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WONDER TALES

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BEFORE THERE WERE BOOKS, THERE WERE STORIES. AT FIRST the stories weren't written down. Sometimes they were even sung. Children were born, and before they could speak, their parents sang them songs, a song about an egg that fell off a wall, perhaps, or about a boy and a girl who went up a hill and fell down it. As the children grew older, they asked for stories almost as often as they asked for food. Now there was a goose that laid golden eggs, or a boy who sold the family cow for a handful of magic beans, or a naughty rabbit trespassing on a dangerous farmer's land. The children fell in love with these stories and wanted to hear them over and over again. Then they grew older and found those stories in books. And other stories that they had never heard before, about a girl who fell down a rabbit hole, or a silly old bear and an easily scared piglet and a gloomy donkey, or a phantom tollbooth, or a place where wild things were. They heard and read stories and they fell in love with them, Mickey in the night kitchen with magic bakers who all looked like Oliver Hardy, and Peter Pan, who thought death would be an awfully big adventure, and Bilbo Baggins under a mountain winning a riddle contest against a strange creature who had lost his precious, and the act of falling in love with stories awakened something in the children that would nourish them all their lives: their imagination.

The children fell in love with stories easily and lived in stories too; they made up play stories every day, they stormed castles and conquered nations and sailed the ocean blue, and at night their dreams

were full of dragons. They were all storytellers now, makers of stories as well as receivers of stories. But they went on growing up and slowly the stories fell away from them, the stories were packed away in boxes in the attic, and it became harder for the former children to tell and receive stories, harder for them, sadly, to fall in love. For some of them, stories began to seem irrelevant, unnecessary: kids' stuff. These were sad people, and we must pity them and try not to think of them as stupid boring philistine losers.

I believe that the books and stories we fall in love with make us who we are, or, not to claim too much, that the act of falling in love with a book or story changes us in some way, and the beloved tale becomes a part of our picture of the world, a part of the way in which we understand things and make judgements and choices in our daily lives. As adults, falling in love less easily, we may end up with only a handful of books that we can truly say we love. Maybe this is why we make so many bad judgements.

Nor is this love unconditional or eternal. A book may cease to speak to us as we grow older, and our feeling for it will fade. Or we may suddenly, as our lives shape and hopefully increase our understanding, be able to appreciate a book we dismissed earlier; we may suddenly be able to hear its music, to be enraptured by its song. When, as a college student, I first read Günter Grass's great novel *The Tin Drum*, I was unable to finish it. It languished on a shelf for fully ten years before I gave it a second chance, whereupon it became one of my favourite novels of all time: one of the books I would say that I love. It is an interesting question to ask oneself: Which are the books that you truly love? Try it. The answer will tell you a lot about who you presently are.

I grew up in Bombay, India, a city that is no longer, today, at all like the city it once was and has even changed its name to the much less euphonious Mumbai, in a time so unlike the present that it feels impossibly remote, even fantastic: a real-life version of the mythic golden age. Childhood as a Hindu name reminds us in 'The Land of Lost Content', often also called 'Blue Remembered Hills', is the country to which we all once belonged and will all eventually lose:

Into my heart an air that kills
 From yon far country blows:
 What are those blue remembered hills,
 What spires, what farms are those?

That is the land of lost content,
 I see it shining plain,
 The happy highways where I went
 And cannot come again.

In that far-off Bombay, the stories and books that reached me from the West seemed like true tales of wonder. Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Snow Queen', with its splinters of magic mirror that entered people's bloodstreams and turned their hearts to ice, was even more terrifying to a boy from the tropics, where the only ice was in the refrigerator. 'The Emperor's New Clothes' felt especially enjoyable to a boy growing up in the immediate aftermath of the British Empire. And there was *Huckleberry Finn*, irresistible to a Bombay boy because of its hero's extraordinary freedom of action, though I was puzzled about why, if the runaway slave Jim was trying to escape the world of slavery and get to the non-slave-owning North, did he get onto a raft on the Mississippi, which flows south?

Perhaps tales of elsewhere always feel like fairy tales, and certainly it is one of the great wonders of literature that it opens up many 'elsewheres' to us, from the Little Mermaid's underwater world to Dorothy's Oz, and makes them ours. But for me, the real wonder tales were closer to home, and I have always thought it my great good fortune as a writer to have grown up steeped in them.

Some of these stories were sacred in origin, but because I grew up in a non-religious household, I was able to receive them simply as beautiful stories. This did not mean I did not believe them. When I heard about the *samudra manthan*, the tale of how the great god Indra churned the Milky Way, using the faber's foot Mount Mandara as his churning stick, to force the giant ocean of milk in the sky to give up its nectar, *amrita*, the nectar of immortality, I began to see the

stars in a new way. In that impossibly ancient time, my childhood, a time before light pollution made most of the stars invisible to city dwellers, a boy in a garden in Bombay could still look up at the night sky and hear the music of the spheres and see with humble joy the thick stripe of the galaxy there. I imagined it dripping with magic nectar. Maybe if I opened my mouth, a drop might fall in and then I would be immortal too.

This is the beauty of the wonder tale and its descendant, fiction: that one can simultaneously know that the story is a work of imagination, which is to say *untrue*, and believe it to contain profound truth. The boundary between the magical and the real, at such moments, ceases to exist.

We were not Hindus, my family, but we believed the great stories of Hinduism to be available to us also. On the day of the annual Ganpati festival, when huge crowds carried effigies of the elephant-headed deity Ganesh to the water's edge at Chowpatty Beach to immerse the god in the sea, Ganesh felt as if he belonged to me too; he felt like a symbol of the collective joy and, yes, unity of the city rather than a member of the pantheon of a 'rival' faith. When I learned that Ganesh's love of literature was so great that he sat at the feet of India's Homer, the sage Vyasa, and became the scribe who wrote down the great *Mahabharata* epic, he belonged to me even more deeply; and when I grew up and wrote a novel about a boy called Saleem with an unusually big nose, it seemed natural, even though Saleem came from a Muslim family, to associate the narrator of *Midnight's Children* with the most literary of gods, who just happened to have a big trunk of a nose as well. The blurring of boundaries between religious cultures in that old, truly secularist Bombay now feels like one more thing that divides the past from India's bitter, stifled, censorious, sectarian present.

The *Mahabharata* and its sidekick, the *Ramayana*, two of the longest wonder tales of all, are still alive in India, alive in the minds of Indians and relevant to their daily lives in the way the gods of the Greeks and Romans were once alive in Western imaginations. Once, and not so long ago, it was possible in the lands of the West to allude

to the story of the shirt of Nessus, and people would have known that the dying centaur Nessus tricked Deianira, the wife of Heracles or Hercules, into giving her husband his shirt, knowing it was poisoned and would kill him. Once, everyone knew that after the death of Orpheus, greatest of poets and singers, his severed head continued to sing. These images and many others were available, as metaphors, to help people understand the world. Art does not die when the artist dies, said Orpheus's head. The song survives the singer. And the shirt of Nessus warned us that even a very special gift may be dangerous. Another such gift, of course, was the Trojan Horse, which taught us all to fear the Greeks, even when they bring gifts. Some metaphors of the wonder tales of the West have managed to survive.

But in India, as I grew up, the wonder tales all lived, and they still do. Nowadays it isn't even necessary to read the full *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata*; some may be grateful for this news, because the *Mahabharata* is the longest poem in world literature, over two hundred thousand lines long, which is to say ten times as long as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* put together, while the *Ramayana* runs to around fifty thousand lines, merely two and a half times as long as the combined works of Homer. Fortunately for younger readers, the immensely popular comic-book series *Amar Chitra Katha*, 'immortal picture stories', offers adept renderings of tales from both. And for adults, a ninety-four-episode TV version of the *Mahabharata* brought the nation to a stop each week when originally screened in the 1990s and found an audience numbering in the hundreds of millions.

It has to be admitted that the influence of these tales is not always positive. The sectarian politics of the Hindu nationalist parties like the BJP uses the rhetoric of the past to fantasise about a return to 'Ram Rajya', the 'reign of Lord Ram', a supposed golden age of Hinduism without such inconveniences as members of other religions to complicate matters. The politicisation of the *Ramayana*, and of Hinduism in general, has become, in the hands of unscrupulous sectarian leaders, a dangerous affair. I learned on the book *The Hindus* – a work of consummate scholarship written by one of the world's greatest Sanskritists, Wendy Doniger – and the regrettable

decision of Penguin India to withdraw and pulp copies of it in response to fundamentalist criticism, is a sharp illustration of that fact.

Problems can extend beyond politics too. In some later versions of the *Ramayana*, the exiled Lord Ram and his brother Lakshman leave Sita alone in their forest dwelling one day while they hunt a golden deer, not knowing that the deer is actually a *rakshasa*, a kind of demon, in disguise. To protect Sita in their absence, Lakshman draws a *rekha*, or an enchanted line, around their home; anyone who tries to cross it except Ram, Lakshman and Sita will be burned to death by flames that erupt from the line. But the demon king Ravana disguises himself as a beggar and comes to Sita's door asking for alms, and she crosses the line to give him what he wants. This is how he captures her and spirits her away to his kingdom of Lanka, after which Ram and Lakshman have to fight a war to get her back. To 'cross the *Lakshman rekha*' has become a metaphor for overstepping the boundaries of what is permissible or right, of going too far, of succumbing foolishly to iconoclasm, and bringing down upon yourself dire consequences.

A few years ago in Delhi, there occurred the now notorious assault and gang rape of a twenty-three-year-old student, who afterwards died from her horrific injuries. Within days of this awful event, a state minister remarked that if the young woman concerned had not 'crossed the *Lakshman rekha*' – in other words, taken a bus with a male friend in the evening instead of staying demurely at home – she would not have been attacked. He later withdrew the remark because of a public outcry, but his use of the metaphor revealed that too many men in India still believe that there are limits and boundaries women should not transgress. It should be said that in most traditional versions of the *Ramayana*, including the original version by the poet Valmiki, the story of the *Lakshman rekha* is not to be found. However, an apocryphal wonder tale can sometimes be as potent as a canonical one.

I want to return however to that enchanted self, enchanted by tales whose express and sole purpose was enchantment. I want to move away from the grand religious epics to the great hoard of scur-

rilous, conniving, mysterious, exciting, comic, bizarre, surreal and very often extremely sexy narratives contained in the rest of the Eastern storehouse, because – not only because, but, yes, because – they show how much pleasure is to be gained from literature once God is removed from the picture. One of the most remarkable characteristics of the stories now gathered in the pages of *The Thousand Nights and One Night*, to take just one example, is the almost complete absence of religion. Lots of sex, much mischief, a great deal of deviousness; monsters, jinnis, giant rocs; at times, enormous quantities of blood and gore; but no God. This is why censorious Islamists dislike it so much.

In Egypt in May 2010, just seven months before the revolt against President Hosni Mubarak, a group of Islamist lawyers got wind of a new edition of *Alf Laylah wa Laylah* (the book's original Arabic title) and brought an action demanding that the edition be withdrawn and the book banned, because it was 'a call to vice and sin' that contained several references to sex. Fortunately, they did not succeed, and then larger matters began to preoccupy Egyptian minds. But the fact is, they had a point. There are indeed in that book several references to sex, and the characters seem much more preoccupied with having sex than being devout, which could indeed be, as the lawyers argued, a call to vice, if that's the deformed puritanical way you see the world. To my mind, this call is an excellent thing and well worth responding to, but you can see how people who dislike music, jokes and pleasure would be upset by it. It is rather wonderful that this ancient text, this wonderful group of wonder tales, retains the power to upset the world's fanatics more than twelve hundred years after the stories first came into the world.

The book that we now usually call *The Arabian Nights* didn't originate in the Arab world. Its probable origin is Indian; Indian story compendiums too have a fondness for frame stories, for Russian-doll-style stories within stories, and for animal fables. Somewhere around the eighth century, these stories found their way into Persian, and according to surviving scraps of information, the collection was known as *Hazar Afsaneh*, 'a thousand stories'. There's a tenth-century

document from Baghdad that describes the *Hazar Afsaneh* and mentions its frame story, about a wicked king who kills a concubine every night until one of these doomed wives manages to stave off her execution by telling him stories. This is where we first see the name ‘Scheherazade’. Sadly, of the *Hazar Afsaneh* itself not a single copy survives. This book is the great ‘missing link’ of world literature, the fabled volume through which the wonder tales of India travelled west to encounter, eventually, the Arabic language and to turn into *The Thousand Nights and One Night*, a book with many versions and no agreed canonical form, and then to move further west, first into French, in the eighteenth-century version by Antoine Galland, who added a number of stories not included in the Arabic, such as the tales of ‘Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp’ and ‘Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves’. And from French the stories made it into English, and from English they journeyed to Hollywood, which is a language of its own, and then it’s all flying carpets and Robin Williams as the Genie. (It’s worth noting, by the way, that there are no flying carpets in *The Arabian Nights*. There are flying carpets elsewhere in the Eastern tradition. For example, there’s a legend that King Solomon possessed one that could change its size and become big enough to transport an army: the world’s first air force. But in *The Arabian Nights*, all carpets remain passive and inert.)

This great migration of narrative has inspired much of the world’s literature, all the way down to the magic realism of the South American fabulists, so that when I, in my turn, used some of those devices, I had the feeling of closing a circle and bringing that story tradition all the way back home to the country in which it began. But I mourn the loss of the *Hazar Afsaneh*, which would, if rediscovered, complete the story of the stories, and what a find that would be. Perhaps it would solve a mystery at the heart of the frame story, or rather at the very end of it, and answer a question I’ve been asking myself for some years: Did Scheherazade and her sister, Dunyazad, finally, after one thousand nights and one night and more, become murderers and kill their bloodthirsty husbands?

It was, I confess, the bloody aspect of the frame story that first attracted me to *The Arabian Nights*. Let's make a small calculation.

How many women did they actually kill, this king, this Shahryar, the Sassanid monarch of 'the island or peninsula of India and China', and his brother, Shah Zaman, sovereign ruler over barbarian Samarkand? It began, or so the story goes, when Shah Zaman found his wife in the arms of a palace cook, whose chief characteristics were that he was (a) black, (b) huge and (c) covered in kitchen grease. In spite of, or perhaps because of, these characteristics, the queen of Samarkand was obviously having far too much fun, so Shah Zaman chopped her and her lover into several pieces, left them there on the bed of their delight, and headed for his brother's home, where, not long afterwards, he chanced to spy his sister-in-law, Shahryar's queen, in a garden, by a fountain, in the company of ten ladies-in-waiting and ten white slaves. The ten and ten were busy gratifying one another; the queen, however, summoned her own lover down from a convenient tree. This hideous fellow was, yes, (a) black, (b) huge and (c) slobbering! What fun they had, the ten and ten and the queen and her 'blackamoor'! Ah, the malice and treachery of womankind, and the unaccountable attraction of huge, ugly, dripping black men! Shah Zaman told his brother what he had seen, whereupon the ladies-in-waiting, the white slaves and the queen all met their fates, personally executed by Shahryar's chief minister, his vizier (or wazir). The 'slobbering' black lover of Shahryar's late queen escaped, or so it seems; how else to explain his absence from the list of the dead?

King Shahryar and King Shah Zaman duly took their revenge on faithless womankind. For three years, they each married, deflowered and then ordered the execution of a fresh virgin every night. It is not clear how Shah Zaman in Samarkand went about his gory business, but of Shahryar's methods there are things that can be told. It is known, for instance, that the vizier – Scheherazade's father, Shahryar's wise prime minister – was obliged to carry out the executions himself. All those beautiful young bodies, decapitated; all those tumbling heads and bloody, spurting necks. The vizier was a cultured

gentleman, not only a man of power but also a person of discernment, even of delicate sensibilities – he must have been, must he not, to have raised such a paragon, such a wondrously gifted, multiply accomplished, heroically courageous, selfless daughter as Scheherazade? And Dunyazad too; let's not forget the kid sister, Dunyazad. Another good, smart, decent girl. What would it do to the soul of the father of such fine girls to be forced to execute young women by the hundreds, to slit girls' throats and see their lifeblood flow? What secret fury might have burgeoned in his subtle breast? We are not told. We do know, however, that Shahryar's subjects began to resent him mightily and to flee his capital city with their womenfolk, so that after three years there were no virgins to be found in town.

No virgins except Scheherazade and Dunyazad.

Three years already: one thousand and ninety-five nights, one thousand and ninety-five dead queens for Shahryar, one thousand and ninety-five more for Shah Zaman, or one thousand and ninety-six each if a leap year was involved. Let's err on the low side. One thousand and ninety-five each let it be. And let us not forget the original twenty-three. By the time Scheherazade entered the story, marrying King Shahryar and ordering her sister, Dunyazad, to sit at the foot of the marital bed and to ask, after Scheherazade's deflowering was complete, to be told a bedtime story . . . By this time, Shahryar and Shah Zaman were already responsible for two thousand, two hundred and thirteen deaths. Only eleven of the dead were men.

Shahryar, upon marrying Scheherazade and being captivated by her tales, stopped killing women. Shah Zaman, untamed by literature, went right on with his vengeful work, slaughtering each morning the virgin he'd ravished the night before, demonstrating to the female sex the power of men over women, the ability of men to separate fornication from love, and the inevitable union, as far as women were concerned, of sexuality and death. In Samarkand the carnage continued for at least another one thousand nights and one night, because it was only at the conclusion of the entire cycle of Scheherazade's tales – when that greatest of storytellers begged to be spared, not in recognition of her genius but for the sake of the three sons she

had given Shahryar during the fabled years, and when Shahryar confessed his love for her, the last of his one thousand and ninety-seven wives, and gave up all pretence of murderous intent – that Shah Zaman’s project also ended; cleansed at last of bloodlust, he asked for, and received, sweet Dunyazad’s hand in marriage.

The minimum total number of the dead by this time was, by my calculation, three thousand, two hundred and fourteen. Only eleven of the dead were men.

Consider Scheherazade, whose name meant ‘city-born’ and who was without a doubt a big-city girl, crafty, wisecracking, by turns sentimental and cynical, as contemporary a metropolitan narrator as one could wish to meet. Scheherazade, who snared the prince in her never-ending story. Scheherazade, telling stories to save her life, setting fiction against death, a Statue of Liberty built not of metal but of words. Scheherazade, who insisted, against her father’s will, on taking her place in the procession into the king’s deadly boudoir. Scheherazade, who set herself the heroic task of saving her sisters by taming the king. Who had faith, who must have had faith, in the man beneath the murderous monster and in her own ability to restore him to his true humanity, by telling him stories.

What a woman! It’s easy to understand how and why King Shahryar fell in love with her. For certainly he did fall, becoming the father of her children and understanding, as the nights progressed, that his threat of execution had become empty, that he could no longer ask his vizier, her father, to carry it out. His savagery was blunted by the genius of the woman who, for a thousand nights and one night, risked her life to save the lives of others, who trusted her imagination to stand against brutality and overcome it not by force but, amazingly, by civilising it.

Lucky king! But (this is the greatest unanswered question of *The Arabian Nights*) why on earth did she fall in love with him? And why did Dunyazad, the younger sister, who sat at the foot of the marital bed for one thousand nights and one night, watching her sister being fucked by the murderous king and listening to her stories – Dunyazad, the eternal listener, but also voyeur – why did she agree to marry

Shah Zaman, a man even deeper in blood than his story-charmed brother?

How can we understand these women? There is a silence in the tale that cries out to be spoken of. This much we are told: after the stories were over, Shah Zaman and Dunyazad were married, but Scheherazade made one condition – that Shah Zaman leave his kingdom and come to live with his brother, so that the sisters might not be parted. This Shah Zaman gladly did, and Shahryar appointed to rule over Samarkand in his brother's stead that same vizier who was now also his father-in-law. When the vizier arrived in Samarkand, he was greeted by the townspeople very joyfully, and all the local grandees prayed that he might reign over them for a long time. Which he did.

My question is this, as I interrogate the ancient story: Was there a conspiracy between the daughter and the father? Is it possible that Scheherazade and the vizier had hatched a secret plan? For, thanks to Scheherazade's strategy, Shah Zaman was no longer king in Samarkand. Thanks to Scheherazade's strategy, her father was no longer a courtier and unwilling executioner but a king in his own right, a well-beloved king, what was more, a wise man, a man of peace, succeeding a bloody ogre. And then, without explanation, Death came, simultaneously, for Shahryar and Shah Zaman. Death, the 'Destroyer of Delights and the Severer of Societies, the Desolator of Dwelling Places and the Garnerer of Graveyards', came for them, and their palaces lay in ruins, and they were replaced by a wise ruler, whose name we are not told.

But how and why did the Destroyer of Delights arrive? How was it that both brothers died simultaneously, as the text clearly implies, and why did their palaces afterwards lie in ruins? And who was their successor, the Unnamed and Wise?

We are not told. But imagine, once again, the vizier filling up with fury for many years as he was forced to spill all that innocent blood. Imagine the years of the vizier's fear, the one thousand and one nights of fear, while his daughters, flesh of his flesh, blood of his blood, were hidden in Shahryar's bedroom, their fate hanging by a story's thread.

How long will a man wait for his revenge? Will he wait longer than one thousand nights and one night?

This is my theory: that the vizier, now ruler of Samarkand, was the wise king who came home to rule Shahryar's kingdom. And the kings died simultaneously either at their wives' hands or at the vizier's. It's just a theory. Maybe the answer lies in the great lost book. Maybe it doesn't. We can only . . . wonder.

At any rate, the final count of the dead was three thousand, two hundred and sixteen. Thirteen of the dead were men.

WHEN I FINISHED MY memoir, *Joseph Anton*, I felt a deep hunger for fiction. And not just any old fiction, but fiction as wildly fantastic as the memoir had been determinedly realistic. My mood swung from one end of the literary pendulum's arc to the other extreme. And I began to remember the stories that had made me fall in love with literature in the first place, tales full of beautiful impossibility, which were not true but by being not true told the truth, often more beautifully and memorably than stories that relied on being true. Those stories didn't have to happen once upon a time either. They could happen right now. Yesterday, today or the day after tomorrow.

One of these wonder tales is from the Kashmiri Sanskrit compendium, the *Katha Sarit Sagara* or 'Ocean of the Streams of Story', whose title inspired my children's book *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. I confess that I stole this story and put it in a novel. It goes something like this:

'Once upon a time in a faraway place, a merchant was owed money by a local nobleman, really quite a lot of money, and then unexpectedly the nobleman died and the merchant thought, This is bad, I'm not going to get paid. But a god had given him the gift of transmigration – this was in a part of the world in which there were many gods, not just one – so the merchant had the idea of migrating his spirit into the dead lord's body so that the dead man could get up from his deathbed and pay him what he owed. The merchant left his body in a safe place, or so he thought, and his spirit jumped into the

dead man's skin, but when he was walking the dead man's body to the bank, he had to pass through the fish market, and a large dead cod-fish lying on a slab saw him go past and started to laugh. When people heard the dead fish laughing, they knew there was something fishy about the walking dead man and attacked him for being possessed by a demon. The dead nobleman's body quickly became uninhabitable, and the merchant's spirit had to abandon it and make its way back to its own discarded shell. But some other people had found the merchant's empty body and, thinking it the body of a dead man, had set it on fire according to the customs of that part of the world. So now the merchant had no body and had not been paid what he was owed, and his spirit is probably still wandering somewhere in the market. Or maybe he ended up migrating into a dead fish and swam away into the ocean of the streams of story. And the moral of the story is, don't push your fucking luck.'

Animal fables – including talking-dead-fish fables – have been among the most enduring tales in the Eastern canon, and the best of them, unlike, say, the fables of Aesop, are amoral. They don't seek to preach about humility or modesty or moderation or honesty or abstinence. They do not guarantee the triumph of virtue. As a result, they seem remarkably modern. The bad guys sometimes win.

The collection known in India as the *Panchatantra* features a pair of talking jackals: Karataka, the good or better guy of the two, and Damanaka, the wicked schemer. At the book's outset they are in the service of the lion king, but Damanaka doesn't like the lion's friendship with another courtier, a bull, and tricks the lion into believing the bull to be an enemy. The lion murders the innocent animal while the jackals watch.

The end.

In the tales of Karataka and Damanaka we also read about a war between crows and owls, in which one crow pretends to be a traitor and joins the owls to discover the location of the cave where they live. Then the crows set fire to the entrance to the cave, and the owls all suffocate to death.

The end.

In a third story a man leaves his child in the care of his friend, a mongoose, and when he returns he sees blood on the mongoose's mouth and kills it, believing it has attacked his child. Then he discovers the mongoose has actually killed a snake and saved his child. But by now the mongoose is unfortunately deceased.

The end.

Many of Aesop's little morality tales about the victory of dogged slowness (the tortoise) over arrogant speed (the hare), or the foolishness of crying 'wolf' when there is no wolf, or of killing the goose that laid the golden eggs, seem positively soppy when compared to this Quentin Tarantino savagery. So much for the cliché of the peaceful, mystical East.

As a migrant myself, I have always been fascinated by the migration of stories, and these jackal tales travelled almost as far as the *Arabian Nights* narratives, ending up in both Arabic and Persian versions, in which the jackals' names have mutated into Kalila and Dimna. They also ended up in Hebrew and Latin and eventually, as *The Fables of Bidpai*, in English and French. Unlike the *Arabian Nights* stories, however, they have faded from modern readers' consciousness, perhaps because their insufficient attention to happy endings made them unattractive to the Walt Disney Company.

Yet their power endures; and it does so, I believe, because for all their cargo of monsters and magic, these stories are entirely truthful about human nature (even when in the form of anthropomorphic animals). All human life is here, brave and cowardly, honourable and dishonourable, straight-talking and conniving, and the stories ask the greatest and most enduring question of literature: How do ordinary people respond to the arrival in their lives of the extraordinary? And they answer: Sometimes we don't do so well, but at other times we find resources within ourselves we did not know we possessed, and so we rise to the challenge, we overcome the monster, Beowulf kills Grendel and Grendel's more fearsome mother as well, Red Riding Hood kills the wolf, and the hero within the beast and then he is beastly no more. And that is ordinary magic, human magic, the true wonder of the wonder tale.

I'M TRYING TO MAKE a case in favour of something that is pretty much out of fashion these days. By general consensus, we live in an age of non-fiction. Any publisher, any bookseller, will tell you that. What's more, fiction itself seems to have turned away from fiction. I'm speaking now of serious fiction, not the other kind. In the other kind of fiction, fictiveness is alive and well, it's always twilight, people are playing hunger games, and Leonardo da Vinci is just a code. Serious fiction has turned towards realism of the Elena Ferrante and Knausgaard kind, fiction that asks us to believe that it comes from a place very close to if not identical to the author's personal experience and away, so to speak, from magic. But many years ago, in a famous essay, the great Czech writer Milan Kundera proposed that the novel has two parents, *Tristram Shandy* and *Clarissa Harlowe*. From Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* descends the great tradition of the realist novel, while from Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, comes a smaller trickle of, well, weirder books. It is the children of *Clarissa* who have filled the literary world, Kundera said, and yet, in his opinion, it was on the Shandean side – the antic, ludic, comic, eccentric side – that most new, original work remained to be done. (Ernest Hemingway famously chose a different literary parent: 'All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*.' That is a freer and more mythic work than *Clarissa*, but it too is a broadly realistic novel. It must also be said that in choosing *Tristram Shandy*, Kundera ignores the work to which it is deeply indebted: Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. Sterne's Uncle Toby and Corporal Trim are clearly modelled on Quixote and Sancho.)

Kundera was suggesting that the possibilities of the realist novel have been so thoroughly explored by so many authors that very little new remains to be discovered. If he's right, the realist tradition is doomed to a kind of endless repetition. For innovation, for *newness* – and remember that the word 'novel' contains the idea of newness – we must turn to irrealism and find new ways of approach-

ing the truth through lies. The wonder tales of my childhood taught me not only that such approaches were possible but that they were manifold, almost infinite in their possibilities, and that they were fun. As I said, the purveyors of schlock fiction in books and in films as well have understood the power of the fantastic, but all they are able to purvey is the fantastic reduced to comic-strip two-dimensionality. For me, the fantastic has been a way of adding dimensions to the real, adding fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh dimensions to the usual three; a way of enriching and intensifying our experience of the real, rather than escaping from it into superhero-vampire fantasyland.

The Western writers I have most admired, writers such as Italo Calvino and Günter Grass, Mikhail Bulgakov and Isaac Bashevis Singer, have all feasted richly on their various wonder-tale traditions and found ways of injecting the fabulous into the real to make it more vivid and, strangely, more truthful. Grass's co-opting of animal fables, his extensive use of talking flounders, rats and toads, grows from his absorption in the wonder tales of Germany, as collected by the Brothers Grimm. Calvino himself collected and perhaps partially invented many Italian wonder tales in his classic work *Italian Folktales*, and all his work was steeped in the language of the Italian fable. In Bulgakov's immortal tale of the devil coming to Moscow, *The Master and Margarita*, and in the delicious Yiddish stories of Isaac Singer, with their golems and dybbuks, their possessions and hauntings, we see, as in the art of Chagall, a deep fascination with and inspiration taken from the wonder tales of the Russian, Jewish and Slavic world. Much of the greatest work of the last hundred or so years, from the fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen to the work of Ursula Le Guin to the midnight-black nightmares of Franz Kafka, has come from this blending of the real and the surreal, of the natural and the supranatural worlds.

Many young writers today seem to start with the mantra 'write what you know' pinned to the wall behind their writing tables, and as a result, as anyone who has experienced creative writing classes can testify, there's a lot of stuff about adolescent suburban angst. My advice would be a little different. Only write what you know if what you

know is really interesting. If you live in a neighbourhood like Harper Lee's or William Faulkner's, by all means feel free to tell the heated tales of your own personal Yoknapatawpha, and you'll probably find you never need to leave home at all. But unless what you know is really interesting, don't write about it. Write what you don't know. This can be done in two ways. One way is to leave home and go and find a good story somewhere else. Melville and Conrad found their stories at sea and in faraway lands, and Hemingway and Fitzgerald too had to leave home to find their voices in Spain, or the Riviera, or East and West Egg. The other solution is to remember that fiction is fictional and try to make things up. We are all dreaming creatures. Dream on paper. And if it turns out like *Twilight* or *The Hunger Games*, tear it up, and try to have a better dream.

Madame Bovary and a flying carpet are both untrue, and, what's more, they are both untrue in the same way. *Somebody made them up*. I'm in favour of continuing to make things up. Only by unleashing the fictionality of fiction, the imaginativeness of the imagination, the dream songs of our dreams, can we hope to approach the new, and to create fiction that may, once again, be more interesting than the facts.

2

In the novel I wrote for my then ten-year-old son, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, an annoyed ten-year-old boy shouts at his storyteller father, 'What's the use of stories that aren't even true?' The book that followed was an attempt to answer that question, to examine why it is that we need such stories and how they fulfil us, even though we know they are made up. It's a subject I seem to have been thinking about for most of my writing life: the relationship between the world of the imagination and the so-called real world, and how we travel between the two. Five years before *Haroun*, I wrote about N. F. Simpson's play *One Way Pendulum*, one of the very few competent British contributions to the Theatre of the Absurd. In this play, a man receives by mail order a full-size replica in do-it-yourself kit form of a courtroom in the Central Criminal Court in London, known as the

Old Bailey; he assembles it in his living room and shortly afterwards finds himself on trial in it. A clerk states that on a certain day the defendant, our hero, 'was not in this world'. 'What world was he in, then?' the judge demands, and the answer comes: 'It seems he has one of his own.'

(Parenthetically: Those who have not read *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* will no doubt be impressed to know that it was featured on the TV series *Lost*, where it played the part of the book being read by the character Desmond on Oceanic Flight 815 during the flash-sideways timeline. I really hope some readers will understand what that sentence means, because I certainly do not. 'What's the use of stories that aren't even true?' is a question that could no doubt form the basis of an interesting lecture about *Lost*.)

Even if we do not live wholly in our imaginations, we all like to make journeys therein. In Jean-Luc Godard's film *Alphaville*, the private-eye hero Lemmy Caution travels across interstellar space in his Ford Galaxy. Dorothy Gale arrives in Oz riding a whirlwind. How and why do the rest of us make the trip?

We are born wanting food, shelter, love, song and story. Our need for the last two is not less than our need for the first three. A friend of mine, researching the horrific treatment of orphans in Ceaușescu's Romania, has found that these children, given food and shelter but denied the rest, do not develop normally. Their brains do not form properly. Perhaps we, who are language animals, possess a song and story instinct; we need and move towards stories and songs not because we are taught to do so but because it is in our nature to need them. And while there are other creatures on earth who might be described as singing – I'm thinking of the trills of songbirds, the howling of wolves, the long slow song of the whale in the ocean's deeps – there is nothing that swims, crawls, walks or flies that tells stories. Man alone is the storytelling animal.

Song is the human voice used in an unnatural way – a way that not all human beings, myself included, can use to create the kind of meaning that beauty instils in us. Story is the unnatural means we use to talk about human life, our way of reaching the truth by making

things up. And we are the only species that, from the beginning, has used stories to explain ourselves to ourselves. Sitting in Plato's cave, men told stories about the shadows on the cave wall to guess at the world outside. Unable to understand their origins, men told each other stories about sky gods and sun gods, ancestor gods and saviour gods, invisible fathers and mothers who explained the great matter of our origin and offered guidance on the equally great matter of morals. In myth and legend we created our oldest wonderlands, Asgard and Valhalla, Olympus and Mount Kailash, and embedded therein our deepest thoughts about our own natures and our doubts and fears as well.

Haroun and the Sea of Stories is a fable about language and silence, about stories and anti-stories, written, in part, to explain to my young son the battle then swirling around his father about another novel, *The Satanic Verses*. Twenty years after *Haroun*, another son demanded, 'Where's my book?' There are two answers to this question. The first answer is, 'Kid, life ain't fair.' It's not a nice answer, I agree. The other answer is to write the book; so I wrote *Luka and the Fire of Life*, and as a result spent much time wandering around wonderlands once again, the imaginary worlds we love to inhabit as children and as grown-ups too.

When I began work on *Luka* twenty years after *Haroun*, I thought a good deal about 'Lewis Carroll', the Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, the creator of Wonderland, and I learned this from him: The best thing about his second Alice book, *Through the Looking-Glass*, is that it is not *Return to Wonderland*. Six years after publishing *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, he set himself the considerable challenge of creating an entirely different imaginary world, with its own internal logic.

Don't go back where you've already been. Find another reason for going somewhere else.

I decided to challenge myself to do the same thing. Commercially speaking, this may have been the best move. As my son Milan advised me when he was twelve years old, 'Don't write books,

Dad. Write *series*.' In the age of *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*, he's obviously right.

A few words more about *Through the Looking-Glass*. By the time it was published, the first *Alice* book had become immensely popular, so the danger of publishing a sequel that disappointed the earlier work's admirers was very great; also, Alice herself – Alice Pleasance Liddell – had grown up and was no longer that child who, on 4 July 1862, on a rowing trip with her two sisters and the Reverend Dodgson, had asked for a story and been told the tale of *Alice's Adventures Under Ground*, the story that was published three years later in much expanded form as the book we now colloquially know as *Alice in Wonderland*. Many of the greatest works of children's literature were created with particular children in mind: J. M. Barrie wrote *Peter Pan* to please the Llewelyn Davies boys, A. A. Milne wrote *Winnie-the-Pooh* about his son Christopher Robin Milne's favourite toys, and Lewis Carroll wrote *Alice* for Alice. But by the time of *Through the Looking-Glass*, he had to write for the memory of Alice, that imperious little girl who seems always to be scolding people, who remains certain of the rules of life and proper behaviour even in a world whose rules she cannot know.

The Alice he had created for himself, however, continued to fill his dreams: 'Still she haunts me, phantomwise,' he wrote, 'Alice moving under skies / Never seen by waking eyes.'

My task, as I wrote *Luka and the Fire of Life*, was easier. I had a new child to write for and to be guided by. And I was fortunate, I am fortunate, that I had grown up steeped in the tradition of the wonder tale, including the heroic myths of the warrior Hamza and the adventurer Hatim Tai, wanderers who married fairies, fought goblins, slew dragons, and sometimes faced enemies who flew through the air riding on giant enchanted urns. From my earliest days, I have been – and I still am – a traveller in wonderlands.

If the realist tradition has been the dominant one, it is worth spending a few moments to defend the alternative, the other great tradition. It is worth saying that fantasy is not whimsy. The fantastic

is neither innocent nor escapist. The wonderland is not a place of refuge, not even necessarily an attractive or likeable place. It can be – in fact, it usually is – a place of slaughter, exploitation, cruelty and fear. Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is a tragedy. Captain Hook wants to kill Peter Pan. The witch in the Black Forest wants to cook Hansel and Gretel. The wolf actually eats Red Riding Hood's grandmother. Albus Dumbledore is murdered, and the Lord of the Rings plans the enslavement of the whole of Middle-earth. The flying carpet of King Solomon, which, according to the stories, was sixty miles long and sixty miles wide, once punished the great king for the sin of pride by beginning to shake, so that the forty thousand people upon it all tumbled to their deaths. (Not for the first time, ordinary people suffered for their rulers' sins. Wonderland can be as flawed a place as earth.)

We know, when we hear these tales, that even though they are 'unreal', because carpets do not fly and witches in gingerbread houses do not exist, they are also 'real', because they are about real things: love, hatred, fear, power, bravery, cowardice, death. They simply arrive at the real by a different route. They are so, even though we know that they are not so.

Before the modern literature of the fantastic, before wonderland and fairy tale and folk tale, there was mythology. In the beginning, myths were religious texts. The Greek myths were originally the Greek religion. But perhaps it's only when people stopped believing in the literal truth of these myths, stopped believing in an actual Zeus hurling actual thunderbolts, that they, we, were able to start believing in them in the way in which we believe in literature – that is to say, more profoundly, the double belief/unbelief with which we approach fiction, 'so and not so'. And at once they began to give up their deepest meanings, meanings previously obscured by faith.

The great myths, Greek, Roman, Nordic, have survived the deaths of the religions that once sustained them because of the astonishing compression of meaning they contain. When I was writing my novel *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, I became enthralled by the myth of Orpheus, the greatest poet who was also the greatest singer, the per-

sonage in whom song and story became one. You can recount the myth of Orpheus in a hundred words or less: his love for the nymph Eurydice, her pursuit by the beekeeper Aristaeus, the snakebite that killed her, her descent into hell, his pursuit of her beyond the doors of death, his attempt to rescue her, his being granted by the lord of the underworld – as a reward for the genius of his singing – the possibility of leading her back to life as long as he didn't look back, and his fatal backward look. And yet when you begin to delve into the story it seems almost inexhaustibly rich, for at its heart is a great triangular tension between the grandest matters of life: love, art and death. You can turn and turn the story and the triangle tells you different things. It tells you that art, inspired by love, can have a greater power than death. It tells you, contrariwise, that death, in spite of art, can defeat the power of love. And it tells you that art alone can make possible the transaction between love and death that is at the centre of all human life.

There is one story that crops up in several mythologies: the story of the moment when men have to learn to do without their gods. In Roberto Calasso's great study of Greek and Roman myth, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, he tells us that that occasion, the nuptials of Cadmus, the inventor of the alphabet, and the nymph Harmonia, was the last time the gods descended from Olympus to join in human life. After that, we were on our own. In Nordic myth, when the World Tree, the great ash Yggdrasil, falls, the gods do battle with, destroy and are destroyed by their appointed foes, and after that they are gone. The death of the gods demands that heroes, men, come forward to take their place. Here, in ancient Greek and Old Norse, are our oldest fables about growing up, about learning that a time must come when our parents, our teachers, our guardians, can no longer command and protect us. There is a time to leave wonderland and grow up.

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THE CHILDREN OF TRISTRAM Shandy, to use Kundera's term – or the children of Quixote, or of Scheherazade – may not be as plentiful

as those of Clarissa Harlowe, but you will find them in every literature, in every place, in every time. From the bedevilled Moscow of Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* to the dybbuk-ridden villages of Isaac Bashevis Singer; from the French Surrealists to the American Fabulists; from Jonathan Swift to Carmen Maria Machado, Karen Russell and Helen Oyeyemi, they are everywhere, forming an alternative, joyous, carnivalesque 'great tradition' to set alongside the realistic one. The best-known such writers in recent literary history were the South American practitioners of so-called magic realism. The term 'magic realism' is valuable when it's used to describe the writers of the Latin American Boom: Julio Cortázar, Alejo Carpentier, Manuel Puig, Carlos Fuentes, Isabel Allende and, of course, Gabriel García Márquez, as well as perhaps their forebears Juan Rulfo, Jorge Luis Borges and Machado de Assis. But it's a problematic term, because when it's used, most people equate it with the fantasy-fiction genre. And, as I've been trying to argue, the literature of the fantastic is not genre fiction but, in its own way, as realistic as naturalistic fiction; it just comes into the real through a different door. A naturalistic novel is entirely capable of being escapist: read a little chick lit and you'll see what I mean.

The truth is not arrived at by purely mimetic means. An image can be captured by a camera or by a paintbrush. A painting of a starry night is no less truthful than a photograph of one; arguably, if the painter is Van Gogh, it's far more truthful, even though far less 'realistic'. (I say Van Gogh, you say VanGo, as if he were a competitor to U-Haul, but the Dutch, you should know, call him Van Ghogh, which sounds like a man expectorating a stream of betel juice into a Bombay gutter. Practise that.) The literature of the fantastic – the wonder tale, the fable, the folk tale, the magic-realist novel – has always embodied profound truths about human beings, their finest attributes and their deepest prejudices too: about, to take just one example, women.

Some of the most brilliant practitioners and critics of the modern wonder tale, like the novelist and story writer Angela Carter and the British critic and novelist Marina Warner, have eloquently investi-