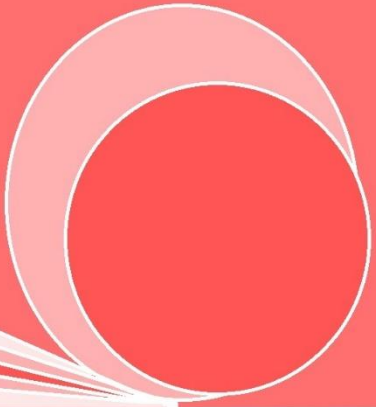


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BELT

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EDITED BY JOSHUA FAGAN



The Fox's Lover

But First It Is Sung

Toward True Moral  
Complexity

Ada Hoffmann

Aimee Ogden

Joshua Fagan

# Orion's Belt

August 2023

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# The Fox's Lover

by Ada Hoffmann

The howling air blows snow into your footprints,  
four-toed, leading from my door.  
Everything you touched tonight is cold again.

Every time, I plan to be prepared.  
Night to day; the sleeping side  
of a cycle; no great pain. Every time,  
I'm screaming along with the wind.  
We do not know where you are,  
the wind and I,  
nor when you will return.

I set out, each morning, for you.  
Trinkets to attract your playful spirit:  
acorns carved into dice, hare-skulls,  
glass like ice dyed sunset-color,  
broken traps. For the animal  
who cannot be caught unless it wills it.

White fox, I would hold you to me,  
weigh us down and let the snow-mountain cover us.  
Let the wide-footed bears pad overtop,  
crushing snow into static blue ice.

In the dark, if I am careful -  
if I set the trinkets just so,  
if I do not light a candle  
or open my eyes -,

your weight is like a man's.  
Your skin, silky and shivering,  
a woman's. You are no dumb beast  
when your tongue rakes winter lightning  
across me, nor when you hold me after,  
warm against the air.

Later, I rise -  
the nights are long here - and tend  
the fire back to wakefulness.  
I offer you the dark morning's  
eggs, the salt fish.

You have padded to my feet,  
you and your shock of white fur,  
all dog again. In this form,  
something blue-white shines  
under your fur, like a snowbound sky.  
I ruffle your ears, as if touching you  
so lightly could pull that heart  
and that light into my hand.

You tell me, with that rough and pointed  
tongue: I am beautiful.  
I am clever, to have captured a fox.  
Watching that light in you,  
I almost believe it: I am warm,  
safe here with one who loves me;  
this snow banked cottage is a circle  
of enchanted grace. Everything white  
and shining.

Will you stay? No.  
Never.

Howling with the wind, I fall backwards  
into powdered white. Watch the uncaring sky,  
its green and rosy flickering lines,  
until all tears have frozen  
and my eyes close.

I am safe here in my fur-lined coat,  
warm enough to sleep out the cold.

Scarf piling wool on my face,  
I breathe warmly and deeply.  
I dream:

My heart is scrubbed with blue-white frost,  
glowing and clean. You did not bring it here.  
You led me, mirrorlike, in fox-print circles  
back to the soul that already  
looked like yours.

I am beautiful, clever,  
warm and safe and loved in this white world,  
whether or not it is said  
by a trickster's shining tongue.

There is no need to wait in the weeping wind.

In the morning, I set out your trinkets again.

# Toward True Moral Complexity

by Joshua Fagan

Disposing of the idea that protagonists must be virtuous and good is far easier and simpler than contemplating what they should be instead. Discussing what genuine moral complexity in fiction even resembles the old Buddhist tale of the blind men and the elephant, wherein the men each touch different parts of the creature and thus come to different conclusions about what the whole creature is. The idea that morally perfect behavior does not make for thoughtful fiction is true. The idea that morally atrocious behavior does not necessarily make for any better fiction is also true. Neither idea brings one any closer to a vision of true moral complexity. The true opposite of uncomplicated virtue is not vice, but the difficult journeys of yearning, desperate people who try their best but are inevitably flawed and limited in both their thinking and their actions.

The idea of moral complexity in fiction has garnered substantial visibility without garnering substantial understanding. Armies of proponents demand more of what they believe moral complexity to be, while equally enthusiastic detractors view that idea of moral complexity as needlessly cynical or even misleading. Instead of a clear definition, moral complexity conjures a series of images: dark and muted colors, characters succumbing to temptation, a general attitude of cynicism. The protagonist is an anti-hero, and the work views

simple-hearted idealism as naïve at best and counterproductive at worst. Far from being a caring and good place, the world rewards cruelty and callous behavior. By this standard, *Game of Thrones* is morally complicated while *The Lord of the Rings* is not.

Admittedly, the prevalence of this worldview is overstated by those that oppose it, whether for ideological reasons or simply because they find it tiring. Those who want stories where good triumphs can find it at the multiplex or bookstore without much difficulty. In America, at least, the number of ebulliently optimistic works significantly surpasses the number of stories that are cynical or even mildly pessimistic. The profusion of Marvel movies serve as monumental reminders of how dominant the ethos of absolute reassurance is. For every *Succession*, there are a number of new *Star Wars* shows. Still, the backlash against shows that wave the banner of moral complexity has perhaps less to do with their prevalence than with the insistence behind these shows that they have discovered the truth about the world. They know that cynicism and cruelty reign, and that little can be done in opposition. This worldview, as limited as the Pollyanna-ish optimism it critiques, can instead be stifling.

The solution is not to retreat into sweet but inert stories about daring heroes that make their moral stakes obvious and clear. This temptation has become rather common. The logic proceeds as follows: there are in today's world immense differences between good and evil in the world, democracy itself may fall, and thus stories should be clear and resolute instead of creating a false perception of neutrality. Those who follow this point of view decry what they see



as “bothsides-ism,” the idea that neutrality is baleful, and that true morality dictates partisan support for one side. This idea appears often in media circles, such as an article in *The Nation* that warned, “‘Bothsidesism’ is Poisoning America.” Yet it also appears in debates about fiction, such as in discussions about *Mockingjay*, the final book of the *Hunger Games*, which had the audacity to assert that corrupt rebellion leaders can be as selfish and graspingly manipulative as authoritarian tyrants and as such generated intense backlash. Nor is such discussion confined to mainstream blockbusters. *The Wind Rises*, Hayao Miyazaki’s elegantly nuanced film about the difficulty of balancing artistic passions with ghastly practical realities, attracted a rush of controversy for daring to actually tell a nuanced and conflicted story instead of offering blunt condemnations of Japanese militarism. *Village Voice* critic Inkoo Kang called the film “morally repugnant,” and even Brooke Barnes at the *New York Times* tepidly discusses that some consider the film “a celebration of Japan’s wartime aggression.”

There is nothing innately wrong with criticizing the ethos or ideology of an artwork, but there is something pernicious about demanding that art be un-objectionable, that it offer complete moral clarity. Dictating unquestioning, unreflecting allegiance to one set of principles is needlessly dogmatic from a political perspective but outright absurd from an artistic one. All good art relates, however obliquely, to the world of the living. It deepens the faculty of understanding by depicting, with a heightened intensity rarely found in the muddle of everyday life, sensations and tensions that are, in

essence, ultimately familiar even if they are in external appearance fundamentally strange and bizarre. Fiction, in not being bound to utilitarian demands of literalism or facticity, has the freedom to reflect inner, hidden truths that have relevance beyond the bounds of specific, transient situations, truths that do not decay or erode with time. Art that attempts to detach itself entirely from passions and tensions and desires, like some of the more precious Aestheticist work, feels cold and trite because it lacks that connection.

The philosopher David Hume eloquently discusses the differences between the strange and bizarre, which art often depicts, and the psychologically preposterous, which it should not. “Should a traveler,” he argues, “returning from a far country, bring us an account” of people who “knew no pleasure but friendship, generosity, and public spirit; we should immediately, from these circumstances, detect the falsehood, and prove him a liar.” The observer knows this truth not because they have been to the land, but because they know from experience certain immutable truths about how people tend to behave. Regular interaction and experience reveal that the world is complicated. No moral conviction can make it completely cohere. Not all fiction has to portray these complexities, but to disdain the portrayal of them is disingenuous.

A form of moral complexity is necessary, and it should be a better one than the reductive paradigm that currently exists, where moral complexity can only mean anti-heroes and vice, the gangsters of *The Sopranos* and the corrupt business executives of *Succession*. The question of whether stories should be morally complicated is simple

in concept and difficult in practice. Without moral complexity, stories have no tension or conflict. They are a morass of tedious moralism, emptied of introspection or difficult choices. Still, demonstrating moral complexity in a way that feels organic and sincere, contending with the ultimate inadequacy of absolutist moral convictions without retreating into cheap equivocation or tawdry depictions of immorality, is more difficult. Doing it properly requires the passion of a poet and the skill of a philosopher. As the writer Matthew Arnold argued, it necessitates contemplating “the whole play of the universal order” and being “apprehensive of missing any part of it, of sacrificing one part to another” and so achieve, through careful thought and reflection, an “unclouded clearness of mind.” No matter how true one might believe their convictions to be, they will never be true enough. There will always be experiences that transcend one’s worldview. Accepting moral complexity does not mean succumbing to nihilism, believing that no choice is better than any other. It does not mean a story cannot have ideological convictions, or that it must assert that the world cannot improve.

As the contemporary New York Times writer Kwame Anthony Appiah states, neutrality may be an illusion, but it is a useful one, preventing thinking from becoming “a ride-or-die embrace of a comprehensive set of ideals and values that identified what was good and what was evil.” As he argues, the stance of the disciplined, unbiased observer may only be a role, but “the social roles we choose—including those that distance us from overt partisanship—matter.” Moral complexity does not mean a story must be unbiased,

or even that being unbiased is possible, but it does mean that a story should rigorously scrutinize the belief systems of its characters. A morally complex story can demonstrate that some behaviors create more satisfaction than others, but it refuses to endorse the idea that a single belief system will make life lucid and obvious. It acknowledges the frailty and limitations of even the most steadfast and heroic heart. The gap between ideals and actions, and between actions and their unintended consequences, always exists. Not all characters are equally flawed, but all characters are flawed, and a story should not refrain from examining the limitations of a certain ideology or value system simply because those values happen to be those of the story's creator.

Certainly, grim stories can be morally ambiguous, as demonstrated by the revelatory ambiguity of noir masterpieces like *Double Indemnity* and *Out of the Past*, but some do not. Works like *24* or *Joker*, for instance, confuse cynicism with moral complexity, but in reality, their moral perspectives are quite straightforward and dogmatic. Even the idea that *Game of Thrones* fits the criterion of moral complexity, while *The Lord of the Rings* does not, demonstrates the narrowness of the contemporary conception of moral complexity. *Game of Thrones*, whatever its merits as a depiction of medieval realpolitik, portrays certain characters, most notably Cersei Lannister, as overtly villainous. They generate boos and hisses as they pursue their plots.

*The Lord of the Rings*, conversely, takes as its hero Frodo, a generous hobbit who nonetheless succumbs to the influences of the One Ring and refuses to destroy it when the opportunity arises. After

his journey ends, he travels as a broken and uncertain person. He can only lament his alienation and then leave Middle-Earth forever. The sorrowful last journeys of Frodo have little to do with stereotypical notions of what “morally complex” narratives are, but that fact does not diminish the uncertainty they evoke. J.R.R. Tolkien, more astute than his critics, understood that identifying what Evil is does not equal right judgements and right actions. Being good for Tolkien did not mean ignoring moral complexity. It did not mean exuding such pristine purity as to be untouched by flaws and immune from temptation. Rather, it meant understanding how frail and vain even the most heroic ambitions often are. The great writers of morally nuanced fiction, from Shakespeare to Tolstoy, would agree with such a view.

Arnold correctly knew that moral complexity is not a luxury. It is not cool or avant-garde, and it does not necessarily mean depicting dark and nefarious actions. Instead, as he wrote, nothing matters more than maintaining “a current of true and fresh ideas,” as well as “inflexible honesty,” exposing treasured and golden notions as secretly “narrowing and baneful.” Only an analytical, reflective spirit, one that refuses to believe any singular conviction or belief system can provide all desired answers, can see clearly when life becomes fragmented and emotionally fraught. Moral complexity should not immediately evoke stories about anti-heroes, and the excessive focus on a specific set of grim tales has distorted the cultural vision of what moral complexity means. In actuality, it necessitates understanding

the murkiness of ordinary life and trying to temper it with thoughtfulness, empathy, and curiosity.

## But First It Is Sung

by Aimee Ogden

It has taken an eon for the universe to settle on a name for the new universe it has spawned. A beautiful little thing: positive curvature, and, yes, judging by the fault lines along which its supersymmetry breaks, ekpyrotic too. A magnificent future ahead of it, then, the endless succession of death and rebirth. Time enough to manifest an intelligence of its own, perhaps—a gift not all universes will enjoy. The parent universe embarks on the song of its child's name, a song that will last across the new universe's entire first cycle.

It is still singing when it feels the familiar pressure from outside its chosen brane in the multiversal manifold. The universe hunters have caught up once more and it can feel them—not individually, but as a whole, groping along its boundaries. Looking for a way to evert it into their own universe, to steal its mass and energy and hold off the Big Rip that threatens to rend all they know particle from particle.

It would not be the first universe to suffer such a fate. It panics and gobbles up the nascent universe before it, too, can be poached by the hunters. They are still feeling their way over it when it flees back into the bulk between branes. A scream that endures millennia as galaxies and rogue stars shear away, and then the universe is free, sliding desperately through the manifold for a corner of reality where it cannot be found.

The universe huddles in a minor pocket unpleasantly gastrulated into the dimensions of a cold dead universe, away from the

inhospitably symmetrical nature of the local fundamental forces. It should have been ridiculous, the universe thinks, a matchup such as this one. The universe is vast and endless and wise; the universe hunters are small and brief, tens of lifetimes passing between the universe's every flight. But they are many, and so much quicker to react, and these things make them powerful nearly to the point of ergodicity—there is no point to which the universe can flee that they will not find it—and as if to prove that, they appear again before the universe has even begun to rest. It tries, as it has before, to shake them off, to pick them loose—impossible. Like trying to pick individual atoms off one of its own infinite moons; beyond its ability to see, let alone manipulate.

So again, it flees. Again, it knows, they will find it. They have found it so many times already. And it has reabsorbed countless offspring in its flight, hoarding its own constituent parts against the potential of a better future.

And what if there is no future?

All things have their natural time, including universes. Sometimes that allocation is infinite. And sometimes rather less. The fabric of the universe contracts minutely as it reflects on all the young universes it has birthed and lost in turn. Would it be so terrible, it wonders, for the weary cycle to make one final turn?

This is not surrender, the universe vows. This is change. This is adaptation. This is one last dear and desperate chance, the universe swears, and it shapes this oath around a single true and never-spoken name.



It is not enough merely for the universe to be: it must also be shared.

The universe knows where the hunters' home brane is and crosses the bulk toward it, sliding in alongside their native universe unnoticed—at least for now. The hunters are all but omnipresent, and they will be here as soon as anywhere else. They will try to force their way inside it. But only if an inside exists.

The universe twists itself into painful contortions, tearing itself wide open at its understructures. At its heart it invaginates, folding in upon itself to create new boundaries where none had existed, closing beloved parts of itself off so that even it cannot find them. Energy cannot be created or destroyed, but it can be spitefully rendered unusable, put to work and crushed flat by the laws of thermodynamics. The universe takes some joy in that as the universe hunters fall upon it with their prying, bottomless need. Without hesitation, without shame, they feed it to the gaping, unthinking maw of their own home universe. Or perhaps there is some sentience lurking there, beneath the cold, the hunger? Impossible to dwell on for long. The ache of this stranger's accelerating scale factor chews away the universe's every thought.

Every thought, except a precious one.

At its heart, hidden from even the universe's own awareness, inside an elaborately bounded manifold, a pocket has been carefully folded into the bulk. There, an infant universe forms; a small one, and too quickly made. Not ekpyrotic: only one chance to live and die.

And no wise and careful parent to shepherd it through that single cycle.

Surely one chance is better than none. Something counts greater than nothing: a mathematical fact across every worthwhile iteration of physics. The universe would like to tell its offspring this, but there is no time for that. All it can do is call out its offspring's name. As eons unspool, even that is torn apart, shredded to its one-dimensional fundamental constituents and farther.

But first—but first—it is sung.

## Notes on Contributors

**Aimee Ogden** is an American werewolf in the Netherlands. Her debut novella *SUN-DAUGHTERS, SEA-DAUGHTERS* was a Nebula Award Finalist, and her latest novella, *EMERGENT PROPERTIES*, came out in July 2023. Her short fiction has appeared in publications such as *Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy 2022*, *Lightspeed*, *Clarkesworld*, and *Analog*. She also co-edits *Translunar Travelers Lounge*, a magazine of fun and optimistic speculative fiction.

**Joshua Fagan** is a writer and critic currently residing in Scotland. His creative work has previously been published in venues including *Daily Science Fiction*, *The Fantastic Other*, and *Star\*Line*. As an academic, his work focuses on the intersection of literature, myth, and technology in the aftermath of Darwin, and his critical work has been published in *The Robert Frost Review*. He is the founder and editor-in-chief of the literary speculative-fiction publication *Orion's Belt*.

**Ada Hoffmann** is the author of the *OUTSIDE* space opera trilogy, the collections *MONSTERS IN MY MIND* and *MILLION-YEAR ELEGIES*, and dozens of speculative short stories and poems. Ada's work has been a finalist for the Philip K. Dick Award (2020, *THE OUTSIDE*), the Compton Crook Award (2020, *THE OUTSIDE*), and the WSFA Small Press Award (2020, "Fairest of All"). They are the winner of the Friends of the Merrill Collection Short Story Contest (2013, "The Mother of All Squid Builds a Library") and a five-time Rhysling award nominee (2014 for "The Siren of Mayberry Crescent"; 2017 for "The Giantess's Dream"; 2022 for "Dream Logic," "Prologue: The Late Heavy Bombardment," and "Epilogue: Memento Mori"). Ada's novel-length work is represented by Hannah Bowman of Liza Dawson Associates.