

STEEPMILK DEERDOG

A NOVEL

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By

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ABSTRACT

Steepmilk Deerdog is an urban fantasy novel set in contemporary Ottawa and centering on the stories of three women. It opens as the protagonist, Kiki, receives an urgent phone call from her absent sister, Juliet, begging her to return to their hometown. Kiki rents a basement apartment from an elderly woman named Maureen who lives in the house above her. As Kiki attempts to make contact with her sister and uncover the secrets of her absence, Maureen's developing dementia becomes more and more apparent. Maureen's only regular visitor, a charming city councillor named Roger, offers Kiki work but may have ulterior motives for fostering his friendships with these women. Meanwhile, Kiki's longtime online flirtation, a porn actor in Montreal, visits for the first time and they attempt to navigate their relationship.

But something is off about reality, and only Kiki and Juliet seem to have noticed. Magical things begin to happen, and Maureen's house upstairs seems to act as a gateway for them. Kiki is befriended by Maureen's talking cat as the older woman begins to forget her pet, and the rest of the city is oddly concerned with tracking down a deer that has been sighted in the neighbourhood. However, the characters do not perceive the magical elements as unusual in any way, and Kiki continues to assert that nothing is different about this reality, despite it being a different reality. By the novel's culmination, magic becomes metaphorical for power gained and power lost. As the centre of Canada's federal political power, Ottawa is a unique and apt choice of setting. The integration of magical elements into an otherwise verisimilar world attempts to redress the underrepresentation of real-life Canadian urban spaces in works of fantasy. In doing so, *Steepmilk Deerdog* draws attention to the relativity of perspective, enabling the novel to explore the traps of the patriarchal and economic systems in which we live, the ways in which women resist these, and the ways in which Canadian cities continue to be sites of these struggles.

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ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Steepmilk Deerdog grew out of a personal quest to write a fantasy novel addressing the kinds of conflicts that are relevant to my contemporary Canadian life. In writing this novel I attempt to answer the questions, what opportunities are there for fantasy rooted in a contemporary Canadian city, and what does magic look like in such a setting?

I wanted to challenge the traditional boundaries of the fantasy genre. Many disparate attempts have been made to create clear categorical boundaries around the genre (one notable example being Tzvetan Todorov's uncanny-fantastic continuum) but these often result in the exclusion of obvious contemporary works of fantasy in favour of the western "traditional" or "high" fantasy cannon, beginning with Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* series and his literary inheritors. Or vice versa, the obvious significant fantasy like Tolkien's is left out in order to include writing that less rigidly or regularly invokes fantasy tropes. Recently, Gregory Bechtel approached this question in his doctoral thesis, adapting the definition of Brian Attebery, in an apparent attempt at inclusivity. For him, "Fantasy" as a genre represents a socially-defined "fuzzy set" in which pieces of writing are more or less definitively fantasy-like, with pieces that use fewer tropes being positioned progressively farther from a centre-point culturally identified as a kind of prototypical fantasy, which in North America he argues remains *The Lord of the Rings* (Bechtel 24).

The problem with this approach is twofold: first, it is premised on the ideas that not only do genres exist in ways that meaningfully impact storytelling, but also that "genre exists in the eye of the beholder," so to speak. Not only do these seem mutually contradictory, but the implication that any particular genre is what we think it is by virtue of us thinking it is so is not only circular logic, but is fundamentally the same claim made by the scholars he dismisses for arguing that what constitutes fantasy is self-evident. Moreover, if we claim that a thing is so because we think it is so, it not only begs the question of what things specifically make us think so (returning us to the original problem of the definition), but who it is who gets to do the culturally-definitive thinking. This brings us to my second objection: Bechtel's model necessarily places the literary innovations of straight white men at its centre and marginalized writers at its periphery. While this approach may be culturally and cognitively realistic, it is lazy thinking that denies the relevance and contributions of people of colour, LGBTQ people, and women. It refuses to look at what is actually happening in the writing within the genre in favour of simply restating what is commonly believed.

Unfortunately it seems that fantasy often finds itself in the position of either being artificially parsed by scholars who are little familiar with it but are interested in writing that can be called "surreal" or "magical realism", or by fantasy scholars who must provide a kind of justification for the literary merit of a genre that by virtue of being considered "popular" is often by extension seen as shallow or formulaic. My belief is that it is neither possible nor useful to simultaneously define fantasy in a way that is both inclusive and exclusive enough. In my opinion, it is far more productive to look at the way magical and fantastical elements operate in a text, and to what aim, than to schematically distinguish fantasy or speculative fiction from non-speculative or realistic fiction.

However, as a creative writer in an academic milieu, I am tasked with identifying the genre of my thesis project. I'm calling this work an urban fantasy novel because it adopts urban fantasy modes in order to challenge the boundaries of the fantasy genre. By urban fantasy, I mean a work of fantasy that is concerned with the histories and conflicts of urban spaces. In

calling *Steepmilk Deerdog* “urban fantasy” I both assert that this novel belongs within the fantasy genre and that in terms of theme, setting, and content it breaks from traditional Tolkienian fantasy. I position this book next to other urban fantasy works which explore urban centres as sites of class and economic struggle (Neil Gaiman’s *Neverwhere* being one prominent example). By setting *Steepmilk Deerdog* in contemporary Ottawa, the centre of our nation’s federal political power, I draw attention to power dynamics and bring these themes into an urban Canadian context.

I have attempted to challenge a perceived divide between fiction that is considered fantastic and fiction that is considered realistic. By writing a novel that is at once undeniably fantasy and yet contains only elements familiar to our everyday real lives, I hope to problematize the idea of a fantasy genre and invite readers and scholars to instead consider what magic means or does in fiction. My novel is set very deliberately in the real, contemporary Ottawa. It does not invite the reader to inhabit a different universe, as do Tolkienian fantasies, or urban fantasies set in fictional or non-specific cities, or even urban fantasies set in specific real cities which act as portals to other magical realities. My characters never cross into a fantastic world. Instead, at the novel’s opening, fantasy crosses into their real world. Every description of Ottawa, the city where I grew up, is based on reality. The address given for Maureen’s house in the novel is a real location in the neighbourhood where the novel is set. Neither is magic at all othered by the text. The objects and acts in the novel that have magical power are not specifically magical objects or magical acts, they’re real unimagined elements of everyday life that are ascribed a greater than normal causal power. Rather than having a ghost friend, for instance, Kiki’s friend is a cat. Neither is magic considered alien or unusual by the characters. When Kiki is first addressed by the cat, she simply answers. She doesn’t have an existential crisis about the nature of causality in the world.

Although it is often a hallmark of magical realism for characters not to respond to magical events as at all out of the ordinary, I feel it is worth noting here that *Steepmilk Deerdog* is not a work of magical realism. As a mode of writing grown out of Latin American countries, magical realism is often used to confront and destabilize the colonial status quo in those countries (Warnes 151). The label has since been applied to other decolonizing writers of colour in other colonized settings, notably British Indian novelist Salman Rushdie. And although my novel meets Faris’ five criteria for magical realism (167-194), this would be misapplied to my text. Other colonized writers of colour sometimes reject the label on the grounds of its Latin American origins (Cooper 37). As a white writer whose novel is not specifically addressing the colonial reality of Ottawa, it would be unjust for me to appropriate that label, particularly as it is often used by scholars to confer a kind of literary legitimacy upon writing that contains magical elements. Moreover, most of the magical elements in my novel, though pulled from real life, have obvious correlates in European magical traditions. The cat is a descendant of a historical belief in witches’ familiars. Maureen, as a female source of magical power, particularly power that destabilizes male authority, can be seen as a kind of witch. The perfumes she makes are not essentially different from magic potions. And Juliet’s baby can be seen as a kind of fairy changeling.

So *Steepmilk Deerdog* is closely aligned with European and mainstream North American fantasy traditions, and yet, except for the presence of magic, distances itself from fantasy tropes. The plot is neither defined by nor distinguishable from the role of magic: it can be described purely in terms of the mysteries within the characters’ social world, but magic both helps and hinders them along the way. Through these choices (the setting, the absence of magical tropes,

yet the simultaneous relevance of magic and inheritance from the fantasy genre), the novel attempts to occupy the undefinable genre grey-space of the simultaneous undeniable fantastic and the simultaneous undeniable non-fantastic.

In this novel, I also wanted to centre the perspectives and experiences of female characters and ask them to succeed on their own terms. It's not uncommon in fantasy for female characters to succeed by learning to adopt traits and skills that are traditionally considered masculine, with their femininity remaining a point of weakness left behind at the novel's start. Often this transition occurs through the guidance of a highly magical Gandalf-esque male figure who acts as a gatekeeper of power for the protagonist. Alternatively, female heroines can be characterized as tomboyish, and this qualifies them to take leadership in their adventures. In *Steepmilk Deerdog*, I attempt to restore value to traits and skills traditionally considered feminine, like compassion, community, and knitting. They are positioned as equally powerful and necessary as such traditionally masculine tropes of bravery, assertiveness, and logic. The women in my novel are not lacking these empowering masculine traits, but rather these traits are rooted in or at the very least inextricably linked to their traditionally feminine skills. In Maureen's self-made career as a small business owner, she sold a variety of products associated with femininity, including tea and perfume. When Jo bargains with Kiki to support herself, it's yarn and the ability to communicate (via her cell phone), that are the most valuable to her as resources she can't easily acquire on her own. When Roger, the villain, does magic, his theft of Maureen's items mirrors the social power he acquires through his financial exploitation of her, as well as the way in which traditional European societies are built on the unwaged and devalued labour of women, in addition to other marginalized groups.

Similarly, I seek to restore value to traditionally feminine spaces. The majority of the book takes place in Maureen's house, either upstairs or downstairs in Kiki's basement apartment. By setting most of my plot in domestic spaces, I assert the value and relevance of those domestic spaces. It has often seemed odd to me how little fantasy is set within characters' homes, given how much of our lives we may spend in our homes. In foregrounding Maureen's house as a setting, I am able to explore the ways the spaces in which we reside inform our lives, and vice versa. Like the feminine skills discussed above, Maureen's house also becomes positioned as a site of power. The talking cat resides there, and seems to travel throughout it unobstructed by its internal boundaries. The house is also the location of the first and second sightings of the deer, and the room full of apothecary cabinets appears magically after having vanished for some time.

In these ways, magic in my novel is a defamiliarizing device, a term first coined by Victor Shklovsky in 1917, that makes the real-life and quotidian more noticeable by virtue of distancing them from the reader's typical modes of perception ("Russian Formalism"). The lives and spaces of my Ottawan characters, and the social dynamics of power surrounding them, are drawn attention to, become more fully experienceable by the reader. In *Steepmilk Deerdog*, I make the familiar fantastic to demonstrate the relevance and importance of female perspectives and spaces in urban contexts, and to restore power and, by extension value, to very same.

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DEDICATION

For Ella, Margaret, Murina, and Nancy:
your stories came first.

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