

Experiments With Magic

The word “magic” does not inspire confidence in the reader. One thinks of bearded wizards and winged faeries, and if one is not into that stuff, one tends to run like hell from the very mention of the word.

But it doesn't have to be that way. We've all read the stories of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, which introduce impossible story elements as though they're routine. China Mieville's Bas-Lag series of novels (*Perdido Street Station*, *The Scar*, *Iron Council*) take an ingenious approach to magic. The series is set in a fictional world that more or less resembles mid-nineteenth-century Earth, except with multiple races of intelligent creatures and fairly advanced bioengineering, powered by magic. The magic here isn't “special”—it's routine, and manifests itself as a kind of science. It even has its own fuel, something called “rockmilk,” which, like oil, must be mined. This setup allows Mieville to explore a host of new and complex moral questions, which of course reflect the problems of our real world in an innovative way.

Below is a list of possible ways for a fictional world to be “off.” Give one a try.

- 1) A world in which there is a third gender.
- 2) A world in which it is possible, with great difficulty and perhaps inaccuracy, to read minds.
- 3) A world in which ghosts are real and widely acknowledged, but are not full members of society. For instance they can't vote.
- 4) A world in which instantaneous travel anywhere is possible, without special technology.
- 5) A world in which electricity is sentient.
- 6) A world in which physical objects are unstable—they degrade or disintegrate in unexpected ways, or turn into other things, or subtly change some of their defining properties.
- 7) A world in which spoken language changes at an astounding rate.
- 8) A world in which all women are witches. Or, alternately, all men.
- 9) A world in which birds are smarter than we are.
- 10) A world in which light can be bent.
- 11) A world in which a certain hallucinogen actually causes physical changes.
- 12) A world in which there are, like, mutants, and people are freaked out by them, and they can all communicate with this bald dude Professor Xavier, except there's this bad guy Magneto who used to be the Professor's friend and some of the mutants are on his side, and that little kid from *The Piano* grew up and is now totally hot, you wouldn't believe it.