

**THE IRREAL READER edited by G.S. Evans & Alice Whittenburg
Reading & Resource Guide**

Introduction

Through the many stories and essays presented in this anthology we can see into a strange, wondrous and disturbing world that is, at first glance, very different from our own but, at the same time, is also very evocative of it.

The anthology presents unreal fiction and essays about the unreal, selected from the first 40 issues of the online publication, *The Cafe Irreal*. Unrealist literature, in the tradition of Franz Kafka, presents fiction in which the reality underlying the story is being constantly undermined and the absurd becomes normal. Indeed, in which the reader is never permitted the reassurance of “normality” anymore than we experience normality in our dreams, which much of this fiction resembles.

It is a challenging form of fiction for both the reader and writer in that it directly evokes the uncertainty, ambiguity and absurdity that underlie so much of our lives. But this, it could be argued, only makes it all the more effective and relevant as an art form.

About the Author

The editors are both long-time writers of non-realist fiction, one of whom is also a translator. The authors of the stories included in this volume include Pulitzer and Pushcart Prize winners as well as winners of equivalent awards in their own countries. They are (by country):

Emilio Martinez (Bolivia); Gleyvis Coro (Cuba); Guido Eekhaut (Belgium); Kuzhali Manickavel (India); Vanessa Gebbie, Paul Blaney, Lee Williams (United Kingdom); Ana María Shua (Argentina); Jiří Kratochvíl, Ewald Murrer, Alexandra Berková, Michal Ajvaz, Tomáš Přidal, Vít Erban, Jiří Valoch (Czech Republic); B E Turner (New Zealand); Kevin Sexton (Canada); Giriya Tropp, Terry Dartnall (Australia); Norman Lock, Richard Kostelanetz, David Ray, Brian Biswas, Peter Cherches, José Chaves, Peter Grandbois, Stephanie Hammer, Greg Jenkins, Mauricio Rosales, D.E. Lucas, Garrett Rowlan, Dean Swinford, Bob Thurber, Harry White, D. Harlan Wilson, Utahna Faith, J.B. Mulligan, Charles Simic, Bruce Holland Rogers and Caitlin Horrocks (United States).

Regarding their motivation for starting and publishing *The Cafe Irreal*, the editors write in their preface to the anthology that:

“By the late 1990s, the brief flirtation that American writers had been having with non-realist genres and experimental narratives was over; the focus had returned to the staid realism, the ‘cult of experience,’ that has traditionally characterized American literature.

Not at all happy with this state of affairs, the two of us wanted to do something about it. Given all the talk at the time about the internet, that something seemed obvious: start an online literary journal dedicated to non-realist fiction.

But we were also partially based in Prague, where the literary presence of Franz Kafka loomed large for us. And so the journal wound up publishing a very specific type of non-realist fiction--one in which the reality of the story is being constantly undermined; in which the story is an allegory pointing to so many unknown meanings; and in which the absurd becomes normal and the reader is never permitted the reassurance of normality. In other words, we published Kafka or, as we have termed it, irreal fiction.

And if we haven't proven any more successful than the other online literary journals at displacing the realist orthodoxy from its dominance of American letters, then, with them, we can at least claim some credit for helping to expand the range of literature being published, read and, presumably, written.

More specifically, we lay claim (demonstrated, we believe, by this anthology) that this irreal, Kafka literature is an important literary genre in and of itself."

Things to Think About While Reading

- Contemporary works of fiction typically presents us with a set of events which have already happened and the point of the work is to make some kind of sense of these events and what we might learn from them. But though this is a characteristic of "realist" literature, there is never, in real life, such a grand, unified narrative structure.
- Mainstream literature strives, through extensive description and the use of "naturalistic" touches, to make the reader feel as though he or she is in a real time and place. The writer of the irreal has no interest in this, preferring that the reader remain detached from any immediate reality and instead inhabit an unpredictable but often emotionally-charged world reminiscent of a dream-state, albeit one mediated by their life experiences and situation.
- Our lives, experienced through our all too finite consciousnesses, can be seen as an attempt to tame the seemingly infinite universe; it is infinite in that we can never be entirely certain what will happen next, nor agree on the meaning of what happened in the past. Literature usually helps us with this by taming and interpreting a small, albeit fictional, part of the universe. Irrealist literature, however, does not do this. In it we are directly confronted with the uncertainty of the infinite, whether this is the infinity of the physical world or that of the cultural and personal complexities that we face. If this creates a sense of the absurd, then perhaps in this way irrealism is the true realism.
- Because it has very different goals, irrealism does not use the same devices as realist literature. Do not look for or expect in this anthology stories which focus, for example, on the psychological state of the characters being presented, on how much the characters in the story "grow," or how much they might resemble people that you have known in your life. Instead be prepared for a world in which, as in a dream, the entirety of the world being presented reflects the psychological state of the writer her or himself or, conversely, a world in which the writer disappears into the complexity of the world that they face.

Discussion Questions

- Stories such as “The Knights of Slipway Seven” by Lee Williams and “The Comedy of Art” by B E Turner use a lot of word play, much as *Alice in Wonderland* does. How might this make them unreal?
- In Jiří Valoch’s piece “semantical studies” we are told that a black line is both black and a line, but also that it is a circle, a square, and a memory of a memory. What might this tell us of the author’s conception of reality?
- The editors alternately describe the fiction in the anthology as being “irreal” and “Kafkan,” the latter due to the influence of the writer Franz Kafka. How might the stories by Ewald Murrer, Kevin Sexton, Harry White and Brian Biswas be said to evoke the work of Kafka?
- In the traditional “realist” short story, great emphasis is often placed on the description of the setting and on the psychological history and state of the characters. Can any of the stories in this collection be so characterized?
- “Absurd” is a word often used to describe fiction such as is found in the anthology. How might a story such as David Ray’s “Seven Pieces of Meat,” Caitlin Horrocks’ “Herzenboogen's Theory of Collective Truth”, or Jose Chavez’s “All I Misunderstood as a Man Makes Complete Sense as a Parrot” be said to manifest the absurd?
- There are many and varied settings presented in the stories in this anthology. How many of them could be described as science-fiction or fantasy in the sense that we have come to know these genres (in the tradition of, e.g., Isaac Asimov and J.R.R. Tolkien)? Conversely, do any of these stories have the “agent” of evil that characterize the other popular non-realist genre, horror?
- A quick reading of the anthology’s opening story, “The Santa Fe,” might seem to show it to be a straightforward allegory of the dying of the great age of the American frontier. But the story, written by the Australian writer Terry Dartnall, could also be interpreted to be an allegory about the protagonist’s battle against old age, in addition to which there is an improbable lament to the passing of the Beat poet Allan Ginsburg and an Arthurian reference to England. How might this story fit the editors’ assertion that an unreal story is “so many pointers to an unknown meaning?”
- In her essay “On international imagination,” coeditor Alice Whittenburg writes of the use in irrealism of the “personal” symbology of dreams as opposed to the “universal” symbology used in more traditionally symbolic literature. Which stories contained in the anthology seem to you to most evoke the personal symbology of their authors? Conversely, how might they be representative of Dean Swinford’s contention in his essay, “Defining Irrealism,” that irrealism is a form “postmodern allegory” whose plurality of symbols is indicative of the breakdown of a traditional, unified cultural symbology?
- Using the word as a generalized adjective, stories such as these are often described as “surreal.” After reading the essay “Irrealism is not a surrealism,” a summary of which is contained in the anthology, explain why the works contained in the anthology might not be considered surrealist in the “proper” and specific use of the word.

- Similarly, stories such as these are also sometimes described as being examples of “magical realism.” Many of the stories in the anthology, however, such as Girija Tropp’s “Cellular” or Stephanie Hammer’s “Mayoral Morbitas,” do not seem to have any element of the “traditional” magic that characterizes the classics of magical realism, such as Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Using this measure, which if any of the stories in the anthology might be called magical realist?
- Discussion group guides often ask fairly standardized questions about the characters, setting, and purpose of a work. The following ask the same questions but apply them to the stories in the anthology. After reading the stories concerned and then trying to answer the questions below, do you think that such questions make sense when applied to irreal literature? (1) Are the protagonist’s repeated demises in Peter Cherches’ “From Mr. Deadman” the result of his circumstances, his own failures, or something else? (2) What, specifically, does the “storm warning” in Vanessa Gebbie’s story of the same name symbolize? Or the giraffe in D. Harlan Wilson’s story? (3) Compare and contrast the relationship between the protagonist and his biological father, as opposed to his substitute father, in Jiří Kratochvíl’s “From the Pulps.” What might the significance of this be in light of the story’s conclusion? (4) Norman Lock’s “The Cruelty of Poetry” relates a conversation between the story’s protagonist and Robert Falcon Scott on his ill-fated Antarctic expedition. To what extent might the historical Scott have been motivated, like the Scott in the story, by a desire to escape, in the purity of the Antarctic’s snow and ice, “poetry” and “interpretation?” (5) What is it that the directions in Peter Grandbois’s “Sewing” instruct us to build? What might be the reasons for making such an object and where might it lead you?

Recommended Reading

Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (1914-15)

Franz Kafka, *The Castle* (1922)

Franz Kafka, *Collected Short Stories* (1993)

Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Unconsoled* (1995)

Donald Antrim, *The Hundred Brothers* (1998)

Shimon Sandbank, *After Kafka: The Influence of Kafka's Fiction* (1989)

Clayton Koelb, *The Incredulous Reader: Literature And The Function Of Disbelief*, (1984)

G.S. Evans and Alice Whittenburg, “After Kafka: Kafka criticism and scholarship as a resource in an attempt to promulgate a new literary genre,” *Journal of the Kafka Society of America*, 31/32:1+2,18-26, 2007/2008.