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BELT
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nightlove	Dream, Wish, Kaleidoscope	Reviving Magic in Fiction
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nightlove

by J. Lee Akin

the moon has been chasing her ever since she recognized
the face of divinity reflected on the window of her car

seeing the echo of sanctity among the surface of the sky
dark and deep, she laid to rest flourishing under its gleam

now, the moon washes her skin in stars and mutters to her
the secrets of twilight, passing as a flicker behind her eyelids

on her hips silver handprints, tightening with an exposed breath
she basks in the blossom of night, never longing for morning

she might do something stupid
the way only lovers do

Reviving Magic in Speculative Fiction

by Joshua Fagan

A story does not automatically become magical because it occurs in a magical setting. The modern media climate revels in stories of magic, from superhero stories to overt high fantasy, yet despite their repeated emphasis on magic, many of these stories fail to feel magical. They ultimately present a world too much like our own modern society. Despite monsters or superpowers, their settings remain ultimately orderly and explicable.

I want to clarify that I am not referring to moments in fantasy works that make immediate references to our world. In *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, for instance, there are characters that clearly resemble hippies and rednecks, despite the world of *Avatar* being an East Asian-inspired fantasy world. These jokey references can damage the coherence of a narrative when done poorly, such as the awkward references to athlete endorsements in Disney's version of *Hercules*, but they do not innately damage the work. Done with a playful wink, they make the fantasy world silly but do not necessarily prevent it from being magical. I am referring to when works present overt magical qualities yet nonetheless feel perfectly ordinary and understandable.

The *Game of Thrones* series perhaps offers the most striking example in recent times of a fantasy series that refuses to feel

fantastical. Magical creatures exist in the world of *Game of Thrones*, but that fact does not make the series feel magical. Dragons exist, and they appear magnificent, but they only serve as a political weapon. Ice zombies, the White Walkers, threaten to invade from the north, but killing them only requires a smart strategy. They trouble the land in the same way as a bad harvest or flood damage. *Game of Thrones* less resembles a truly magical world than a typical medieval or Renaissance world that happens to have dragons.

Such a world does not innately disappoint. Indeed, the immense popularity of *Game of Thrones* demonstrates the appeal of worlds that incorporate magical elements while still remaining quite familiar. I also do not want to suggest that *Game of Thrones* is somehow unique in being a fantasy series that nonetheless remains grounded in a world fundamentally comprehensible through observation and reason. *Harry Potter*, despite featuring magic far more overtly than *Game of Thrones*, has the same attitude. Magic spells have a place in the *Harry Potter* world in the same way that kangaroos have a place in Australia: they operate as a distinguishing characteristic but ultimately serve as a curiosity to understand and analyze. In a classroom setting, students devotedly study spells and potions just as we study math and English literature.

True magic differs because it defies the reductive idea that careful study and analysis can reduce the world to integers and data points. Magic posits a world apart from that of utility and efficiency, a weird and strange world that resists clarity. It undermines the dogmatic emphasis on certainty and order. As smart and devoted as an

individual may be, their perspective cannot grasp the fullness of magic. The viewpoint of a magical world is less that experiences cannot be explained and more that those explanations inevitably falter. Contrary to the oft-repeated idea that a fantasy world should have recognizable laws, true magic demonstrates how relying on rigid and reasonable laws severs the observer from the true character of experience, which remains wild and wondrous and terrifying. The assumptions that govern ordinary life function until they do not. Widely held beliefs corrode and prove insufficient.

The ancient world understood magic because they viscerally experienced it. Places and events had the capacity to undermine established routines. These places and events exuded an untamed vitality that overwhelmed the categories and conventions that governed daily life. Ancient civilizations conceptualized this quality as magic. Simply because this perspective differs from that of modernity does not make it random or capricious. While magic, lingering in hidden places, could theoretically be everywhere, specific kinds of places tended to exude it: deep forests and towering summits and serene springs. What these places have in common is that they differ profoundly from the predictable state of experience that defines everyday life. In these places, the impulse to define and categorize falters. They have an independent essence that reduces august preconceptions to smoldering ash.

Herodotus, the ancient Greek historian, thoughtfully understood the presence of such enigmatic forces, discussing how only after the end of one's life can others judge their fortune, as even in times of

joy, the strange and bizarre can easily transform that joy to sorrow. There remains in this view, a common one before industrialization, one half of the world that remains hidden and latent, charging places and objects with a tempest-like significance. This mystic, disorderly force can both destroy and create, as the psychologist C.G. Jung eloquently discusses. For Jung, the individual feels the pressure of two separate worlds. One world contains the known, the predictable and expected, that which makes life comprehensible. Without a sense of routine, only chaos exists. Behavior becomes erratic and bizarre. Yet staying in this world of conventionality destroys one's connection to magic.

Jung writes that the consciousness is “continually in danger of being led astray by its own light,” and that it longs “for the deep well of being and for unconscious communion with life in all its countless forms.” The experience of magic disintegrates the alienation created by mechanical routine, reaffirming instead the grandeur of existence and the connection between the individual and that grandeur. Stasis, by contrast, constrains the mind to a limited, rotting perspective. Departing into the magical and strange world matters not because this world has no relevance to everyday life, but because it is extremely relevant. Despite the danger it poses, it offers the only true antidote to malaise.

This sense of the other world, so common to myth, has faded in modernity. The German writers Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno discuss this change in perception as “disenchantment.” They write that the premodern observer ascribed wondrous powers to

their environment, while the modern observer, having the power to shape and mold that environment, reduces it to numbers and statistics to categorize. This process masquerades as the triumph of empiricism, but in reality, it represents a higher form of mystification. The ideology of disenchantment reduces magic to superstition and deep forests to lists of trees to chart and catalogue. The English writer John Ruskin thought similarly about the falseness of the analytical modern method of observation, which he believed distanced individuals from their sensory experiences of the world. He wrote of the need to recapture the essence of experience, to see as the ancients did. The Greeks, he wrote, perceived the sun fundamentally as laden with significance and meaning, conveying “daily restoration to the sense of passionate gladness and of perfect life.” They viewed it with a wonder lost to the modern eye, which reduces it to parcels of information. The contemporary tendency of posting pictures of the sunrise to social media only indicates a furthering of this tendency, demonstrating how the sunrise becomes an object, a picture to see and share, and not an experience to have.

No mystery, then, surrounds the question of why so few stories genuinely feel magical. Our stories reflect us, and we do not value the magical as we once did. It no longer corresponds to our everyday reality. The wondrous and otherworldly, capable of evoking both delight and terror, still exist, but in lesser quantities, grasped only at times of great joy or great despair. Our lives, compared to those of our ancestors, rely on an incredible degree of precision and efficiency. We know the weather for the next two weeks, and we can

find almost every movie ever released within a few minutes of searching. Magic, so tied to the components of existence that evade algorithms and spreadsheets, has become foreign to us. *Harry Potter* deserves to exist, as does *Game of Thrones*. I do not argue against these works, but I argue that they should not be our only guide to magic.

Regardless of how efficient and data-driven society becomes, the sensations and images represented by magic continue to have relevance. Magic never fully fades. Closely examining even *Game of Thrones* reveals sparks of true, primordial magic. While George R.R. Martin, compared with the likes of Tolkien, does not understand the full experience of enchantment, he provides glimpses of it in the books. The show erodes many of these glimpses, but a few remain. When Daenerys enters the flames and walks free, miraculously unburnt, her triumph represents the presence of the wild and elemental. It exposes as inadequate ordinary preparations and social mores.

Still, the potential for fantastical realms to demonstrate magic, exposing what eludes ordinary apprehension, remains largely untapped in the modern world. The films of Studio Ghibli offer a rare counterexample, most notably *Princess Mononoke*. Animistic and primeval, *Princess Mononoke* exemplifies the appeal of an enchanted space better than any modern film. Ashitaka, the protagonist, enters the inner sanctum of the forest, seeing it as myths describe such places, a realm of absolute serenity and strangeness. The almighty Forest Spirit saves his life but does not fully heal him, refusing to side with any faction or offer any explanation. It acts from an enigmatic

consciousness more profound and bizarre than any human or animal viewpoint. While opaque and disconcerting, its actions never seem random or arbitrary. The Forest Spirit is not the equivalent of a kangaroo. It exists apart from the recognizable and orderly world, and its majesty serves no ideology or preconceived conviction.

In the realm of the Forest Spirit exists purest magic. Unlike dragons or wands, it does not provide playful delights. It is no resource to use and craft. Defining how it differs from the quantifiable and utilitarian is easier than defining what it is. Yet it offers a haven outside the realm of routine and custom. In their place arises a glimpse of the freshness of experience we always know as curious children but tend to forget. Caught in the malaise of a disenchanted world, true magic should matter more than ever to us.

Dream, Wish, Kaleidoscope

by Victor Forná

DREAM

The obsessions of the father seep into the son. Juldeh was six years old when I first told him about monarch butterflies. By thirteen, he'd read all the literature available on them in our dome at the end of the world. By fifteen, he'd shared the same dreams as me; to bring the insects back, or, at least, we prayed, to get a glimpse of them before we died. At sixteen, he was diagnosed with cancer of the blood.

WISH

—It gets dangerous. With the ice. And you want to risk your life over a scavenger's pipe dream?

—I'm already dying, Dad. And I believe her. It makes sense the monarchs are coming back the same year we're seeing these big melts. It makes sense.

—Big melts happen. Always. And nothing changes. There are no roads northwest, anyway.

—Roads for vehicles. I checked the maps. I can trek. I just need my shots.

—It's illegal to leave the dome...

—Let me see the damn angels before I die. Old man. Honour my last wish. I know what you're doing.

—Oh, shut up. Damn angels. You're no poet.

We both laugh. I draw him close. He fell asleep in my arms that night—I let myself cry. He's too young to die, too beautiful, my boy. To die, and to not have lived.

KALEIDOSCOPE

A kaleidoscope is an optical instrument that creates a psychedelic display of colours using mirrors. The collective noun for butterflies is kaleidoscope—for the beautiful array of shades and patterns a cluster of their fluttering wings creates against a vivid sky.

Ice sheets break beneath us, father and son and stranger, all in woollen cloaks.

A forgotten lake pulls us down into its memories.

—Dad!

—Jul!

What's the collective noun for an explosion of maybes?

Maybe I should've never told Juldeh about all the insects our ice age killed.

Maybe I should've never given him that book on monarch migration, or played him the last surviving videos of their lives.

Maybe I should've never let my obsession seep into him, like sunlight, like poison.

Maybe I should've said no to his dying wish, and never snuck out with him through the blue veil of night in search of butterflies.

Maybe I should've told him monarchs are unlikely to fly in these temperatures, and be more of a scientist and less of a father grieving.

Maybe I should've told him some dreams are better left unsought.

Maybe, then, the last months of his life would've been peaceful. Maybe, then, we would've spent so long on the couch watching his favourite cartoons. Maybe, old friends would've stopped by. Maybe his mother would've called from the other end of the world.

Maybe.

Orange wings against white sky. Kaleidoscope. Butterflies.

They hate the cold.

We shiver.

Maybe we saw the monarchs before we died. Maybe it was worth it. Maybe it was worth it.

—It's freezing, Dad.

—Hold on to me. I can...can...swim...

—Dad, look, look. They are so beautiful. Old man. Do you see them?

Notes on Contributors

Victor Forna is a Sierra Leonean writer based in his country's capital Freetown. His short fiction and poetry have been published or are forthcoming in homes such as *Fantasy Magazine*, *PodCastle*, *Lightspeed*, *Strange Horizons*, and elsewhere. He is an alumnus of the 2022 AKO Caine Prize Writing Workshop. You can find him on twitter @vforna12.

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*.

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