

# The Strange Edge: Have I Stumbled Upon a New Idear? (Blog)

*by* G. Arthur Brown

In my reading, my searching out what's going on in fiction, I've run across a lot of unusual subgenres/movements/effects. Two in particular have caught my eye: Slipstream and New Weird.

For those who are unfamiliar, my brief overview. Slipstream is a style or effect in fiction that relies on cognitive dissonance to make the reader feel strange. This can come in the form of unreliable narrators who seem to give contradictory accounts of events or in the inability of a reader to distinguish whether the events in a story are real and magical or imaginary and mundane. Slipstream stories normally occur in a world not entirely distinct from our own. That is, typically only the events in the story itself--or those elements central to the story--are impossible, and the normal rules of existence seemingly apply to every other aspect of life. Slipstream may also use textual subversion while also relating surreal perceptions or events that operate on dream-logic. Slipstream generally deals more with epistemic, ontological or metaphysical uncertainty than social or political ideology. When it is social, it leans toward the psycho-social. You won't find many morality tales in this style.

New Weird, on the other hand, is almost always set in a secondary world, a world very much unlike our own. In this way, it is more accessible to core Fantasy fans than may be Slipstream. New Weird relies on the grotesque (in somewhat the same way Horror does) to give a feeling of wrongness to the reader. There is a tendency toward darkness in theme and the stories tend to contain very gritty social themes squirming below the surface. As these stories are set

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in a secondary world, many of the creatures, races, venues and customs of that world can be seen as symbols. Unlike your shelf-stable, run-of-the-mill heroic fantasy, you won't see many recognizable tropes (no Elves, Dragons, Vampires, Wizards) in New Weird. You will instead see Lovecraftian variations on those themes.

Though both of these types of story appeal greatly to me, and I'd wager they appeal to a very large common intersection of the Venn diagram of genre readers, they can be contrasted in this way (if somewhat oversimplified for sake of my point): Slipstream features strange events in a typical world whereas New Weird features typical events in a strange world. There is a perfectly good reason why these two conventions have arisen so. In Slipstream, the reader attempts to tell what events are real while trying to interpret them in light of the physics of the known world. If those tales were set in a strange and alien world where the reader has yet to be shown an established physics, the reader could easily become overwhelmed with the task. That is to say, when a boy turns invisible in the real world, we know something out of the ordinary has occurred. But when a twarb turns invisible on planet Tandrel, we don't have a basis to decide if that is an unusual event or something that happens all the time. If all elements of the tale are very strange, it takes a lot of work for the writer to expose the necessary information to his reader and gain the reader's trust while enticing the reader to read on. It is much easier to fall into the New Weird conventions of a very strange setting with a fairly typical adventure, romance, drama, or intrigue plot. Or a very normal setting with an entirely unbelievable, confusing, atypical, post-modern plot.

Harder work, maybe. But interesting work? I think so. Here are a few stories I was reading that gave me some ideas about where to begin (and collections where you can find them for your own personal enjoyment):

Brian Evenson - "The Progenitor," "Body" (The Wavering Knife),

"Watson's Boy (The New Weird)

Thomas Ligotti - "My Case for Retributive Action," "Our Temporary Supervisor," "In a Foreign Town, In a Foreign Land" (Teatro Grottesco)

Kelly Link - "Catskin" (Magic for Beginners), "The Wizards of Perfil," "The Constable of Abal" (Pretty Monsters)

Phillip Raines and Harvey Welles - "The Fishie" (Best of Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet)

Veronica Schanoes - "Serpents" (Best of Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet)

All of the above stories have radically different styles and feels. Evenson plays with bleakness and insanity and alienation. Ligotti combines just about every form of horror ranging from the psychological to the financial to the supernatural. The stories from Link have an off-kilter fairy tale feel, the Raines and Welles collaboration feels like a psychedelic folk tale, and Schanoes' story happens in a non-child-safe Wonderland. But they all have elements in common. They take place in worlds that we are unfamiliar with. They are not in simple Fantasy Land templates ala Tolkien or Terry Brooks. But more than that, they all contain a plot that makes us question the underlying reality of what seems to be the surface reality. Where is this story really taking place? What is really happening to the character? What is the true nature of the characters? Do the characters know what the nature of their reality truly is? Can we the reader be sure of what the reality of the tale is? In one way or another, all these stories create this unified feeling of strangeness. Not just in locale but in action and theme.

So, in short, I want to create successful stories that capitalize on the full spectrum of strangeness. I want to create worlds and plots that

are equally bizarre, and fill them characters that don't fall apart under the pressure of being completely and utterly uncanny. I want to entertain, but I also want to encourage my readers to challenge assumptions, which means subverting conventions, but not so much as to become pure experimentalism. Secondary world fiction with plots that induce cognitive dissonance. Let's call it The Strange Edge. Because it will never be a core of any genre. It will always be a frontier region that scares people on all its borders, be they literary, fantasy, mystery, science fiction or horror.

