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Here and There: At the Borders of Reality, Memory, and the Fantastic

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Panel: World Literature Today: Cross-currents

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Here and There: At the Borders of Reality, Memory, and the Fantastic

Some novels that have drawn my interest over the past several years by younger American writers don't fit into the usual frameworks; they cross any number of borders having to do with reality and fantasy, genre, and foreign cultures.

Kelly Link has won a number of science-fiction awards and was also a finalist for this year's Pulitzer Prize. In her short story "Magic for Beginners," a boy named Jeremy and his group of four friends are both characters in and fans of a TV show that airs at unpredictable times called *The Library*. In this and other stories, we have no idea how the action will unfold, and a slightly bizarre version of the world we live in is constructed through language.

In the novel *The People of Paper*, by Salvador Plascencia, who immigrated to the United States from Mexico, multiple stories proceed at the same time—about a Mexican man going to America in search of his missing wife, people made out of paper, a saint who is a professional wrestler—all told in a layout that has three or four columns of text running across the same page. For some reason, no matter how strange these stories may be, when I read them, I can't help but think about the desperate sadness and kindness—and hope—of human beings.

In the sci-fi writer Ted Chiang's "Hell is the Absence of God," the author explores people's views on religion, via a story in which angels suddenly begin appearing on earth and wreaking havoc on it. In Laird Hunt's *Kind One*, a story about slavery is handed down across generations in multiple perspectives, all through a narrative in the style of a grandmother telling fairy tales.

Among non-American writers, Olga Tokarczuk in *House of Day, House of Night* writes several stories in parallel: the eerie everyday life in a village on the border of Poland and the Czech Republic, together with recipes that call for mushrooms, and the story of a monk. Through this, she writes the history of people whose lives were ruined by war. In *Atlas: The Archaeology of an Imaginary City*, the Hong Kong writer Dung Kai-cheung, a former IWP participant, writes about the provenance of place names in the city in episodes that blend fact and fiction, conveying Hong Kong's history and reality along the way. In her new work, *Don't Let the Giant Bird Snatch You Up*, Kawakami Hiromi, a writer from Japan, writes in the manner of an ancient myth about a world in the distant future in which the population has dropped precipitously and humans are being reproduced using scientific techniques.

These novels convey something that can only be expressed by rearranging reality, by changing the way in which we apprehend the world. Young writers in Japan, and in particular women writers, have in recent years been publishing work in which reality and the fantastic are intermingled, or work suffused with a global sensibility. I wonder if perhaps this is because, to them, contemporary Japanese culture is suffocating or strange, and they are groping to somehow find their own way of depicting this unfairness.

Here is a section from the beginning of the novel that has most influenced me, Natsume Sōseki's *Kusamakura*:

However you look at it, the human world is not an easy place to live. And when its difficulties intensify, you find yourself longing to leave that world and dwell in some easier one ---- and then, when you understand at last that difficulties will dog you wherever may live, this is when

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poetry and art are born.

A hundred years ago, Sōseki studied abroad in London, and returned to Japan after suffering a nervous breakdown. While participating in the IWP, I have felt these “difficulties wherever you may live.”

The person who has shined a light on everything I have been thinking about since I first started to write is W. G. Sebald. In an interview, Siri Hustvedt once said that the task of the writer is to remember things one hasn't experienced. That's exactly it, I thought. And so, how do I remember these things, and am I qualified to write about somebody else's memories? There are photos that appear in Sebald's novels. At first glance, they appear to be source material, but there are inconsistencies between the photos and the narrative. Things that are captured in photos and missing from photos, things that are written in stories and left unwritten, someone else's memory and my own memory. And, the border between the dead and the living. I am fascinated by novels that make me aware of the boundary between the world within the novel and the world outside of it, and that try to cross over that boundary. From them, I gained the courage to write my own novels. Life may be hard no matter where you go in this world, but no matter where you go there are people writing, and I am able to read their work.

Translated from the Japanese by Kendall Heitzman

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