How to Make the Impossible Believable

Discover how Lewis Carroll makes the impossible feel believable in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. Learn how a relatable main character, consistent storytelling and familiar emotions help readers accept even the strangest imaginary worlds.

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What Alice's Adventures in Wonderland teaches us about writing extraordinary worlds.

Suppose you were writing a story in which a rabbit carries a pocket watch, a baby turns into a pig, and a cat can disappear until nothing remains but its grin.

How would you persuade readers to accept any of it?

Lewis Carroll faced that question when he wrote *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. His solution wasn't to explain the scientific principles behind disappearing cats or talking animals. He did something much more interesting.

He gave readers Alice.

A sensible girl in a nonsensical world

Alice is curious, sometimes impatient, occasionally rude and often thoroughly confused.

She's also reasonably sensible.

When she sees the White Rabbit checking his watch and worrying about being late, she follows him because something extraordinary has interrupted an otherwise ordinary afternoon.

That matters. Alice isn't introduced as someone who routinely travels through magical worlds. She is surprised by things the reader would find surprising.

When she falls down the rabbit hole, she wonders about the distance she's falling and what might happen if she falls straight through the Earth.

Her thoughts may be rather peculiar, but they're recognizably those of a child trying to understand an unexpected situation.

Carroll gives us someone whose reactions provide a connection to reality, even when reality seems to have disappeared.

Give the reader something recognizable

Consider the Mad Tea-Party.

A tea party is an ordinary social occasion. We know roughly what to expect: a table, conversation, refreshments and certain rules of polite behaviour.

Carroll keeps the familiar setting but makes the conversation absurd.

The Mad Hatter, March Hare and Dormouse behave according to rules that Alice doesn't understand. Their questions and arguments turn ordinary conversation into a frustrating puzzle.

The humour comes partly from the contrast. Alice expects people to behave sensibly, but the inhabitants of Wonderland seem perfectly comfortable with nonsense.

Carroll doesn't need to invent an entirely new activity. He takes something familiar and changes the rules.

This is a useful technique for fantasy writers.

A magical marketplace is easier to imagine when it resembles a real marketplace. A fictional school becomes more convincing when students still worry about friendships, teachers and getting into trouble.

The extraordinary becomes easier to follow when it's attached to something readers already understand.

Nonsense can have its own logic

Wonderland isn't a world without rules. It's a world where the rules are strange, inconsistent between encounters and frequently frustrating.

During Alice's conversation with the Cheshire Cat, she asks which way she ought to go. The Cat points out that the answer depends on where she wants to get to.

That's an entirely reasonable observation coming from an entirely unreasonable creature.

Elsewhere, words are taken literally, questions are answered with other questions, and familiar social conventions become ridiculous.

This mixture of ordinary logic and absurd circumstances is part of what makes Wonderland entertaining.

Notice that Carroll doesn't have to explain every oddity.

Sometimes readers enjoy the mystery of an impossible event more than they would enjoy a detailed explanation of how it works.

That doesn't mean anything can happen without consequences. Readers still need to follow what a character is experiencing and understand why the experience matters.

Alice's confusion provides that continuity.

Let the character react

Imagine what would happen if Alice accepted everything without question.

A disappearing cat? Perfectly normal.

A baby turning into a pig? Nothing unusual there.

A Queen threatening executions over minor inconveniences? Hardly worth mentioning.

Much of the story's humour would disappear.

Alice's objections, questions and irritation are essential to the effect.

She doesn't merely travel through Wonderland. She responds to it.

Those responses also allow Carroll to reveal her character. We learn that she likes explanations, has opinions about proper behaviour and becomes increasingly willing to challenge the authority of the strange creatures she encounters.

The world reveals the character, and the character helps us understand the world.

That's a useful relationship to remember when writing fantasy or science fiction.

What about modern fantasy?

Not every writer should imitate Wonderland's dreamlike unpredictability.

A tightly plotted fantasy adventure may need more consistent magical rules. Readers can accept a dragon breathing fire, but they may become frustrated if it suddenly acquires entirely new powers whenever the hero needs rescuing.

The distinction is between mystery and convenience.

An unexplained wonder can be delightful. An unexplained solution to every problem can make the characters' struggles seem unimportant.

Carroll's approach works because Wonderland's peculiarities are the experience we're meant to enjoy, not merely shortcuts to solving Alice's difficulties.

Try a little nonsense

Take an ordinary setting: a library, railway station, school or grocery store.

Change one rule.

Perhaps books refuse to be opened until someone compliments them. Perhaps railway passengers must tell the conductor where they don't want to go.

Now introduce an ordinary character who encounters that rule for the first time.

How do they react? What do they misunderstand? What happens when they try to apply common sense?

You don't need a complete fantasy world to begin experimenting.

Sometimes one impossible idea, placed in familiar surroundings, is enough to start a story.

About the book

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland was written by Lewis Carroll and first published in 1865.

Primary source: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland — Project Gutenberg, eBook #11

This article examines the literary techniques visible in the original story. Its interpretations are intended as practical observations, not claims about the author's private intentions.

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