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Arts & Humanities

# The Wild and Wonderful World of Kelly Link

With five collections of genre-bending short stories and a recent debut novel titled *The Book of Love*, the 2018 MacArthur fellow has helped make fantastically strange books the norm.

By
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**When you enter Kelly Link's** wild and wonderful world of fiction, it's best to check all expectations at the door. There's no road map for the twists and turns she takes, no warm-up for the workout she gives the imagination.

In Link's inventive landscapes, places that start out as commonplace quickly become unrecognizable. Characters are almost never who they seem to be. In her alternative realities, magical fairy-like creatures keep human servants, parents microchip their children, animals talk, overnight trains barrel toward hell. And the crazy lady sitting next to you at the bar might just be the moon herself.

Link's stories have been called fantasy, science fiction, literary fiction, magical realism, horror, modern-day fairy tales, modern-day ghost stories, and steampunk. With her love of the bizarre, she has been compared to writers like Shirley Jackson, Angela Carter, and Haruki Murakami. Her books are bold and original and buck categorization. But despite her unwillingness to bow to convention in either form or genre, Link '91CC has been enormously successful, both critically and commercially. She has been a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the Kirkus Prize, has won the World Fantasy Award, and was a 2018 MacArthur Fellow.

Kelly Link (Adrianne Mathiowetz)

This February, Link released her much-anticipated debut novel *The Book of Love*, marking a turning point in her already eventful literary career. Unsurprisingly, it too is an amalgam of many things. “It’s my love letter to all the kinds of narratives that have given me immense pleasure over the years: romance novels, gothic novels, young-adult fantasy, CW shows like *The Vampire Diaries*, and other melodramas of all shapes and sizes,” Link says. “I hope it gives my readers some joy too.”

For Link, books have been a constant companion for as long as she can remember. She was born in Miami, but her family moved often during her childhood. Her father was a minister, though he eventually left the church to become a psychologist. The family bounced from Tennessee to the Philadelphia suburbs and then back to Miami before finally settling in North Carolina when Link was in high school. Link says that she was happy in most of the places that she lived, as long as she had access to nature.

“In Pennsylvania there was a gang of neighborhood kids that I ran around with, and we would play in the woods near our houses,” she says. “In Miami, I loved being close to the ocean. And I loved the lizards and other creatures hanging around. If there was a frost in the winter, iguanas would start falling out of the trees. It was like

something out of a fairy tale.”

Fairy tales and ghost stories were the through line of Link’s childhood. She grew up in a family that cherished books, with parents who read to Link and her two younger siblings every night. Link’s father favored J. R. R. Tolkien, and together they made it through his entire oeuvre. “I think *The Hobbit* is probably the book that influenced me the most as a writer,” Link says. Her mother loved C. S. Lewis, and Link remembers following her around the house, begging her to read just one more chapter from the Chronicles of Narnia. Once Link learned to read, she says, it was a miracle that anyone saw her again.

“I have very strong and vivid memories of the libraries in each of the places where we lived,” Link says. “At the Coral Gables library in Florida, there was no limit to how many books you could check out; to me that was heaven.”

While Link explored all kinds of books as a kid, she loved anything a little spooky or scary. Anthologies of ghost stories piled up in the corners of her bedroom (Edith Wharton was a particular favorite), and as she got older, she started gravitating toward the science fiction and fantasy sections, especially things like the Earthsea series from Ursula K. Le Guin ’52GSAS. “But really, I liked anything with a lurid cover.”

Link played around with writing in high school — she worked on her school’s literary magazine and experimented with poetry. “I had fabulous teachers who encouraged me,” she says. “But I was much more of a reader than a writer. There were so many great books out there that I wanted to read, so that’s how I wanted to spend my time.”

When it came time to apply for college, Link was attracted to Columbia’s Core Curriculum: “I liked the idea of starting life with this curated set of knowledge,” she says. And as a lover of Broadway musicals and great bookstores, she was enticed by New York City. But it was her first visit to campus that convinced her to apply. “It felt like a little walled city of its own,” Link says. “I couldn’t imagine anything better than that.”

At Columbia, Link started writing fiction in earnest. She took classes with the novelist Raymond Kennedy and began working on a novel about a woman whose son has inexplicably dug an enormous hole in the family’s backyard. Kennedy showed the first few chapters to his agent and editor, and they encouraged Link to

keep going. But she abandoned it for a more immediate pursuit: travel.

“I’m a writer who doesn’t write if there are other things to do,” Link says. “That remains true to this day.”

Link spent her junior year abroad, at St. Andrews University in Scotland. At that time, travel arrangements were made through agencies, and the one she used was holding a sweepstakes for a big international trip. “The final question was, ‘Why do you want to go around the world?’” Link says. “I answered, ‘Because you can’t go through it.’”

Link won the trip, and after graduating from Columbia she spent six months traveling to places like Malaysia, Thailand, and New Zealand. When she returned, she found she wasn’t tempted to finish the novel. Instead, she moved back to North Carolina and applied to graduate school.

Link earned her MFA from UNC Greensboro, but says she felt boxed in by the traditional approach to storytelling taught in the program. “We’d read a story by Raymond Carver, and that was the standard-bearer for what the short story should be,” she says. “I admire Raymond Carver, but I wanted to take elements of that kind of writing and go in my own direction.” After graduating, she enrolled in the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers’ Workshop, then held at Michigan State University, thinking that was where she would find her people. But at Clarion, too, her writing didn’t adhere to the conventions of the form.

Link decided to move to Boston to share an apartment with one of her former Columbia suitemates, and she got a job at a used bookstore, a Newbury Street fixture called Avenue Victor Hugo. There she met a kindred spirit, a bearded Scotsman named Gavin Grant. Grant had just launched a small, low-budget zine called *Lady Churchill’s Rosebud Wristlet*, full of “writing that reflected back some of the weirdness of the world.” Grant and Link started dating (they would eventually marry), and soon Link was coediting the magazine.

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Out of that little zine (which recently published its forty-seventh issue) grew another, more ambitious project — a small publishing company called Small Beer Press. Grant, who had worked for the American Booksellers Association, knew the fundamentals of book marketing and publicity. And Link had experience editing for literary magazines. “We had a lot of conversations with people who ran small presses to try to learn from them, and eventually we got to the point where we knew we’d make mistakes, but we hoped we would at least make brand-new mistakes,” Link says.

At the time, Link remembers, there was a deep divide between genres. Major publishers slotted books into strict categories, and science fiction, fantasy, and romance — called “genre fiction” — were marketed completely differently from literary fiction. Short fiction was almost universally ignored. “We realized that there was a gap in the market: short stories that straddle the line between genre and literary fiction,” Link says. “That’s what we focused on.”

The realization was grounded in personal experience. Link had been shopping her own first collection of stories to the big publishing houses. And while many agents and editors expressed interest in her writing, they all asked her the same questions: What *was* this book? How would they market it? And, even more frequently, did she have a novel that they could look at instead?

So Grant and Link decided to publish her book themselves. In 2001 they released *Stranger Things Happen*, eleven stories with the funny, slightly ominous, and definitely off-kilter sensibility Link would come to be known for. A dead man sends letters to his ex-wife. A librarian develops a crush on a girl whose father collects artificial noses. New York is invaded by sexy, blond aliens — and so on.

“We could immediately think of other writers with work like mine that we wanted to put out,” Link says. Slowly they started to amass a list. Most of their writers were unknowns, but as Small Beer started to build a reputation, they were also able to publish what they call “sideways work” by established writers like *New York Times* bestseller Karen Joy Fowler and even Link’s literary hero, Ursula K. Le Guin. “We really just love what we do,” Link says. “It’s groovy to be able to put out the work that we like, without constraints.”

Novelist Karen Russell ’06SOA, a Pulitzer Prize finalist, was one of the then-novice writers who used Small Beer Press as a launching pad for her literary career. *Lady Churchill’s Rosebud Wristlet* put out her first-ever published work, a prose poem called “Help Wanted.” “To this day, it is one of my proudest accomplishments,” she says. “In addition to being a supernova herself, Kelly has supported so many writers and made a home for so much genre-straddling work. She and Gavin have taken exquisite care of an evolving literary family tree.”

Meanwhile, Link’s own work started to collect accolades, which caught the attention of some of the traditional houses that had once rebuffed her. Stories in *Stranger Things Happen* won the Nebula, Tiptree, and World Fantasy Awards, and the collection was named a best book of the year by both *Salon* and the *Village Voice*. Her next story collection, *Magic for Beginners*, published in 2005 by Small Beer, picked up even more critical acclaim. Three years later, Link for the first time sold a book to a bigger house — a young-adult collection called *Pretty Monsters*, which was published by Viking.

But if the buzz around Link and her work built slowly for years, it hit new heights by 2016. She signed a two-book deal with Random House, for another story collection and (finally) a novel. The collection she wrote, *Get in Trouble*, became a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. “It was sort of beyond comprehension,” Link says. “I thought just getting published by Random House was the pinnacle of literary success. The rest of it has all been a big surprise.”

After completing *Get in Trouble*, Link started working on the novel. It was the first time she had tackled a longer narrative project since college. “I realized that my stories were getting longer and longer, and one of my friends told me, ‘If you don’t write a novel on purpose soon, you’re going to write one by accident,’” Link says. “I think no matter how successful you are as a short-story writer, there’s always going to be some part of your audience who wants to know when you’re going to write a novel. I felt a little bit like I owed it to them.”

While Link was curious about what it would be like to immerse herself in a different form, she admits that “it felt much more like a slog.” Over the course of the eight years that it took her to write *The Book of Love*, which Random House published this February, she ended up writing and publishing a whole other collection of stories ( *White Cat, Black Dog*, which came out in 2023).

At 628 pages, *The Book of Love* is a magnum opus. It tells the story of three teenagers in a coastal Massachusetts town who find themselves back in their high-school music classroom after having disappeared for a year. But things are not as they seem. The teens didn’t just disappear; they’ve been dead. And their dorky music teacher is actually a supernatural being from the underworld who, along with some nefarious-seeming colleagues, will decide whether to allow the teens to remain among the living or drag them back to eternal damnation. *Publishers Weekly* hailed the book as a “masterpiece,” the *New York Times* called it “profoundly beautiful,” and *Time* described it as “a heart-wrenching exploration of love and loss.”

“I knew that I wanted to explore different kinds of love stories. Romantic love, familial love, community love,” Link says. “A central question of the book became what anchors us to the world; what are the things that make us who we are. I used some of the fantasy elements to explore those universal questions.”

That seamless blending of genres with a serious moral center remains Link's trademark. But thanks to her trailblazing, she is no longer alone. The once strict boundaries of literary fiction have blurred, allowing for more imaginative storytelling. Even MFA programs are seeing an uptick in applicants interested in writing speculative fiction, a genre that encompasses supernatural, futuristic and otherwise fantastical works.

Victor LaValle '98SOA, an award-winning novelist and professor at Columbia's School of the Arts who calls Link an "absolute genius of a writer," says that he's been seeing MFA students experiment more openly with genre fiction. "This kind of writing has always been with us — at its best, think Kafka, Murakami, or Toni Morrison. Using the unreal to offer new insight on the real is an exciting approach to storytelling," he says. "In the past, students may have felt the need to disguise, or apologize for, this method, but many now openly cite various genres as influences, proudly, and I'm thrilled when they do so."

In 2018, Link was awarded a MacArthur grant for "pushing the boundaries of literary fiction." Both as a writer and as the founder and publisher of Small Beer Press, the MacArthur committee wrote, Link serves as "a source of inspiration for many young writers dissatisfied with traditional distinctions between genres."

Russell says that Link's influence on other writers and artists — herself included — can't be overstated. "A good friend of mine is working on a theatrical adaptation of 'The Specialist's Hat,' and he sent me the sublime music her story inspired him to compose," she says. "It made me think about how many kinds of storytellers and artists adore Kelly Link, how many paintings and tattoos and songs and stories her work has inspired. She has this uniquely generous imagination that is so capacious, so welcoming. It's the kind of genius you invite to influence you and pray will."

These days Link does most of her writing from a cozy yellow farmhouse in Northampton, Massachusetts, which she shares with Grant, a labradoodle named Koko, a slew of chickens named mostly for dragons, and their teenager. Link and Grant moved to the small, artsy city years ago, when they needed space to run the press out of their home.

Recently, Grant and Link have made the difficult decision to put Small Beer Press on indefinite hiatus, since Grant is suffering from long COVID. But Link has another community outlet that keeps her busy. After she won the MacArthur, the family used

some of the grant money to open Book Moon Books in nearby Easthampton. Having spent much of her early career as a bookseller, Link says that she feels at home back in a store. And choosing books to make available to the public feels similar, in some ways, to publishing them.

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“So much of our work has been getting books that we love into the hands of readers who also love those books,” Link says.

For a writer who often avoids writing, Link says it’s always been important for her to have other professional and creative outlets. “I’m most productive when I have a period of time working at the store, for example, and then a period of time teaching, and then a period writing.”

She’s also found over the last twenty years that she thrives in the company of other writers. Before the pandemic, she says, she met up most days with the novelists Holly Black and Cassandra Clare to work, talk, and bounce ideas off each other. Now

she mostly writes alone, carving out chunks of time in between her other obligations. But she still needs buzz in the background — whether it's music on her headphones, conversations with her family, or even checking social media in between sentences. "I find that I write better when the part of my brain that doesn't like writing is occupied," she says. "I like to be reminded that life is still happening all around me."

It is the alchemy that Link performs on her observations of that everyday life that makes her writing so special. Link says she's often drawn to fantasy as a way to understand the world around her. "In real life we are often confronted with things that are horrific next to things that are mundane," she says. "We still have to sit with those things. Fantasy can be a way to experience that strangeness."

But what is so singular about Link, according to Russell, is the way she's able to make her undeniably weird books also feel inviting. What should be disquieting is also, in a way, a comfort.

"When I read Kelly's stories, I feel that the surprises in them are bottomless, and at the same time I get a back-of-the-brain déjà vu, a kind of dream familiarity that is both inexplicable and somehow reassuring," she says. "Fairy tales go back a long way and connect us to the youngest and oldest parts of ourselves. Link's stories touch so many of us, I'd venture, because they do the same."

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