Does a story inhabit a genre, or does genre inhabit a story? While such a question might at first seem to confuse questions of market with questions of aesthetics—after all, for decades some writers having been submitting their work to identifiable genre magazines, anthologies, and publishing lists, while others have been using similar materials in stories published outside of these venues—it nevertheless underlies a fascinating dialogue that has emerged in the last decade or two in various essays, reviews, anthologies, conference papers, blogs, interviews, and panel discussions, mostly in the arena of fantastic literature and its familiar genres of fantasy, horror, and science fiction. It’s also one of the crucial questions surrounding the recent evolution of these genres and their materials, and it has given rise to a panoply of new terms: Slipstream. Interstitial. Transrealism. New Weird. Nonrealist fiction. New Wave Fabulist. Postmodern fantasy. Postgenre fiction. Cross-genre. Span fiction. Artists without Borders. New Humanist. Fantastika. Liminal fantasy. Transcendental Horror, anyone? OK, we made that last one up, as a way of trying to approach the fiction of Peter Straub (who adds to the glossary himself with the subtitle of his new anthology Poe’s Children: The New Horror), in an essay that quickly led us into the territory we explore here (Wolfe and Beamer). While we could easily devote the rest of this essay simply cataloguing these various definitions, that would be validating a practice our purpose is to avoid: namely, the growing tendency to replace meaningful critical discourse with ingenious tagging. Some of these labels, like “span fiction” (suggested by Peter Brigg in a 2002 book on intersections of mainstream and science fiction) frankly don’t seem to have gone anywhere. Others, like “slipstream,” have altered their meaning through time and usage (John Clute’s entry on it in his and Peter Nicholls’s 1993 Encyclopedia of Science Fiction related it to a kind of “commercial piggybacking” on the part of non-genre writers using SF tropes—quite different from contemporary usage, but we’ll get back to this). Still others are accidents; “New Wave Fabulist” was concocted by Bradford Morrow merely as a label for a special issue of the journal Conjunctions edited by Peter Straub in 2002, and has since taken on a life of its own, often misattributed to Straub (for example the 2006 anthology Parashpheres, edited by Rusty Morrison and Ken Keegan, is subtitled “Fabulist and New Wave Fabulist Stories”). And yet others, such as “interstitial,” come complete with organizations, conferences, and anthologies.

Suffice to say that a bewildering array of terms has been suggested to describe recent fiction outside the traditional categories of the fantastic, and that some of these terms are being promoted and treated as actual literary movements. We’ve come a long way since Michael Swanwick, writing in Asimov’s in 1986, could note, “The generation I want to talk about hasn’t been named yet” (Swanwick 314). By now it’s been named with a vengeance. Let’s take...
slipstream as an example, since many of the stories that we're discussing in this essay have been called slipstream. The original term, meaning a region of low pressure and forward suction in the wake of a fast-moving vehicle, provides an obvious source for the “piggybacking” that Clute referred to back in 1993. Jeff Prucher, in his Brave New Words: The Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction, traces the first use of “slipstream” as a back-formation to a Bruce Sterling piece in SF Eye in 1989, where he proposes as shorthand for what he describes as “novels of Postmodern sensibility” (Prucher 189). But the word is also a parody of “mainstream,” according to Bruce Sterling in that same essay (in a column called Catscan). It’s difficult to trace when “mainstream” became a kind of derogatory code term among genre writers, but its first use in critical discourse about science fiction is likely an essay by Rosalie Moore, “Science Fiction and the Main Stream,” which appeared in Reginald Bretnor’s early critical anthology Modern Science Fiction: Its Meaning and Its Future, in 1953. To everyone else, it’s just general fiction—anything shelved in the Fiction & Literature section at your local chain bookstore.

By 2003, in a column in Asimov’s, James Patrick Kelly could describe slipstream as “a type of writing that crosses genre boundaries in and out of science fiction” (Kelly 343), suggesting that it’s a conscious strategy on the part of a number of authors and identifying three in particular—Kelly Link, Karen Joy Fowler, and Carol Emshwiller—as the “muses” of the movement (351). And by 2006, it had all coalesced to the point where Kelly, with his collaborator John Kessel, could edit a slipstream anthology, Feeling Very Strange, only now they defined it as an effect rather than a genre, characterized by a violation of the tenets of realism, an abjuration of specific genre identity, “playful postmodernism,” and above all the quality of (another term from Sterling) “feeling very strange” (Kelly and Kessel, xii-xiii). In Kelly’s terms, slipstream is “a literary effect—in the same way that horror or comedy are literary effects achieved by many different kinds of dissimilar stories. What is that effect? We borrowed the term cognitive dissonance from the psychologists. When we are presented with two contradictory cognitions—impressions, feelings, beliefs—we experience cognitive dissonance, a kind of psychic discomfort that we normally try to ease by discounting one of the cognitions as false or illusory and promoting the other to reality… We think that what slipstream stories do is to embrace cognitive dissonance” (Adams interview).

Kessel added, “Many people feel that the world doesn’t make sense according to the structures that held during the 20th century.” By way of example, he described a story by Mary Rickert, “You Have Never Been Here,” as follows: “It is both clearly written and profoundly disorienting. It does not resolve itself easily into any simple category. At times it seems like a dream. At times it seems like a dystopian fantasy. At times it seems to be a rational story told from the point of view of a madman. Just when you think you’ve got it figured out, it takes a left turn. Yet it does not feel arbitrary. This story makes me feel very strange” (Adams interview). Kelly and Kessel’s much-discussed anthology included not only the slipstream “muses” Link, Emshwiller, and Fowler, but also newer writers like Rickert and Benjamin Rosenbaum, writers with “mainstream” credentials like Michael Chabon and Jonathan Lethem, and comparative old-timers like Sterling and Howard Waldrop (not to mention Emshwiller herself, who had been doing something like this since the 1950s). Specific reference to any privileged association with science fiction in particular was omitted from this new definition. Slipstream was no longer viewed as an offshoot of genre SF, but as a mode of writing that might freely allude to all the genres of the fantastic, sometimes even within the
The following year, Christopher Priest, in an essay on Ice by Anna Kavan (reprinted in Vector 253, pages 10-11), revisited the issue of how slipstream had moved beyond science fiction, identifying it as a movement which arose during the late '80s in the US, “originally an attempt to identify a certain kind of ambitious science fiction, which lay outside the familiar pulp-magazine tropes of space travel, alien invasions, time travel, and so on... [O]ther writers, who were outside the SF genre, but whose work could conceivably fit into the wider definition allowed by slipstream, were summoned in support. So Angela Carter, Paul Auster, Haruki Murakami, Jorge Luis Borges and William S. Burroughs were some of the writers invoked in this case... The best way to understand slipstream is to think of it as a state of mind, or a particular approach, one that is outside of all categorization. It is in essence indefinable, but slipstream induces a sense of ‘otherness’ in the audience, like a glimpse into a distorting mirror, perhaps, or a view of familiar sights and objects from an unfamiliar perspective” (10).

Where science fiction tends to resolve toward explanations, however unlikely, slipstream, according to Priest, “shifts science (and its effects) into the realm of the unconscious mind, into metaphor, into emotion, into symbols” (11).

And what of interstitial and New Wave Fabulist and all of the others? Unsurprisingly, these various movements also claim many of the same authors identified as slipstream, and claim many of the same characteristics. Several “slipstream” writers show up in that Straub-edited “New Wave Fabulist” issue of Conjunctions, or in Jeff and Ann VanderMeer’s The New Weird anthology in 2008, and a number of younger writers in this tradition in Interfictions (2007), from the Interstitial Arts Foundation edited by Delia Sherman and Theodora Goss. The Interstitial Arts Foundation website, by the way, defines interstitial art as “art made in the interstices between genres and categories. It is art that flourishes in the borderlands between different disciplines, mediums, and cultures. It is art that crosses borders, made by artists who refuse to be constrained by category labels.” As stirring as this anthem-like definition may sound, it’s a definition based not on any set of identifiable characteristics, but rather on exclusion: just like some definitions for slipstream, interstitial is precisely not something that we can point to, though we can readily point to what it isn’t. In traditional categorical terms, it’s not something but rather something else. It’s a definition that harks back to one of the conditions of slipstream stories mentioned by Kelly and Kessel: “they are not science fiction stories, traditional fantasies, dreams, historical fantasies, or alternate histories” (Feeling Very Strange, xii).

We’re not trying to pick a fight about the usefulness or necessity of snazzy new terms to describe snazzy new fiction; these all can serve as affinity groups, literary movements, marketing niches, or convenient ways to group and understand stories, and they may well be helpful for readers seeking to find stories of a certain type. We do, however, want to explore for a moment the odd fact that these definitions tend to focus far more on what these stories are not rather than on what they are. And it’s not very useful to have a genre that is essentially indefinable, or definable only in terms of what it is not. Slipstream is not “about” any particular material content, even in the broad conventional sense of science fiction being about the possible and fantasy about the impossible. In a purely rhetorical sense, this is a very strange way to go about defining a new movement: the very act of claiming that a story is not genre science fiction or fantasy or horror, or that an artist refuses to be constrained by category labels, seems more likely to validate
Why approach these stories in terms of such received categories at all? When Shirley Jackson published her story collection The Lottery in 1949, New York Times reviewer Donald Barr merely emphasized her “very effective talent as an ironist” and mentioned her use of the macabre, but paid no attention at all to the stories’ genre content or lack thereof (Barr). More important, describing works of fiction in categorical terms seems to violate the rhetorical and aesthetic imperatives by which fiction is created in the first place; many of the authors mentioned have indicated in interviews and essays that their methods involve following the internal logic of the story at hand—which may or may not involve the deployment of genre materials—rather than setting out to write stories which are unclassifiable in traditional terms. “I certainly had no intention of resisting categories when I started writing,” Kelly Link told an interviewer. “I submitted my work to genre magazines. Being published in magazines like Fence and Conjunctions came as a surprise to me, and I’m not being disingenuous when I say that” (Aulenback). Nor are we trying to be disingenuous by titling this piece “21st Century Stories” rather than adopting any of the labels we’ve discussed, or suggesting any new ones. Our title is, if anything, an anti-label. We refer back to Kessel’s comment that “the world doesn’t make sense according to the structures that held during the 20th century,” and note that, while critics and writers were commenting on this trend as early as the 1980s, there has been a virtual blossoming of these stories in the new century; nearly all the stories we discuss here (and certainly all of the story collections) were published after 2000.

We’d like to propose that many stories claimed by slipstream, interstitial, and other movements can be explored in terms of specific narrative and rhetorical strategies, that these stories in fact have identifiable features. Our main examples—M. Rickert, Elizabeth Hand, Theodora Goss, Kelly Link, and Jeffrey Ford—use genre materials without limiting themselves to genre forms or structures, and draw freely on both modernist and postmodernist literary techniques. The choice of these writers is somewhat arbitrary, and we could include a variety of others (Andy Duncan, Ted Chiang, Ellen Klages, Michael Swanwick, Joe Hill, and Peter Straub readily come to mind), but these writers offer a variety of approaches and methods that seem to provide a useful entrée into an exploration of this new fiction. Thematically, their stories are often charged with grief, loss, nostalgia, and irreconcilable change, but often attain a feeling of wonder, insight, and hope—even transcendence. Often there are themes of tragic romance, though no one would reasonably associate these fictions with romance as a genre, and often there are strategies that recall young adult or even children’s fiction. Writers like Ford, Rickert, Goss, Link, and Hand—all early-to-mid career writers—are developing a new, 21st century paradigm, a fiction beyond postmodernism, a fiction for the unstoryable, or as yet unstoried, new century. Choosing broadly from the narrative toolbox, such tales are often metafictional, with self-aware and emotionally powerful storyteller voices. Unlike the often coolly ironic surfaces of much postmodern fiction, they are often funny or heartbreaking, though they are comfortable with mystery and irresolution—which is not to say that there is no resolution of plot or story; unlike some postmodern or contemporary mainstream fiction, these narratives have plots and characters, not just style and voice.

Most important, despite their lack of clear genre markers and their unconventional approach to even traditional narrative elements as plot, character, and setting, these tales “do not feel arbitrary” (as Kessel said of Rickert’s story), nor particularly performative. At their
For the remainder of this essay, we will suggest a number of recurrent techniques and characteristics that help this fiction achieve such coherence, and that seem to provide some commonalities between the work of writers who, on the surface at least, differ widely in their influences, style, and narrative modes and who, as far as we know, don’t even identify themselves as being part of the same group. The characteristics we’re suggesting are hardly exclusive to these writers, and the list of techniques is neither exhaustive nor prescriptive. Many of the features we’re describing are not even particularly innovative—some are familiar from the long history of the modernist short story; some are drawn from techniques specific to science fiction, fantasy, or horror; some can be found in a range of postmodernist or experimental fiction.

Our argument is not that any particular technique can serve as a litmus test for this sort of 21st century fiction, but rather that the manner in which these techniques are combined and recombined can yield insights about the nature of such fiction.

**Slippage**

These stories freely draw on the furniture of horror, fantasy, or science fiction, as well as the conventions of domestic realism, memoir, surrealism, even nonfiction. Stories may offer what appear to be clear genre markers, but then shift among genres in midstream—almost giving a literal meaning to “slipstream.” For example, M. Rickert’s “Map of Dreams” (in her collection Map of Dreams) begins like a horror story, when the protagonist Annie Merchant’s six-year-old daughter is gunned down by a crazed sniper on a New York streetcorner. Another of the sniper’s victims, we soon learn, is a physicist involved in quantum theory, and for a while the story seems to be turning into science fiction as Annie grows obsessed with the notion that she might find her daughter in an alternate timestream. She convinces herself that the physicist’s widower has found the secret of time travel, and tracks him down to a remote part of Australia. Now the science fiction gives way to a mythical fantasy involving aboriginal dreamtime, as Annie finds herself aided in her quest by figures from different periods of Australian history; she eventually returns to New York just before the shooting, facing a classic grandfather paradox while returning the tale to its original horrific situation. In a sense, each successive genre iteration subsumes those which had gone before, resulting in a tale that is both profoundly unsettling in its mode yet remarkably coherent in its final effect.

Another example, Jeffrey Ford’s “A Night in the Tropics” (in The Empire of Ice Cream) begins with a nostalgic childhood recollection of a painting in a neighborhood bar, in which a character that very much resembles Ford himself—a writer and community college teacher—returns to visit as an adult. But as the bartender relates a lengthy story about a cursed chess set, the tale-within-a-tale becomes a classic horror story, only to unite the two modes into a single tale at the end. Kelly Link’s “Pretty Monsters” (in Pretty Monsters) begins disarmingly as a kind of teen romance—a girl named Clementine Cleary, who has had a crush on the handsome Cabell Meadows since first grade, determines to win him over once and for all after he saves her from drowning. As the tale unfolds, we realize that the story is actually contained in a book being read by a girl named Lee, who is involved in a far more realistic teen story involving abducting a foreign student at the high school (along with her younger sister) for a harrowing initiation “ordeal.” Each of these stories takes an unexpected turn toward supernatural horror, however, involving werewolves, and neither offers a clear
resolution. Furthermore, both are eventually subsumed into a third
tale involving two sisters reading a book together in a bedroom in an
isolated country house—the story they’re reading is apparently
Lee’s—and this tale too resolves into a werewolf tale.

Horror, in fact, is the genre that provides the most significant
patterns of imagery in these tales, though the materials of horror
are often subverted, and few readers would identify these three
tales as genre horror stories. In her collection Magic for Beginners,
Link writes of haunted houses (“Stone Animals”), zombies ("The
Hortlak," “Some Zombie Contingency Plans”), ghosts, witches, and
the devil (“The Great Divorce,” “Catskin,” “The Lull”), but often with
a distinctly ironic or comic edge—her zombies are more like
nebbishes than monsters—while Ford’s work includes ghosts ("The
Trentino Kid" in Empire), serial killers (The Shadow Year), monsters
("The Beautiful Gelreesh" in Empire), and ancient curses (“A Night
in the Tropics”), but often filters these through a haze of memory
and nostalgia.

Theodora Goss’s “Miss Emily Gray” and “Conrad” (both in In the
Forest of Forgetting) might well qualify as horror stories, at least of
the Shirley Jackson variety. In the former, Miss Gray is a seductive
governess who takes over an entire family, apparently engineering
the death of the father and son and chillingly explaining to the
surviving daughter, “I was sent to make come true your heart’s
desire” (In the Forest, 106). In the latter, she’s a nurse in collusion
with an aunt whom the title character Conrad is convinced is trying
to poison him. Rickert also achieves a Shirley Jackson-like flavor in
her story “Bread and Bombs” (in Map of Dreams) which begins in a
sunny town where the fourth-graders have just started summer
vacation, but quickly turns ominous as we realize that this is an
almost science-fictional post-terrorist world of continuous war in
which the refugee neighbors become targets of a horrendous act.
Her other tales feature child abuse (“The Harrowing”), murderers
("Many Voices"), child murder (“Map of Dreams,” “The Chambered
Fruit”) and ghosts (“More Beautiful than You”). Elizabeth Hand’s
“Cleopatra Brimstone” (in Saffron and Brimstone) concerns a rape
victim and entomologist who becomes a vengeful denizen of
London’s punk nightclub scene, and has almost already become a
classic modern horror tale, though its supernatural elements are
hardly the source of the tale’s governing emotion, which derives
from the very real-world sexual assault that is its motivating event.
Hand’s “Calympso in Berlin” (also in Saffron) involves a predatory
artist of similar supernatural abilities, but again the horror is far from
an end in itself. In fact, each of these stories, in its own way, slips
free of the expectations associated with the genre machinery which
they so freely appropriate, whether from science fiction, fantasy,
horror, or the domestic realism associated with what is called
“mainstream”.

Domesticity

The kings and rings and spells and bells of traditional genre fantasy
are comparatively rare in these tales, though not entirely unknown.
We’ve already seen how Rickert’s “Map of Dreams” begins in
contemporary New York or “Bread and Bombs” in a suburban
community during school vacation, Ford’s “A Night in the Tropics” in
a neighborhood bar, Link’s “Lull” with an unhappy married couple.
Link, in fact, is one of the authors who most consistently and most
effectively makes use of the furniture of domestic realism. “Stone
Animals” (in Magic for Beginners) with its family recently moved into
a suburban house–disaffected wife, unhappy children, and
preoccupied commuter husband– might well be borrowing a page
from John Cheever’s suburban angst, until various household
items—the TV, the coffeemaker, even a toothbrush—start to act
haunted, and a growing population of rabbits begins keeping vigil in
the front yard. "Magic for Beginners" begins with the familiar
situation of a group of teenage friends sharing an obsession with a
TV show called The Library—except that this show appears
according to no fixed schedule and on no particular station, with a
different cast of actors every time. The story focuses on a boy
named Jeremy Mars, whose goofy father writes horror stories about
giant spiders and badly upholsters sofas, and whose relationship
with Jeremy's mother is falling apart. As Jeremy and his mother go
on a road trip, the story develops into a reality-testing tale involving
a phone booth in Las Vegas which Jeremy has been calling in order
to talk to what might be a character from The Library. In "The Great
Divorce" (in Magic) a husband who has married a dead wife (and
has two dead children with her) tries to work out the problems in his
marriage by taking the family to Disneyland. The characters and
events may be fantastical, but the settings and anxieties are those
of domestic realism. Even one of Link's most famous zombie tales,
"The Hortlak" (Magic) is set largely in an all-night convenience
store, and is about clerks and customers as much as zombies.

Many of Ford's stories (The Shadow Year, "The Honeyed Knot,"
"The Trentino Kid") also feature realistic settings drawn from his
childhood on Long Island or his teaching career in New Jersey, and
even as purely as fantastical a tale as "The Annals of Eelik-Ok" (in
The Empire of Ice Cream, and depicting in high heroic terms the
vastly accelerated life cycle of tiny fairies who take up residence in
sand castles built on the beach by children) is framed as a
manuscript discovered inside a conch shell by a five-year-old girl
roaming a beach in New Jersey in 1999. Hand may have introduced
ancient goddesses and mythological figures into her work, but a key
trademark of her fiction is her convincing rendering of similarly
autobiographical settings—Yonkers, New York ("Illyria"), coastal
Maine ("The Least Trumps," Generation Loss, "Winter's Wife"), or
the District of Columbia ("Wonderwall," Waking the Moon).

In virtually all these cases, however, the fantastic or supernatural
elements emerge less as an intrusion into this domesticity (as in
conventional horror fiction) than as a hidden dimension of it,
sometimes represented in Hand's stories through images of walls:
a wall in a Manhattan loft which turns into an immense slab of rock in
1999's Black Light; a wall in a hidden London lane in 2004's Mortal
Love which reveals to the poet Swinburne a seductive green world
beyond; a wall in a hidden attic room in the novella "Illyria" which
hides a magical miniature theatre; a Minoan fresco in "The Saffron
Gatherers" (in Saffron and Brimstone) which serves as another
window into a lost world; an apartment wall in 2004's "Wonderwall"
(Saffron) on which a quotation from Rimbaud, painted years earlier,
bleeds through each successive layer of paint. The protagonist of
the latter story obsesses over how to "tear through the wall that
separated me from that other world, the real world, the one I
glimpsed in books and music, the world I wanted to claim for
myself" (Saffron, 175). As in magic realism, the marvelous is
presented not in opposition to domestic realism, but as a subtext of
it.

Contingency of worlds

Not only are the narrative and genre markers slippery, the fictive
worlds themselves are inherently unstable in many of these tales—
that is, in a formally logical sense, they are neither purely possible
nor purely impossible, and may shift among levels of possible
reality. Samuel R. Delany's famous essay "About 5,750 Words"
distinguished between what he called levels of "subjunctivity" in
various modes of fiction, associating "could have happened" with
naturalistic fiction, "could not have happened" with fantasy, and
“have not happened” with science fiction (Delany 31-32). It’s not uncommon for the stories we are discussing to shift freely among these modes, sometimes with no “base” level of narrative at all, or only what’s implied by the storyteller’s own voice (which is not necessarily trustworthy).

Jeffrey Ford’s “Under the Bottom of the Lake” (2007) begins with a writer describing his efforts to discover his story, which he imagines is contained in “a bubble of rose-colored grass” in a grotto beneath the bottom of a lake. As baroque as this particular image may be, the initial situation of a writer seeking a tale is familiar and realistic (even bordering on cliché). Soon the author realizes he must create a character to release the story, and he invents a teenage girl named Emily, on the way to the cemetery to visit her recently deceased grandmother’s grave, accompanied by her boyfriend Vincent. Though we’re told these characters are invented, their story is still a fairly mundane one, but it shifts into a slightly more fantastical, alternate-history mode as they come upon the mausoleum of a wealthy local resident named Cake who, we are told, made his fortune from inventing a heroin-like painkiller used on the battlefield in a war much like World War II—and who had fallen in love with Emily’s grandmother, fascinated by her talent for origami. The story shifts again into a more aggressively fantastical mode as we’re offered a vision of Vincent’s father as a young man, finding a many-colored bird in a cage in the woods and shooting it with an arrow, after which its feathers burst into flame; and a story of an ancient wizard who taught Cake the secrets of negating pain in exchange for his soul—which he then placed into a many-colored bird. All these levels of fantasy and reality are eventually united in the image of the tale trapped in the rose-colored glass with which the story began, and which Emily and Vincent discover when they follow a hidden tunnel beneath Cake’s tomb. As they emerge from this dreamlike fantasy back to the surface, they find that Cake’s tomb has cracked open, that his skeleton contains a feather where the heart should be, and, in the hand, folded paper figures of the story’s main images. In one reading of this conclusion, the feather serves as a fairly conventional bit of evidence to validate the fantastic tale we’ve just heard; in another, it’s an image of the writer-narrator (who has by now backed out of the tale altogether) finally discovering his tale. The story is at once a fantasy of magical birds and wizards, and an account of the process of storymaking.

In Kelly Link’s “Lull” (Magic), unhappy middle-aged parents call a phone number offering a storytelling service and request a story about the Devil and a cheerleader. In the story they are told, time runs backwards. The cheerleader is waiting for the arrival of her parents, whom she’s never met, and recalling her kids, long since returned to the womb. The Devil asks the cheerleader for a story, and she tells one about a couple with the same names as a man and his estranged wife in the frame story. The woman, Susan, clones multiple copies of herself, and talks about the impending arrival of aliens. She asks her husband, Ed, to tell her a story, and he in turn makes up a short tale about a couple and a time machine. By the time we get back to the frame story, the internal stories have wrought irrevocable damage to Ed and Susan’s relationship (or perhaps just revealed the damage already there), and time has stopped. The story shifts so freely among its narrative levels that the reader is never quite certain as to which is the “base” narrative, or if there is one at all.

Another Link story, “The Faery Handbag” (Magic) deals with the tentative beginnings of romance among a group of contemporary urban young people, but soon focuses on the narrator and her grandmother Zofia, who escaped from an obscure eastern European country with a magic handbag made of dogskin, which
once sheltered Zofia’s entire village from a pogrom-like raid. After
the narrator tells her boyfriend Jake—who’s obsessed with Houdini-
like escapes—about the handbag, he disappears, and then the
handbag itself disappears when Zofia falls ill and dies. The narrator
is left searching for the lost handbag and her lost love, uncertain as
to which world is really hers.

Shifts in point of view, setting, or
chronology.

These stories often achieve a disorienting effect by suddenly
shifting from one character’s point of view to another’s, or by
startling breaks in setting or chronology. Kelly Link’s “Stone
Animals” moves freely from the commuter husband’s viewpoint, to
that of the disaffected wife, the real estate agent, and the individual
children. Theodora Goss’s “The Rapid Advance of Sorrow” (In the
Forest), a dark existential fable of entropy, alternates a legend of a
fabulous Siberian city named Sorrow with a convincingly detailed
account of a strange anomie that overcomes students in
contemporary Budapest, and perhaps around the world, while her
“Singing of Mount Abora” alternates the legend of a famed
dulcimer-maker’s niece who marries the Cloud Dragon with a tale of
the romantic entanglements of a contemporary graduate student in
Boston trying to complete her thesis on Samuel Taylor Coleridge,
whose poem “Kubla Khan” provides the source mythology of the
legend. Elizabeth Hand’s novel Generation Loss begins with a
grimly naturalistic account of its narrator Cass’s failed photography
career in New York and her descent into drug abuse and
promiscuity, then abruptly shifts to Maine more than twenty years
later, signaling a shift in narrative mode from realism to mystery
thriller. Hand’s novella “Illyria” similarly vaults the narrative decades
forward in its last few pages, lending a distinctly elegiac tone to the
romance at its center and shifting the fantasy element away from
center stage (quite literally, since the main fantasy element is a
magical toy theatre).

Jeffrey Ford, too, frequently makes effective use of memory as a
narrative device, along with point-of-view shifts; “The Annals of
Eelin-Ok” (Empire) begins with the narrator’s memory of something
he was told as a child, then shifts to the tale of the five-year-old girl
finding the conch shell on the beach, then finally arrives at the
central narrative of the sand-fairies. “The Beautiful Gelreesh”
(Empire) begins as a kind of medieval legend about a half-human,
half-canine monster who uses his talent for empathy and pity to lure
his victims to death, after which he devours their bodies, but the tale
only comes into focus when the point of view shifts forward
centuries to that of a graduate student trying to uncover the
legendary gelreesh’s remains, in a device similar to that of Goss’s
“Singing of Mount Abora.” And several Ford stories—“Jupiter’s
Skull,” “The Weight of Words,” “The Empire of Ice Cream,” “The
Shadow Year”—are told from the point of view of a narrator
remembering events decades past, as though trying to subsume
the eruption of the fantastic into the stuff of memory or legend.

Denial of resolution

Not only do many of the stories we’re describing resist conventional
modes of closure; they also resist what we might think of as genre
resolution—they often don’t “settle” into one genre or another.
Despite the presence of multiple and sometimes conflicting genre
markers, the stories are seldom controlled by such markers;
science fiction tropes do not necessarily signal a rationalistic
science fiction resolution, and fantasy or horror tropes—or even the
conventions of domestic realism—do not necessarily mean that the
story will satisfy expectations association with those genres. Kelly
Link, in a recent interview, said “I prefer reading fiction that resists easy interpretation, or which can be reread in such a way that it's a different story each time” (Aulenbeck). Similarly, her character Carly in “Some Zombie Contingency Plans,” invoking art forms that might serve as useful analogues to this fiction, says “I like concerts. Jazz. Improvisational comedy. I like stuff that isn’t the same every time you look at it” (Magic, 150). Carly’s own story can serve as an illustration: on the simplest level, it can be viewed as a tale of a girl who throws a party at her parents’ house in the suburbs (the domestic setting again) while her parents are out of the country. There she meets an ex-convict who introduces himself as Will (but is also variously called Soap, Art, and eventually Wolverine) who possibly seduces her, robs the house, and kidnaps her little brother. But such a reading would be almost catastrophically reductive of a complex tale which spins off a variety of improvisations, like jazz solos or comedy riffs, involving zombie movies, art museums, prisons, soap, icebergs, and bicycles, organized largely around Will (or Soap’s) obsession with the zombie contingency plans of the title, reflected in a couple of interpolated scenes that read like parodies of zombie films. Almost none of these improvised tales are resolved in the story’s indeterminate conclusion, but all contribute to the comic sensibility and unity of theme of the story.

We’ve noted how these authors may comfortably use materials from multiple genres, but to classify these stories as horror or fantasy or science fiction would be to radically oversimplify their effect, or to deliberately misread them—either by dismissing some of the contradictory narrative markers, or by imposing genre markers from outside the story. To this extent we’re in agreement with the advocates of slipstream or interstitiality; these tales employ genres without necessarily inhabiting them. In the penultimate episode of Goss’s “The Rose in Twelve Petals,” after the sleeping beauty princess has been asleep for a century the prince finally appears, driving a bulldozer. “What did you expect?” Goss writes. “Things change in a hundred years” (Forest, 26). The Prince, it seems, is a working class sod living in the Socialist Union of Britannia, from which royal titles have long been abolished. Is this an invitation to recast the entire story in near-future science fictional terms? Of course not; it’s merely another one of the multiple narrative modes Goss employs, including fairytale, alternate history, and genre fantasy, to explore this otherwise overfamiliar tale. By the same token, the embedded narratives with clones, aliens, and time travel in Link’s “Lull” are not enough to make a case for reading the entire story as science fiction, any more than the zombies of “The Hortlak” or the summer-camp monster of “Monster” transform these tales into genre horror. We can say the same for Rickert’s “Journey into the Kingdom” with its embedded ghost story, or Ford’s “Night in the Tropics” with its embedded horror story.

**Story as agency**

While tales-within-tales date back centuries if not millennia, the specific technique we are referring to here involves embedded or “braided” tales which often serve a fractal or dialogic role — they comment on, resonate with, or reveal additional information about the surface narrative, almost functioning like characters in the wider tale. We’ve already seen how Link’s “Lull” involves a story told by a cheerleader within a story about the devil told by a phone service within the frame narrative, how her “Pretty Monsters” creates two stories in dialogue with one another before braiding them into a third tale that closes the narrative, or how Jeffrey Ford’s “Under the Bottom of the Lake” interlaces stories of a writer seeking his tale with those of teenagers visiting a cemetery, an entrepreneur inventing an addictive painkiller, and an ancient wizard. M. Rickert’s “Journey into the Kingdom” begins with a young man named Alex
reading an “artist’s statement” accompanying a series of innocuous paintings (collectively titled “Journey into the Kingdom”) on display in a coffee shop. The artist’s statement, titled “An Imitation Life,” is actually a story narrated by Agatha, a lighthouse keeper’s daughter whose father has died in a boating accident and who subsequently begins meeting ghosts, including that of her father. One of the ghosts, a sailor named Ezekiel, relates his own tale of his life as the son of a Murano glassmaker who becomes jealous of the boy’s talent, and whom the boy eventually murders in what he views is an act of self-protection. Against the wishes of her mother, Agatha falls in love with Ezekiel, eventually becoming a ghost herself and gaining the ability to suck breath from the living with a kiss. Her mother becomes her first victim, after which Agatha flees to a distant city, takes up painting, and gets the job in the coffee shop, thus returning the narrative to its apparent surface level. But in fact there is yet another narrative enveloping all these—the story of Alex himself, the young man who reads all this and becomes morbidly infatuated with Agatha, despite her insistence that the “artist’s statement” is merely a story. Alex’s story involves the recent loss of his wife Tessie to cancer, after which “he felt in danger of floating away or disappearing” (312), as he tells Agatha when he finally persuades her to accompany him on a kind of date. What appears to be turning into a romantic tale shifts yet again when Alex, having invited Agatha for dinner, ties her up, watches a bit of TV with her, and finally drives her to a pier and throws her in the water. In the story’s conclusion, Agatha returns dripping wet, like a figure from an EC horror comic, admits that he was “right about everything” (319), and finally offers the breath-stealing kiss which will end his suffering. Each of the major tales embedded in the story—Alex’s, Agatha’s, and Ezekiel’s—echoes and illuminates the themes and events of the others.

In one of the most accomplished examples of the story-as-dialogue technique, “Cold Fires,” Rickert begins by describing a spectacularly cold winter in the locutions of a tall tale: “It was so cold birds fell from the sky like tossed rocks, frozen except for their tiny eyes, which focused on the sun as if trying to understand its betrayal” (Map, 116). A man and woman isolated in a remote house decide to tell each other stories, which at first appear to be wildly unrelated. The woman tells of her great-great grandmother, whose pirate husband brings home a strange blonde girl who is thoroughly incompetent as a maid but who seems to have a magical affinity for strawberries. While the husband is away on a long pirating expedition, the townspeople make plans to try the girl as a witch, but then the husband returns with a shipload of irresistible strawberries and soon builds a fortune selling them, until the strawberry girl—who may be the maternal ancestor of the woman telling the story, since both the girl and the pirate’s wife become pregnant—suddenly disappears. The man in turn describes a time years earlier when he took a job curating a small art museum whose founder, Emile Castor, had obsessively painted hundreds of inept portraits of a particular woman. Trying to escape the depression of being surrounded by so much bad art, the curator finds himself in a bed and breakfast which features a brilliantly nuanced painting of the same woman, which he learns was also painted by Castor. The bed and breakfast owner and his wife relate the story of Castor and the woman he loved, and of his efforts to create an icon for her in a local church, which turns out to be another great work of art. Each of the two tales ends in a kind of moral: the woman saying, “if ever you should wake and find me gone, it is not an expression of lack of affection for you, but rather, her witchy blood that is to be blamed” (Map, 119), and the man, at the end of his tale, saying, “when you find me sad and ask what’s on my mind, or when I am quiet and cannot explain to you the reason, there it is. If I had never seen the paintings, maybe I would
be a happy man” (Map, 128). The counterpoint of these two disparate tales of abandonment and devotion tell us all we need to know about the two unnamed narrators, and creates their story as well, though that story is never explicitly developed beyond those two brief morals and a brief coda explaining how the two survived the remainder of the winter in their ice-covered cottage.

The storyteller’s voice

As should be apparent from the frequency with which characters in these stories tell each other tales, the storyteller’s voice is often a paramount feature, both in the surface level and in embedded narratives. The voice calls attention to itself—and thus to the author’s assertion of control—in a number of ways, including direct addresses to the reader and allusions to earlier storytelling traditions such as myths and fairy tales. Goss’s “The Rose in Twelve Petals” tells the Sleeping Beauty story from twelve viewpoints (including those of the spinning wheel and the tower). In the space of a few pages, Goss moves from fairy tale redaction to whimsical historical fiction to poetic meditation and finally a kind of offhand SF, somehow without losing consistency of tone or theme. Her story “In the Forest of Forgetting” similarly uses a fairy-tale tone and setting: a cancer patient is exploring a forest, meeting a witch, knight, princess, etc., and questioning each about her own name. The names she’s given are allegories of her roles in life: Patient, Daughter, Wife, Mother, casting her as a figure in various kinds of stories.

We’ve already noted how the problem of a storyteller discovering his tale is central to Jeffrey Ford’s “Under the Bottom of the Lake.” Rickert, in her collection Map of Dreams, takes this a step further by presenting the bereaved mother of her lead story “Map of Dreams,” Annie Merchant, as the author of the remaining tales in the collection. Kelly Link, for her part, sometimes addresses the reader in the ingratiating tones of a gossipy teenager. “The Wrong Grave” concerns a boy who, in a fit of romance, places a sheaf of his poems into the coffin of his dead girlfriend, then later has second thoughts and digs up the grave to retrieve them. When he finds a strange girl in the grave, the narrator comments: “You might think at certain points in this story that I’m being hard on Miles, that I’m not sympathetic to his situation. This isn’t true. I’m as fond of Miles as I am of anyone else. I don’t think he’s any stupider or any bit less special or remarkable than—for example—you. Anyone might accidentally dig up the wrong grave. It’s a mistake anyone could make” (Pretty Monsters, 7).

Allusions to specific storytelling modes of myth or legend are also common in such fiction. Ford has often visited mythological themes. “Boatman’s Holiday” (Empire) reconsiders the myth of Charon, while “The Cosmology of the Wider World” concerns Belius the minotaur, born to a human family and seemingly fated to a life of exile and alienation until he’s somehow translated into the “wider world” of sentient animals, which he seeks to understand by writing a vast cosmological treatise. “Creation” (in The Fantasy Writer’s Assistant) revisits the legend of the Golem, “The Green Word” invokes the medieval legend of the green man, and “The Beautiful Gelreesh” and “The Annals of Eelin-Ok” invent their own legends (the latter three stories in Empire). Rickert offers variations on the myths of Leda and the swan (“Leda”) and Persephone (“The Chambered Fruit,” “Map of Dreams”), and even plays with the Nativity story in “Peace in Suburbia” (all in Map). Hand offers a whole series of myth redactions in her remarkable story suite “The Lost Domain” (Saffron) which includes four variations on themes involving muses and nymphs: “Kronia”, “Calypso in Berlin”, “Echo”, and “The Saffron Gatherers,” while her earlier fiction includes
stories that feature avatars of Circe, Dionysus and Ariadne (notably in her most underappreciated novel, Black Light), Euripides’ Bacchae (in the story “The Bacchae”) or Pan (“The Boy in the Tree”; both stories are in Last Summer at Mars Hill). Her most famous novel, Waking the Moon, brings the ancient pre-Minoan cult of the goddess into a college campus in contemporary Washington D.C.

Themes of art and artifice

In addition to all the devices we’ve mentioned which remind us in various ways that the story is a told or made thing, many of these tales remind us of their artifice through the recurring use of art and artists as themes and subjects. Rickert’s characters include painters (“The Chambered Fruit,” “Journey into the Kingdom,” “Cold Fires”), sculptors (“The Girl Who Ate Butterflies”), glassmakers (“Journey into the Kingdom” again), and singers (“Moorina of the Seals”); Goss’s include children’s book writers (“In the Forest of Forgetting,” “Pip and the Fairies”), painters (“Letters from Budapest”), musicians (“The Wings of Meister Wilhelm”), ballerinas (“Death Comes for Evrina”). Hand’s characters include actresses and singers (“Illyria”), photographers (Generation Loss), writers (“The Saffron Gatherers,” “Pavane for a Prince of the Air”), a tattoo artist (“The Least Trumps”), painters (“Calypso in Berlin”), rock musicians and even TV kids’ performers (“Chip Crockett’s Christmas Carol”), and she’s written a perceptive essay on outsider artist Henry Darger. Ford’s include poets (“Jupiter’s Skull”), painters (“Coffins on the River”), writers (“A Night in the Tropics,” “Under the Bottom of the Lake,” “The Fantasy Writer’s Assistant”), musicians (“The Empire of Ice Cream”), a lighting designer (“Man of Light”); Link’s include writers (“Magic for Beginners,” “Most of My Friends are Two-Thirds Water”) and cellists (“Louise’s Ghost”). Interestingly, both Hand, in “The Least Trumps,” and Goss, in “Pip and the Fairies,” have written stories about characters who had as children served as models for figures in children’s books (recalling the real-life struggles of Christopher Milne) written by their mothers and who now struggle to deal with that heritage as they discover their own artistic identities, thus doubling or tripling the allusions to artifice. These are essentially stories about people trapped in stories.

The Writing Process

Some of these authors have said in interviews or essays that they are consciously playing with genre materials, while others claim not to know where a story is going as they write it. M. Rickert said in a recent Locus interview: “I know I’m not a very clever writer and I’m not an intellectual writer, but I’m an emotional writer, and that’s something I can work with. When I’m starting out to write, a lot of times I don’t know where things are going to go and I’m not clear about what the lead character’s voice has to say. I might write a sentence that has three things happening that couldn’t all be happening at the same time. Eventually I’ll have a clearer picture of what’s going on, and I’ll crop out the extra things. And then at some point, I usually grab a new sheet of paper (I write longhand) and I have the ending: I know what I’m writing towards. It doesn’t feel like ‘ideas’ — it feels true” (“M. Rickert”). For Elizabeth Hand, art is a very conscious focus. In a recent Locus interview, she said, “Art is one of the means we have of reaching transcendence, a method for achieving an ecstatic experience, and that’s what I’m most interested in writing about. An earlier version [of 2007 novel Generation Loss], when it was going to be a straight horror novel, was going to revolve around music (electronica, techno), but with music even outsider artist can get turned into commodities very quickly, so I wanted to take somebody who was a little more outside that loop. (“Elizabeth Hand,” 68).” She continues,
“Short stories are much easier for me to produce [than novels] – I tend to write them at a white heat. Often it’s ‘the lady or the tiger?’, a binary process where I have two endings in mind. One will generally be the happy, transcendent, uplifting ending, and the other the terrible, awful, ambivalent ending. I wrote ‘The Least Trumps’ in about two weeks with two endings in my head, and literally did not know which I’d use until the day before I finished it. But by the time I got to that point, one seemed more right than the other. It’s not a traditionally happy, feel-good ending so much as a potentially redemptive one: having the world open up for the central character, rather than close down.” (68)

Hand’s writing process seems to be much like Rickert’s in that the “right” ending is an emotional decision, dictated by the needs of the story rather than considerations of genre expectations or markets.

Kelly Link, discussing the state of the field in a Locus interview, offered a dual perspective from her role as editor and publisher as well as writer: “Reading for the fantasy half of the Year’s Best anthology, Gavin and I have noticed that the best collections aren’t straight fantasy, straight horror, or straight science fiction. Writers recombine or tease out elements of all of these genres to really good effect…. It’s good news — for writers like me at least — that mainstream and genre are colliding so productively.” (Kelly Link: The Uses of Boredom," 75). Like Rickert and Hand her reading protocols seem to be based on the cognitive and emotional effects of stories, rather than genre conventions:

“I have this theory that it’s possible to read mainstream fiction as if it were science fiction. Or maybe what I mean is that if you’re a science fiction fan, everything comes filtered through that lens. Certain mainstream books with no discernable fantastic content make me happy, satisfy me as a reader in the same way that genre work will. […] Even in the most traditional, heart-of-genre fantasy and science fiction, there’s something about the way the fantastic interacts with the style of the author, with the way that characters encounter the world, that pulls me right in.” (Kelly Link," 75).

This from someone who declared herself a science fiction writer in a 2002 Locus interview, saying: “I finally decided that everything I write was SF, whether or not it had science fiction in it” (Kelly Link: Making Strange Things Happen," 7) and who has repeatedly responded to interviews by simply describing her fiction as “SF.”

**Conclusions**

In the same 1989 essay in which he offered that early definition of slipstream, Bruce Sterling quoted an interview with Carter Scholz about the literary significance of genre literature: “In the 60s and 70s, Scholz opines, SF had a chance to become a worthy literature; now that chance has passed. Why? Because other writers have now learned to adapt SF’s best techniques to their own ends.” While we’ve chosen to talk about writers who publish in genre magazines and presses and often identify themselves with the genre community (the terms “slipstream,” “interstitial,” et al, came from within the genre community), but we might as easily have examined the work of contemporary “mainstream” writers borrowing genre trappings—Aimee Bender, Junot Diaz, Michael Chabon, Dan Chaon, Brian Evenson— or on the long and unexamined string of authors who predated and influenced the movement—Shirley Jackson, Donald Barthelme, Avram Davidson, Roald Dahl, Harlan Ellison—some of whom are known primarily as genre writers, some of whom are almost never mentioned in genre histories or critical studies.

Part of what we are arguing is that a term such as “mainstream” is
as archaic as the other more familiar genre labels, and as imprecise as those terms offered to label new movements with which we began. As China Miéville—an author identified with the New Weird, whose work we might easily have discussed here—said, “any act of artistic labeling is as much to do with reclamation as with categorization. To look at past writers in a new way, to reclaim writers who have been forgotten, to announce the necessary forgetting of writers who have been remembered – this is part of the process. It is as much argumentative archaeology as it is ongoing taxonomy” (“China Miéville,” 74). Miéville’s point is crucial to understanding the origins of this 21st century aesthetic. Historically, new movements in fiction have been characterized largely in terms of some version of Harold Bloom’s anxiety of influence—the need to overcome the past, to cast off old strictures, to proclaim revolution. Modernism reacts against the narrative conventions of classic storytelling, postmodernism reacts against the formalism and perceived elitism of modernism, the New Wavers and cyberpunks react against the narrative formulas of genre fiction, the post-New Wave or post-cyberpunk seek ways to reclaim those formulas, etc. The indeterminacy in these 21st century stories—in terms of slippery genre markers, contingent worlds, self-conscious narrative devices and aesthetics — may well be a no more than a post-postmodern narrative iteration of Keats’s negative capability, which he defined in his famous 1817 letter thus: “I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Keats, 277).

However, as we hope we’ve shown, the new aesthetic is based less in a rejection of earlier forms than in a celebration of them, what Jonathan Lethem calls the ecstasy of influence — a willingness to borrow tropes, language, techniques from almost anywhere—genre fiction, literary modernism, popular culture, avant-garde experimentalism, fable and folklore, as well as from alternate modes such as music, film, theatre, so-called “outsider art,” graphic novels, painting, or photography—and to incorporate them into an eclectic new mode which quite properly resists labeling and libeling. This is why we’re simply calling them 21st century stories, rather than something post-tacular and meta-tastic—although we were at times reminded of a line from rapper M.C. Lars, himself an exemplar of a recombinant movement known as nerdcore hip hop: “Did I say postmodern? That was a lie! I’ve been post-postmodern since junior high!”

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VanderMeer, Anne, and Jeff VanderMeer. The New Weird. San Francisco: Tachyon


History. 21st Century. Next Chapter. Share. Obviously, attempting to write anything definitive about 21st century Canadian history is ridiculously premature. We’re only just entering the century’s second decade, and a lot will no doubt happen in the remaining eight. But it may still be useful to review a few current events. Uber/Instagram. 15 books based on 18 votes: Stories and Scripts: an Anthology by Zack Love, Tenth of December by George Saunders, Impromptu Scribe by Alex Morritt, Knock... The best short story collections from 2000 until now. Score. A book’s total score is based on multiple factors, including the number of people who have voted for it and how highly those voters ranked the book. All Votes Add Books To This List. 1. Stories and Scripts: an Anthology by. Illustration: Tim McDonagh. Why Now? Okay, assessing a century’s literary legacy after only 18 and a half years is kind of a bizarre thing to do. Actually, constructing a canon of any kind is a little weird at the moment, when so much of how we measure cultural value is in flux. Born of the ancient battle over which stories belonged in the “canon” of the Bible, the modern literary canon took root in universities and became defined as the static product of consensus — a set of leather-bound volumes you could shoot into space to make a
It’s not that you don’t know about anal sex, childbirth, or even about a partner’s transition or a parent dying, but Nelson puts each next to the other in a manner that changes our perception of each and all. I’m always glad to have never had a baby, yet Maggie has writ birthing so deeply that I’m grateful to say I’ve missed nothing in this life, thanks to this uncanny saint of a book.

Atonement, by Ian McEwan (September 2001) | 3 votes

At once a war story, a love story, and a story about the destructive and redemptive powers of the imagination, Atonement pivots around a terrible lie told by a 13-year-old girl that will shatter her family.