

Here Be Dragons

“Tell me a story . . .”

Myths and legends, heroic quests and epic sagas, fables, fairy tales, and bedtime tuck-ins—all start from these four simple words. Indeed, writes Frank McConnell, “all the great narrative works of [humankind] begin with the demand from one primitive troglodyte to another, ‘Tell me a story’” (1975, 90). From our first attempts at narrative, which may have begun as early as a million years ago (Kearney 2002, 4), to the epic storytelling at the historical horizon and on to the most sophisticated forms of high fantasy television and modern shared-world fiction—that is, from *Gilgamesh* to *Game of Thrones*, from the cave paintings at Lascaux to live-action role-playing—we have been *Homo narrans*. The ones who tell stories. The ones who give texture and shape to our lives through the storyworlds we create and who, through story, order the scattered shards of our world into meaningful wholes. For decades, therapists have helped people resolve painful events and traumatic experiences through storytelling. Marketing companies and branding specialists work with clients to craft a “compelling story” for potential customers. Religious leaders begin weekly homilies with a story, engaging parishioners and connecting them with the day’s lessons. Storytelling affects our ability to recall things, often biasing our understanding with each retelling. And, perhaps most importantly, the more we tell a particular story, the more we come to believe the story we’re telling.

“People think that stories are shaped by people,” writes Terry Pratchett in *Witches Abroad*, the twelfth in his celebrated *Discworld* series. “In fact, it’s the other way around” (1991, 8).

“Once upon a time . . .”

“It was a dark and stormy night . . .”

“In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit . . .”

“A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away . . .”

“This is the Discworld . . .”

All these are variations on a theme: the ubiquitous invitation to hear a story.

For many, it’s that singular moment in a movie theater when the last of the house lights go out. The ads are over, the trailers unreeled, and a second or two of almost total darkness engulfs the audience, an instant of silence in which anything can happen. Pupils dilate; hearing becomes more acute. Almost unconsciously, we settle back. Our seats become the log by the campfire for the evening’s round of ghost stories, the gathering of the clan to hear Granny Meg tell her “tales o’ the auld country.” In that moment, it is as though the entire theater closes in and whispers, “Let me tell you a story.”

“Stories matter and matter deeply,” McConnell continues, arguing that “make-believe stories,” whether literary, cinematic, or participatory, “are still the best version of ‘self-help’ our civilization has invented” (1979, 3; see also Boyd 2009; Gottschall 2012; Pinker 2009). That is, stories have always been far more than simply entertainment, and to dismiss them as such willfully ignores their deeper dimensions, their extraordinary power to shape human experience. Writing in the late 1970s, at the height of the first wave of human potential movements, McConnell beckons us back to the well of narrative from which humankind has drawn for millennia. “Even at the most unredeemed level of ‘escapist’ entertainment, cheap novels or trash films,” he concludes, “the didactic force of storytelling is still present” (McConnell 1979, 4).

Stories, however, are not simply didactic, not intended merely to impart a moral or a lesson. They are also participatory and transformative. We resonate with stories because we so often write ourselves into them, whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not. Commenting on the counterterrorism drama *24*, which, for all its gritty realism, is as much a fantasy as anything else, philosopher Tom Morris points out, “my wife comes into the room and laughs when she sees me standing five feet in front of the TV, poised on the balls of my feet, ready to spring into action and help Jack if he ever needs it” (2008, xi). Full dis-

closure: when I was binge-watching all eight “days” of *24*, I would often tell my wife, “I have to go. Jack needs my help.”

Whether through online fan fiction, elaborate cosplay, or dedicated accumulation of action figures, models, games, toys, and shared-world art and literature, millions of Trekkies around the world regularly write themselves into the science fiction franchise they love (Nygard 1999). Any number of Ringers, the Tolkien version of *Star Trek* fans, role-play their favorite characters and scenes from *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* (Cordova 2005). Begun in 1970 by a group of San Diego comic book enthusiasts, Comic-Con is now a bona fide cultural phenomenon, bringing together myriad aspects of science fiction and fantasy culture. Each year well over one hundred thousand people crowd the long, cavernous space of the San Diego convention center, many hundreds arriving in character as their favorite science fiction and fantasy heroes. Thousands of smaller conventions around the world attract fans equally devoted to the storyworlds they love and the stories in which their own lives find meaning.

Whether it’s a blockbuster movie watched through 3-D glasses or a YouTube clip on a mobile device; a network television show or amateur online video; a role-playing game: tabletop (RPG), live action (LARP), or massively multiplayer online (MMORPG); or a graphic novel, a multi-volume epic, or a trading-card strategy game—and whether it’s the profound amusement of the Discworld or a fairy tale’s dark make-believe—*fantasy culture* invites us into storyworlds often manifestly different from our own, yet reflecting remarkably similar concerns and experiences. Fantasy culture draws us into realms and planes populated by imaginary creatures, bizarre settings, and story arcs that whisk us away from our “normal” lives in the most astonishing, improbable, and entertaining ways. Whether we enter through the back of a wardrobe, a hole in the ground, an unseen train platform, or the simple act of reading aloud, fantasies book us passage into what Tolkien calls the “secondary world” (1966, 33–99), the world of Faërie (not fairies), the worlds of mythic imagination that are separate but not distinct from the “primary world” of traffic jams, utility bills, and dental appointments.

From our species’ earliest mythic imaginings, these secondary worlds bring together three basic narrative elements. First, we glimpse some manner of what William James calls “an unseen order” ([1902] 1999, 61), a hidden realm lodged above, behind, or in between the ordinary spaces of the storyworld. Often, though not exclusively, the domain of supernatural forces, this is primarily the realm of mystery and *magic*.

For the most part, these varied unseen orders remain the sole province of the storyworld, though, occasionally, their power evolves into religious belief and spiritual practice in the real world (see, for example, Cowan 2012; Possamai 2012). Next, we meet the cast of characters who brave these fantastic realms, both seen and unseen. Sometimes eager for the journey, other times setting out only reluctantly, intrepid *heroes* invite us to join them on their quest. Finally, alongside our heroes, we encounter various supernatural creatures, forces, and powers. Some try to be helpful (a White Rabbit to lead the way) while others are evil and treacherous (a Stoor Hobbit enchanted by a magic ring). Many are disturbingly ambiguous—a small boy appearing in flash of fairy dust—and some, simply put, are *monsters*. All of these elements, though, are essential to the evocative power of the fantasy storyworld, and if one is missing or drawn less vibrantly than the others, the entire narrative suffers for it. It loses some of its ability to conjure the world in our imaginations. “For believable characters to exist,” writes Mark Darrah, executive producer of the *Dragon Age* fantasy franchise, “they need a believable world. This goes beyond the ground they stand on” (in Gelinas and Thornborrow 2015, 9).

As the house lights dim, then, as the television warms up or the video game loads, as the first page is turned, consider just a few of the ways in which we create magic, monsters, and make-believe heroes, the *sine qua nons* of fantasy culture and the mythic imagination.

“THIS IS NO GAME . . .”: *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS*

NARRATOR

The empire of Izmir has long been a divided land. Ruled by the Mages, an elite group of magic-users, lowly commoners, those without magic, are little more than slaves. Izmir’s young empress, Savina, wishes equality and prosperity for all. But the evil Mage, Profion, has other intentions.

The opening narration ends, and, as we must, we find ourselves in a dungeon, with a dragon. Wooden capstans creak and grind, pulling heavy chains taut, as leather bellows huff and chuff in the background. Skeletal remains litter the floor. A bleached skull rests atop a sluice box, while the rush of water powers a complicated array of gears and arcane machinery. Dominating the center of the room, turning relentlessly on

its axes, stands a large, bronze armillary sphere, its triple rings orbiting an ornate staff with a dark green stone cradled at one end.

Enter Profion, the evil Mage, his scarlet cloak billowing as he sweeps down the worn stone stairs like an eldritch diva. He speaks, and a spell not heard in a thousand generations echoes through the chamber. Once empty, the armillary void is suddenly filled . . . with dragons. “Yes! At last!” Profion hisses exultantly, gazing upward and clutching the staff, its gem now glowing with malevolent power.

“Release him,” the Mage commands.

Cringing minions struggle to raise a heavy portcullis. Hideous roars echo from the darkness, and all but Profion shrink in fear. The green dragon emerges, fierce and proud, enraged by captivity. It immolates the closest servants as they scatter in panic, but Profion does not waver. “Come to me,” the Mage orders, raising the staff high above his head. The huge beast takes two lumbering steps, its massive claws furrowing the granite flagstones. Bellowing in frustration, the dragon tries in vain to stretch its wings, unable to seek the freedom of the Feywild, yet powerless to kill the one who holds it in thrall. “You have the power of the immortals,” whispers Profion’s awestruck lieutenant. “You can control dragons.”

He can’t, of course, for dragons of any color only offer themselves in service willingly and for the moment, preferring death to enslavement at the hands of mere mortals.

Courtney Solomon’s 2000 film, *Dungeons & Dragons*, follows the basic gameplay of its source material, arguably the most popular fantasy role-playing game in the world. The opening narration is the Dungeon Master’s introduction to the adventure, setting the backstory and establishing the challenges the heroes must face. Here, they seek the near-legendary Rod of Savrille, an ancient artifact said to control red dragons, the most dangerous in the *D&D* storyworld (Mearls, Schubert, and Wyatt 2008, 74–85). It is this film’s version of the Death Star, its Ark of the Covenant, its One Ring, its Iron Throne, its Dark Crystal. And, at all costs, Profion must not gain the Rod, for with it he will entrench the power of the Mages and reinforce the apartheid of Izmiri society.

Like *D&D* players “rolling up” characters, a motley band of adventurers sets out to save the day. Indeed, anyone familiar with fantasy role-playing games will recognize the different races (human, dwarf, and elf) and character classes (rogue, wizard, and fighter). The tavern where the rag-tag company plans its mission could easily be the Inn of the Prancing Pony (*The Lord of the Rings*), the Mos Eisley cantina (*Star*

Wars), or Ankh-Morpork’s pub, The Mended Drum (*Discworld*). Sundry guardsmen, villagers, thieves, and dungeon dwellers serve as non-player characters (NPCs)—story fodder for such story as there is. And, though the dragons are monstrous, Profion is the boss-monster, the final challenge, the hardest to kill, and faced only at the end of the journey. Indeed, this is a classic *D&D* campaign: rooms must be escaped and NPCs defeated; traps must be avoided or passed; lesser monsters vanquished; locks picked, puzzles solved, and treasure stolen. Successfully gaining the various elements of the quest, our heroes hope to survive with enough experience points to level-up at the end of the film.

All that and the movie tagline: “This is no game.”

“EVENTUALLY WE FOLLOW OUR TRUE NATURE . . .”:

DRAGON AGE: REDEMPTION

PROLOGUE (TEXT)

In the world of *Dragon Age*, humans hold power through their church, the Chantry. The church’s warriors, the Templars, strictly regulate the use of magic, as Mages are easily corruptible by demonic possession. The Qunari, a race of formidable “grey giants,” forcibly convert humans, dwarves and elves alike to their rigid philosophy, the “Qun.” Disobedience is never tolerated. Mages from both cultures often become pawns in the unending conflict between Qunari and Chantry. . . .

Like *Dungeons & Dragons*, the six-part web series *Dragon Age: Redemption* begins in a dungeon. Although there is no immediate prospect of a dragon, there are monsters enough. In a rude cell, a prisoner lies bound to a rack. His ears betray him as an elf: Yevven the Keeper, for many years a wielder of magic among the forest peoples of Thedas. Now, his eyes are glassy with pain, his bruised skin sheened with sweat and blood. A rasp of steel whickers as a long blade slides from its sheath. Once again, the hulking torturer steps in, bending to his work. In the language of the Chantry, however, one of the two religious traditions battling for dominance in the *Dragon Age* storyworld, Yevven is not being tortured, merely “examined.”

Suddenly, from outside the cell come the unmistakable sounds of combat. “The prisoner is escaping!” someone yells, and the jailer turns as the heavy, iron-bound door bursts inward. Stepping through the dust and smoke, a vision of hell itself. Towering above even the tallest

humans, with long white hair and an imposing set of horns, the grey-skinned Qunari looks every inch the medieval image of a devil. Barely noticing the others in the cell, he approaches Yevven and picks up the torturer's knife, still wet with elven blood.

"Amateurs," the Qunari says, shaking his head in disdain.

Based on the bestselling video game franchise *Dragon Age* and produced in partnership with the game company BioWare, *Dragon Age: Redemption* was created by Felicia Day, an actor, writer, producer, and prolific internet entrepreneur of all things "Geek & Sundry" (Day 2015). Although each episode contains less than ten minutes of action, *Redemption* is a wonderful example of minimalist storytelling that relies on audience familiarity with the fantasy genre, a detailed backstory drawn from the *Dragon Age* games, books, and shared-world fiction, and our generalized ability to fill gaps and maintain a sense of narrative coherence (see Gaider 2013; Gelinas and Thornborrow 2015). More than that, it reinforces the basic elements of fantasy storyworlds: there is magic, there are monsters, and, however flawed, there are heroes. Despite the eagerness with which the actors attack their parts—excepting Doug Jones, who plays the Qunari with a delicious, understated menace (as opposed to the scene-chewing abandon of Jeremy Irons as Profion in *Dungeons & Dragons*)—the story is well-plotted enough that even someone unfamiliar with the *Dragon Age* universe can enjoy it. Which is to say, whatever we may think of the story itself, it succeeds in evoking the storyworld and invoking the questions that drive the mythic imagination.

The plot is relatively simple: a rogue Qunari Mage called "the Saarebas" (Jones) has escaped the Chantry's custody. Using a mystical artifact known as the "Mask of Fen'Harel," he plans to rend the veil between the worlds, raise an army of demons from an unseen realm called "the Fade," and usher in a nightmare age of evil and despair. Both the Chantry and Qunari have dispatched agents to recapture him, the latter sending an elven assassin named Tallis (Felicia Day, who looks the very quintessence of a wood-elf); the former, Cairn, a Templar dedicated to the mission of his church (Adam Rayner, the strong, but tragically flawed hero). As in a *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign, they are joined by other adventurers, in this case a young elven magic-wielder (heir to the title of Keeper) and a Reaver, a supernaturally enhanced mercenary who lives only for the pain and bloodshed of mortal combat.

The final battle takes place at the ritual site chosen by the Saarebas for a *de rigueur* blood sacrifice. "For the first time in my life," he cries, "I am not the weapon. I wield it." Recruiting legions of the dead as foot



FIG.1 Cairn and Tallis agree to hunt the Saarebas together in *Dragon Age: Redemption* (2011).

soldiers for his unearthly apocalypse, he begins the incantation to open the door between the worlds. Destroying the Mask of Fen'Harel, though, Tallis disrupts the ritual and saves the world (such as it is). Minions are killed, betrayals revealed, and sacrifices made. In this game, however, there are no winners, per se, and no one is left untouched or unharmed. Moments after the Templar dies defending her from the Saarebas's magic, Tallis faces the Qunari, who is now magically collared and at her mercy. "Why? Why this?" she asks him. "Why not just escape and live your life?"

THE SAAREBAS

I had the means to do harm, so I took it. It was almost . . . involuntary. How could I deny my function? The Qunari made me this way, as they have made you.

TALLIS

You're right. No matter how hard we fight it, eventually we follow our true nature. You can't be faulted for that. And neither can I.

(TALLIS kills the SAAREBAS.)

If one of the perennial functions of storytelling is to remind us of who we are, another is to encourage us in the quest to find out who we can be. In the *Dragon Age* storyworld, religion is the paramount reality and

magic the supernatural threat—quite the reverse of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Indeed, *Dragon Age* franchise creators have gone to extraordinary lengths to evoke a religious world easily as complex and conflicted as any we find off-screen or AFK (“away from keyboard”). “Thedas would not be what it is without religion,” writes David Gaider, one of *Dragon Age*’s principal storyworld creators. “Faith in a higher power drives the history and politics behind every nation on the continent” (2013, 111). Characters are identified, given meaning and purpose, and ultimately challenged by their relationship both to the religions of the world they can see and to the unseen order of the Fade.

Raised by the Qunari, Tallis is their weapon, the enforcer of their will. By killing the Saarebas, though, by disobeying their orders to return him alive, she risks becoming “Tal-Vashoth,” an apostate who will be left with neither name nor calling, an outcast from the only community she has ever known. The Templar, Cairn, on the other hand, is caught between his religious vows and his desire for vengeance. Prior to his initial capture by the Chantry, the Saarebas destroyed Cairn’s village, killing his entire family, including Cairn’s sister, who died in the young Templar’s arms. Thus, for each of *Dragon Age: Redemption*’s main characters, the hunt for the Saarebas is the journey toward who they really are.

The battle at the ritual site is the moment on Dagobah when Luke Skywalker confronts his shadow self in the Dark Side Cave or when Xena the Warrior Princess meets her own violent doppelgänger in the Dreamscape Passage. This is the moment when Sarah Williams sets out through the *Labyrinth* to the castle of the Goblin King or when Sarah Connor offers her hand to the Terminator she has sworn to destroy. This is that incomparable moment when Sam Gamgee finally puts aside the role of Bag End’s gardener and takes his place as Tolkien’s “chief hero” (1981, 161). This is the moment of mythic imagination when we realize, once again, that all we are is not all we can be, that following our “true nature” is always a journey, never a destination.

This is the path of the fantastic.

GAMING CONVENTIONS: SETTING THE LIMITS OF FANTASY

The mythic imagination encompasses more than the simple transmission of cultural values, though this is often how we interpret the function of “story.” Fairy tales are more than just warnings to stay out of the forest,

fables more than morality plays about living a good life, and epic sagas more than extended exercises in discovering who's really the "hero" and who the "monster." Stories gain their depth—and storyworlds, their evocative power—not so much in the telling, but in the retelling and reenvisioning of familiar narratives. "That variety and novelty can be found only at the place of identity," writes literary critic Northrop Frye, "is the theme of much of the most influential writing in our century" (1971, 29)—and, I would argue, the most influential writing humans produce in any age. That is, difference—tellings, variants, and versions—becomes significant only when we know a story well enough to ask what's been changed, to wonder why it's been altered, and to reflect on how our experience of the story is affected by its departure from the familiar. Michael Cohn's 1997 film, *Snow White: A Tale of Terror*, for example, could easily have been a pure psychological study of a woman's jealousy and insecurity erupting in the presence of a younger, more attractive rival. Nearly everything that happens onscreen can be explained as the product of the Queen's deepening psychosis, though as we will see, Cohn is willing to push his telling of the classic fairy tale only so far.

However familiar or unfamiliar the version or telling, we tend to resonate with *parts* of a given story, rarely with all of it. Whether we know it or not, we ask ourselves, "Who are we in this story?" Both *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Dragon Age: Redemption* are far more than simply film and video, and more than the games on which they are based. Each invokes a richly detailed storyworld, and both are grounded in the participative storytelling of role-play fantasy. The audience is presented with the characters as imagined by the filmmakers, but each film gives us different options for identification. Solomon's storytelling encourages us to pick a character in the main party; nothing in the film suggests we should identify with Profion or his dour enforcer, Damodar. Drawing on the *Dragon Age* universe, Day's storyworld is more ambiguous, the lines between good and evil drawn with considerably less clarity. For all its monsters and magic, its elves and barbarians, *Dragon Age: Redemption* invites us into a world that looks remarkably like our own, a world filled with less-than-heroic characters, less-than-optimal choices, and less-than-perfect outcomes.

Indeed, turning for a moment from film to tabletop or game console, the intertextual nature of these storyworlds encourages viewers to continue their own stories within these fantasy worlds, and beyond. One of the first significant changes *Dungeons & Dragons* creators Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax introduced to tabletop gaming was the ability to "roll

up” characters, to choose who you will be and how you will behave in the evolving storyworld of the game (see Cover 2010; Ewalt 2013; Fine 1983; Peterson 2012; Witwer 2015). Each player selects not only the race she will play, but also the character class, preferred weapons, special abilities, and, most significantly, the character’s moral and ethical “alignment.” Using nothing more than the readily available *Dungeons & Dragons Starter Set*, newcomers to *D&D* can go on their own quests, playing a Lightfoot Halfling named Milo Goodbarrel or a female hill Dwarf named Finellen Ironfist (Mearls and Crawford 2014c). Since *D&D* is a cooperative game—the object being less to “win” than to succeed as part of a team—who we are in the game matters a great deal. Players choose between good, neutral, and evil alignments, each with different valences. “Chaotic good” characters, for example, “act as their conscience directs, with little regard for what others expect,” while “lawful evil” characters “methodically take what they want, within the limits of a code of tradition, loyalty, or order” (Mearls and Crawford 2014b, 122).

Immersed in the video game *Dragon Age*, players choose from any of the races in that particular franchise storyworld, playing as characters devoted to their religion or as rogue Mages determined to breach the Fade. Many role-playing video games follow similar conventions. As in *Dragon Age*, creating a character is the first major action a player takes in *Skyrim*, the fifth entry into the popular *Elder Scrolls* franchise, or in the wildly popular *World of Warcraft* (see Bainbridge 2010; Corneliusen and Retburg 2008; Nardi 2010). In this case, that character is personalized right down to musculature, skin tone, and facial hair, as well as scars and tattooing. Rather than simply play the character assigned by the game, as one does in first-person shooters (FPS) such as *Halo* or *Crysis*, role-playing games invite participants deeper into the storyworld experience by creating the characters they will play from the ground up, as it were, and resulting in a deeper investment in those characters.

As storytelling has done for millennia and literature for centuries, film, television, role-playing games, and participatory media regularly bid us to identify with, even emulate one or another character from fantasy culture—partly because it *is* fantasy, but partly because it accesses and ignites the mythic imagination in each of us. Whether for a child’s trick-or-treat outing or an adult costume party, the tradition of dressing up on Halloween is only the most obvious example.

Consider cosplay and the fan convention phenomenon. Why do some participants dress as villains, others as heroes, and still others as

relatively minor characters in well-known narratives? Out of the entire *Star Trek* universe, for instance, why would a middle-aged woman choose to cosplay “Andorian Guard #28” (possibly a reference to the original series episode, “Journey to Babel”) and not a character more central to the franchise storyworld? As we see in *Trekkies*, however, Roger Nygard’s delightful look at *Star Trek* fandom, many enthusiasts do just that, wandering between the merchandise booths as unremarkable, though remarkably detailed, Borg drones or as unnamed “red shirts” doomed to die so the named characters can beam back to the ship in the nick of time. Similarly, at Tolkien-themed events, all the races and faces of Middle-earth are represented: hobbits and elves (of course), heroic humans and dwarves (naturally), several wizards (supernaturally), but also more than a few orcs, goblins, and at least a Ringwraith or two (see Cordova 2005; Gilsdorf 2009; Stark 2012).

As with cosplay and fan conventions, in role-playing contexts, being “in character” means far more than simply being in costume. Most important here is that these character choices not only determine how the game is played, but they often shape the game’s goals, victory conditions, and outcomes as well. That is, within the narrative confines of the storyworld, players write the story even as they write themselves into it.

Many role-playing game systems, such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Pathfinder*, *Numenéra*, and *Fantasy AGE* (the RPG engine for *Titansgrave*), encourage players to develop dossiers for their characters, compelling backstories that will support and guide the choices they make throughout the game, and on the basis of which the game master can develop the story. Although specific game mechanics limit the abilities of various races and classes in different ways, each of these systems is nothing more or less than cooperative storytelling. Rather than simply moving tokens around the board collecting houses, hotels, and railroads, each player is expected to role-play within the boundaries of the character she’s created. As actor Wil Wheaton, designer and game master for *Titansgrave: The Ashes of Valkana*, says, “Player characters are fundamental and integral to the story, and they can and will change it while they play” (2015a). Indeed, the fifth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* includes a new rule, “Inspiration,” which the Dungeon Master can use to reward players for bringing their characters to life in particularly convincing ways. “No matter how hard we fight it,” fantasy culture whispers to us, “eventually we follow our true nature.” Much of this, though, depends on how we limit fantasy and attempt to explain it.

Limiting Fantasy

In one sense, fantasy has no limits. All fictional narratives, all our story-worlds, and, some contend, much of what we consider the “real world,” are fantasies. Although ostensibly based in reality and reflecting a world we more or less recognize, crime procedurals still ask us to suspend our disbelief about that world in significant ways. It may be immensely satisfying to watch Jethro Gibbs and his crack team of *NCIS* agents solve complex cases within the narrative frame of a single television episode, but we know that isn’t how things work in the off-screen world. Serious crimes are solved through painstaking police work, months, even years of collaborative effort, and, in the end, not a little luck. Hardly the stuff of action-adventure offered on a weekly basis. Similarly, though stranded in a line of shipwreck narratives stretching from the *Odyssey* and *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* to *Lost in Space* and *Stargate: Universe*, *Gilligan’s Island* is no less a fantasy than *Lost*, its dark, complex, and often confusing doppelgänger. We know going in that any plan the castaways hatch to escape “their tropic island nest” is doomed to fail, regardless of what the Professor creates out of bamboo, coconuts, and parts scavenged from the shipwrecked *Minnow*. Yet, despite significant lack of initial network confidence, to this day *Gilligan’s Island* remains one of the most popular “magical situation comedies” in American television history (Marc 1997; Johnson and Cox 1993; Schwartz 1998). Rather than being put off by its fantastic premise, we are drawn in to the fantasy of its story.

In all these cases, trading our belief in reality for the pleasure of an hour’s entertainment, we readily forgive any slight insult to our intelligence as we tune in week after week, year after year, often watching favorite episodes over and over. We accept that it’s fiction, we’re aware of the fantasy, and we even know how it ends—yet we remain emotionally, viscerally, and often intellectually engaged. “Are you not entertained?” *Gladiator*’s Maximus Meridius still demands of us. “Is that not why you are here?”—on the couch, in your seat, or in the stands. That is, we are continually captivated by the story. Consider another example. Anyone who has ever been in a fight—or even been hit relatively hard—knows the fantasy that is professional wrestling. No one in real life takes the kind of beating regularly suffered by characters in the squared-circle world of make-believe and returns to the ring, not just weekly, but often several times per week. The show must go on, though, for it *is* a show—it is a *story*—and tens of millions of fans not only

embrace but also remain deeply invested in both its fantasy violence and the violence of its fantasy (see Barthes 1972; Lincoln 2014).

In many ways, though, as a *genre*, fantasy “asks us to pay something extra,” to accept the work as a whole on the grounds that its events could *not* happen (Forster [1927] 1954, 159). “Rocket ships are SF,” declares Thomas Disch in *The Dreams Our Stuff Is Made Of*, while “magic carpets are fantasy” (1998, 3). It is “the fiction of the heart’s desire,” adds David Pringle, suggesting, though, that “we can divide fantasy fiction into as many categories as we want” (1998, 8, 19; see also Mendelsohn 2008). “Fantasy is true, of course,” warns Ursula Le Guin. “It isn’t factual, but it is true” (1979, 44). Fairy tales and animal fables; “lost race,” “lost world,” and “lost time” stories; epic battles involving wizards and witches; Arthurian legends and postapocalyptic landscapes; superheroes and supervillains—all are caught by fantasy’s web and ask us to accept things that *cannot* be so.

“You’ll believe a man can fly,” ran the tagline for Richard Donner’s 1978 film, *Superman: The Movie*. We know it isn’t true, yet we’ve been lining up for superhero comic books, graphic novels, movies, video games, toys, and ephemera since the Man of Steel first appeared on Earth in 1938 (see Tye 2010; Wright 2001). Similarly, from the hundreds of *peplum* (“sword-and-sandal”) films that dominated European screens in the late 1950s and early 1960s, endlessly retelling stories of such heroes as Hercules, Samson, and Goliath (Cornelius 2011), to the stop-motion genius of Ray Harryhausen’s *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad* and *Clash of the Titans* (Rovin 1977), fantasy culture is often synonymous with “sword-and-sorcery” storyworlds. “The sheer magic of *Dynarama*,” proclaims the poster for *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad*, “now re-creates the most spectacular adventures ever filmed.” Few in the late 1950s were fooled by Harryhausen’s stop-motion Cyclops, two-headed Roc, or fire-breathing dragon, but *7th Voyage* proved so popular that it was nominated as one of the American Film Institute’s Top 10 Fantasy Films. These are only the most recognizable elements of the fantasy genre; there are others, many of which we will consider in due course, more than a few we will be forced to overlook (but only for want of space), all of which, though, turn on the mythic trifecta of magic, monsters, and make-believe heroes.

Writing about fantasy is, in many ways, more difficult than either horror or science fiction, both of which have relatively well-established generic conventions. “Non-horror films,” for example, “may frighten the audience to tell their stories, but horror films tell stories to frighten

the audience. In the former, fear is a side effect; in the latter, it is the object of the exercise” (Cowan 2008, 17). We have little difficulty identifying horror culture. Likewise, science fiction has at least some readily recognizable boundaries. In hard sci-fi, for example, scientific explanation or exploration of the natural world is intrinsic to the plot, and nothing is permitted that could not be logically inferred. *Tron*, *The Lawnmower Man*, even *Ghost in the Shell* may have seemed the height of computer-generated fantasy when first released nearly a generation ago, but they look considerably less so now, as we move closer and closer to fully immersive computer environments. While speculative fiction, such as John Boorman’s *Zardoz*, often turns on more sociological or psychological extrapolation, both are driven by the creative engines of possibility. “Whether implicit or explicit, every science fiction story, novel, film, or television show begins with two words: What if? What if we could travel faster than light and explore the stars? What if we could achieve immortality through cloning, transhuman augmentation, or computer uploading? What if the machine-beings we create seek their own evolution? What if those we have dominated in whatever fashion suddenly return the favor?” (Cowan 2010, 270). Although there are numerous examples of science fiction/horror hybrids (e.g., Ridley Scott’s masterful *Alien*) and fantasy/horror fusions (e.g., Scott’s *Legend*), fantasy itself boxes the compass on a much broader, less well-defined field.

In *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, her superb “tour around the skeletons and exoskeletons of the genre,” literature scholar Farah Mendlesohn distinguishes four species of fantasy: “the portal-quest, the immersive, the intrusive, and the liminal. These categories are determined by the means by which the fantastic enters the narrated world. In the portal-quest, we are invited through into the fantastic; in the intrusion fantasy, the fantastic enters the fictional world; in the liminal fantasy, the magic hovers in the corner of our eye; while in the immersive fantasy we are allowed no escape” (2008, xiv).

Often labeled “high fantasy,” immersive fantasies take place in worlds, cultures, and civilizations entirely separate from our own, existing “in place,” as it were, in their respective storyworlds. From Fritz Leiber’s Nehwon and the tales of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser to the Seven Kingdoms of George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire*, from the Underdark of R.A. Salvatore’s *Legend of Drizzt* to the *Forgotten Realms* explored by legions of *D&D* adventurers, and from Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Earthsea* to Anne McCaffrey’s celebrated *Dragonriders of Pern* series, these immersive fantasies are self-contained storyworlds.

Despite the fact that thousands of LARPerS gather regularly to enact their favorite scenes from the Tolkien universe, and thousands more cosplayers attend fan conventions in full Ringer regalia, Middle-earth remains an immersive fantasy. Although critics and commentators often point to the “medieval-esque” character of Middle-earth, unlike, say, J. K. Rowling’s Pottermore or Bill Willingham’s sprawling graphic novel, *Fables*, Tolkien’s storyworld has no connection with our own. The teachers, carpenters, homemakers, and lawyers who dress as wizards, hobbits, elves, and orcs bring Rivendell to life in a setting that is not its own, the residents of Middle-earth appearing in our world only as live action role-players or cosplayers. Going home after a particularly captivating movie or a rousing *D&D* adventure, we may wish we were stepping out into the Shire or the streets of Baldur’s Gate, but the smell of the parking lot, the noise of the traffic, and the utter normality of the crowds soon remind us that these are fantasies.

Portal-quests, on the other hand, invite us to enter from our world into the fantastic, occasionally as captives or victims, but, as we shall see, more often as the heroes those worlds need us to be. When little Dorothy Gale “was halfway across the room,” writes L. Frank Baum in his beloved *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, “there came a great shriek from the wind and the house shook so hard that she lost her footing and sat down suddenly upon the floor. A strange thing then happened. The house whirled around two or three times and rose slowly through the air. Dorothy felt as if she were going up in a balloon” (Baum [1900] 2000, 22). On the other hand, when she sees a rabbit-in-a-waistcoat disappear “down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge,” it never occurs to seven-year-old Alice not to follow. “The rabbit-hole went straight on like a tunnel for some way, and then dipped suddenly down, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself before she found herself falling down what seemed to be a very large well” (Carroll 2000, 12). Finally, “this must be a simply enormous wardrobe!” thinks eight-year-old Lucy Pevensie as she explores the old clothes cabinet in the Professor’s house. “Then she noticed something crunching under her feet” (Lewis 2001, 113). Instead of the mothballs she expects to find or “the hard, smooth wood of the floor of the wardrobe, she felt something soft and powdery and extremely cold. ‘This is very queer,’ she said.”

To say the least.

Whether it takes us to Oz, to Wonderland, or to Narnia, each of these is a magical doorway from “our” world into “theirs,” from the real to the fantastic. They are flying carpets whisking us from what we think we

know to what we must come to accept. In this, portal fantasies are always a function of the unexpected: an ordinary wardrobe opening into a magical forest; a rabbit-hole so deep that Alice wonders if she might “fall right *through* the earth!” (Carroll 2000, 13); a cyclone whirling a small Kansas farmhouse “hour after hour” and far, far away (Baum [1900] 2000, 24). Through the eyes of these three young girls—who represent the child in each of us who loves to explore dark and hidden spaces—we are taken and transported from one world into another. Unlike immersive fantasies, whose reality in our world is always limited to our ability to bring their characters to life for ourselves, portal fantasies are predicated on the existence of a conduit from one world to the other.

Forced to pigeonhole films into less-nuanced, but more easily understood award categories, the American Film Institute defines “fantasy” as “a genre in which live-action characters inhabit imagined settings and/or experience situations that transcend the rules of the natural world.” Notwithstanding the AFI’s requirement for “live-action”—few would argue that Ralph Bakshi’s animated *Wizards* is not a classic of the fantasy genre—“situations that transcend the rules of the natural world” land us in the realm of what literature scholar Jan Alber calls “the unnatural narrative.”

Explaining Fantasy

Relying heavily on the work of Czech literary theorist Lubomír Doležal (1998), Alber defines “unnatural narratives” as “the various ways in which fictional narratives deviate from ‘natural’ cognitive frames, i.e., real-world understandings of time, space, and other human beings” (2013, 449). Put differently, these are “physically impossible scenarios and events, that is, impossible by the known laws governing the physical world, as well as logically impossible ones, that is, impossible by accepted principles of logic” (Alber 2009, 80). Think Profion’s magic spell seeking to control the green dragon, or the Saarebas ritually opening a portal to the other-worldly Fade. Think the various things Alice eats and drinks during her sojourn in Wonderland—cake, mushrooms, a potion that tastes like a mix of “cherry-tart, custard, pine-apple, roast turkey, toffy, and hot buttered toast” (Carroll 2000, 17)—each of which dramatically changes her size and thus her perspective on the world around her. Or, if you prefer, think the (im)possibility of dragons, the Fade, or Wonderland altogether.

Two things we should note here. First, whether they acknowledge it or not, Alber and his colleagues respect Arthur C. Clarke’s now-famous

Third Law: “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” That is, the “unnatural” is always a function of perception and the “known laws governing the physical world.” Once we understand these laws, it’s not that what seems “unnatural” suddenly *becomes* natural, but that we recognize it as such. Our perception changes. Our point of view shifts. Simply because we don’t understand something doesn’t mean that it’s necessarily “magic” (see Cowan 2005a).

Second, despite what he describes as the “long tradition” of denigrating fiction as (at best) a waste of time and (at worst) a threat to one’s moral or psychological health—a practice dating back at least to Plato but revived with depressing regularity by a variety of moral crusaders—Alber argues for the particular value of unnatural narratives. Not only does a story about things that cannot happen “widen our cognitive horizon by urging us to create mental models that move beyond real-world possibilities, it also challenges our limited perspective on the world and invites us to address questions that we would perhaps otherwise ignore” (Alber 2013, 456). That is, rather than simply be entertained by *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, or the *Inkheart* trilogy, unnatural narratives invoke the mythic imagination and invite us down the rabbit-hole with Alice, through the wardrobe with the Pevensie children, or to read aloud with Mortimer and Meggie Folchart—and so to write ourselves into the story. Paraphrasing G. K. Chesterton, Neil Gaiman introduces his wonderful, disturbing novel, *Coraline*: “Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten” (2002, v). More than that, through tellings and retellings, variants, versions, and reenvisionings, we come to understand the denizens of the mythic imagination differently and in greater depth. That is, as historian of religion Gary Ebersole writes, myths, mythologies, and mythstories are not “timeless and static structures but dynamic agents in the ongoing process of the creation and maintenance of a symbolic world of meaning” (1989, 6).

Although the “unnatural narrative” helps define fantasy in certain practical ways, Alber’s usage is still somewhat limited—and limiting. Working not so much to understand the effect of storytelling or how different social groups value the stories they tell, he tries instead to explain how “readers naturalize unnatural scenarios” (Alber 2009, 81). That is, how do we make sense of stories that, on the surface, don’t make sense?

In many cases, unnatural narratives are naturalized simply by reframing them as fables or fairy tales. This seems a distinction without much of a difference, though, and merely shifts the burden of interpretation. Alternatively, they can “be explained away as dreams, fantasies, or hallucinations” (Alber 2009, 82). Consider *Once Upon a Time in Wonderland*, a single-season spin-off of ABC’s popular fairy-tale retelling, *Once Upon a Time*. In the parent series, an evil spell has transported the entire European fairy-tale world to the modern town of Storybrooke, Maine. There, characters seek to recover their identities (find out who they are), break the curse (defeat the monster), and restore the balance between their world and the “real” world (complete the quest). In the Victorian derivative, Alice has finally returned from her lengthy sojourn in Wonderland, but when she tells her father about rabbits in waistcoats, mad hatters, and hookah-smoking caterpillars, he—not unreasonably—thinks she’s lost her mind. Committed for much of her adolescence to Bethlem Asylum (i.e., “bedlam”), doctors work to cure Alice’s “obvious” mental illness, although she knows (as do we) both that Wonderland does exist and that all such “impossible” stories are forever connected.

Impossible stories, says Alber, can also be read allegorically, which is arguably the most common way of naturalizing them. Almost from the moment they appeared in print, for example, C.S. Lewis’s *Space Trilogy* and the *Chronicles of Narnia* have been hailed as peerless allegories of the Christian faith. Indeed, writes theologian Ralph C. Wood, if, “in reading *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, we fail to see that Aslan is a Christ-figure, we have missed the *real point* of the book” (Wood 2003, 5). As we will see, however, the important issue is not the telling of particular stories, but their retelling and reuse, not the recovery of *ur*-meaning or an original source text, but understanding how and why meanings change, and how those changes reflect and refract the symbolic worlds they evoke. What happens, for instance, when a skeptic steps through the wardrobe and fetches up against the lamp-post in Narnia? Is nothing there? Is there no story into which he can write himself? If what he brings to Narnia won’t let him see Aslan as a Christ-figure, who, then, is the lion “so bright and real and strong that everything else began at once to look pale and shadowy” (Lewis 2001, 660)? Is there no place in Narnia for nonbelievers? Put differently, *pace* Wood, *is* there a “real point” to the story, and who decides what it is?

Invoking the specter of post-structuralism and the “death of the author” most closely associated with Roland Barthes, what *does* happen

if we assume a different readership or tell a familiar story from a different point of view? How would the chronicles of Narnia read if written from the perspective, say, of Jadis, the White Witch, or Tumnus, the faun? What more could they tell us? Gregory Maguire, for example, has created an elaborate series of novels based precisely on inverting the perspective of familiar fantasy storyworlds. *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* (1995) presents the titular character as something other than simply the villain in Baum's famous novel, while *Mirror, Mirror* (2003) retells the tale of Snow White in the storyscape of Borgian Italy. Marion Zimmer Bradley, on the other hand, is best known for her magisterial *The Mists of Avalon* (1982). Retelling the Arthur legend through the women most important in his life—principally, his sister, Morgaine, and his wife, Gwenhwyfar—Bradley evokes a storyworld so compelling that thousands of modern Pagans regard her novel as something akin to a sacred text.

This is not to say that Lewis *didn't* intend Narnia as a Christian allegory. He did, and was so explicit about it that Wood's point is all but tautological. But what other layers of the story are revealed once we suspend that requirement? Allegorical readings may be superficially satisfying, especially when we find a way to map our own social, psychological, or theological biases onto a particular story, but they ultimately reduce the tale's ongoing mythic resonance, its ability to evolve beyond the obvious. That is, they often persuade us to stop reading, or at least to stop reading deeply. More problematically, once an allegorical reading convinces us that we've solved the problem, that we've found the interpretive key, it encourages us to stop asking questions of the text—and of ourselves. We no longer open the pages and whisper, "Tell me a story . . ."

Certainly, some unnatural narratives can be read as cloaked descriptions of mental illness and deterioration. Roman Polanski shot his classic horror film *Rosemary's Baby* in such a way that it can be interpreted either as a supernatural assault, which follows the plain sense of the story, or as a young woman's regression to adolescence in the face of a pregnancy for which she is not ready and the overbearing presence of a dominant father-figure/husband whom she cannot please. Conversely, though often read allegorically, both William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* and Stephen King's *Carrie* ultimately resist this kind of naturalizing interpretation; too many points of view must be taken into account to dismiss them *a priori* as anything but the straightforward supernatural

and paranormal struggles they purport to be (see Cowan 2008, 167–99; 2018, 23–27).

Setting aside attempts to naturalize unnatural narratives, Alber's final strategy does have potential for understanding fantasy story-worlds. Building loosely on elements of sociologist Erving Goffman's theory of frame analysis (1974), he suggests that "processes of 'frame enrichment'" can help us make sense of stories that make no sense.

Consider this brief interchange from the second episode of *The Big Bang Theory*, a popular sitcom celebrating all things geeky and nerdy. The four male leads have invited their beautiful new neighbor Penny (Kaley Cuoco) to join them for "Thai food and a *Superman* movie marathon." When theoretical physicist Sheldon (Jim Parsons) points out that a crucial scene in Donner's *Superman* "was rife with scientific inaccuracy," Penny smiles, at this point blissfully unaware with whom she's dealing. "Yes, I know," she says, nodding sweetly, "men can't fly." "No," replies Sheldon, "let's assume that they can." A debate erupts about the Man of Steel's aeronautical ability.

LEONARD

Your entire argument is predicated on the assumption that Superman's flight is a feat of strength.

SHELDON

Are you even listening to yourself? It is well established that Superman's flight is a feat of strength. It is an extension of his ability to leap tall buildings, an ability he derives from exposure to Earth's yellow sun.

HOWARD

And you don't have a problem with that? How does he fly at night?

SHELDON

A combination of the moon's solar reflection and the energy storage capacity of Kryptonian skin cells.

LEONARD (pointing off-camera)

I have 2,600 comic books in there! I challenge you to find a single reference to "Kryptonian skin cells."

SHELDON

Challenge accepted.

For Jan Alber, “frame enrichment” occurs when readers and viewers “stretch existing frames beyond real-world possibilities until the parameters include the strange phenomena with which we are confronted” (2009, 82–83). They make the world fit the story, rather than forcing the story to conform to the world. That said, does it really matter how Superman flies, as long as he saves Lois Lane (*Superman*), pushes the moon out of orbit to save Earth (*Superman IV: The Quest for Peace*), or destroys General Zod’s terraforming world engine (*Man of Steel*)? Probably not, but both Sheldon and Leonard attempt to naturalize what is clearly an unnatural narrative element in order to make sense of a world in which Superman can actually exist. Both try to explain the inexplicable. In this case, though, both Penny and Sheldon are correct: men and women don’t fly—unless they do. Penny doesn’t see a problem: Superman is a fictional character; he can fly if he wants to. *How* doesn’t really matter. For Sheldon, though, it matters a great deal. The unnatural narrative must be naturalized in a way consistent with the “known laws governing the physical world” of the *Superman* narrative. Paradoxically, for all her general lack of interest, nerd-neophyte Penny is able to enter into the storyworld more easily and completely than Sheldon, the ardent fan. For him, to make sense of a story that doesn’t make sense, the “existing frame” of the story must be extended “beyond real-world possibilities,” in this case to include “the energy storage capacity of Kryptonian skin cells.”

While Alber’s concept of frame enrichment can help us interrogate the differences we encounter in well-known stories, it falls short, precisely because of what we might call the “Sheldon Cooper problem.” The principal goal of all these reading strategies is to help readers or viewers explain the inexplicable. Without such an explanation, Alber implies, we somehow lose access not only to the story itself, but to the storyworld the narrative intends to evoke. That is, if we can’t explain it, we can’t enter into the storyworld deeply enough for it to affect us. This, even for Sheldon, is clearly not the case. Our ability to hold natural and unnatural narratives *in tension*, without the need to resolve contradictions completely or permanently, is arguably the controlling facet of the mythic imagination. Indeed, this is one aspect of what makes it “mythic”: there *are* dragons, the Fade *does* exist, and superheroes *do* fly. Neither Alber nor his colleagues seem to have noticed, for example, that the most influential storyworlds in human history are based precisely on unnatural narratives, that these narratives must be held in progressively greater tension as society evolves, and that for billions of

people it is their unnatural character that actually sanctions their authority.

Consider the vast numbers of people who believe that the tribal god of a few Iron Age nomads spoke to one of their leaders from a small brush fire and issued commands which, more than three millennia later, continue to shape the lives of one-third of humankind. Almost as many people believe that an angel appeared to an illiterate merchant in seventh-century Arabia and commanded him to recover the original monotheism allegedly intended from the world's creation. Half a world away, millions of others believe that this *ur-faith* was only restored after an itinerant treasure-seeker in upstate New York translated the "reformed Egyptian hieroglyphics" inscribed on a set of golden tablets and declared himself the Prophet.

As a product of the mythic imagination, *religion* is not simply littered with similar examples of unnatural narrative, it is, in fact, predicated on them. The miraculous nature of Yahweh speaking to Moses from the burning bush, that Allah chose Mohammed as his final messenger, or that Joseph Smith was angelically led to the golden plates are not considered *challenges* to religious faith but are taken, by many believers, as *proof* of their faith. How could such things *not* be true, believers of all types ask rhetorically? Indeed, as the second-century Christian theologian Tertullian has been paraphrased: *Credo quia absurdum*. "I believe because it is absurd." The apologetic argument for hundreds of millions of believers is that the stories must be true precisely because they sound so unbelievable, which is to say, they are so fantastic (see Cowan 2005b).

Many believers rationalize these unnatural narratives by removing them from present-day experience. Quite willing to believe the gods spoke in ages past and prophets performed great feats of what, by any other light, would be magic, they are less likely to accept it when their next door neighbor claims to hear a divine voice and begins to build a rather large boat in the backyard. Again, however, this seems an explanation without an answer. Why continue to credence *this* set of unnatural narratives, when so many others have been abandoned? By contrast, other believers go to extreme lengths to naturalize unnatural narratives by proving that they are, in fact, *not* unnatural. Young Earth creationists, fundamentalist Christians who believe in a literal six-day creation and a universe just slightly older than six thousand years, have created a cottage publishing industry, a pseudoscientific enterprise, and an educational insurgency in support of their belief in a fundamentally fantastic story (Numbers 1993; Toumey 1994).

Indeed, debates over creation myths are among the most telling examples of the convergence of factuality and fantasy as functions of social and cultural convention. On its face, the Garden of Eden story makes no more sense than does the Church of Scientology's story of Teegeeack (i.e., Earth) or Terry Pratchett's giant turtle A'tuin, on whose immense back stand four gigantic elephants that together support the Discworld. Why should one be thought more reasonable than the others? Because we know for a fact that there is no Great A'tuin, any more than a primordial Titan, Atlas? Because we know that the universe is only a tiny fraction of the 73 trillion years old that L. Ron Hubbard claimed in the science-fiction short story that evolved into Scientology's creation myth? Maybe so. But the point is that these are no less fantastic, no less unnatural than a coherent, literal reading of the Genesis narrative (even were such a reading possible). They're all magic carpets, as Thomas Disch might say. Each is a fantasy, an unnatural narrative, a counterfactual product of the mythic imagination. Yet, billions of believers, followers of any number of religious and spiritual paths, are content to leave this paradox unresolved, to hold natural and unnatural narratives in tension, to find some other way of extracting meaning than by explaining the problem away.

This is one of the principal paradoxes of religious belief and practice: that in any other context their unnatural narratives would be regarded as bizarre and ridiculous. If taken at all seriously, they would be considered fantasy at best, delusion and madness at worst. As we will see, though, this is not dissimilar to the processes that ensure the survival of fables and folk legends, that is, as Jack Zipes puts it, "why fairy tales stick" (2006).