

À la chasse au dahu: on magical stories

written by Guest Contributor | February 9, 2017



Until I was eleven years old I lived part of each year on the flank of a toothlike mountain. In those days, my mother often took me my siblings and me on hikes. These excursions were variously purposed; sometimes we foraged for mushrooms or wild strawberries; sometimes we made for a specific destination, such as the little hut known as le Refuge de la Traie, where a small wind-brined man brews a thick fondue all year long and, with tireless enthusiasm, offers every visitor at least one swig of his *vipérine*.^[1] The best hikes, though, were those on which my mother took us “à la chasse au dahu” (hunting for the dahu).

The dahu is the most rare and exotic of alpine creatures. In many respects it resembles the mountain goat. It is horned and hooved. It grazes, craves salt. Unlike the mountain goat, however, the dahu is vibrantly colored: the female is purple, the male is blue. Also, the dahu is taller than the mountain goat; and its bleat is more lugubriously melodious. There are other points of difference—the most significant (that which distinguishes the dahu incontrovertibly not only from the mountain goat but also from pretty much every other quadruped on the planet) is limb proportion. The dahu’s legs on the right side (always the right side) are about a foot and a half shorter than the dahu’s legs on the left side. As a result, the dahu is able to navigate steep mountainous terrain as though it were flat. Short legs up, long legs down, the dahu goes around the mountain. Always in the same direction—clockwise. As you can probably imagine, if it was to try to double back, the dahu would topple. But it seems something about the way the dahu’s brain works prevents it from even trying.

In late summer, mating season, the plangent bleats of dahus transpierce the high alpine air. When one dahu hears the mating call of another it frantically calls back and rushes in the only direction it can rush—clockwise. Meanwhile, the other dahu, all gonad drunk, rushes clockwise also, and both dahus rush clockwise around the mountain—simultaneously away from and toward each other—for days. If, by the grace of nature, one of the dahus is fast enough to catch up to the other, they copulate, and in the spring a blue or purple offspring lurches unevenly around the mountain for

the first time. It is too often the case, however, that the rutting dahus are evenly matched in pace, and that before they can meet one or the other dies of exhaustion.

I stopped believing in *Papa Noël* by the time I was six or seven years old, but I went on dahu hunts with my mother until I was ten. I didn't suddenly quit believing in the dahu. Instead, when I was eleven, I was removed from the dahu's natural habitat; the dahu hunts ended, and I slowly forgot about the creature. When, years later, I remembered the dahu, I had undergone the mind-altering process known as puberty. What had seemed real in the diaphanous haze of boyhood was revealed, in the greasy haze of new manhood, to be hoax. That felt strange.

What I was experiencing, I retrospectively understand, was nostalgia.

I've been rereading my version of the dahu myth and thinking that if I declaimed to some kid she'd probably stop listening a few sentences in. For fathomable reasons (white-page anxiety, an insidious desire to feel original, etc.) I have changed—added to, mostly—my mother's story. All my mother ever told me about the dahu was that it has uneven legs and goes around the mountain. Everything else—the dahu's color, its size, its habits, etc.—I imagined for myself while on our hunts.

If you are going to tell the dahu story to a kid, you ought to follow my mother's example, I think. First, to command the kid's attention and sense of adventure, say, "*allez, viens, on va à la chasse au dahu*" (come on, let's go hunting for the dahu). When the kid asks, "*mais, c'est quoi un dahu?*" (but, what is a dahu?) express disbelief that the kid does not know about the most famous animal on the mountain. After a while, when the kid has made it clear both that she isn't in the loop about the dahu and that she'll throw a big tantrum if you don't elaborate, reluctantly provide the minimum in details. Within minutes the kid should have her own vividly idiosyncratic dahus hobbling tragicomic loops in her head.

In *A Perfect Day for Bananafish*, J.D. Salinger writes a poignant fictionalization of this kind of storytelling. A little girl, Sybil, approaches a troubled young man, Seymour, as Seymour lies in the sand of a Californian beach. They converse for a few pages before Seymour suggests that they set out to catch a bananafish.

"A what?" Sybil asks.

Seymour first pretends to think that Sybil is pretending not to know what a bananafish is ("you must have seen quite a few bananafish in your day"); then he pretends to become convinced that she actually doesn't know ("you haven't? Where do you live, anyway?"). As they move into the ocean, Seymour gives Sybil a brief description of bananafish and their life cycles: "Well, they swim in a hole where there's lots of bananas. They're very ordinary looking

fish when they swim *in*. But once they get in, they behave like pigs. Why, I've known some bananafish to swim into a banana hole and eat as many as seventy-eight bananas. Naturally, after that they're so fat they can't get out of the hole again. Can't fit through the door."

"What happens to them?"

"Well, I hate to tell you, Sybil. They die."

"Why?"

"Well, they get banana fever. It's a terrible disease."

A paragraph later, Sybil spots a bananafish with six bananas in its mouth.

There are, of course, no such things as bananafish in this world or that of Salinger's story, but that does not prevent Sybil from being so strongly convinced of their existence that she actually sees one. Sybil's capacity to believe things into reality is a hallmark of childhood. Because her brain is in constant development, eager to make sense of the world but not yet taught to distrust anything that smells of the supernatural, Sybil is the perfect audience for a magical tale. If the story is well told, she will inhabit its reality just as uncompromisingly as she inhabits this one.

An adult can no longer translate herself so fully into a fictional world.^[2] But she can perform a shadow of the childhood trick of total believing: she can "suspend her disbelief." Whether or not an adult decides to suspend her disbelief depends on her mindset as well as the story she is interacting with.

A certain kind of adult reader has firmly decided that he isn't the type of person who suspends his disbelief. If he perceives a story to be in any way 'unrealistic,' he won't engage with it. It's not improbable that this person doesn't like to interact with any story at all. He prefers "solid facts," like those of physics or history.^[3] If you're peddling a magical tale and you run into someone like that, you should expect for him not to get involved with you or your merchandise. If life is a desert and a good magical story is a bottle of mineral water, then this person prefers to lead a desiccated existence.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, a certain kind of reader, like me, is maybe so pathologically nostalgic for the childhood feeling of inhabiting magical contexts that he's *eager* to suspend his disbelief, loves to hurl himself as totally as possible into the universe of Paul Atreides or of Frodo Baggins or of some badly written Star Wars fan fiction protagonist. Regardless of the quality of the material, this reader will willingly work to mentally animate and inhabit it. He will do this not in spite of a story's supernatural elements but *because* of them. He's just a sucker for anything that approximates the feeling he had when he thought he was on the tail of a dahu, or when he first read *The Chronicles of Narnia* and then believed for more than a year that there was a trapdoor to a more magical universe under a man-sized bronze amphora in the living room.

In the case of every reader of magical stories who falls between these extremes—who's neither a complete skeptic nor shamelessly lusting to get right up in any and all enchanted realms—whether or not she suspends her disbelief will depend on how successfully a story is told, especially with respect to how magical elements are conveyed and treated.

In her essay "Fairy Tale Is Form, Form Is Fairy Tale," Kate Bernheimer, identifies four fundamental techniques of traditional fairy tale. These are "flatness, abstraction, intuitive logic, and normalized magic."

- **Flat** characters lack complex emotions or internal conflict.
- **Abstractions** tell rather than show (e.g. "a *poor* woman"; "a *beautiful* child").
- **Intuitive logic** is associative (or proximal) rather than causal.[\[4\]](#)
- **Normalized magic** is magic that characters unquestioningly accept as a norm of the world of the story.[\[5\]](#) [\[6\]](#)

Flatness and abstraction more specific to fairy tale than intuitive logic and normalized magic, which (the latter two) are used in genres ranging from magical realism to fantasy. While making all your characters flat and all your descriptions abstract isn't usually the recommended way to go about writing a chunky novel, if you don't mind your novel being labeled anything but 'staunchly realistic,' then by all means, rock out with your intuitive logic and normalized magic out.

I don't want to dismiss the power and usefulness of the techniques of flatness and abstraction in certain contexts. The combined use of flatness and abstraction allows stories to unfold with breathtaking concision, giving the audience little chance to lose track of the narrative or to become disinterested. Moreover, rather than ask the imagination to work in a very particular way to produce a very particular picture, the tale told using flatness and abstraction provides the imagination with just enough detail to let it freely construct its own picture. If you're hoping that the kid to whom you're telling your story to might mistake a rock or a mountain goat for a dahu, or a piece of seaweed or an ordinary fish for a bananafish, you might not want to tell her too much about what a dahu or bananafish looks like. The brain knows best how to fool itself.

One function flatness and concision can perform in magical tales is that of easing the normalization of magic. The fewer specific details one provides, the fewer specific pieces of evidence a realist-minded critic might have to object to. If I tell you that dahus are either purple or blue you might stop me to say, 'hold up, that's just ridiculous: I'm pretty sure no alpine creatures exhibit those colors.' Assuming I want you to stick with me through the story, it might be better for me not to say anything, to let your brain choose if and how to color the dahu. Likewise, if I just tell you that because a dahu has legs shorter on one side it can only go clockwise around the mountain I'm probably going to be better off than if I attempt to explain everything the dahu's asymmetrical physiology means about its life cycle. If we linger to examine the uneven-legs premise (i.e. if I try to explain it) we'll realize just how blatantly implausible it is about as soon as we realize that mountains are neither evenly steep nor round. One way to

normalize magic, then, is to treat it like any other normal thing—briefly state it, then move on.

But flat and abstract environments aren't the only ones in which magic can become normalized. In Frank Herbert's *Dune*, for instance, the entire ultra-detailed fictional universe seems designed to normalize the messianic prescience of the protagonist. There are a confluence of reasons Paul Atreides can see the future: he has been trained since childhood to perform as a human computer;[\[7\]](#) he is the culmination of a multimillennial eugenics program intended to produce, well, him; he ingests the most potent drug in all of space, a drug no male human before him has survived, handles it like the championest of frat boys, and the drug awakens dormant abilities ... Each of these reasons comes with a supporting network of narrative, and these networks extend and interweave complexly. In *Dune*, it is precisely the wealth and depth of detail, pseudoscientific and otherwise, that normalizes magical elements such as Paul's prescience, faster than light travel, sword and energy shield-only warfare, and so on.

In fairy tales and in novels such as *Dune*, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* novels, Ursula Le Guin's Hainish cycle novels, etc., entire fictional universes function according to laws different from those that rule our own, so that a reader decides whether or not to suspend disbelief about a whole universe rather than about elements of it. Some stories, however, introduce supernatural elements to an otherwise 'realistic' fictional universe.[\[8\]](#)

Different writers employ different methods to normalize magic within a 'realistic' context. In *The Great Night*, Chris Adrian takes care, at first, to demarcate a magical fairy world from a normal (if characteristically vibrant) San Francisco, which allows the reader to become accustomed to both realities and to their parallel existences, before, inevitably, the border between the magical and the real osmoses and collapses.

In Martha Baillie's *The Search for Heinrich Schlögel*, Heinrich Schlögel falls into some kind of time warp while hiking alone in the north of Canada. When he emerges from the wilderness, thirty years have passed for the world outside of him, but he remains twenty years old. *Seems impossible*, everybody agrees, including Heinrich. That's a pretty good way to go about keeping disbelief in suspension: acknowledge it; say 'this is too paranormal to be true, and yet ...'

In "The Immortal," Jorge Luis Borges frames an incredible diary-style account of a life several thousand years long with the preamble and closing argument of the scholar whose hands the manuscript have fallen into. The academic voice leads the reader in, implying by its tone, 'believe me, I'm qualified.' That same voice, upon the reader's reemergence from the framed narrative, silences any potential protests. "[Even I] detect a certain falseness," it says, but "I can attest that [these pages] do not stray beyond the bounds of truth ..."

In "The Balloon," Donald Barthelme's narrator points to an immense balloon floating over and interacting with New York and her citizens. If the reader is tempted to ask why, the story laughs at her,[\[9\]](#) and it the eeriness and

hostility of the narrative voice, keeps (presumably) her disbelief suspended until the end, when the narrator vaguely but hilariously lets the reader know that the balloon “is a spontaneous autobiographical disclosure, having to do with the unease I felt at your absence, and with sexual deprivation.”

In Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, the reader is aware, like the Khan to whom each tiny story is addressed, that the stories are not real. The first words of the novel are “Kublai Khan does not necessarily believe the stories ...” But as much as he conveys Kublai’s understanding that Marco is not telling him factual truth, Calvino also conveys Kublai’s profound appreciation of Marco’s stories, as well as a sense that even if they aren’t factually true, they aren’t necessarily empty of truth or without value.

This can be said, I think, of magical stories in general. Even if they aren’t factually true, they aren’t necessarily empty or truth of without value. And you’ll never know what’s in the pantsuit unless you suspend your disbelief at least a little bit. So don’t be a prude about it.

[1] A glass bottle in which a viper hangs suspended in very strong eau de vie.

[2] Unless she reaches the kind of golden age in which one regresses into childlike consciousness.

[3] The obvious irony is that very few of the ideas commonly accepted as facts will remain so. Most facts are like shark teeth or apples. They keep falling and being replaced. Stories aren’t perishable in that way.

[4] In the example Bernheimer focuses on, “The Rosebud,” a little girl goes into the woods, meets a child who gives her a rosebud and says he’ll be back when it opens. The girl brings the bud back to her mother. The bud opens. The little girl dies. As the reader, I had no trouble making a logical connection between the bud opening and the child’s death, but in fact there is no way to explain that link short of invoking magic, (which, of course, fairy tales do, but sometimes, as in “The Rosebud,” only implicitly—the magic is, as Bernheimer’s next point expounds on, “normalized”). (Whereas if, for instance, the rosebud had been the organic timer of a bomb implanted in the spine of the little girl, then the link between it opening and her dying would be easily explainable, and the story might be labeled science fiction instead of fairy tale.)

[5] Bernheimer exemplifies the concept by pointing to a passage in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventure in Wonderland* in which “Alice is not worried that a baby she is carrying transforms into a pig: in fact, she simply sets ‘the little creature down, and felt quite relieved to see it trot away quietly into the wood.”

[6] Bernheimer equates, for a confusing moment, “normalized magic” to “suspension of disbelief” (“You can call [normalized magic] ‘suspension of disbelief’” she writes), but I think she’s mistaken in doing so. The concepts seem to me to be quite distinct. Whereas suspension of disbelief is *something the reader does* every time she engages with a story,* normalized magic is *something the author writes into the story*, which the reader may or may not decide to suspend disbelief about.

* on a more existential note, I think societally functional humans are constantly suspending disbelief, that suspending disbelief is a prerequisite to having both beliefs and linear consciousness.

[7] Given enough data (i.e. *all* the data) and processing power, a computer should, assuming

a mechanistic universe, be able to predict the future. This line of thought recalls the principal tenet of causal determinism—the *facts of the past, in conjunction with the laws of nature, entail every truth about the future.*

[8] Most typically stories that belong to the genre of “magical realism,” but also horror stories, my-daddy-done-this stories, religious myths ...

[9] “There was a certain amount of initial argumentation about the ‘meaning’ of the balloon; this subsided, because we have learned not to insist on meanings.”



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