Earth – and he is gathering them all up. Only two remain – the one the group has, and the one the Watcherwoman has. He explains he returned to Earth only twice – once to kill Plover, and once during class at Brakebill's. Martin cannot have the group running around trying overthrow him, so they must all die.

Quentin realizes that Martin, like they all are, is trying to escape himself – but no matter where they are, they cannot do that. The entire group fights back against Martin. Quentin unleashes his cacodemon, which Martin eats. Alice transforms herself into a niffin – a righteous destroying angel who gives her own life to defeat Martin. She battles Martin back. Quentin, injured during the fight, passes out.

## Analysis

Reality and fantasy continue to blend together as Quentin, Penny, Alice, and the others begin their journey in Fillory. Recalling the novels from their youths, all the friends approach the trip as a grand adventure, rather than a life or death situation. Indeed, their carelessness is telling in how they conduct themselves with the nymph in the water. While they are not willing to get in the water with her out of concern, they are willing to accept a gift from her – an ivory horn meant to be used in a situation of hopelessness.

The reader will sense the ominous nature of the gift, but Quentin and the others do not view the gift with any sort of skepticism. To them, they are still on a grand adventure of fantasy – but the fantasy of the novels, safely ensconced on the pages, is now real and raw around them. Their world is shaken when a praying mantis in a carriage attempts to kill them, and they realize that spending time in Fillory is not something they can take lightly.

Indeed, everything in Fillory reinforces the idea that what is considered fantasy is actually real in this place. Beyond the praying mantis and the nymph in the stream, Quentin and the others encounter an alcohol-swilling bear named Humbledrum, magic warriors in Fen and Dint, and Ember the Ram, a god in Fillory whose power is limited by the boundaries of the world in which he exists. Even magic has rules, as the group of friends learn.

As they have learned previously, there is also a dark side to magic. Still not thinking clearly, the friends utilize the horn given to them by the water nymph, which leads to the appearance of the Beast. The Beast is the consummate source of darkness in the world of Fillory, far more evil and more powerful than has been previously understood. Magic





is not all light; Quentin is reminded of this as he and his friends must now confront the Beast.

In the confrontation with the Beast, friendship among Quentin, Alice, Penny, Eliot, and the others is given its most severe test, for the friends are confronted with pure evil. Terrifyingly, the Beast is revealed to be Martin Chatwin, who, like Quentin, has constantly been trying to escape himself. Martin is an example of what will happen to Quentin if Quentin doesn't turn his life around.

Nevertheless, Quentin rallies with his friends to face down the Beast, who severs Penny's hands, nearly kills Quentin, and is only defeated by Alice, who makes the ultimate sacrifice to save her friends by giving up her own life. That Alice gives her life should be noted not just because it is done on behalf of all of her friends, but that it is done out of love for Quentin.

## Discussion Question 1

Early on in *Fillory*, Quentin, Alice, Penny, and the others do not take their travels in *Fillory* seriously. Why? What ends up changing their minds?

## Discussion Question 2

What do Martin Chatwin and Quentin have in common? What distinctions are there between them? Do you believe that Quentin could end up a Beast like Martin? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Alice give her life to defeat the Beast? Do you believe Alice should have made this sacrifice? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

philosophical, ferrous, frisson, petulantly, dubiously, promontory, abysmally, profound, scintillating, persiflage, apropos, arboreal, protuberant, excrescences, fealty

# Book IV

## Summary

The Retreat – When Quentin wakes up, he is tended to by a centauress. She tells him he has been asleep for six months and two days. Quentin is beside himself with sadness that Alice has given her life for him. Quentin learns that a group of humans dropped him off at the place in which he is now recovering – a monastery-like place – and that they haven't been seen in months.

Quentin slowly recovers, though his grief for Alice grows. A note from Eliot has been left behind for Quentin, saying that they will meet again, and that he is sorry for the way everything worked out. Also left for Quentin is the sixth novel, “The Magicians” of Fillory he has not seen in years. The novel picks up where the fifth, “The Wandering Dunes”, left off, with the quarrel over the magic buttons. Thirteen-year-old Jane Chatwin recovers the magic buttons, helped by Prickleplump the Hedgehog.

Looking up, Quentin is stunned to see Jane herself sitting before him. She is the Watcherwoman, having assumed the role to keep Martin at bay. She can control time with a magic silver pocketwatch. Jane is the only Chatwin left, she says. Quentin wants her to turn back time. She says it is not possible, that she has tried. Quentin lunges for the timepiece, but she smashes it on the ground.

She tells Quentin not to judge Martin too harshly, for Martin was sexually abused by Plover as a child. Quentin then sees the note that he chased the first day in the hedge. All it says is, “SURPRISE!” He realizes he and Alice have merely been pawns to defeat Martin. Quentin later leaves the monastery-like place to hunt down the Questing Beast.

The White Stag – Quentin heads after the Questing Beast, a muscular white stag, keeping his mind focused on it rather than Alice. He encounters it weeks and weeks later on an unknown continent. By shooting the stag with an arrow, Quentin is granted three wishes. He wishes that Penny had his hands back and Alice was no longer a niffin, but this cannot be done. He wishes to go home instead, and he reappears in front of his apartment in Tribeca in New York. He finds Anais in a bar, who says she and the others had a hard time getting out. Penny survives the loss of his hands, but remains behind in the Neitherlands. Quentin then goes to Brakebills.

Kings and Queens – Quentin has taken on work as a junior member of the PlaxCo account team at Grunnings Hunsucker Swann as an associate management consultant, a job secured for Quentin by Fogg. At a work meeting, he meets Emily Greenstreet. Emily does not miss the magic world, and thinks it is too dangerous for its own good. They tell each other about their lives, and Emily concludes that, sooner or later, magic leads to evil. One day, outside his apartment window, Quentin is stunned to see older version of Janet and Eliot (who wears a crown), and a woman he does not recognize at first is Julia. They encourage him to come to Fillory. Quentin agrees to go.



## Analysis

Only when Quentin is confronted with everything he has lost, does he truly realize he has allowed his life to head in the wrong direction. His conceptions about what is real and what is fantasy have all been shattered. His one true source of happiness in life, Alice – someone he took for granted – is now gone. Having suffered so much loss, Quentin has been given a sobering dose of reality. Just because there is magic, just because Fillory can be visited, doesn't mean that life is somehow less valuable, or more difficult to lose. Life is just as fragile.

Because of this, Quentin finally settles down, taking a stable job, and ditching the drugs, alcohol, and partying. Life is too precious to be wasted – but Quentin goes a little too far in utterly isolating himself outside of work. Life shouldn't be thrown away, or waited away, and this is part of what compels him to want to return to Fillory in the end.

At the same time, Emily Greenstreet reminds Quentin of some sobering truths when it comes to magic. She explains that magic, no matter how used, always leads to evil. The reader is here reminded of the buttons, intended for good, but used for evil by the Beast. The horn, intended to be used in a situation of hopelessness, is now recognized as being an instrument of evil. The journey to Fillory, meant to be an adventure among friends, instead leads to physical dismemberment and death.

The world of magic in Fillory is hijacked and manipulated by Martin Chatwin for his own evil ends. But rather than discouraging Quentin from leaving the magical world behind, he decides to return to it. Instead of returning to the world of magic on Earth, he returns to the world of magic in Fillory – with his friends. This might seem strange at first, but on reflection, it isn't so strange at all. Magic might bring about evil, but it can also be used against evil. Quentin has nothing left in New York – and so he goes somewhere that his friends will be, to somewhere he will have something.

## Discussion Question 1

How does Quentin's character as a person change after the death of Alice? Why?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Emily Greenstreet maintain that magic only ever leads to evil? Does Quentin agree with this assertion? Why or why not? Do you agree with her assertion? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Quentin decide to return to Fillory? Do you believe this is a smart thing to do? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

daintily, circularity, quintupled, inevitable, unimpeachable



# Characters

## Quentin

Quentin Coldwater is the main character of the novel "The Magicians". The novel begins when he is 17 and follows him through his early 20s. Quentin has an easy, middle-middle class lifestyle, and has never had to work for, or earn anything in his life. As such, he is unhappy with his life, and longs for more. When he discovers Brakebills, Quentin decides to study magic.

There, he befriends Penny, and falls in love with Alice, whom he ends up dating. After graduation, Quentin becomes lethargic and unhappy with his life yet again, engaging in parties and drugs, and cheating on Alice. This leads to their breaking up. When Penny reveals a magic button allowing them all to travel interdimensionally, Quentin goes along to Fillory, where he and Alice slowly begin to make up.

When they and their friends are confronted by the Beast, and Quentin is nearly killed, it is Alice who sacrifices herself for everyone else. Her death leaves Quentin shaken, who decides to stabilize his life. He realizes how much he has truly lost with the passing of Alice. At the end of the novel, however, Quentin decides to return to Fillory.

## Alice

Alice is the primary love interest of Quentin. She is slightly older than Quentin, is incredibly intelligent, and pretty as well. Alice is a student at Brakebills, a native of Illinois, and the daughter of two magicians who have lost their way and their purpose in life. She hopes she will never become like them. When she learns that Quentin is cheating on her, she breaks up with him only later to save his, and everyone else's life in Fillory when confronted by the Beast. By doing this, she becomes a niffin, and sacrifices her own life.

## Penny

William, nicknamed Penny, is a punk kid who is also a student at Brakebill's. He is very intelligent and very incisive, and becomes quick friends with Quentin and Alice – though Penny falls for Alice later on. It is Penny who purchases the magic button from Lovelace, and it is Penny who first manages to travel interdimensionally to the Neitherlands. He encourages the others, including Quentin and Alice, to join him on an adventure to Fillory. While in Fillory, Penny loses both his hands and nearly dies. As a result, he decides not to return to Earth, but to remain in the Neitherlands.



## Dean Henry Fogg

Dean Henry Fogg heads up Brakebills School for Magical Pedagogy. Kind and fair, Fogg is a powerful magician who carefully oversees the selection of students that attends Brakebills. Fogg is one of the first people to respond when the Beast appears at Brakebills, and he helps to strengthen the school's defenses after the Beast disappears. Fogg later secures a consultancy job for Quentin after the trip to Fillory.

## Professor March

Professor March teaches practical magic classes. He is a proficient professor, but not without imperfections. A bungled spell example during class leads to the appearance of the Beast.

## Eliot

Eliot is the first student that Quentin meets at Brakebills, and the two eventually become friends. Eliot is gay, and prefers to spend most of his time – even during vacations – at Brakebills, so he doesn't have to be gay in the outside world.

## Julia

Julia is one of Quentin's closest friends, and is his crush at the beginning of the novel. Julia does not return Quentin's feelings, but like Quentin, is tested at Brakebills, though she does not get in. She spends the rest of the novel trying to get in, and at the very end, somehow manages to find a way to travel to Fillory to become a queen. She reappears at the end of the novel to entreat Quentin to return with her, Eliot, and Janet, to Fillory.

## Martin Chatwin

Martin Chatwin is both a fictional character in the Fillory novels, and a real child who is sexually abused by the author of the novels. Martin is a sibling of the other Chatwin children who find a way to Fillory, and when he discovers that magical buttons exist which can allow them to travel back and forth at will, he becomes enraged because his sister wants to hide the buttons, believing that travel to Fillory must be earned, rather than free.

Martin then spends years of his life finding ways to stay in Fillory, ultimately culminating in his search for the buttons, becoming a horrible, well-dressed version of his former self –the Beast.



## The Beast

The Beast is a monstrous man, formerly Martin Chatwin, that seeks to control Fillory through control of the magical buttons that allow travel to the fantasy land. The Beast appears at Brakebills when a bungled magical spell makes interdimensional travel possible. There, the Beast eats a female student before returning to Fillory. The Beast later appears, prepared to destroy Quentin and the others, but is himself stopped by the sacrifice of Alice.

## Janet

Janet is one of the friends that Quentin makes while at Brakebills. She is intelligent and overtly sexual. Janet and Quentin later sleep together after graduation, and is one of the members of the group that Penny forms to travel to Fillory. Janet goes on to become one of the people who entice Quentin to return to Fillory.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Magic buttons

Symbolic for opening and closing, coming and going, the magic buttons are given to the Chatwin children at the end of the fifth Fillory novel, “The Wandering Dune”. The magic buttons are saturated with magic, and enable individuals to freely travel between Fillory and Earth. Buttons open and close seams – and open and close the seams between dimensions.

The Chatwin children divide over the buttons, some believing they should be used, with others believing they are too powerful, and that going to Fillory has to be earned. The buttons are ultimately hidden, but found one at a time by Martin Chatwin as he slowly becomes the Beast. By the events of the novel, Martin needs to locate two more buttons to control them all – one sold to Penny by Lovelady for \$80,000, and which Quentin, Penny, Alice, and the others use to travel to Fillory.

## Fillory novels

Fillory novels are written by Christopher Plover in the 1930s in England. The “Fillory and Further” novels entail the magical adventures of the Chatwin children in Fillory. The books are favorites among youths, and for Quentin, they remain his favorite novels. Originally believed wholly fictional, the novels turn out to be largely true. It is believed no more than five Fillory novels were ever written, but Quentin comes into possession of a sixth in the form of a handwritten manuscript.

## The Magicians

“The Magicians” is the handwritten sixth Fillory novel by Christopher Plummer, written in a notebook and passed into Quentin’s possession by a pretty young magician who also doubles as a paramedic. “The Magicians” picks up where the fifth, “The Wandering Dunes”, left off, with the quarrel over the magic buttons. Thirteen-year-old Jane Chatwin recovers the magic buttons, helped by Prickleplump the Hedgehog.

## Note

A note accompanies the manila envelope given to Quentin which contains the sixth Fillory novel. The note reads “SURPRISE!” and is meant to convey that Fillory and the magical world are real. It is this note that blows away in the wind, and which Quentin chases, leading him through a hedge and onto the lawn of Brakebills.





## Charms

Charms are magic spells cast by magicians in the novels. Charms often serve protective or defensive ends. Brakebills, built along the Hudson River, is hidden by a concealment charm. Out in the world, magicians cast protective charms around their homes and apartments to protect them from enemies.

## Drugs

Drugs are taken in copious amounts by Quentin and Eliot following graduation from Brakebills. Drugs are a form of excess and entertainment to Quentin and Eliot, though Quentin eventually comes to feel bad about taking them. He only stops taking them when he goes to Fillory.

## Alcohol

Alcohol is consumed in large amounts by Quentin, Eliot, Alice, Janet, and the other students at Brakebills. It is while drunk that Quentin and Janet have sex with one another, and while drunk, Alice and Penny have sex with one another.

## Sword

A sword is wielded by use of magic by Quentin during the final stage of his entrance examinations at Brakebills. Quentin manipulates the sword to fly around the room and come near Dean Fogg, who then admits Quentin to Brakebills.

## Ivory horn

An ivory horn is given to Quentin and the group when they encounter a beautiful water nymph in the woods. She tells them to use the horn in a moment of hopelessness. When the horn is used, rather than bringing relief, it brings evil, for it summons the Beast.

## Silver watch

A silver watch which controls the progress of time is owned and used by Jane Chatwin, who has become the Watcherwoman. For years, she has turned back time and struggled to attempt to undo the evil Martin has done, but without success. Knowing that Martin has finally been defeated, and knowing that Quentin wishes to turn back time, Jane destroys the silver watch so its power can no longer be harnessed.

# Settings

## Brakebills

Brakebills College for Magical Pedagogy is a school for magicians on the banks of the Hudson River in upstate New York. Concealed from public view by a charm, the school features a main building, boathouse, expansive grounds, and various other smaller outbuildings. The school is home to at least a few hundred students, who come from all over the United States. It is the only magical college in the country. Acceptance to the school is predicated upon passing an entrance examination. From there, students attend classes for five years, learning the craft of magic. It is at Brakebills that Quentin, Richard, Eliot, Penny, Alice, Janet, Josh, and the others attend classes, and it is from Brakebills that they graduate. It is from Brakebills that Julia is rejected.

## Brakebills South

Brakebills South is the southern branch of Brakebills, and is located near the South Pole. There, students attend classes in their fourth year, and receive intense practical magic training, with little emphasis on theory. At Brakebills South, the students learn to transform into animals, and lose themselves to their animal natures. It is at Brakebills South that Quentin and Alice first have sex as foxes, and it is at Brakebills South that the other students constantly have sex with one another.

## Fillory

Fillory is a magical land of fantasy originally believed by Quentin and the others to be wholly fictitious. Fillory is a magical land of anthropomorphized animals and creatures that features into a quintet of novels, "Fillory and Further", by Christopher Plover. Fillory is visited by the Chatwin children during World War I, who rule as kings and queens, and keep the peace by keeping evil away.

Since their departure, Fillory has grown dark and is indeed of salvation. When Penny discovers that Fillory is real, he, along with Quentin and the others, journey to Fillory to see if they can receive a quest. But Fillory is not the happy, magical adventure that they believe it to be. They are nearly killed by a praying mantis, deceived by a nymph, are attacked by wasps and killer animals, and must confront the Beast, who intends to exert total control over Fillory.

## Brooklyn

Brooklyn is one of the five boroughs of New York. It is the hometown of Quentin, James, and Julia. It is where they attend school, hang out, and live with their families. Brooklyn, Quentin originally believes, is all there is to the real world. Yet, it is in Brooklyn, as

Quentin chases a note through a hedge, that he ends up on the Brakebills campus along the Hudson River.

## **Neitherlands**

The Neitherlands is an interdimensional world partway between other dimensions and Earth. It is an old, abandoned town, with buildings full of books. The buildings themselves cannot be entered. The town also features a fountain, which acts as a portal for people who come and go through the Neitherlands. Toward the end of the novel, when everyone returns from Fillory, Penny remains in the Neitherlands. There, he is finally able to enter one of the buildings, and shuts himself away, inside.



# Themes and Motifs

## Coming of Age

Coming of age is an important theme in the novel “The Magicians” by Lev Grossman. Coming of age involves the personal, spiritual, moral, or emotional growth and maturation of an individual often based on real world experiences. In the novel, it is primarily the character of Quentin who comes of age in certain respects – but still ends up having much to learn in other regards, as well. Here, the journey is not merely travel, but a journey of the self as well.

When the novel begins, Quentin readily admits to himself that he is not happy with his life. His life, however, seems to be quite stable and a blessing. His parents are married, by all accounts appear to be good parents, are middle-middle class, and Quentin seems to have no real desires, needs, or things beyond his reach. Indeed, Quentin is intended to interview for Harvard at the beginning of the novel – something most kids will never get the opportunity to do.

The reader can safely observe that a large part of Quentin’s displeasure with his own life is that he has never had to struggle or earn anything he has; and Quentin is selfish as a result. He doesn’t seem to have any real goals in life beyond wishing he was dating Julia. Most people struggle to be in that kind of a position, but Quentin is not happy with anything.

Quentin’s time at Brakebills, in the world after Brakebills, and in Fillory, all affect him differently. At Brakebills, Quentin finally has something to work towards: the craft of magic. He must dedicate himself to learning to thrive at something. As such, he begins to appreciate things, and to grow as a person in that appreciation – he is finally having to work towards something. But just as quickly, he becomes dissatisfied and looks forward to graduation and life after Brakebills, for Brakebills no longer has any value to him.

Funded by slush from the school, Quentin has absolutely everything in life taken care of after graduation. As such, his character as a person reverts – and he begins a downward spiral with drugs, parties, and cheating on Alice. He once again becomes unhappy with himself, and finds little of value in his current life.

Only in Fillory do things change to some degree for Quentin. In Fillory, Alice points out that nothing will ever be good enough for Quentin – a sober but hard lesson for Quentin – and Quentin later comes to realize that he has been trying to escape himself – whether on Earth through one experiences after another, or in Fillory. Martin Chatwin had the same problems – and turned into a Beast because of them.

Only after Alice is gone does Quentin truly realize what he has lost out on. By the end of the novel, Quentin has come to appreciate stability in life, and continuity – and so has



taken a desk job. He does not frequent bars or do drugs anymore, and his biggest vices seem to be nonstop gaming and porn. However, he is still without a true direction in life.

## Reality and Fantasy

Reality and fantasy form an important dual theme in the novel “The Magicians” by Lev Grossman. That which is often initially perceived to be fantasy in the novel is usually real, and that which is perceived to be reality in the novel is not always the case, either.

When the novel begins, the narrator is quick to point out Quentin’s favorite books – both as a child, as a teenager, and as a young adult – Plover’s “Fillory” series. The novels are fictional in nature, and based in a fantasy land accessed from the real world. The novels are understood to be fantasy by all who read them, though Quentin wishes such a place was real.

Likewise, the world in which Quentin lives also considers magic, and magicians, to be fantasy, or a form of trickery at best (such as the kind of tricks a child or professional magician might perform to entertain an audience). However, as Quentin comes to discover, magic is indeed real, and there is a school for magicians called Brakebills, which he attends instead of traditional college.

At Brakebills, reality seems to have turned on its head – from all the sorts of magic the students study to the enchanted grounds to the games that they play (such as welters) to the spells that keep the school hidden from public view along the Hudson River. Quentin is amazed by everything, and considers it all almost like a dream.

However, Quentin has a lot of growing to do as a person, and so does not truly appreciate Brakebills for what it is. He likewise still maintains a sense of skeptical superiority, especially when Penny explains he has ways into other dimensions, such as with the magic buttons – which themselves are not supposed to exist.

As it turns out, Fillory is a world that truly does exist – from anthropomorphized animals and insects to mythical creatures like centaurs and centauresses, from walking trees and alcoholic bears, to witches, time-turning, and an interdimensionally-traveling villain, Martin Chatwin, in the form of The Beast.

At first, Quentin and the others are thrilled to learn that Fillory does exist – but then they are terrified to learn that everything fantasy is also real. This is made clear with the death of Fen, the evisceration of Penny’s hands, and the death of Alice. They may be in a “fantasy” land, but everything that happens in that land is real. Indeed, everything perceived to be real – from magic not existing to having an adventure in a beloved fantasy land – is likewise demonstrated to be real.

Being in Fillory is not a game or a joke. There are real consequences to what they do. The use of magic also has its dangers, as noted by Emily Greenstreet. Just because something appears to be fantastical, or is “fantasy” or surreal in nature, doesn’t mean it doesn’t have real consequences. That which becomes real – the life of leisure the



magicians have after graduating from Brakebills – becomes a fantasy in and of itself, as Quentin is more concerned with parties and doing drugs than actually doing something good for the world – a fantasy lifestyle that ultimately costs him his relationship with Alice.

## Friendship

Friendship is an important theme in the novel “The Magicians” by Lev Grossman. Friendship becomes essential to the plot from the very first, and is essential to the plot to the very last page of the novel. Friendship is essential not just for each of the individuals in the story who ultimately travel to Fillory, but to Quentin himself – who would otherwise be lost without friends by his side.

When the novel begins, Quentin appears to have only two real friends, James and Julia. James can be seen by the reader to tell Quentin that nobody understands Quentin the way that he does. Quentin himself has a crush on Julia, and is jealous that Julia and James are dating. Quentin wishes he was dating Julia, and not James. However, this knowledge does not interfere with their friendship, as James accompanies Quentin to what is believed will be an interview for Harvard. Later, when Quentin determines to stay at Brakebills, his few thoughts of the world behind are of his parents, and of James and Julia. Quentin’s friendship with James and Julia demonstrates that he does care for something beside himself, at least marginally.

While at Brakebills, Quentin forms new friendships with people from all walks of life. For example, he becomes friends with Eliot, who turns out to be gay. He becomes friends, and later romantically involved with, the pretty-but-bookish Midwesterner, Alice. He becomes friends with the punk-styled Penny as well, who ultimately convinces Quentin, Alice, Eliot and their other friends – including Josh, Janet, Anais, and Richard – to travel interdimensionally, through the Neitherlands, and into Fillory.

Without being friends, the group would not have stuck together after Brakebills, and without being friends, the group would have more than likely refused to go to Fillory (with gentle peer pressure to go here being key). Furthermore, without being friends, the group would not have functioned as well in Fillory, for their friendship defines a sense of loyalty for one another, which proves invaluable as the group travels through Fillory. For example, a combination of Alice’s love for Quentin, and her loyalty through friendship of the others, compels her to transform into a niffin in order to defeat the Beast – though it costs Alice her own life in the process.

In the world after Fillory, friendship again becomes essential to Quentin’s survival, as he befriends Emily Greenstreet in the midst of absolute loneliness and depression. Having seen the way that Fillory has ruptured his best friends – Penny now lives in the Neitherlands and Alice is gone – Quentin at long last realizes how much of his own life he has ruined, and how important doing good in the world truly is, especially now that the world is without two incredibly good people (Alice and Penny).



Interestingly enough, at the end of the novel, Eliot, Josh, and Julia appear outside Quentin's apartment, and entreat him to return to Fillory to rule as kings and queens. Because of their friendship, and because there is little left for Quentin on Earth, Quentin decides he will return to Fillory with them.

## Love

Love is an important theme in the novel "The Magicians" by Lev Grossman. Love appears in novels in various ways, but in "The Magicians", it appears predominantly in the romantic sense, and is primarily concerned with Quentin – either in love lost, or love gained and lost.

When the novel begins, Quentin's two closest friends, James and Julia, are in a relationship with one another. James and Julia hold hands and do everything together, and Quentin often feels like a third wheel. In fact, in the opening scene of the novel, Quentin wishes that it was he and Julia alone together, rather than James being there as well.

When Quentin goes to Brakebills, and begins to check out other female students, he feels as if he is betraying Julia in some small way, so strong are his feelings for Julia. However, this romantic interest in Julia quickly fades as Quentin grows closer to Alice.

Quentin at first befriends, and later comes to love Alice, beginning a relationship with her that also quickly turns sexual. The relationship lasts throughout their remaining time at Brakebills, and into the real world. Quentin and Alice end up living together in Tribeca in New York. Alice considers that she and Quentin will end up getting married, and she wants to use the example of how her own parents have become listless and fallen apart as a model for how she never wants to be. This does not stop Quentin from getting heavily into partying and drugs, however – something of which Alice disapproves, but tolerates due to her love for Quentin.

When Quentin cheats on Alice, Alice is heartbroken and ends the relationship. She, in turn, gets drunk and sleeps with Penny – which crushes Quentin. However, Quentin and Alice slowly begin to mend their fractured relationship while they are in Fillory, coming to terms with what each of them has done.

From there, when they are confronted by Martin Chatwin in the form of the Beast, Alice leaps to the defense of her friends – and especially of Quentin – to save their lives. Unfortunately, Alice ends up giving her own life out of love for Quentin in order to save him – and this absolutely crushes Quentin. Back on Earth, he becomes despondent and depressed, and ends up attempting to settle down by securing a regular job. No matter what he does, however, he cannot get over Alice.



## Magic

Magic is an important theme in the novel “The Magicians” by Lev Grossman. Magic, the use of words or gestures to create supernatural responses, incidents, and actions, is believed to be fantasy by Quentin at the very beginning of the novel, but as he discovers, magic is real.

Quentin learns that magic is real at Brakebills. He learns numerous things about magic, both in theory, and in practice. It is explained to Quentin early on that magic is not a science, or an art, but a craft. As such, magic is not something that can be purely studied in theory, or only casually attempted, but must be practiced, honed, and perfected over time. It is, in other words, a discipline which needs constant perfecting.

Quentin also learns a lot about the capabilities of magic through the course of the novel. Brakebills School is hidden from public view along the banks of the Hudson River by concealment charms. Quentin learns how to control objects, cast spells, and manipulate the world around him using magic. He also learns that magic extends beyond Earth. For example, not only does Fillory exist, but it is a land that can be traveled to, and in which magic can be utilized as well.

Quentin also comes to discover that magic has its dark side, too. This is true of Martin Chatwin, who strives to use magic for his own nefarious purposes. He has manipulated magic in order to remain in Fillory, and manipulated magic in order to hunt down the magical buttons which will give him the ability to control access to and from Fillory, for others, and for himself.

Quentin also discovers that tremendous use of magic also has negative effects, such as is the case for Alice, who turns into a neffin as she seeks to save the lives of Quentin and the others. While speaking to Emily Greenstreet after returning from Fillory, Emily explains that all magic, no matter its intentions, no matter how well used, always ultimately leads to some kind of evil. This, for example, is true of Martin Chatwin, who as a child was corrupted by the possibilities of magic.



# Styles

## Point of View

Lev Grossman tells his novel “The Magicians” in the third-person limited-omniscient narrative mode, centered around the life and actions of main character and principal protagonist, Quentin Coldwater. The third-person narrative mode allows the narrator not only to follow the life and actions of Quentin, but allows the narrator to probe the minds and considerations of other characters as well, adding additional layers of depth to the novel, and dimension to the characters themselves. The limited-omniscient perspective puts the reader at the level of a character, learning and understanding so much only as the characters learn and understand things. The limited-omniscient perspective also lends a sense of mystery and suspense to the novel, in that the readers do not know everything, or what is going to happen next.

## Language and Meaning

Lev Grossman tells his novel “The Magicians” in language that is simple and straightforward. This is done for at least two reasons. First, the characters in the novel are all in their late teens and early twenties in the contemporary era. As such, the language not only fits their age demographic, but the sociocultural environment of the era (the book was published in 2009). The simple and straightforward language also reflects the fact that the book, in size, scope, and content, is vast – and the simple and straightforward language helps the reader to keep track of diverse peoples, places, and events, and often in parallel dimensions and parallel worlds.

## Structure

Lev Grossman divides his novel “The Magicians” into four primary parts, with each part further subdivided into unnumbered, titled chapters. Each part deals with a major set of circumstances or time period in the novel. For example, Part I consists of Quentin’s life before and during studies at Brakebills. Part II deals with life after Brakebills, and leading up to the departure for Fillory. In each part, the chapters are named according to a specific place, event, or incident occurring in that chapters. For example, in Part I, Brooklyn, the chapter occurs in Brooklyn, New York. In Part III, Humbledrum, Quentin and the others meet Humbledrum, the alcohol-swilling bear.



## Quotes

I should be happy, Quentin thought. I'm young and alive and healthy.  
-- Narrator (Book I, Brooklyn paragraph 23)

**Importance:** From the very beginning of the novel, Quentin is unhappy with his life. Though he has everything going for him, he feels incomplete. He is not sure why, but it is a growing hollow inside of him that will eventually take control of him, and eventually lead him to make stupid decisions later in the novel in the attempt to escape himself.

Like most people Quentin read the Fillory books in grade school. Unlike most people – unlike James and Julia – he never got over them.  
-- Narrator (Book I, Brooklyn paragraph 35)

**Importance:** Here, the narrator explains what will become a central point to the novel's plot later on. Quentin is a huge fan of the Fillory set of novels – about a land of fantasy and magic visited and changed by wartime English children in the later 1910s. The novels still captivate Quentin – and seem to be a better world than the one in which he lives.

First thing's first: Magic is real.  
-- Fogg (Book I, Eliot paragraph 10)

**Importance:** After Quentin arrives at Brakebills, he tests into the school. There, Dean Fogg explains clearly and succinctly that magic is real. And magic is what is taught at Brakebills.

Magic is a craft.  
-- Professor March (Book I, Magic paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Here, Professor March explains to his students that magic is neither an art nor a science, but something that must be practiced, honed, and perfected over time. It doesn't always come easily, but it does come with practice. Magic is theoretical and practical, and must be practiced constantly.

He realized only now he'd been waiting for Brakebills to vanish around him like a daydream.  
-- Narrator (Book I, The Beast paragraph 1)

**Importance:** For a long time, Quentin exists as if he is in a dream. He still has a difficult time believing that Brakebills is real. The initial reverence for the place has faded, and he realizes that Brakebills is not just a place to marvel at, but to participate in fully.

It was only two months since graduation, but already Brakebills seemed like a lifetime ago.  
-- Narrator (Book II, Manhattan paragraph 15)



**Importance:** A few months after graduation, Quentin is on a downward spiral, engaging in all-night parties and drugs. Soon enough, he cheats on Alice. The hollow that Quentin felt at the beginning of the novel is what he is clearly running away from – as well as floundering with a lack of purpose in life following graduation from Brakebills.

God, he'd been so wrong about everything.  
-- Narrator (Book II, The Neitherlands paragraph 10)

**Importance:** Having left Earth as they know it behind, Quentin is stunned to discover he has been wrong about everything – and especially that a world like the Neitherlands, or even Fillory, could exist. It is an eye-opening experience for Quentin – and serves to offer a potential new direction in life.

We're going to Fillory. This is going to change everything.  
-- Penny (Book II, The Neitherlands paragraph 64)

**Importance:** Here, Penny announces the new direction down which he, and all their friends, will proceed. They will go to the land of their dreams in the novels of Fillory. Their going to Fillory will change everything – not just from the fact that such alternate worlds exist, but that they will be going to such an alternate world. However, Penny's prediction also serves as an ill-omen, for the journey to Fillory will not just be a change in reality, but will change each one of their lives as well.

Kings and queens. Glory has its price.  
-- Narrator (Book III, The Ram paragraph 5)

**Importance:** Quentin, as the narrator describes, sadly reflects on the loss of Alice, and how traveling to Fillory truly has changed everything, especially when it comes to life and death. In their desire to do something glorious in Fillory, Quentin has lost the woman he loves. Glory, as is explained, has a cost – and Alice had to pay that cost. Quentin now lives with the cost.

Sooner or later magic always leads to evil.  
-- Emily Greenstreet (Part IV, Kings and Queens paragraph 43)

**Importance:** Emily Greenstreet makes an important point to Quentin as the two of them trade the stories of their lives. Emily explains that magic, no matter how it is used, sooner or later leads to evil. This is certainly true of the magical world in general, and of Fillory as well. The use of magic to save Fillory has led to evil –to the death of Alice and the near-death of Penny. Indeed, the use of magic at all led to the transformation of Martin into the Beast.