

ENGINEERING IMPOSSIBLE ARCHITECTURES

KAREN RUSSELL

I. "So Real That It Is Fantastic"

As a KID growing up in Miami, I lived in the closet of my mind, trying on costumes. Later, I'd go to college and read textbooks in which academics try to shove the universe into various corsets, but as a kid, I wasn't reading for that kind of knowledge, that kind of adult girdle or belt. I just wanted to wear new skins. I wanted scales and wings. I'd figured out that you could do these really bizarre tricks in the library, in full view of the imperturbably cheerful librarians. You could, for example, metamorphose. You could suture a character's wings to your eight-year-old body. You could drop time like a skirt and step outside its wrinkled orbit. In the span of one hour on a rainy, ordinary Wednesday, you could live several lifetimes; commune with the dead; kill a man, without remorse, in the Western Territories; run off with traveling carnivals; fall in and out of love; or fall down a rabbit hole in your backyard and land in another galaxy. (This last thing was always happening to British kids in the YA novels I liked; I think those Brits need better zoning laws.) I dutifully

checked out Brontë novels to throw the teachers off my scent, but inside my desk I had a stash of fairy tales and science fiction—Jack London, Ray Bradbury, Madeleine L'Engle, Stephen King, Frank Herbert. The skins I got to wear when reading these books were thick hibernation whites, electronic carapaces, martian plumage, whole-body carnival tattoos, the black straitjackets of nightmares—these skins were not restrictive; they were great traveling clothes. All of my favorite voyages as a young reader occurred inside of them.

In the Miami-Dade public library system, if a book was identified as HORROR/FANTASY/SCI-FI, it got quarantined behind the beanbag chairs and labeled with a sticker of a cross-eyed dragon. A fat dragon in bad need of an optometrist—this was how I came to think of myself, as a consumer of fantasy and horror books. I developed the false ideas that, first, there was some essential division between the kinds of books I best loved and “Literature/Fiction” and, second, that there was something deeply suspect about the absorbing pleasure of “genre.” *Anna Karenina*, *The Great Gatsby*—these were the books to emulate. *Dune* and *Cujo* I zipped into my bag and when caught out with such books, would deny what I was doing with the confident cowardice of Peter in the Bible. (Cool guy: “So, you’re reading *The Mirror of Her Dreams*, huh?” Me, peering over the spine of *The Mirror of Her Dreams*: “No.”)

When I took my first creative writing class, I wrote many stillborn stories about matters pertaining to the “real” world: adultery and dinner parties; zero dragons. If my favorite traveling outfits as a young reader had been rabbit fur and jaundiced Frankenstein skin, now I wore nude panty hose and sensible

pumps. But, paradoxically, the more I tried to portray the “real” world, to whip married adults into plausible dramas and describe the makes and models of their cars, the more these stories felt like a stiff, self-conscious ventriloquy of reality. These Raymond Carver-wannabes were boring and grim, and a betrayal of my actual emotional experience of the world. “Flat cola stories,” I came to think of them. I was trying so hard to get the facts right that these stories lacked any effervescent sense of creation, discovery, something bubbling under the surface.

Then a favorite professor of mine turned me on to several wild authors, some of whom will be discussed later in this essay—Kevin Brockmeier, George Saunders, Kelly Link, Italo Calvino—world-class literary stylists whose sentences sing, whose characters have integrity and complexity (even when they are young children or ghosts or dinosaurs). Here were writers of serious adult literature drawing upon the oneiric power of fairy tales and fables. Borrowing the technique of uncanny estrangement from horror and science fiction. Handing monsters the mic and letting them crack jokes. I was awed by their ability to demolish the “real” world of a midwestern Tuesday and rearrange the rubble into something glowing and new. Out of the dynamited materials of the everyday, these authors had engineered impossible architectures: escalators to the underworld, moon ladders. They extended my notion of what literature can be and do. They gave me permission to write in twilight, at midnight, on islands, in much weirder and blurrier seasons. I saw that these sorts of genre-bending stories aren’t mere kid’s stuff, not at all. They have an extraordinary power: to draw out the deep strangeness of what we too often dismiss as “the everyday.”

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes, "The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one's eyes.)" What I loved about these writers was the way they gave me new goggles with which to consider the "known" world. After observing how characters respond to the altered universes of Kelly Link and Kevin Brockmeier (a haunted mansion in North Carolina, say, or a city where sores and wounds emit light), I'd return to my own world with keener eyesight, a fresh appreciation for the mysterious properties of "the ordinary." I'd put the book down and blink my way back into my bedroom as if for the first time.

None of this is meant as a knock on "realist" fiction (if such a thing exists!). Turning a seed packet of words into a permanent landscape inside a reader's mind is an eerie accomplishment, whether that setting is a Ray Bradbury moon colony or Stuart Dybek's Chicago. But let's say, for the purpose of this essay, that you, too, are interested in engineering an impossible architecture in your fiction, a place that does not exist on any of our school globes or gas station atlases—a world like Macondo, or Narnia, or the spider-web city of Octavia. How does one begin?

In her essay "Writing Short Stories," Flannery O'Connor says:

Fiction is an art that calls for the strictest attention to the real—whether the writer is writing a naturalistic story or a fantasy. I mean that we always begin with what is or what has an eminent possibility of truth about it. Even when one writes a fantasy, reality is the proper basis of it. A thing is fantastic because it is so real, so real that it is fantastic . . . I would even go so far as

to say that *the person writing a fantasy has to be even more strictly attentive to the concrete detail than someone writing in a naturalistic vein*—because the greater the story's strain on the credulity, the more convincing the properties in it have to be. (italics added)

That's the challenge, no matter what kind of fiction you are writing: to convince the reader, through the art of detail, that the story you are telling is a true one.

In other words, no matter how whacked-out or strange or funny or (fill in the blank) your setting turns out to be, no reader will be able to live there for long unless it also feels solid enough to support a genuine emotional connection.

II. The Kansas:Oz Ratio

SOME OF THE most successful fantasies I've read take a matter-of-fact approach to even their strangest events. Characters don't "protest too much" or apologize for the crazy thing in their fiction (a chimpanzee narrator, an undersea setting) through compulsive exposition/explanation. The apocalyptic plague called "The Blinks" in Kevin Brockmeier's fabulous *The Brief History of the Dead*; Gregor Samsa's rebirth as that big bug in *The Metamorphosis*; the specter that floats placidly over the fields in Chekhov's "The Black Monk"—all of these supernatural/impossible occurrences are narrated in a naturalistic vein, *as if real*. Which is to say, they are presented to the reader with the same attention to detail as the story's more banal elements: the

grain of a wooden desk, the sound of frogs croaking, the red of sunset. A ghost and a pen nib are painted with the same deft brushstrokes.

In "The Black Monk," for example, Chekhov's protagonist, Kovrin, describes the monk, a mirage that appears as a black dervish, with the same steady tone and precise language that he uses for milk and moustaches and tree roots. The story details a vacation to the Russian countryside, and not one of its events deviates from our expectations about the laws that govern reality until one scene about halfway in: Kovrin is standing in "a wide field covered with young rye not yet in blossom," admiring the sunset, "the evening glow . . . flaming in immensity and splendor." Suddenly, "a monk, dressed in black, with a grey head and black eyebrows" comes floating toward him over the rye. Kovrin "move[s] aside into the rye to make way for it, and only just ha[s] time to do so" before the monk "vanishe[s] like smoke."

Everything in this scene, from the unripe rye to the monk's black eyebrows, is related to the reader with the same vivid detail through Kovrin's wondering eyes. What's always impressed me is the detail about how Kovrin moves out of the monk's way—that's the gesture that convinces me that the monk has a definite, albeit uncanny, reality for Kovrin. His involuntary reaction to a wondrous event gives this scene its "eminent possibility of truth." Like Kovrin, I am ducking out of the phantom's way, watching slack-jawed as it dissolves into the trees. Reader and character merge in this vertiginous moment—because Kovrin's reaction to the eerie manifestation is our own. Rooted in the rye fields, well grounded in the story's concrete reality, we are also encouraged by Chekhov to abandon the known world and

soar. Kovrin's very human reaction to the apparition (bewilderment, exhilaration, instinctive recoil) gives the phantasmagoric scene the texture of a memory. A supernatural event, told in the "naturalistic vein," becomes believable and affecting.

One nice result of this approach—consistency of tone/precision of detail, no matter what is being described—is that our prejudices about what is fantastic and what is banal start to break down; *everything* begins to feel strange and wondrous. We are cured of the blindness that Wittgenstein cites, our inability to sense the mystery in the "everyday," and soon the Russian sunset seems every bit as fantastic as the Black Monk.

Marianne Moore once famously said that she thinks that poets are "literalists of the imagination" and that a poem should be "an imaginary garden with a real toad in it."

I'm currently working on a novel set during the Dust Bowl, and one of the narrators is a talking scarecrow. I feel as if I am taking a *real* garden—the historical reality of the Dust Bowl—and inserting an imaginary toad—this nattering old, pseudo-magical scarecrow—into it. So my interest in this question of "naturalistic" vs. fantastic/otherworldly/magical detail comes directly from my own struggle to engineer an impossible architecture. What kinds of concrete details, exactly, are required? How do you mix the right sort of otherworldly cement? I've started to think of this as the Kansas:Oz ratio; you could just as easily call it the Supernatural:Natural ratio, or the Timeless/Mythic:Historic/Linear ratio, or the Batshit-Insane Stuff:Banal Tuesday ratio. Real Toads:Imaginary Gardens.

Kansas:Oz is my way to think about the vibrational feedback generated by juxtaposing fantastic and realistic details in a story

or novel. Unsettling echoes can result from their interaction. These details can mutually confirm one another (e.g., both Gregor Samsa's exoskeleton and the bedposts are made out of solid material), even as, on another level, their interplay causes the earth beneath a reader to tremble and suggests that our whole idea of "reality" might be a slippery, glorious fiction. This is the central instability exploited by the writer of a fantasy: if Oz is given solid life, through concrete detail, then Kansas can begin to feel dreamlike and fragile. Certain bedrock truths that we take for granted in our "everyday" are loosened, spaded up, and reexamined.

But before any of this exciting, seismic stuff can happen, you've got this big challenge: How do you convince a reader to go along with you for the ride? What kind of grit, grain, and mortar from Kansas do you need to import into your Oz to ground your readers, to inspire their confidence in your narrator's voice? How can you use concrete details to earn the right to do something truly crazy on the page and have it believed?

I'll return to my own experience for an example, since I can't vouch for whatever entomological research Kafka did to write *The Metamorphosis*. (Though, my guess is: none. So maybe the lesson there is, if you're Kafka, ignore everything I'm telling you.)

To earn the authority to present a scarecrow as a viable character to readers, I felt I needed to acquire a deep knowledge of the history of the Dust Bowl—a familiarity with the soil in which he is, literally, staked. I wanted to import lumber from the real world to build a universe around the scarecrow, so I read up on suitcase farmers; crop tables; the Farm Security Administration; and Black Sunday—a dust storm that buried houses and cars, electrocuted watermelons, and erased the sun for hours. (You can see where the line between

reality and fantasy begins to dilate and blur.) Mad creations work best when assembled out of the terrestrial, out of the dirt of the author's and the readers' lived experience. Any dream Oz that we construct derives its color and its meaning through its analogy to our readers' "ordinary" lives. Magical-realist worlds, in fact, could be thought of as "scrambled Kansases." O'Connor points out:

If we admit, as we must, that appearance is not the same thing as reality then we must give the artist the liberty to make certain rearrangements of nature if these will lead to greater depths of vision. The artist himself always has to remember that what he is rearranging *is* nature, and that he has to know it and be able to describe it accurately in order to have the authority to rearrange it at all.

III. Follow Your Yellow-Brick Road to a Consistent, Rule-Governed Dream World

ONE LESSON THAT I have to relearn continually is that writing fiction set in an alternate reality doesn't mean you get a free pass to do any crazy thing you want. If you're going to try a Kansas:Oz shuffle, a radical "rearrangement of nature," you have some additional responsibilities to the reader. Namely, that you don't get tripped out on your godlike power (or more likely just exhausted and forgetful) and violate the parameters of the world that you've created.

Many of my early stories failed to create a consistent, rule-governed world, an Oz of sturdy emerald construction. They

took place in frictionless worlds where I myself felt like a tourist with only a shallow sense of the laws and customs, places where anything was possible and there was no discernible center of gravity. I kept changing the rules as I was going, so the stakes were nonexistent—it was a world that wasn't governed, that wasn't consistent, so nothing was at stake. It wasn't a world of consequences, so readers didn't care what happened.

As difficult as it is to get a reader to suspend disbelief, it's even harder to keep his or her disbelief lofted over the course of a story or novel as it progresses. In the same way that you can break a reader's heart by playing fast and loose with the rules of your Oz, you can also fail a reader by getting sloppy on the Kansas details. Here's my own embarrassing cautionary tale: I recently got proofs back for my first novel, *Swamplandia!* In one chapter, Ava, the female protagonist, hatches out of a glowing red alligator in a reptile incubator in the Florida swamp. A few pages later, I had written that she falls out of "a forty-foot tree." The copy editor gave me a pass on the red dragon, but that forty-foot-tall tree was circled three times. She'd attacked it with editorial lightning bolts. Her note read: "Is this a joke or a mistake?"

So the red dragon was okay, but I had to do a panicked, humiliated revision to the forty-foot tree.

I think this is a good lesson about the danger of imprecise details. Somehow, a mutant, strawberry-red lizard was more plausible in the world I'd created than a child's forty-foot fall. Why? My guess is that a reader's belief in the red alligator is predicated on Ava's own reaction to it—she finds the gator "miraculous," just as we might, but she goes on to assure us that it is real; it needs food and water like any hatchling gator; in other words, it obeys

certain natural laws we recognize. Its blinking eyes and scales are described by Ava in the same straightforward register she would use to describe an ice-cream cone or her sister's hair color. To Ava, and hopefully to the generous reader, the red alligator is a strange-yet-true entity. In contrast, when Ava falls out of that "forty-foot" tree, she doesn't call her survival "miraculous," doesn't check for a broken femur or anything; she just dusts off her swamp culottes and continues rambling on about her sister. That concrete detail, "forty-foot," was my own lazy mistake. So, because I had not earlier indicated that Ava had an adamantine skeleton, and because gravity still seems to operate in the Florida swamps of this novel exactly as it does for us tumblers out here in the "real" world, readers were guaranteed to be confused and distracted by my Kansas detail gone awry. The copy editor's faith in Ava's narration, and in the entire cosmos of the novel, was rattled.

This is what I mean by "a consistent, rule-governed world." In the kind of Kansas:Oz ratio I'd set up in *Swamplandia!*, no way should a kid fall a fatal distance, get up, and walk away like a cat on its ninth life. There should be a serious consequence (911, broken bones) or, at any rate, some kind of acknowledgement within the text of the story that a law has just been violated. When my characters weren't jarred by a forty-foot fall, my readers were.

IV. The Interior World of Oz

I'VE SPENT A lot of time discussing "the concrete detail" and its ability to pin down the reality of both Kansas and Oz for a

reader. I would add that a person writing a fantasy must also be strictly attentive to *emotional* detail. As I mentioned above, I missed the boat on a concrete detail, flubbing the realistic height of a tree; but just as crucially, I also failed to give Ava a credible human reaction to her fall. You need concrete detail to establish the bricks-and-mortar reality of your alternate world: its fauna and truck stops and weather. But equally vital, I think, is the convincing emotional detail. Characters must have convincingly human reactions to their world for it to feel real.

Sometimes the details that fully convince me of a twilight zone aren't descriptions of the setting itself, *per se*; they are details that reveal the private, emotional worlds of the characters who occupy it. In Kevin Brockmeier's *The Brief History of the Dead*, millions have been killed by a lethal virus unleashed by the Coca-Cola Company. (And there's a Kansas detail for you—Coca-Cola—to confirm the fictive, apocalyptic plague!) All of the newly dead are reincarnated in a purgatorial zone they call "The City," which looks a little like Main Street, USA, where they continue to exist as long as someone alive on earth still remembers them. A brilliant, wild premise that becomes absolutely plausible as soon as you hear "eyewitness testimony" from credible sources like the character Jeremy Fallon: "Jeremy Fallon, sixteen, and from Park Falls, Wisconsin"—those are some pretty Kansas details, right?—"said that the fighting hadn't spread in from the coasts yet, but that the germs had, and he was living proof. Or not living maybe, but still proof, he corrected himself."

You can just see this kid's shit-eating grin, his wry self-correction. Hear that teenager's desire to charm, which, against the backdrop of his recent suffering, becomes all the more poignant:

The bad guys used to be Pakistan, and then they were Argentina and Turkey, and after that he had lost track. "What do you want me to tell you?" he asked, shrugging his shoulders. "Mostly I just miss my girlfriend." Her name was Tracey Tipton, and she did this thing with his earlobes and the notched edge of her front teeth that made his entire body go taut and buzz like a guitar string.

In that tiny capsule, I think you can really see the Kansas:Oz ratio: you've got Park Falls, Wisconsin; you've got some sort of murky, apocalyptic plague that has driven these souls into the City; and you also have Jeremy's shrug, his mock-casual affect and sincere confession of longing. These details strike me as exactly the way a sixteen-year-old boy from Park Falls, Wisconsin, *would* react to finding himself in an afterlife. Why should things make more sense in the afterlife, why should any of our questions get answered there? How can we even approach, in language, a loss so violent and extreme as the loss of *everything*? Against the scale of a global apocalypse, everything he misses, everything he's lost, condenses to this tiniest of gestures of his girlfriend's: a nibble on his earlobe. It's a heartbreaking, human detail, and one that makes me immediately willing to believe in the plague and this city of the dead.

Another example in which concrete and figurative details combine to nail down a fictional world occurs in Kelly Link's story "The Specialist's Hat," in which Link stages a tale about childhood grief in a possibly haunted mansion called Eight Chimneys:

Eight Chimneys has exactly one hundred windows, all still with the original wavery panes of handblown glass. With so many windows, Samantha thinks, Eight Chimneys should always be full of light, but instead the trees press close against the house, so that the rooms on the first and second story—even the third-story rooms—are green and dim, as if Samantha and Claire are living underneath the sea. This is the light that makes the tourists into ghosts.

These two sisters, Samantha and Claire, have recently lost their mother. In the description above, Link skillfully blends concrete details about the house itself, such as the number of windows and the “handblown” glass, with the girls’ subjective experience of these “green and dim” rooms. We get a powerful sense of their isolation and their grief. During the day, we learn, Eight Chimneys is a tourist attraction: “The house is open to the public, and . . . people—families—driving along the Blue Ridge Parkway will stop to tour the grounds.” But these cheerful visitors from the “real” world, far from making the rooms of Eight Chimneys any less mysterious, enhance our sense of the kids’ seclusion. They really are just tourists, mere interlopers through the ghostly fog of the twins’ grief. Our feeling for the girls’ bereavement and isolation and the claustrophobia of Eight Chimneys (and of the private world of childhood more generally) is enhanced, not diminished, by Link’s deft mention of the Blue Ridge Parkway. While family sedans go whizzing past on the highway, here is a stagnant pocket, a twilight zone. “The light that makes the tourists into ghosts” makes the sisters’ grief palpable—it’s a literal detail about the actual light in Eight

Chimneys, as well as a powerful evocation of these two characters' haunted interiors.

So, to add my two cents to O'Connor's original advice for "the person writing a fantasy": strict attention must be paid to your characters' inner lives. It's the characters' responses to their environment that will ultimately make their setting real for your readers. No matter how foreign or strange your imaginary world may initially appear, if your characters move through it in ways that feel "realistic"—if your characters' speech and behavior and moods and terrors ring true to what we know about their personalities and basic human nature—then your readers are far more likely to accept the place on its own terms. Through each character's reactions to his or her setting, important boundaries are erected—what's normal and what's abnormal in this alternate zone? Possible or impossible? Cheering or heartbreaking? Where does the danger reside? What is there to fear in a Narnia or a Macondo? This is how consequence gets established. "Raise the stakes," young writers frequently hear in workshops; in the case of an altered universe, I think this advice is particularly important. What do readers want? A world with pleasures and dangers that mirror our own, "so real that it is fantastic." Characters with something to gain or lose. Permission to care.

V. Hit the Ground Running

WHEN DOING SOMETHING weird, you can trust your reader to make adjustments if you hit the ground running. Let's examine three beginnings that launch our voyages into impossible realms.

They frontload the strangeness, and present it in O'Connor's "naturalistic vein" without elaborate explanation or apology. "Dorothy, you're not in Kansas anymore," these openings inform us.

1. When Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from troubled dreams, he found himself changed into a monstrous cockroach in his bed.

I love the unapologetic strangeness of this first line. A friend of mine calls this "the fish-slap-to-the-face technique"—there is no effort made to gradually acclimate the reader, no accommodation for our disbelief. We are thrown into Gregor Samsa's altered reality at the precise moment that he is tap-tapping his insect body for the first time. Practically, this is a wonderful strategy, in terms of exposition and pacing—we learn the ropes with him.

2. When the blind man arrived in the city, he claimed that he had traveled across a desert of living sand. First he had died, he said, and then—snap—the desert. He told the story to everyone who would listen, bobbing his head to follow the sound of their footsteps. Showers of red grit fell from his beard.

Here is another great example of a balanced ratio of Oz mystique and Kansas mortar, courtesy of Kevin Brockmeier. This chatty blind man claims to be both newly dead and newly arrived from a desert of "living sand"—who is this nut job? Imagine if somebody walked into a Starbucks and told you that! But when his head bobs, "showers of red grit" fall out of his beard. A

fine shower of support for the blind man's story. Really, though, that "snap" is what does it for me. His hunger to be listened to by anybody, everybody—his bobbing insistence—these gestures and attitudes feel so recognizable, so human, that they confirm the blind man for me as a real person, someone so attentively, lovingly observed by Brockmeier that he becomes a character with a soul, whose testimony I can trust.

3. *The causes of the rapid extinction of the Dinosaur remain mysterious; the species had evolved and grown throughout the Triassic and the Jurassic, and for 150 million years the Dinosaur had been the undisputed master of the continents. Perhaps the species was unable to adapt to the great changes of climate and vegetation which took place in the Cretaceous period. By its end all the Dinosaurs were dead.*

All except me,—Qfwfq corrected,—because, for a certain period, I was also a Dinosaur: about fifty million years, I'd say, and I don't regret it; if you were a Dinosaur in those days, you were sure you were in the right, and you made everyone look up to you.

This is the opening from my favorite Italo Calvino story, "The Dinosaurs." Here we get a spectacular leap from Kansas into Oz—we start with a dry epigraph that could be from a science textbook, and then, whiplash fast, we are listening to the gregarious first-person rant of Qfwfq (whom I've always pictured as the dinosaur version of a boozy Italian uncle). The matter-of-fact, chatty tone suggests that we readers can relax and let go of the ordinary questions that might occur to one when confronted with such an outlandish premise ("How did this ancient reptile survive?," "How did

he learn English?," "Was Stephen Jay Gould right about the end of the Cretaceous?," et cetera.) The authority of Qfwfq's first-person voice, his storyteller's charisma, gives us permission to go on reading with a similarly relaxed and joyful attitude. Right away, Calvino makes it clear that he's set his story so far outside the realm of possibility that there's no need to be troubled by logistic questions about the premise, or the setting, or just how, exactly, a prehistoric refugee like Qfwfq could be stowed away in our century.

One final note, since I've talked so much about the importance of concrete detail to engineers of fantasy worlds. O'Connor also warns against the "accretion of mere detail": overdescription, data accumulation. You want to anticipate the kinds of questions that are going to occur to your reader, but it's good to remember that readers don't necessarily need or even particularly want answers to all the questions that occur to them. There might be a way inside the text to acknowledge the questions. Perhaps your character is equally baffled, which happens in *The Metamorphosis*; Gregor doesn't know why he is a cockroach. Omission is also an art. In one of the most beautifully mysterious moments in *The Brief History of the Dead*, a young woman, Graciela Cavazos, is asked how she came to the city. Brockmeier writes, "Graciela Cavazos would say only that she began to snow—four words—and smile bashfully whenever anyone pressed her for details."

VI. The Purpose

THE BELIEVER PUBLISHED an interview between Ben Marcus and George Saunders from which I shamelessly recite whenever

tudents anxiously ask me if they are permitted to write "weird" fiction. Marcus asks:

I'm interested in the trace fantastical elements that appear in your stories, as well as the occasional ghost. So much of your stories seem wedded to an emotional realism, yet your settings—the landscapes—are often, if not fantastical, then exceedingly odd or improbable, leading to real emotions in an unreal world. And then your stories, sometimes very slightly, leave the realm of physical possibility entirely (the dead awaken, for instance). Are these three distinct-writing spaces to you? Do you see a difference between "realism" and fantastical writing?

To which Saunders replies: "Realism is nonsense when you think of it. I mean, there is no such thing. Nobody writes realism, if realism is defined as 'fiction that is objective and real and not distorted, but is just, you know, normal.' . . . The nature of all fiction is distortion, exaggeration, and compression . . . What I find exciting is the idea that no work of fiction will ever, ever, come close to 'documenting' life. So then, the purpose of it must be otherwise."

What is the purpose, then?

Why spend so much energy to create an imaginary place?

I speak as a person who has several male relations who refuse on principle to read fiction at all, fantastic or realistic. Their rationale goes something like this: "What truth can I learn from some whoppers told by a damn elf, or an asshole on a road trip, or a make-believe Russian in outer space?" Historical fiction

occasionally gets a grudging pass, because at least it teaches one about period dress and "customs." But Oz, *Eight Chimneys*, the *City of the Dead*—get out of here! What's the value in spending a chunk of your life in a place that doesn't exist?

And here comes Flannery O'Connor again, preaching to our choir: "The truth is not distorted here," she writes, "but rather a distortion is used to get at truth." We exit these Oz places with a renewed sense of wonder, and with an altered understanding of our own lives and bodies and boundaries; with a looser relationship, too, perhaps, to that undulating set of memories and perceptions and sensations, the engulfing sum, of "everyday reality." As Shirley Jackson, another engineer of impossible architectures, writes as she opens a door onto infinite corridors in "The Haunting of Hill House": "No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream."