

WHAT IF - IF THEN: HOW FICTION FITS IN

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My first book holds up: two pheasant-like creatures live in a harmonious same-sex partnership, go on wholesome adventures, and drink a lot of tea. I wrote it for my younger sister. I was six.

I never didn't write fiction and I rarely asked myself why I write fiction. I just wrote, hardly anyone ever reading a word of it. Fiction-writing was detached from schoolwork, or later university-work, or later academic work. It was only during my PhD that I started sharing fiction I wrote, or even the fact that I wrote fiction at all. I don't know what to make of that. I always saw academic writing and fiction-writing as unrelated. Nowadays I write mainly horror and science fiction. What's academic about that?

Perhaps two pairs of words: "what if" and "if then".

One of my beta-readers is an amazing writer of realistic literary fiction. Recently, she read a sci-fi story I wrote and sent me an email saying this:

"I do not know how to read science fiction, but I really want to know. I just finished reading your story and, although embarrassed, left my comments in. As you can see, I am constantly trying to relate the unknown to what I know. This, I am sure, is not how to read science fiction."

"Trying to relate the unknown to what I know". Isn't that academic work? Using known principles and methods to probe into the unknown?

Then: "This, I am sure, is not how to read science fiction."

I protested: that's exactly how to read science fiction and it is exactly how I happen to write fiction. A known world is disrupted by the intrusion of an unknown element, maybe in the guise of a monster, alien, strange object, or unannounced visitor.

My response to my friend began somewhat like this:

"I see science fiction as a playground, where you can play with 'what if' without having to follow the laws of what is currently possible."

In this 'what if' game, I insert an unknown element into a known world. I posit: a monster visits a suburban family. I let that play out in a

story, observe what happens. Almost scientific, actually, almost like an experiment. Especially if constrained by ‘if then’.

There are rules governing world-building and there are constraints I commit to when writing a story. Perspective is one example. *If* I commit to writing from one character’s perspective, *then* I cannot describe an event from another character’s perspective. My beta-readers are sure to give me a hard time if perspective isn’t consistent or if there is a logical error in the world-building. ‘If-then’ (by which I mean the rules of characterization, world-building, perspective, you name it) is related to methodology, academically speaking, to consistency, and to logic, to delivering a coherent argument.

Somewhere between the freedom of ‘what if’ that allows us to explore something new in relation to something known, and the constraint of ‘if then’ that makes a story cohesive and a world believable, fiction and academic work are related.

I would recommend soaring on the possibilities of ‘what if’ to anyone. Writing fiction as an academic is the thorough thing to do. In my PhD thesis there are many highly theorized shout-outs to all my favorite horror-monsters, but of course always removed, always in the vein of ‘and what does the popularity of this trope at this time signify, sociologically speaking?’ But the monster didn’t come here to be subjected to sociological theory. It came here to scare the crap out of me. So I would recommend allowing the monster to do its thing: go into a dark hallway with a character and experience what that feels like. Then have their flashlight die. And then have them hear that scratching sound, coming closer and closer. Now tell the same story from the point of view of the monster: is it cold? Hungry? Really annoyed with all the monster-admin? Shifting perspectives away from the cerebral, objective and toward the visceral, experiential, subjective can grant a deeper understanding of ‘the monster’, or, you know, ‘the research subject’. I highly recommend writing fiction. No-one ever needs to read that story. (Though I, for one, sure would like to.)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Frauke Uhlenbruch has a PhD in Sociology/Biblical Studies. Her research interests revolve around applying sociological and cultural theory to ancient literature. Her PhD thesis on trouble with promised lands and utopias was published as *The Nowhere Bible*. More recently, she has worked on the project *Fan Fiction and Ancient Scribal Cultures (Transformative Works and Cultures, vol. 31, 2019)*. In 2018 she started publishing fiction under her pen-name Anna Ziegelhof. Her stories have appeared in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Shoreline of Infinity*, *The Future Fire*, and the *Footsteps in the Dark* anthology (Flametree Press).