FICTION IN REVIEW

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What's by turns comic or confusing, real or imaginary, and has Something Not Quite Right? The literary genre known as slipstream, by definition evading easy categorization, hovers between mainstream and speculative fiction. Readers are never exactly sure whether the thing that goes bump in the night is a loose floorboard or a ghost on the loose.

Though the term was coined by William Gibson, one of the originators of cyberpunk, perhaps the best-known practitioner of "maybe" is Kelly Link, whose first short story collection, *Stranger Things Happen,* came out in 2001. It contained such titles as "Flying Lessons" and "Survivor's Ball; or, The Donner Party." Are we in some fairy tale past or an uncertain present? Exactly what kind of meal is being served at the hotel? Has a minor character died or merely vanished – and how? Idiosyncratic lists and acontextual observations provide more intrigue without quite answering the questions they raise. Yet the style is authoritative. These are people and situations that Link makes us believe in, as in this introductory bit from "Travels with the Snow Queen": "You enter the walls of the city early in the evening, when the cobblestones are a mottled pink with reflected light, and cold beneath the slap of your bare, bloody feet. You ask the man who is guarding the gate to recommend a place to stay the night, and even as you are falling into the bed at the inn, the bed, which is piled high with quilts and scented with lavender, perhaps alone, perhaps with another traveler, perhaps with the guardsman who had such brown eyes, and a mustache that curled up on either side of his nose like two waxed black laces, even as this guardsman, whose name you didn't ask calls out a name in his sleep that is not your name, you are dreaming about the road again."

Link followed this up in 2005 with her second collection, *Magic for Beginners,* which drew praise from writers ranging from Michael Chabon to Daniel Mendelsohn. Link has also come out with *Pretty Monsters,* a collection marketed for the Young Adult crowd, as well as an edited anthology, *Trampoline,* which shows Link's affinity for experimental work, not just in form but also in stance. Link possesses the literary equivalent of peripheral vision – like peering into a neighboring, off-kilter realm. As the French surrealist Paul Éluard is reputed to have remarked, "There is another world, and it is in this one."

Link's latest collection, *Get in Trouble,* contains stories with her trademark weirdness, including hints of magic and science fiction, yet these narratives take a few steps away from her earlier work. If they seem a bit less edgy (as in cutting edge and the edge of reality), they're also more substantial, imbued with definite meaning and morality.

Starting off the collection is "The Summer People," in part a tale about elves, maybe, and the tactful handling they require. The teenage protagonist, Fran, acts as caretaker for a clutch of summer houses, but one of those houses has rather special inhabitants. As Ophelia, a schoolmate of Fran's, finds out when she enters, they heard items: "Dolls' legs and silverware sets and tennis trophies and mason jars and empty matchboxes and false teeth and still chancier things poked out of paper bags and plastic carriers." They make ingenious little objects, including a grotesque jack-in-the-box and a walnut-and-ebony iPhone case. They can be nice or nasty, fairies or fae. Part of Link's elusivity, if that's a

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word, is a refusal to clarify. Perhaps the sanest response is to engage in what Keats termed negative capability: "that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."

What grounds the story is the down-to-earth Fran, her father an alky bitten with religion who soon disappears, and her relationship with her schoolmate Ophelia, pressed into service when Fran is too sick to work. Fran's mother is long gone, having left long ago through a sort of rent in the tent fabric of reality. Fran, too, has that option. People in Link's stories tend to fade in and out of the picture: try to get a proper focus, and they're gone. "The Summer People" would be light fantasy were it not for the hard edge of reality that closes in, and the prospect of escape, which by the end seems like an oblivion close to death.

In fact, death hovers around a fair number of these tales, either literally or figuratively, rarely in the forefront but offstage or implied. In "Valley of the Girls," a tale of the near future, rich kids who want to leave a legacy after death do it on a grand scale, in imitation of the pharaohs, lending new meaning to the term "pyramid scheme." The satiric assault on exploitive capitalism and all its excesses is like a George Saunders vision: "The girls have *ushabti* made of themselves, give them to each other at the pyramid dedication ceremonies, the sweet sixteen parties." An additional conceit is that, to avoid publicly disgracing themselves before they reach adulthood, the privileged offspring hire body doubles, known as Faces, who can be counted on to comport themselves properly. But self-destructive behavior goes on in private, and the end of this story is an end indeed.

"Two Houses" is another take on death, an old-fashioned ghost tale recast as science fiction. Here are men and women astronauts in cryo-sleep, in a rocket ship headed for Proxima Centauri, awaking with all the disorientation of people who've been out of commission for a while. Hard SF – the tech stuff – isn't Link's specialty, but she does a fairly good job of describing the ship's biosphere and the odd relationships that grow among people in fixed proximity. (The sexuality in these stories is not just straight and gay but an acknowledgment that people attract people.) Since one way to pass the time is to tell ghost stories, that's what the space travelers do –

but Link conflates the tellers and the tales in a beguiling coda as chilling as any spectral vision.

The most sophisticated take on the romance of death occurs in "I Can See Right Through You," a long story about a demon lover against a backdrop of celebrity haze, or how media and the public gaze tend to create ghostly or unreal images. Here the launch of a vampire film catapults its co-stars into instant celebritydom: "It's one of the ten most iconic movie kisses of all time. In the top five, surely. You and Meggie, the demon lover and his monster girl; vampires sharing a kiss as the sun comes up. Both of you wearing so much makeup it still astonishes you that anyone would ever recognize you on the street." But Link is after bigger phenomena than instant fame. Rather, the piece focuses on how time blurs everything, even as it transfixes certain moments into icons. And that can be a drag. As the demon lover's co-star, Meggie, notes: "Year after year, on the monkey's face a monkey's face." This observation, ever so slightly fixed up (it's a Bashō haiku translated by Robert Hass), is also the epigraph to the story collection. Identity is fixed even as age alters the form. In fact, the demon lover is now in his mid-forties, an embarrassing sex tape has recently hit the media, and this sad state of affairs propels him back to his former love, Meggie, who is now directing a ghost-hunting TV show called *Who's There?* After a series of missteps, she's moved on; he hasn't.

Link gives you all the intervening years in cinematic jump-cut, a narrative style she uses a lot. As the uncomfortably omniscient narrator notes: "Films can be put together in any order. Scenes shot in any order of sequence. Take as many takes as you like." This isn't the first time that Link has spliced media and reality. In the title story from *Magic for Beginners*, Link begins, "Fox is a television character, and she isn't dead yet. But she will be, soon. She's a character on a television show called *The Library*. You've never seen *The Library* on TV, but I bet you wish you had." Whereas "Magic for Beginners" is about adolescence and its urges, "I Can See Right Through You" offers a more poignant view of age and its discontents. Not that Link is interested in glum realism: the story also includes a kicker involving ghosts and doubles and classic misdirection. Suffice to say that the title works on

several levels, from transparent motives to something eerier, with a hard opacity at the core.

A couple of stories in the collection seem a bit formless, as if Link were simply having fun working out ideas. "The New Boyfriend" is a concept piece, android boyfriends in boxes, leading to the question of proper behavior, but who cares about that when the lust object isn't really human? Or, as a girl named Mint perhaps thinks when getting too close to her friend Ainslie's unboxed boyfriend: "None of this is okay. But it's not real. So it's okay." As in "Valley of the Girls," with its chronicling of adolescent misbehavior, Link explores the seduction of power: who gets to call the shots, and what the consequences are.

The same circling attention applies to "Origin Story," which starts out as a he-and-she conversation, evidence of a long-term if fading relationship. The action attenuates as the man, Biscuit, grows drunker, and the woman, Bunnatine, reminisces. Does it matter that she can float – levitate a couple of feet off the ground? Or that mutants are a distinct possibility in this world? What matters in the end is that Bunnatine returns home to take care of a baby that she never told Biscuit about, one that might be his. Reading this kind of account is like trying to establish what the psychoanalyst Donald Spence termed the narrative truth: not exactly the reality that Freud sought, peeling away neurotic defenses like onion skins, but an agreed-upon version of what happened, a narrative that the therapist and the patient can build upon to enact progress. Postmodern static and fuzz are a given in Link's worlds. The assumptions and overlays are what's important.

Yet the most significant stories in the collection seem also the most solid. "Secret Identity," a fifty-page masterpiece, follows a clueless yet knowing teenage girl who's traveled by bus all the way from Keokuk to see Paul Zell, a man she knows only from an interactive Web site called FarAway. Her unprepossessing name is Billie Faggart. Does that matter? It does, and as she also notes: "I'm not good at the friends thing. I'm the human equivalent of one of those baby birds that falls out of a nest and then some nice person picks the baby bird up and puts it back. Except that now the baby bird smells all wrong. I think I smell wrong." These and other plaints come out through unsent letters addressed to the man she wants to meet.

Since this is a Kelly Link story, we also have a slight shift in reality, not to mention point of view. Billie moves in and out of first person and third person: "Forgive her. She's been on a bus for over twenty hours. Her clothes smell like a bus, a cocktail of chemical cleaners and other people's breath, and the last thing she was expecting, Paul Zell, was to find herself in a hotel full of superheroes and dentists." The combination of superheroes and dentists (two conventions hosted by one hotel) is *so* Link. Will Billie hook up with Paul Zell? The details along the way make for a great story, although, since no fifteen-year-old girl is so articulate and socially aware, Link engages in some authorial ventriloquism to make all the observations she wants. These stories often involve teens, possibly because Link's got the rhythms down cold, but also because that's the age of wonder, before the world solidifies around you like cement and the lines of force become evident. As a villainously rich character named Conrad Linthor informs Billie, wealth beats other superpowers any day. But drive and persistence make an admirable power of their own, which is why we root for the disenfranchised but plucky, the Billies of this world.

The most compelling stories in *Get in Trouble* show a drawing back from anomie, an insistence on consequences rather than a cosmic shrug. Modern morality consists not so much in declaring something bad as in acknowledging that actions have reactions. The story "The Lesson" delves right into this issue. Thanh and Harper, an interracial gay couple, are waiting for their baby, its birth possibly premature, complicated by the surrogate's health issues. Yet the couple are elsewhere, attending the island wedding of a friend, an ex-hippie type named Fleur, and monitoring the situation from afar. Will the groom ever show up? When will the baby arrive? What might take a turn for the uncanny instead stops at the edge of the reality we all have to live with. And relationships are the basis of this world. Link is particularly good at evoking the two men, one motherly, attentive, and worried, the other not, not, and not. At one point, Thanh spots a funny text about pregnancy on their surrogate's cellphone: "Thanh wants to tell Harper about the text. Maybe it would make him laugh. He doesn't. It wouldn't." These astute sum-ups do a great deal in a small space. Link has always been a master of long, evocative phrases capped by small, blunt sentences. But rarely in earlier

Link would one come across this estimate: "The loved one suffers. All loved ones suffer. Love is not enough to prevent this. Love is enough. The thing that you wished for. Was this it?" Link concludes the story, "Here endeth the lesson."

To suggest that Link is turning toward our world would be inaccurate. The final story in the collection is "Light," featuring a place in which some people are raised by wolves, with perhaps a tip of the hat to Karen Russell's story "St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves." But it includes people who cast two shadows; a woman named Lindsey and her odd twin brother, Alan, who speak a language only they comprehend; and sleepers, people permanently comatose and tended to in a large warehouse. Here, Link clearly ignores what the *Astounding* editor John W. Campbell, Jr., stipulated for successful science fiction: one impossibility per story. Instead, we have references to a woman giving birth to rabbits, and invisible men robbing a convenience store. As it turns out, Link is describing pocket universes, including some that make lovely vacation spots for retirees. The story is rife with possibility, if a little vertigo-inducing.

Fictional worlds that work like pocket universes is an apt description of Link's work. These worlds encompass alternate myths that stay in the mind long after the last sentence. They accomplish this feat by locating some crux as to how we live and die, then changing the context: a form of metalepsis. Ancient Greek literature, with characters whose futures depend on fate, offers a useful parallel – or maybe contrast. Link's characters operate within patterns more mysterious than in our society or even in the laws of physics; they follow different rules of reality because Link has altered those rules.

How does all this affect the audience? As Link writes in the title story from *Pretty Monsters:* "Not everyone who reads a story feels the same way about how it ends. And if you go back to the beginning and read it again, you may discover it isn't the same story you thought you'd read. Stories shift their shape." Link shifts and shimmers, then refocuses. Or maybe it's just you.

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