

The Novella: A Personal and Professional Exploration

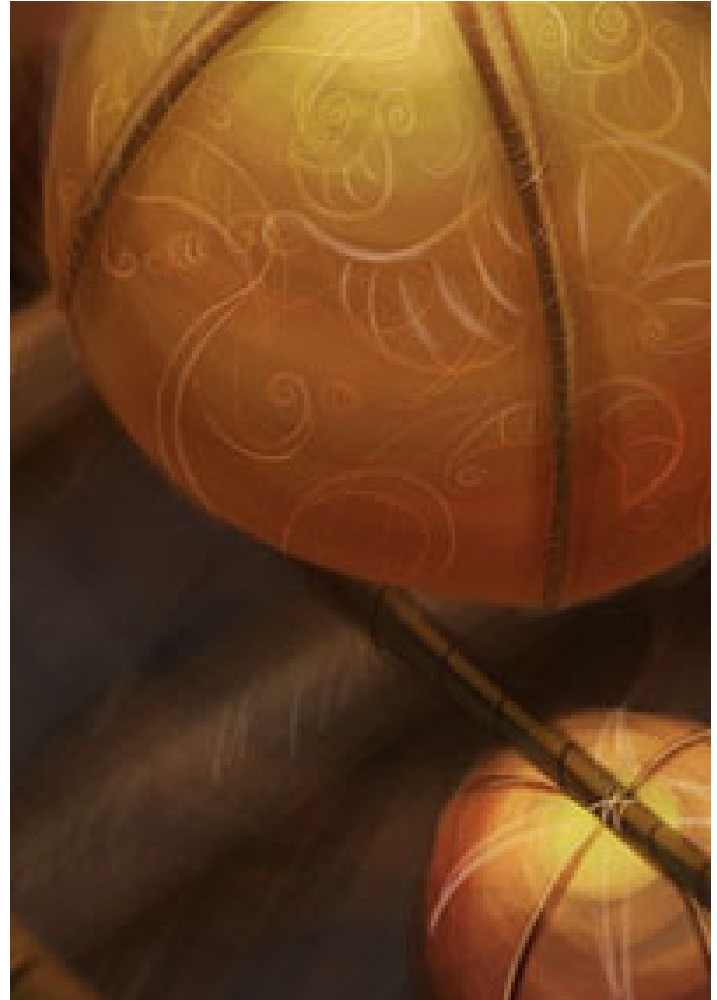
by Jeff VanderMeer

The novella has always been a very personal form for me because it was through the novella form that I came into my own as a writer. Even today, it speaks to me in a more personal way than either the short story or the novel. Perhaps this is because although I have not written nor ever want to write the perfect novel, I have come close to, for me, writing the perfect novella. Similarly, although I love the short story form, it is too restrictive in its miniaturization and compression—I have created short stories that were too perfect for their own good, in a sense.

The novella also has a personal resonance for me because it marked the beginning of a long journey in the wilderness after years of having built up a reputation as a writer of short stories. I soon found that writing novellas might best serve my progression as a writer, but it did not best serve my career. For several years in the mid to late 1990s, after I began to write almost exclusively novellas, I found that I had difficulty getting them published, and when I did, it was in venues that had more limited circulations and reputations.

Suddenly, I went from being an up-and-coming talent to being a kind of sequestered hermit or eccentric, or at least that's how I felt. Publications that were happy to risk a limited number of pages to a new writer were less interested in devoting a lot of pages to that same writer.

For five years, I labored in utter obscurity, writing...novellas. It was perhaps the most liberating experience of my life. Although I had not considered publication while writing the short stories, I had come to expect that I could place them, and would continue to place



short fiction, even if it was in the longer form of the novella. When that expectation turned out to be false, I retreated further from the idea of “audience” and “market.”

In a way, this preserved and protected me. Free of any expectation of success or of career, I matured as a writer in ways that I would not have otherwise—and all almost exclusively through the novella form. I became more original. I invested more in my characters. I invested more in the prose. This was in part because of the form. There couldn't be the instant gratification of completing a rough draft in a day, as with most of my short stories. There also, I knew, wouldn't be the semi-instant gratification of a

nice acceptance letter in the mail once I sent it out, either. So, I was content—and even happy—to simply spend each day held by the vision and promise of whatever novella I was working on. In short, I wrote more intrinsically for myself than ever before.

Now, for some writers this might have been self-indulgent and the lack of audience might have resulted in lack of focus or in lack of progression. But for me it worked because it re-established a high wall between art and commerce. It gave me the distance and the space to rediscover myself as a writer. I had some vague idea of “the reader” who might encounter my novellas at some point in the future, well after my death, the manuscript found in some aunt’s attic and resurrected with appropriate introduction, afterword, and tragic endnotes, but for the most part this shadowy reader had my own face.

The novella became, ultimately, deeply confessional in a way, exploring what writing meant to me as well as the nature of the imagination, obsession, and love. I think I can say with certainty that I was never happier than during that period when I had no prospects and no hope of a career.

Eventually, most of the novellas were collected in a book entitled *City of Saints & Madmen*, which went on to be a *Publishers Weekly* and *Amazon.com* year’s best pick and has been, to date, translated into five languages, indicating ironically enough that sometimes the best career move is to write unpublishable novellas until they become publishable.

But why the novella? What about the novella was so attractive? Was it just that I couldn’t write novels yet? That I didn’t have the marathon endurance to do so?

Reflecting back on this period before I wrote novels, I think the novella seemed so attractive because when you deal in images

charged with a magic realist or surrealist sensibility, when your style, as a reflection of your worldview, is naturally fantastical at the level of metaphor, whether anything fantastical occurs in your fiction, then the novella provides the perfect form for what is, at base, visionary literature.

By a naturally fantastical worldview, I mean that the style itself is suffused by it, so that on the level of metaphor a novel like Mark Helprin’s *A Soldier of the Great War* is more intrinsically fantasy or fabulist in nature than J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* or J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series.

This concept goes beyond the cliched idea of suspension of disbelief. It’s true that fabulist novels can be harder to sustain because the implications of the fantasy element are harder to sustain (generally) in a believable manner than the implications of a realistic setting or realistic events—at least in part because readers are already familiar with the here and now. However, I don’t believe this is the primary reason I attempted novellas before novels. After all, every writer, as they say, creates his or her own reality when sitting down to write fiction, and this can be just as difficult a task for the writer of “realistic” fiction.

It’s more that there is a deep anti-rational or irrational element to the best fantastical or visionary fiction, something that speaks to the intuition and the subconscious. Many times it comes out of the resonance of images connected to characters—or the way in which setting and style attain a hyper-realism. As Michael Moorcock writes in his collection of essays *Wizardry and Wild Romance*, this kind of fiction “may not be judged by normal criteria but by the power of [the writer’s] imagery and by what extent their writing evokes that power, whether trying to convey wildness, strangeness, or charm; whether like Melville, Ballard, Patrick White, or Alejo Carpentier, they transform their images into

intense personal metaphors.”

While such elements can be sustained in the short story or novella form, at the novel length, they often become diluted, and thus more ordinary, robbing it of its intrinsic power. In a novel, some elements of plotting or other “business”—even practical considerations like moving characters from scene to scene or the need for dialogue as narrative—can undermine the surrealistic vision.

It isn't about the suspension of disbelief on the reader's part—it's about the inevitable decaying orbit on the part of the writer, the succumbing to the mundane. Sometimes “filler” can take a form other than the wasted scenes in a typical commercial paperback. Sometimes too much focus on the rational can also be filler. (I'm tempted to say that it's about the difference between a 25-year-old scotch straight up and one on the rocks.)

Another element that entered my novellas at the time was postmodern technique. Very little that I used of postmodern technique hadn't been done before in so-called realistic fiction. I wrote a fictional essay about my fantastical city at novella length, which more or less compressed plot and character. Another novella inserted the author into the text. A third used an annotated bibliography to convey plot.

I found that using these techniques to support fiction set in a fantastical city changed the context of the postmodern technique considerably. Which is to say, those techniques that might be said to break the fourth wall instead reinforced the reality of the fantasy.

But postmodern technique can be perilous in more than small doses. Although certain narrative techniques can be deployed successfully over the novel length, I do believe the novella length is the upper limit for the

success of some of these approaches to fiction. (That said, someone will always come along to prove you wrong...)

So I believe this is also why I wrote novellas—the combination of the visionary and the postmodern made the novella length perfect, in that the visionary element didn't become diluted and the postmodern element didn't begin to annoy or seem affected. Certainly, it is even more difficult to sustain postmodern technique and visionary qualities over novel length when you are also trying to support the reality of a secondary world without allowing pure description/exposition to take over—in other words, trying very hard for the hull of your ship not to become so encrusted with barnacles and other extraneous matter that it affects your speed and maneuverability.

And, in fact, when I moved to the novel length, as with my new novel, *Shriek: An Afterword*, I found that I was writing in a slightly more conventional mode, jettisoning some elements of the fantastical and the postmodern in favor of strategies that work better at the novel length.

Now, at the same time I'd been writing novellas, I'd started an original fiction anthology called *Leviathan*. The purpose of *Leviathan* was to map the continuum of short fiction, recognizing that works tackling the same themes would generally have more similarities regardless of “genre” than just, say, “fantasy” stories versus “mainstream literary” stories. *Leviathan* mixed works of realistic and non-realistic fiction, using theme and other elements as a guide for coherence.

Because I'd found so few publications willing to even consider novellas, I decided that the second volume of *Leviathan* would be devoted to them. (The irony of editing an anthology of novellas that I couldn't submit to myself wasn't lost on me.)

So, for over six months, I read more than four

thousand novellas of all varieties, in all genres. This was an instructive if exhausting exercise. I was able to observe all of the myriad permutations from a wide range of beginning-to-experienced writers—from writers who had been published in *The New Yorker* or *Omni* to those who hadn't published anywhere at all.

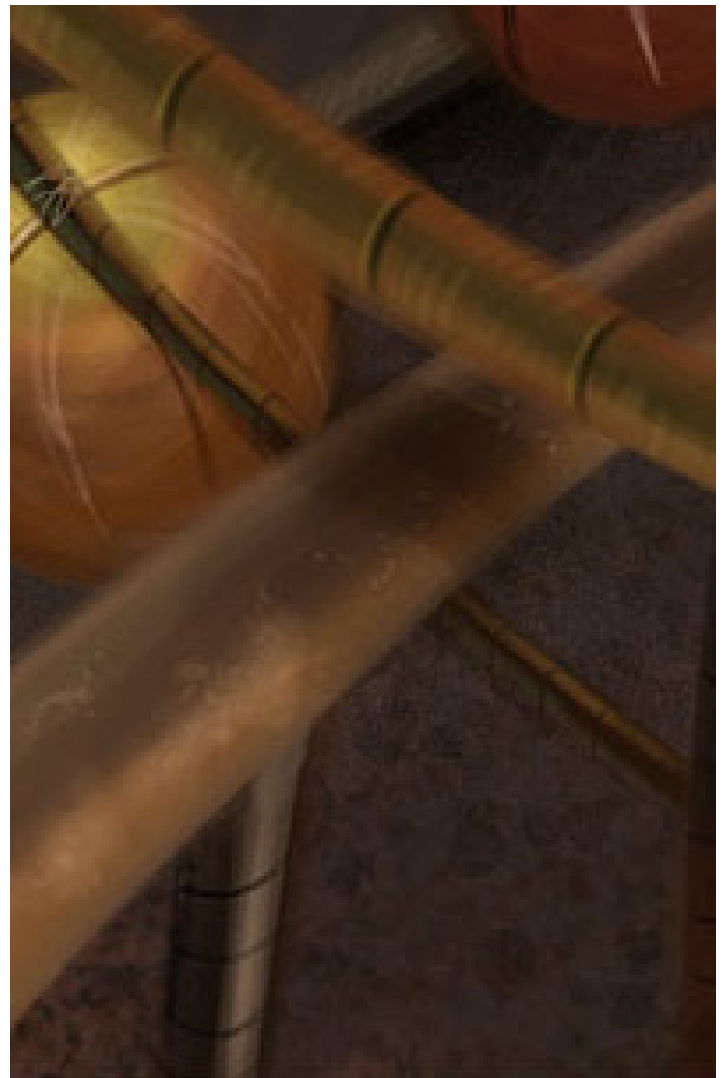
The most common reason, besides inadequate grasp of technique, for rejecting novellas during that reading period came from the realization that many of these so-called novellas were actually short stories. Many of them had unnecessary scenes or scenes that dragged on too long, or scenes that did not operate at the multiple levels necessary to make them “real,” thus necessitating the writing of additional scenes to make up for this lack, and just perpetuating a general slackness.

In short, many of the novellas read to me like rough draft short stories, and seemed to lack the recognition that a novella might be longer than a short story but that this didn't mean you could simply write something longer than usual and it would magically become a novella. It still had to have a pleasing form, a pleasing structure.

The other flaw that became preternaturally prevalent was the novel excerpt presented as a novella. While I do believe that the much-maligned A to B “slice-of-life” short story structure can still offer up new and delightful variation, I do not believe that, in general, it is sustainable at the novella length. And yet we received many submissions that had either been deliberately sampled from a novel or novel-in-progress, or, more interestingly, novels-in-waiting that the writers didn't realize should be longer, and at the novella length appeared to be A to B “slice-of-life” tales. A novella is not simply an interesting stretch of novel, would be one lesson to be learned from reading slush pile novellas of this type.

Although there are obvious exceptions, therefore, I don't think that a novella justifies apparent plotlessness as easily as a short story can. Short stories, like poems, can be about a moment in time quite easily. But the structure of the novella seems more practical—that if you are going to stretch your canvas over that length, you should have more to say on a structural level than just here's a segment of someone's life.

Which brings me to a third problem, one that can, of course, be inherent in a flawed short story as well, but that becomes more apparent in a novella: weak ideas or characters only become weaker at the greater length. The nervous stylistic tic that in a short story might even seem charming becomes unbelievably annoying in a novella. The character that might stand up under the



reader's jaded gaze for the length of a short story crumbles under the pressure exerted by the greater responsibilities created by the novella. Even a propensity on a writer's part to suggest setting through quick flashes of description can, in the novella form, begin to suggest a lack of commitment.

These statements might make it sound as if I think that short stories are a lesser form; not true. The ideal short story and the ideal novella are equals. I am talking about the context of slush pile submissions, the context of reading with an eye toward selecting work for publication. But it does make me think about the limits of the short story form in terms of your average published short story. How many writers run through the finish line, so to speak? How many of their characters really do have a life beyond the end of the story?¹

Since *Leviathan 2*, novellas have continued to play an important role in the anthology. Both *Leviathan 3* and *Leviathan 4* contained several novellas. In many cases, we were the market of last resort and the work would have gone unpublished otherwise. Ironically, these pieces are the ones that almost always receive the most praise from reviewers, which to my mind means there is a need for more markets for novellas. It may also be a perception issue, too. One writer I cajoled into sending in a novella had put it aside in a drawer and had no plans to send it out, having no idea of anyone who would be interested in a cross-genre piece of that length.

This attitude uncannily echoes my own experience in the mid-90s, when I ran out of markets willing to look at anything longer than a certain number of pages—or unwilling

to look at anything surreal or magic realist in nature.

For my own part, I have lately focused more on short stories and on novels. But both have been greatly enhanced by working in the novella form. Because of working with novellas, I have a greater appreciation for, on a purely instinctual level, what a short story does well and what it cannot support. It has, by way of contrast, made me better understand how a short story coils and compresses information and situation.

At the same time, working with novellas has allowed me to organically transition from writing short stories to writing novels. It has allowed me to experiment with using larger casts of characters, functional digressions (the kinds of things that novels thrive on), and to discover the kinds of textures stylistically that work best at the longer lengths, without having to commit to them first for the years it takes to complete a novel.

For all of these reasons, the novella remains my favorite form of fiction, both to read and to write. I believe it will continue to be a source of innovation for a long time to come.

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¹ *What I did find interesting in making final selections was how many novellas used the original definition of the term—of many stories meshed together into one story cycle. That for some writers the novella was an opportunity to weave stories within stories in a way that, just for length reasons alone, would have been impossible at the shorter length. For example, a novella from Stepan Chapman, “Minutes of the Last Meeting,” takes place aboard a train in Czarist Russia, as it is about to be attacked by anarchists. Chapman uses the different compartments of the train almost as separate chapters or stories in his novella, spinning stories off of the inhabitants of each that intertwine and contribute to a greater whole.*

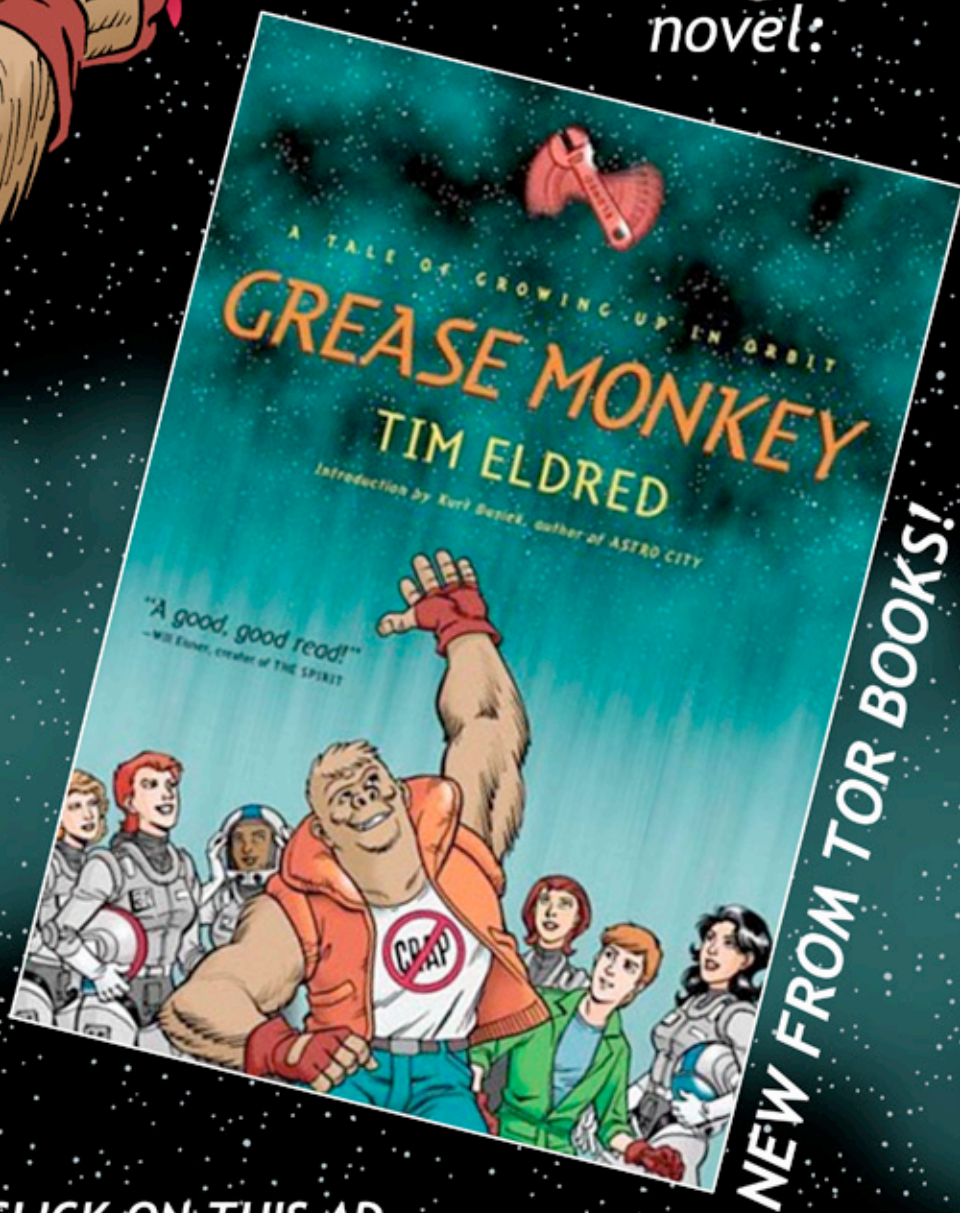
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