

Fantasy and Reality

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I quote from the «hyperdictionary», a useful tool you can find on the net.

Fantasy: *Imagination unrestricted by reality.*

Imagination: *The formation of a mental image of something that is not perceived as real and is not present to the senses.*

Reality: *All of our experiences that determine how things appear to us.*

So Fantasy is: *The formation of a mental image of something that is not perceived as real, unrestricted by all our experiences that determine how this thing appears to us”.*

Confused? Yes that is what the real, rational world does to us, even through a hyper - invention such as the internet... Thank God things in the world of fiction are more free flowing...

“All novels are really metaphors of reality,” John Fowles said. Writing fiction is not an escape from reality, it is a plunge into it. Even “magic realism,” a term coined by the Venezuelan writer Uslar Pietri, and excellently expressed in literature by such figures as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Juan Rulfo, is nothing more than heightened reality. Real is that what can happen. Either in life, or in the mind.

A novel is, in a sense, a construction. And as such, it obeys certain laws. These laws are not of course those of everyday life - although they are not so distant from it. A character in a novel is believable – or should I say real - if he can act according to these laws. If he does this successfully, he acquires a unique property: he is able to literally do whatever his creator wishes... Let’s take as an example a famous short story by Kafka: *The Metamorphosis*. This is the first paragraph:

One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in bed he had been changed into a monstrous verminous bug. He laid on his armour-hard back and saw, as he lifted his head up a little, his brown, arched abdomen divided up into rigid bow-like sections. From this height, the blanket, just about ready to slide off completely, could hardly stay in place. His numerous legs, pitifully thin in comparison to the rest of his circumference, flickered helplessly before his eyes.

From the first line we are already transferred into a world beyond the borders of reality, into the realm of fantasy, science fiction, the absurd, allegory - you name it. A man wakes up as a bug? This is not stuff someone can easily relate to. However, as we continue reading, we are able to follow this story with ease and enjoy it. That is because the author sets the laws from the beginning. Kafka starts by feeding the reader a specific, bizarre, concrete statement. Samsa wakes up transformed into a bug. This assertion seals the contract between writer and reader. We almost immediately identify with poor Gregor and read the rest of the story, thinking, fantasizing of him as a monstrous bug jailed in a room. Throughout the story Gregor obeys the laws the author has set out from the beginning. In order to write intriguing fantasy, Kafka has to be strictly attentive to every concrete detail, if he is to be believed.

All fiction is an illusion, but it has to be a believable one. If, in order to describe what you see, you are obliged to send your hero back in time, make him speak from the dead, or transform him into a bug that is okay, as long as you make it believable.

Personally, as a writer, I am often concerned with the limits between fantasy and reality. Eighty percent of my novel *Like a Thief in the Night* takes place inside the protagonist's head. She is an actress who undergoes a kaleidoscopic mind journey to fictitious places, a descent into a bizarre world that brings a number of buried secrets into light. Falling into a carefully--I hope--prepared narrative trap, the reader is led to believe that all these mysterious things actually happen to the protagonist in reality, only to be shocked at the last chapter, when it is revealed that the past 250 pages of the book were just a dream, a hallucination, a fantasy.

I just said the reader is shocked. But is he really? Why? Because he suddenly realized that what he read wasn't «real»? But, hang on a minute; at the time he was reading it, he believed it was actually happening. He remembers actions. And that is what matters. Reality is what is remembered. In life too, remembered things are not reproduced in the mind exactly as they have been experienced. The mind, memory, is not a digital camera, it is a chiaroscuro painting.

We writers write about what we see, either with our eyes, or with our soul. The night I realized I wanted to become a writer, I was at a pub in London, sipping a beer and looking at the indifferent scene in front of me. This scene, this “plan” – as the French would put it - involved everyday sounds and images: trees, parked cars, people passing by, a dog, moist whispers from the leaves, a distant voice. Suddenly I understood that, within this trivial canvas, there was everything. I tested the image I was seeing against all values, all notions, all questions, and all ideas that sprang into my mind - however crazy, over the top or surrealistic they might have been. The “plan” contained all the answers. This accidental canvas reproduced the world, both in its reality and its fantasy.

Later, as I started to work as a novelist, I understood that what the writer actually does is an editing job. The writer is a tutor, an editor of chaos. When I say chaos, I don't mean disorder, but an uncharted space which contains emotions, loss, memory, conflict, reality and fantasy, a space which is a direct reflection of the universe. But the writer is at the same time a shepherd of clouds – clouds being the ideas, the feelings, the sentiments, the fluid of life. He guides the clouds in such a way that he permits them to be in a state of continuous free movement as well as one of constant alert. The writer is the spectator who follows their movement and chooses the one that interests him most. This movement becomes the writer's world.

In everyday life, we are at times drawn into situations where there are no clear borders between fantasy and reality. How then can we expect clear, definite boundaries in an art which only exists in mind and on paper? Fantasy and Reality are the two faces of Ianos, inseparable and knitted together as one. “Reality,” as Will Blythe said, “is largely created by the observer, which makes it an awful lot like - well – fiction.” Fantasy is actually a means of extending, bisecting, transforming, and editing this reality, in order to return to it.

And fiction, literary creation, is this “Other way to see,” as Emily Dickinson brilliantly said, it is “another gaze” at the world, a gaze which interprets reality with fantasy and fantasy with reality, an imaginative construction with truth as its basic element.