

INTRODUCTION TO BEST AMERICAN FANTASY, VOL. 3

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“Sitting under trees on or before noon is, in a number of romances, tantamount to inviting a supernatural visitation. The precise significance of a grafted tree is unclear, though notionally such a tree represents a coincidence of the natural with the unnatural.”

—from a footnote to “Sir Orfeo,”
Norton’s Middle English Romances,
edited by Stephen H. A. Shepherd

Though the tradition of realistic fiction is a rich and a verdant one, it is a mistake to believe that it exhibits the oldest or grandest trees in the forest of literature. Undoubtedly, realism has offered the world some of its finest chronicles of society and the family, as well its most ambitious representations of the individual mind at play with the materials of consciousness. It has attracted the talents of such extraordinary writers as Lady Murasaki and George Eliot, Tolstoy and Flaubert, Proust and Faulkner. Almost certainly, it has been the predominant mode of our time. All along, though, there has been another kind of literature stretching its limbs and putting

out its leaves alongside it, one that is rooted in the magical and the otherworldly, where a deep soil of myths and creation tales has given rise to *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, to Homer and Ovid and Aristophanes, to *The Thousand and One Nights*, to *Beowulf* and *Le Morte D'Arthur*, to countless Medieval romances and morality plays, to Dante and to Shakespeare and to Goethe, to Mary Shelley and Edgar Allen Poe, Lewis Carroll and Hans Christian Andersen, H.G. Wells and Karel Capek, and to all the great fantasists of late Twentieth Century fiction: Rushdie and Borges, J.G. Ballard and Isaac Bashevis Singer, Jose Saramago and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Some of this literature presents itself as a violation of the ordinary, some as merely an augmentation of it. In many cases, though, it offers stories in which the branches of the ordinary and the extraordinary are so tightly intertwined that it is nearly impossible to tell them apart.

What you hold in your hands is a collection of such grafted trees: stories that take the balanced prose, complex internality, and finely gauged awareness of the human heart that's found in the best realistic fiction and join them together with the strange gymnastic possibilities of fantasy to create a single living organism. The blossoms that appear may display unexpected colors, but they are no less beautiful or vibrant for the transformation.

It was only recently, in examining the lists I keep of my fifty favorite books and movies, that I realized how suffused with fantasy my tastes really are, and how often they involve exactly this coincidence of the natural with the unnatural. Ask me for a copy of these lists and I'll happily pass them along to you. On their pages, you will find historical epics and quiet character studies brushing up against fairy tales and sci-fi apocalypses and the strange nesting boxes of magic realism and classical fabulation in one great roiling crowd. Even the most naturalistic of my favorites—novels like *I*

Served the King of England, films like *Ponette*—are touched with either a religious sentiment or a clarity of perception that seems to verge on the fantastic. It appears that the conjunction of the real with the unreal, of the complications of human feeling with the whimsies and dreamlike visitations of fantasy, is an inescapable feature of my aesthetic.

Here, for instance, and apropos to this anthology, are my ten favorite fantasy stories of all time, listed in alphabetical order:

1. “Akhnilo” by James Salter
2. “Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor” by Franz Kafka
3. “Catskin” by Kelly Link
4. “The Dreamed” by Robert McLiam Wilson
5. “Extracts from Adam’s Diary and Eve’s Diary”
by Mark Twain
6. “Faith and Mountains” by Augusto Monterroso
7. “From the Fifteenth District” by Mavis Gallant
8. “The Light-Years” by Italo Calvino
9. “Professor Berkowitz Stands on the Threshold”
by Theodora Goss
10. “The Scalehunter’s Beautiful Daughter”
by Lucius Shepard

So—we have seven writers whose books are typically marketed as literary fiction, three as fantasy or science fiction; seven English-language writers and three foreign-language writers; seven men and three women; four writers who are now deceased, six who are currently living; two writers who occupy the pinpoint center of the

canon, three who are slowly gravitating there, and five who, thus far, remain unjustly at the margins; two writers I know personally; one writer whose work I treasure above all others; and three writers who, to my knowledge, aside from the stories on this list, have never otherwise written outside the realist mode.

In this edition of *Best American Fantasy*, you will find the twenty finest fantasy stories I read this year. Also, inevitably, you will find a record of my own preoccupations. There are stories of the afterlife, such as Shawn Vestal's chronicle of an eternity played out beneath the weight of nostalgia, Stephen King's tender and disquieting phone call from the other world, and Ramona Ausubel's diamond-bright vision of a boat full of grandmothers floating upon a mysterious ocean—her first published piece of fiction.

There are stories in which the failings and idiosyncracies of the human body are tipped into the fantastic, such as Ryan Boudinot's surrealist study of a town whose residents share a single heart, Paul Tremblay's beautifully vulnerable domestic chronicle of a girl with a second head, and Kuzhali Manickavel's elegant glance at the prospect of flight and the strangeness of parenthood.

There are stories that interrogate religion—Peter S. Beagle's wise, touching, and merciful tale of angelic encounter, Benjamin Rosenbaum's fierce reckoning with the holy and the inhumane—and stories that interrogate politics—Martin Cozza's miniaturist dose of anti-Presidential venom, Thomas Glave's daring, nightmarish, yet strangely incandescent atrocity catalogue.

There are stories that turn established narrative tropes to their own ends, like John Kessel's intimate, carefully modulated collage of *Frankenstein* and *Pride and Prejudice*, Lisa Goldstein's idealist subversion of the reader's guide, Will Clarke's roughneck superhero saga, and Kellie Wells's boisterous and divinely vexed pied piper tale.

And there are stories in which ordinary people are confronted with the fantastic and use its mechanisms to understand their own histories, such as Deborah Schwartz's poignant examination of the way our griefs rise up to haunt us, Chris Gavaler's doorway between a forgotten childhood and an inharmonious present, Laura Kasischke's savage elegy to lost possibility, and Rebecca Makkai's teasingly yearning composer-out-of-time fable. (Makkai's story "The Briefcase," by the way, from the same issue of *The New England Review* as Chris Gavaler's, was bar none the finest non-fantasy story I read this year: Seek it out.)

There are also two stories whose status as fantasy might demand a little justification: Jeffrey Ford's unforgettable tale of scale disruption and tiny genocides, "Daltharee"—the methods of which are primarily science fictional, but the science in question, "submicroscopic differentiated cell division and growth," is so playfully unlikely that it seems to me to cross the border into fantasy—and Katie Williams's darkly comic "Serials," which profoundly violates the customs of our world, if not its rules, presenting a society that mirrors our own but is enough unlike it that I think it can rightly be considered fantastic.

As different as these stories are—as varied in their tones and approaches, as motley in their wonders—they all share one thing in common: I greeted each of them with the tingle of exhilarated discovery that is the uppermost joy of fantasy. Nearly three-quarters of them are by writers whose work I had never previously encountered (though I'm making up for lost time: Thomas Glave's *The Torturer's Wife* and Kuzhali Manickavel's *Insects Are Just Like You and Me Except Some of Them Have Wings* are every bit as good as the stories their authors contribute to this volume), and just as many are from publications I had never read before. I hope that they offer you the same sense of flourishing possibility they offered me, that feeling you

get when you are sitting beneath a tree at noon and a flock of birds lifts from its branches, their tailfeathers flashing behind them like needles pulling the brightest threads.



With stories by: Stephen King, Peter S. Beagle, Ryan Boudinot, Jeffrey Ford, Martin Cozza, Will Clarke, Ramona Ausubel, Chris Gavalier, Thomas Glave, Lisa Goldstein, Laura Kasischke, John Kessel, Rebecca Makkai, Kuzhali Manickavel, Benjamin Rosenbaum, Deborah Schwartz, Paul Tremblay, Shawn Vestal, Kellie Wells, and Katie Williams.

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