

LIVING IN A SCIENCE FICTIONAL UNIVERSE

Some years ago, when I still toted the print edition of the New York *Times* around the city, there was a cheap little cafeteria/grill hidden away in my local YMCA. Here, I could grab scrambled eggs on a bagel or hamburgers with curly fries and feed my starving children for prices that seemed impossibly low for Manhattan. One morning—as I negotiated the paper and breakfast, while waiting for the Y’s summer day camp to start—my daughter and I were approached by a frantic couple. They demanded to know what the day was and refused to believe me when I said it was Wednesday the 14th. Even after I showed them the date at the top of the *Times*’ front page, they continued to ask me if I was sure. Couldn’t it be Tuesday? Wasn’t it the 13th?

They were clearly unconvinced by my assertions to the contrary.

I’m certain there were plenty of mundane explanations for this unusual behavior, but only one theory came immediately to mind. As the man and woman left the cafeteria, I leaned over and whispered to my daughter, “Do you know who *they* are?” When she shook her head, “no,” I stated the obvious:

“Time travelers.”

Now, it could be argued that they were confused tourists who, having seen as much of America as they could in two or three weeks, had just missed their flight home—but what would be the fun of that?

Meeting time travelers was not my first interaction with the science fictional side of life in New York City. And I’m not talking about the guy with glitter in his hair who played *Twilight Zone* theme music on his saxophone while panhandling on the subway. I’m talking about those moments when reality seems to shift and the SF explanation begins to make more sense than any commonplace rationalization.

In the eighties and early nineties, my husband and I frequented a lovely Mexican restaurant called Tequila’s on Columbus. After fifteen years as loyal customers, we were surprised and dismayed to suddenly discover a new restaurant in the same spot called the American Café on Columbus. The Mexican décor was gone, but all the waiters looked the same. Shortly after that, Tequila’s on Columbus returned to the exact same place! With the same waiters! Alternate-universe slipping portal, anyone?

Now maybe I should believe the white-haired gentleman who told us the owner had always dreamed of running an American-style café, but really, doesn’t that seem like a cover-up to you? It’s a lot of work to change restaurants every few weeks! Much more likely that we had chanced upon a location where parallel universes intersected. For years now, the restaurant seems to have stabilized as Cafe Frida’s, but I keep an eagle-eyed watch lest it start shifting ground again.

The list goes on. Not long ago, I was crossing 86th Street when I heard the unmistakable pneumatic whine of a time machine. I could have assumed that one of New York’s accordion busses was stopping to discharge passengers, but at that very moment I also heard a nervous young woman shout into her cell phone, “Doctor, doctor who?” The bus explanation just does not cover all the variables here.

I am an editor. I know the difference between fact and fiction. I know that if I meet someone on the street who lets me know that he is a citizen of the multiverse and that he’s been visited by aliens or time travelers, it is almost certain that he is either telling me a story or is in need of more help than I can give him. Still, sometimes I can’t help

pretending that the craziest explanation is the best one.

Generally, though, I leave my tin-foil cap at home and navigate the waters of reality with cool, clear-headed logic. Like all adept science fiction readers, I reserve my capacity to suspend disbelief for those times when I am ensconced with a good book or story. A skillful author will immediately convince me that the next-door neighbor has been replaced by a pod person, the monster lurks behind the rock that blocks the path, and the detective is a robot. In the hands of the artist, it doesn't strike me as incredible that a man shrinks, becomes invisible, or ventures to the center of the Earth. I can't imagine why anyone would question aliens who change gender, students who time travel, or children who are engineered to be sleepless.

I'm happy that my ability to depart for Arrakis, to bridge the mist at Nearside, or to think like a dinosaur has given me the opportunity to inhabit so many different universes. Of course, I also enjoy works set during ordinary days on Earth. But, no matter how much pleasure I get from reading Jonathan Lethem, Lee Smith, or Toni Morrison, I respond best when they bend genres, ghosts drop in, or an author like Shirley Jackson ensures that my ordinary days come with peanuts.

I love living in a science fictional universe. I love being the zany parent who embarrasses her kids with outrageous explanations for why the world works the way it does and I love being a reader of fantastic literature. I never want to completely trade the possibility of a science fictional universe for an utterly humdrum vision of reality. Scientists have claimed that the universe might be a hologram, that they've identified the elusive Higgs boson, and that the universe we inhabit is, indeed, only one of billions. None of these claims is any less weird than most science fictional assertions, but the last one makes me the happiest. Maybe someday I'll rediscover the portal that brings me back to a universe where I can once again dine at Tequila's on Columbus.