

10 Foundational SFF Books That Fed My Nerd Soul (And Will Feed Yours Too)

By Oren Cohen

Welcome to my list of Foundational SFF books. These books shaped my taste. They are not what I consider the best science fiction and fantasy books of all time. A book that makes you feel something is a book worth remembering.

These are the books that made me feel something. Each of these has stuck with me and helped me better understand what I like and dislike in my reading.

Enjoy!

STORMLIGHT ARCHIVE: THE WAY OF KINGS

I regret reading this book. It has unlocked an obsession like no other in me. As of writing these words in 2026, The Stormlight Archive spans five books, each is over a thousand pages long. It has consumed my life. The 2030s can't come soon enough.

But I will happily sit with you to talk about Shallan, Kaladin or Adolin any time. Just let me know.

DUNE

Dune is one of my early favorites. In my late teens and early twenties I read not just Dune and its sequels, but also all the prequels and sequels that Frank Herbert's son had co-written after his father passed away.

Might be a bit harsh to read at times, but still a very good series. Dune sits somewhere in the middle between proper Science Fiction and Fantasy.

MISTBORN: THE FINAL EMPIRE

Mistborn is one of the first books in the cosmere I ever read. I recently re-read this book as part of my Cosmere re-read and it still holds up. A fantastic sad world where you find happiness and warmth in a new chosen family - what more can you ask for?

Mistborn will take you on a journey that you will never forget. While The Final Empire totally stands on its own, I strongly recommend you read the rest of the trilogy as it answers most of the remaining unanswered questions you may have after reading this book.

LORD OF THE RINGS (Trilogy as one book)

The Lord of the Rings is the Fantasy to top all fantasy. While it's a slow read and Tolkien does like his long descriptions and deep dives, it's still a must read. All three books tell a grand story together and much as Frodo went on a journey, Tolkien takes you on a journey, too.

This is by far the hardest book I read in my youth, but I still loved it. I am planning to re-read it again sometime in 2026.

SWORD OF TRUTH: WIZARD'S FIRST RULE

Sword of Truth was the first series of books I actively followed for years. This was way before my introduction to Brandon Sanderson or George R.R. Martin.

I remember reading through all 11 books in the series and then reading through some other books, one of them being a prequel.

I loved it when I read it, but as my collection grew, I found that many of these books drew direct inspiration from earlier books like The Wheel of Time (which I haven't read yet and is not on this list because of it).

THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY

Many people in the high-tech industry that I worked with over the years have recommended this book so many times to me. I can't explain why.

I only ever read the one and I know it has multiple sequels which I didn't dive into. I remember it being a fun read and it of course introduced me to the answer 42. While I don't remember much of it, it did open my eyes to the fact that Science Fiction can be funny.

TWENTY THOUSAND LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA

This is one of those books I read as a kid. I don't remember much of it, but I definitely remember the Nautilus and how grumpy Captain Nemo felt to me. It's probably also where I first read of Atlantis decades before I was ever introduced to that city through Stargate.

I blame this book for how much I love the ocean, too. There's so much we don't know about the deep and this book makes you wonder what's out there even more.

THE GREAT BOOK OF AMBER

This is actually 10 books. The first in the series is Nine Princes in Amber and it's a story about the Kingdom of Amber which is the only True place in the universe. Our world is considered a shadow of it.

I remember being so hooked by the idea that there's a real "center" to the universe and this city is at the heart of it. I read all 10 because it's essentially one physical book sitting on my shelf, but the vibe changes dramatically between the first half and the second half. I personally loved the first five books more than the five that came later.

THE NEVERENDING STORY

The first time I read this book, I was a kid. It was the first book I read that played with the formatting of the book itself. All text that happens inside Fantastica was one color, and the text happening in our world was a different color. That was a cool distinction.

I recently re-read this book in 2025 and realized how much I love it more as an adult and how much I didn't understand it as a kid. I highly recommend it.

A GAME OF THRONES

A Song of Ice and Fire is the book series behind the HBO show Game of Thrones from the early 2010s. I remember buying the entire series of five books - yes, we're still waiting for the Winds of Winter - and starting to read them after the end of season 3. If you recall, that was the season where the Red Wedding happened. It broke my heart and some part of me really hoped the books were somewhat different.

It's quite a heavy read. If you watched the show and it made you mad, the books provide a somewhat different experience. GRRM also confirmed that for some characters their book fates would be different from the show's ending.

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I hope to see you around!

Oren