

# Fantastical History: Dreams in The Roman Mysteries

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**Abstract:** *When it comes to dreams and prophecies, where is the dividing line between realist historical fiction and historical fantasy? This paper explores Caroline Lawrence's use of prophetic dreams in her historical detective series for children, The Roman Mysteries, and asks how and why the author is able to weave a fantastical element of this nature into a realist series. This allows us to consider wider questions concerning what sets fantasy apart as a genre and how historical fiction in particular can embrace certain types of genre slippage without losing its essentially realist identity.*

**Keywords:** *Romans, Roman Mysteries, children's literature, fantasy, genre, historical detective fiction*

This paper is about a meeting-point of genres; a literary crossroads at which fantasy, history, religion and literature are combined. It started with a simple question – why did one particular author include Greco-Roman style prophetic dreams in a series of otherwise mimetic historical novels for children?

The initial impetus for this article came out of a short e-mail correspondence with children's author Caroline Lawrence some years ago. I was researching the use of dream reports and dream sequences in Greek and Latin literature of the Roman period (eventually resulting in the publication of *Dreams and Dreaming in the Roman Empire: Cultural Memory and Imagination*; Harrisson 2013). Lawrence includes several dream sequences in her series of historical children's detective stories, *The Roman Mysteries*. Several are prophetic and some even revive the ancient literary trope of the message dream, which tends to be more rare in modern literature. I asked her why she included these dream sequences and she replied:

I decided to give Jonathan prophetic dreams because it's the closest historical fiction can come to magic or fantasy. The ancient Romans believed in signs and wonders, horoscopes and dreams. I was partly inspired by biblical dreams and visions and as Jonathan is the most spiritual I thought he'd be the best one. Also, he's a pessimist and the weight of prophetic dreams can help add to his burden.

In fact, all the children except Lupus have dreams. Flavia dreams of Hercules in the *Twelve Tasks of Flavia Gemina*, Nubia dreams of her traumatic capture and death of her family in several books, and Jonathan also

has a kind of out of body experience in *The Pirates of Pompeii* where he catches a glimpse of Paradise.

Dreams are a useful way of recapping, prefiguring and showing the emotional state of the character (Lawrence, e-mail to Harrison, July 12 2009).

Lawrence refers to several different factors in her choice to use prophetic dreams:

- The desire to include an element of fantasy in otherwise mimetic books.
- The fact that some ancient Romans believed in the significance of omens and some dreams.
- The Judaeo-Christian tradition of divine dreams and the spiritual aspect of prophetic dreams.
- The usefulness of dreams in indicating character, both through prophetic dreams and the character's reactions to them, and more internal, emotionally-based dreams.

This last factor, though interesting, is beyond the scope of this paper. The others, however, place dreams as a literary device at a crossroads between fantasy and reality and between history and modernity.

Defining fantasy as a genre is notoriously difficult, but in this paper we will draw on the definitions suggested by Farah Mendlesohn, Edward James and John Clute (see below) to examine this very particular form of genre slippage. Prophetic dreams are fantasy (in generic terms); but they are also reality (for ancient Romans); which implies fantasy (for modern readers); but perhaps, again, reality (for Christian or other religious or spiritually inclined readers). This paper uses Lawrence's books as a case study to argue that prophetic dreams are uniquely well placed to allow for the kind of genre-slippage Lawrence refers to ('the closest historical fiction can come to magic or fantasy'), especially in historical fiction set in the Classical past.

The Roman Mysteries (published 2001-2009) are a series of seventeen children's detective stories set in the ancient Roman world during the reign of the Emperor Titus (79-81 CE). The series follows a group of four young children of roughly the same age as the book's presumed readership (the books are middle-level, on which see Crumpler and Wedwick 2011, 66-68; although British children do not usually attend a separate middle school, the concerns of middle-level literature are broadly similar in the United Kingdom). The four protagonists are; Flavia, a middle-class Roman girl, the group's leader and self-styled 'detective'; Jonathan, her Jewish-Christian neighbour; Nubia, initially Flavia's slave and later her freedwoman, who was captured in Africa and her family killed, and Lupus, the youngest, whose tongue was ripped out by his uncle after he witnessed the murder of his father. A series of arc plots plays out

across the seventeen books, but each novel also follows an individual ‘mystery’, so they can be read out of order. There are two spin-off series; *The Roman Mystery Scrolls* (2012-2013), for younger children, and *The Roman Quests* (2016-2018), for older readers.

The author, Caroline Lawrence, studied Classics at Berkeley and Classical Art and Archaeology at Newnham, Cambridge, at undergraduate level; she studied Hebrew and Jewish Studies at University College, London at postgraduate level, and she taught Latin, French and art for primary school children (*The Roman Mysteries* 2015). Lawrence is, therefore, familiar with (and passionate about) the primary sources for the period in which her stories are set. Having grown up in America, she describes the initial idea for the series as ‘Nancy Drew in ancient Rome’ (Flavia is the Nancy Drew analogue) (*The Roman Mysteries* 2015).

Taking the three factors in the choice to include prophetic dreams under consideration here in reverse order, we will consider first the Judaeo-Christian tradition of divine dreams.

Dreams are one of the few aspects of pagan religion shared with ancient Judaism, and that survived into Christianity. Divine and prophetic dreams appear in both the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible. Unlike other forms of divination, prophetic dreams are not condemned, but are usually seen as a message from God (see for example Genesis 20.3-7; Genesis 28.10-22; Genesis 31.10-13; Genesis 37.2-47.12; 1 Kings 3.4-15; 2 Chronicles 1.16-12; Matthew 1.20-24; Matthew 2.12-16; Matthew 2.19-23; Matthew 27.19). At one point, Yahweh specifically states that He speaks to prophets through dreams (Numbers 12.6-8). A significant proportion of Christians today believe in the possibility of divine dreams – for example, a contemporary Southern Baptist congregation surveyed in 2007 were asked whether they agreed that ‘Dreams sometimes foretell the future or reveal hidden truth’; 43.5% agreed, 40.3% disagreed, while 16.1% had no opinion (Dougherty et. al. 2009, 330).

There is an identifiable genre, particularly in North American literature, of ‘Christian fiction’, which includes both mimetic fiction and fantasy. ‘Christian fiction’ grew to prominence in the United States through the 1990s and includes self-help books and mimetic fiction for both children and adults, some of it including religious experiences, as well as more ‘fantasy’ style narratives of the afterlife or the end of the world (see further Christopherson 1999, 440). However, not all novels that deal with Christian themes are ‘Christian fiction’. The works of Christian authors such as CS Lewis or JK Rowling, for example, while including substantial Christian allegorical material, do not fall under this category, because they are written for and marketed to a general audience, not an exclusively Christian one. The term ‘Christian fantasy’, as used by Brian Stableford, more accurately reflects these works – it encompasses religious fiction that uses allegory or that deals with the afterlife and includes works

dealing with heaven and hell, such as CS Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*, as well as *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Stableford 1997, 191; on heaven in contemporary Anglophone literature, see further Tate 2009). Stableford's sub-category, however, is a scholarly construct used to categorise fantasy fiction, unlike 'Christian fiction', which is a sub-genre recognised by book-sellers and publishing marketing teams.

The Roman Mysteries are not 'Christian fiction' in the sense that they are not marketed as such and they are aimed at a wide, not exclusively Christian, readership. However, the series does feature numerous Christian themes. Throughout most of the series a Christian worldview is presented through the Jewish-Christian characters of Jonathan and Dr Mordecai. Jonathan and his family identify primarily as Jews, belonging to an early Christian sect and continuing to practise Jewish customs as well as Christian. Some stories have particularly overt Christian themes, such as the emphasis on the importance of forgiveness in *The Dolphins of Laurentum*, and Christian themes and language recur throughout *The Gladiators from Capua* (for example 'Jonathan was dead... and now he is alive' echoing Luke 15:32), as well as imagery drawing on depictions of Christians in the arena in films such as *Quo Vadis?* (dir. Mervyn LeRoy, 1951), culminating in Jonathan's near execution at a false hill in the arena topped with a false cave and a wooden cross, echoing the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus (Lawrence 2004, 176, 182, 186).

One of The Roman Mysteries (*The Prophet from Ephesus*) and one of the spin-off novels for older children (*Death in the Arena*, the third of The Roman Quests), are Christian conversion stories, and both feature significant, apparently divine, dreams. In *The Prophet from Ephesus*, the children travel from Egypt to Ephesus in search of Jonathan's baby nephew, Popo, who has been kidnapped. They do not find Popo, but they do encounter John the Evangelist, one of Jesus' twelve disciples. Jewish-Christian Jonathan is baptised and reaffirms his Christian faith, and Nubia and Lupus both convert to Christianity, leaving only Flavia to practise tradition Greco-Roman pagan religion.

The book opens with a 'vision' of a 'celestial battle', later revealed to be a recurring dream of Jonathan's that sends him off to Rome to warn the Emperor Titus that his brother Domitian is trying to kill him (Lawrence 2009a, 1, 181-184). This brings the other characters back to Rome and sets in motion the events of the final book in the series, *The Man from Pomegranate Street*. The dreams are contrasted with the 'voice' Jonathan hears throughout much of the book, which taunts him by insisting that all the bad things that have happened to the group and to Popo are his fault for accidentally starting a catastrophic fire in Rome (the historical fire of 80 CE, which takes place during *The Enemies of Jupiter*; see below). The voice is clearly stated to be 'inside his head' (Lawrence 2009a, 77) and when Flavia asks if it is his God, Jonathan replies "Definitely

not. If anything, it's the opposite – it's evil” (Lawrence 2009a, 91). Jonathan is baptised and reaffirms his Christian faith about two thirds of the way through the novel, and this frees him from the voice, which he does not hear again (Lawrence 2009a, 164, 170). The dreams, on the other hand, Jonathan does not mind, even those that bring him back to the fire in Rome (Lawrence 2009a, 143). Dreams, it is implied, may come from God – unlike the whispering voice that seems to want to drive him to suicide (a mortal sin in Christian theology), saying ‘why don't you just die?’ (Lawrence 2009a, 77).

Jonathan interprets his dream as a reference to Titus and Domitian, but *The Man from Pomegranate Street* reveals that Titus was not, in fact, murdered by Domitian (and leaves his possible murder unsolved). The significance of Jonathan's dream is not revealed until the spin-off series, *The Roman Quests: Death in the Arena*, published eight years later. In this story, Roman teenager Ursula gets involved with a cult group of Druids in Britannia, presented as broadly analogous to the hippie counter-culture of the 1960s and 1970s. She takes a ‘potion’ and gains the ability – so she believes – to enter into the animals around her, resulting in a fantastical sequence with distinct similarities to the young Wart's apprenticeship in the form of various animals in TH White's *The Sword in the Stone* (Lawrence 2017, 17-29; White 1996 [1939], 42-50, 76-86, 126-136 171-175, 194-206). While her brother Juba is sceptical, Ursula is able to ‘prove’ the reality of her experience by having witnessed the arrival of her other brother, Fronto, as a bird, almost bringing the book entirely over into the realm of historical fantasy (Lawrence 2017, 33).

Over the course of the book, this Druidic fantasy becomes a Christian conversion narrative, with a similar structure to Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* (but resulting in Christian conversion rather than conversion to Isis). Ursula and the others are looking for Jonathan. When they find him, Christian Jonathan exorcises the animal spirits that he is able to see within Ursula (Lawrence 2017, 178). Towards the novel's climax, Ursula experiences fever dreams of fighting in a gladiatorial arena, similar to those reported by early Christian martyr Perpetua in her *Passio* (dreaming of herself in the arena; *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis* 10; Lawrence 2017, 169-170). These dreams guide Ursula through the story's climactic events and end with her conversion to Christianity and becoming Jonathan's apprentice as a healer, having recovered from the seizures she had been suffering after taking the potion (Lawrence 2017, 213-217, 226, 230).

It is Ursula and her siblings who finally find Jonathan's nephew Popo (whose original full name was ‘Philadelphus’, ‘one who loves his brother’), who has been adopted by British Druids and is living under the name Raven. By the time Jonathan is finally reunited with his nephew, a series of events have resulted in Raven and his long lost twin brother Castor (originally named ‘Soter’, ‘Saviour’) being pitted against each other in a fight to the death in the

arena. This, finally, fulfils Jonathan's dream of two brothers representing 'Castor and Pollux... Dark against Light. Good against Evil. Ice against Fire' struggling against each other, as the heroic Castor fights his Druid brother who has taken the name of a dark coloured bird (Lawrence 2009a, 181; 2017, 210-212). It is Ursula's actions that save the twins from having to kill each other (Lawrence 2017, 213-216). The two Christian conversion stories are therefore entwined together by Jonathan's prophetic dreams.

However, Christian Jonathan is not the only character to experience divine dreams in *The Roman Mysteries*, nor are dreams the only form of accurate prophecy represented. There is some literary precedent for accurate prophecies in novels set in ancient Rome thanks to Robert Graves' influential historical biographical novel, *I, Claudius* (1934), which opens with a set of fictional Sibylline verses (Graves 1941 [1934], 12-17). As Antony Keen has pointed out, the significant thing about these prophecies is not just that Claudius reports prophecies that later turned out to be true – the law of coincidences suggests that, in a world full of prophecies, this must sometimes happen. But Claudius' Sibylline prophecies also refer to events surrounding the publication of Graves' novel (within the fiction, as Claudius' autobiography) and the reign of Nero and end of the Julio-Claudian line, events which Claudius could not possibly be aware of (Keen 2009). These prophecies are designed to foreshadow known later history for the reader and provide them with a sense of superiority over the hapless characters through their better knowledge – as such, they must be proved to be accurate, regardless of whether or not author and reader would consider this likely in real life.

The *Roman Mysteries* also include an accurate prophecy from a famous ancient oracle, in this case the Delphic Oracle. In *The Fugitive from Corinth*, following an attack which left her father wounded, Flavia is convinced that he has been cursed, contrary to the doctor's opinion that he is suffering from amnesia as the result of a blow to the head (Lawrence 2005, 28, 38). It is the Delphic Oracle who points out the truth, that no one has tried to kill her father (they were trying to kill her tutor, Aristo) and who prophesies that he will recover himself when it rains from a clear sky (eventually revealed to be a reference to Flavia crying before he wakes up; Lawrence 2005, 123, 206-207). Farah Mendlesohn has observed that in quest fantasy prophetic visions often go unchallenged (Mendlesohn 2008, 44) and Diana Wynne Jones' dryly witty *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland* clearly states that 'all Prophecies come true' including 'dreams and visions' (Wynne Jones 1996, 148) The same is true of prophecies and vision across several forms of fiction (see Harrisson 2013, 126) and so it is true here also – the pagan Delphic Oracle is entirely accurate. The preferred form of prophecy in the *Roman Mysteries*, however, is dreams.

The *Roman Mysteries* incorporate several different types of dream, just as ancient literature does; some deliver some kind of omen or prophecy, some offer

a vision of the future, some are anxiety or wish-fulfilment dreams reflecting the dreamer's state of mind. Prophetic dreams in ancient literature took on two main forms – symbolic dreams (in which various images, words or actions in the dream metaphorically represent real life future events) and message dreams (in which the dreamer is given a message by a god or divine figure, usually giving them orders, occasionally predicting the future; see Harrison 2013, 57-68). In modern literature, however, message dreams have increasingly gone out of fashion. While symbolic dreams may be considered plausible, at least to the extent that readers are willing to suspend their disbelief and accept them in a narrative, message dreams are not. The exception, of course, is in fantasy literature, though even there direct message dreams of the type found in ancient literature are rare. However, the plots of two of *The Roman Mysteries* are driven by message dreams; *The Twelve Tasks of Flavia Gemina* and *The Enemies of Jupiter*.

Message dreams are useful because they provide a clear mechanism to drive the plot. We have already seen that Jonathan mis-interprets his symbolic dream about the twins fighting, and it is years, in both story-time and real time, before the true meaning of the dream is revealed. In ancient literature, message dreams were far more likely to provoke action from the dreamer, while symbolic dreams were used more often for foreshadowing and dramatic irony (see Harrison 2013, 131). Whereas symbolic dreams are usually hard to understand and very difficult to do anything about, message dreams usually suggest – indeed, stipulate – a particular course of action. This is especially useful to a novelist, as characters can be made to take actions as a result of message dreams that they would not otherwise take. This technique is used frequently in ancient Greco-Roman novels; for example, in *Chaireas and Kallirhoe*, Kallirhoe decides to go ahead with marriage to Dionysios because of appearances by Chaireas in her dreams (Chariton, *Chaireas and Kallirhoe*, 2.11), while in *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, Sostratos is led to his daughter through dreams sent by Artemis (Achilles Tatius, *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, 7.14) and in *Daphnis and Chloe*, the lovers' foster parents are persuaded by dreams to send them out to the fields, where they will meet each other (Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe*, 1.7–8).

In *The Twelve Tasks of Flavia Gemina*, Flavia comes to believe that her father's new girlfriend, Cartilia, is hiding a sinister secret, and that following a trail guided by the twelve labours of Hercules will lead her to uncover it. This belief is prompted by a dream that she has after her freedwoman Nubia has calmed down an escaped lion. Flavia dreams that Hercules tells her she has completed the first task, but must complete eleven more as he did, to atone for an offence that is the same as his (Lawrence 2003b, 69-70). Flavia misunderstands the message; she thinks it means she must prevent her father from marrying Cartilia, whereas in the end the tasks lead her to discover only that Cartilia is divorced rather than widowed, but genuinely loves her father. The 'offence,' which Flavia thinks is a reference to her disobeying her father by

refusing to get married, turns out to refer to the fact that shortly after her putative stepmother Cartilia takes her out dancing in the woods in the middle of an epidemic, Cartilia becomes ill herself and dies – thus Flavia has, like Hercules, killed her family, not by refusing to marry and have a family (for which there is still plenty of time) but by inadvertently being the partial cause of her potential stepmother's death. However, even though she misunderstood the dream (another classic trope of ancient literature), it is the message that drives the plot of the novel.

In *The Enemies of Jupiter*, Flavia and her friends try to interpret a message dream of the emperor Titus, but are unable to do so until it is too late. Titus has dreamed that Jupiter appeared to him and said, 'When a Prometheus opens a Pandora's box, Rome will be devastated' (Lawrence 2003c, 44-45). Titus believes that this 'devastation' refers to the plague the city is suffering under and he hopes that, if the children can work out who the 'Prometheus' is (this is understood to be a metaphorical reference) and what box he or she has opened, they will be able to close it again and the plague will end. In the end, however, it turns out that the phrase 'opens a Pandora's box' is a figure of speech similar to the modern 'open a can of worms,' and that the 'Prometheus' is actually Jonathan, who has already done so by writing to Titus suggesting his father be brought to Rome to treat plague victims (hoping to effect a reconciliation between his father and mother, who is Titus' slave) and who takes the name 'Prometheus' when he becomes a gladiator at the conclusion (Lawrence 2003c, 171). The 'devastation' is, in fact, the fire that sweeps through the city at the end of the book (and ends the plague).

The use of prophetic dreams in these two stories is very much in line with the use of prophecy in ancient literature. Prophecy determines action, but all the action succeeds in accomplishing is to bring about the prophecy, which is always completely accurate. In the ancient world, there was no division between 'fantasy' and 'realism,' so stories of this kind belonged to no special subset, but were simply part of literature, and indeed, history, with various historians and biographers including Herodotus, Suetonius and Plutarch making use of such dreams.

Accurate prophecies and prophetic dreams are also found frequently in modern fantasy literature both for adults and children, including (though by no means limited to) fantasy stories with a connection to the ancient world. The Percy Jackson series, for example, includes a number of prophetic dreams throughout the series. However, *The Roman Mysteries* are not written or marketed as fantasy, but as historical detective stories.

Some Roman-set detective novels for adults include historical supposedly prophetic dreams, but it is rare for the detective themselves to take any interest in them. In his historical mystery novel *Rubicon*, for example, Steven Saylor has his hero Gordinaus the Finder's son write to him about Caesar's dream of



having sex with his mother (Plutarch, *Caesar*, 32; Suetonius, *Divine Julius*, 7) but Gordianus himself has other things on his mind and make no comment (Saylor 1999, 360). Caesar's wife Calpurnia's historical dream is also featured and embellished, becoming recurring nightmares that last for years, in *The Triumph of Caesar*; Gordianus the hero, however, scoffs at the idea that dreams might be significant, telling her, 'I thought you were not the sort to act on dreams or omens' (Saylor 2008, 8) and although Calpurnia continues to be afraid, Caesar's death does not occur during this book (for the historical sources for Calpurnia's dream, see Appian, *Civil Wars*, 2.16.115; Plutarch, *Caesar*, 63; Suetonius, *Divus Julius*, 81.3; Valerius Maximus, 1.7.2; Velleius Paterculus, 2.57.2). Similarly, in Lindsey Davis' series of novels about Roman detective Marcus Didius Falco, a dream interpreter appears in one novel, *Saturnalia*, but the viewpoint of both author and first person narrator protagonist is spelled out clearly in the list of principal characters that appears in the novel's front matter, which reads, 'Pylaemenes offering Chaldean dream therapy (twaddle)' (Davis 2007). In historical detective stories, the detective, who focuses on looking for clues and evidence and avoids jumping to conclusions, is rarely interested in prophetic dreams.

In order to ensure that The Roman Mysteries remain essentially realistic and to keep them firmly within the historical detective subgenre, *The Twelve Tasks of Flavia Gemina* plays down the more fantastical elements of the plot. Flavia's dream could be the product of her own subconscious, as she is surrounded by images of Hercules. Her actions are motivated by her own dream, which is plausible in a realist sense, as this does not require the dream to be accurate, only Flavia to be convinced by it. This reflects a not uncommon technique in historical fiction, of replicating the world-view of historical characters, without necessarily subscribing to it. What brings the use of the message dream here closer to fantasy is that, although Flavia concludes that the dream was false, it can be interpreted as true by the reader.

This sort of technique can also be found in ancient literature – for example, in Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*, Iphigenia dreams that the earth shakes and she runs out of the house and sees the cornice, roof and pillars fall. One pillar is left, with yellow hair on it, and it speaks in a human voice, and Iphigenia gives it the rites given to strangers about to die in Tauris (Euripides, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, 43–55). Iphigenia believes that it was her brother Orestes that she consecrated with the rites, and that the dream indicates that he is dead (Euripides, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, 55–62). When Orestes appears alive, he immediately assumes that the dream was false after all (Euripides, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, 570–3). However, the dream has, in fact, come true; although Orestes is still alive, he has come to Tauris and Iphigenia has performed the rites of consecration as she usually does before the sacrifice of a Greek man, though in the event she recognizes him in time and they escape together (Euripides,

*Iphigenia in Tauris*, 43–55). The audience know that the dream was truly prophetic, even though the characters do not.

*The Enemies of Jupiter* is even closer to fantasy, and in some ways it is the closest of the series (excepting *Death in the Arena*) to a fantasy novel in tone, themes and plot structure. The narrative is driven by the attempt to interpret Titus' dream on the assumption that it is divine and prophetic and its divinity is not questioned, except by Jonathan on Christian grounds, who declares, 'I don't believe in pagan prophecies' (Lawrence 2003c, 47 – but see above on why we might assume Jonathan is mistaken here). The solution to the central 'mystery' of the book, which would more normally refer to the discovery of human activity through observation (the 'search for truth', as Jerome de Groot puts it; de Groot 2010, 126), is the revelation of the meaning of the dream, which is indeed revealed to be entirely accurate.

The book also features several other dreams, chiefly non-prophetic anxiety dreams; Flavia reassures Nubia that the man who sold her into slavery is not still alive, after Nubia has dreamed about him, explaining the Virgilian concept of the Gates of Horn and Ivory, with true dreams coming through the horn gate and false dreams through that of ivory (Lawrence 2003c, 89-90; Virgil, *Aeneid*, 6.893-899). Nubia also has a fever dream in which she senses that Jonathan is in danger (Lawrence 2003c, 148). However, it is Titus' prophetic dream that is most significant. The link with fantasy as a genre is cemented with an appearance from the Ark of the Covenant, in which the Ark is described in such a way that it could be simply a very pretty box, or it could be the magical artefact that melts the faces of Nazis in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (dir. Steven Spielberg, 1981). When Nubia sees it, the narrative explains that she had seen nothing like it before:

Why Perhaps it was the pearly light, pouring down from above. Or the fact that three of the four walls in the room were painted gold. Whatever it was, the box seemed to be the source of the light (Lawrence 2003c, 108).

Jonathan warns his friends not to touch the box, so no one does – leaving the reader free to decide whether it really does have magical properties or not. Strictly speaking, the book remains realist and plausible, but in the imagination of the reader, especially a young fan of *Indiana Jones*, it becomes more and more like fantasy.

To talk of 'the closest historical fiction can come to magic or fantasy' is to talk about genre, a highly complex subject with a rich scholarly background (see Duff 2000 for an introductory reader including essential works on the subject by Bakhtin, Genette and Derrida). As far as the broader questions of what genre *is* are concerned, and even what historical fiction or fantasy fiction are (not to mention children's literature and mystery stories), the aspect of genre I would like to focus on here is that of audience expectation. 'Genres are... social

contracts between a writer and a specific public', according to Fredric Jameson (1981, 106). Farah Mendlesohn suggests 'Genre = codes + narrative techniques + audience' (Mendelsohn 2008, 229). Children's historical fiction is, in the words of John Stephens, 'essentially a realist genre' (1992, 202). A reader (child or adult) sitting down to read a historical detective story – already a blend of two genres – that is not marketed as historical fantasy expects to read mimetic fiction, devoid of supernatural elements. To betray that expectation is to risk betraying the trust of the reader and their ability willingly to suspend their disbelief. And yet, this does not happen. The reader accepts the intrusion of the fantastic and moves on. Why?

The closest the reader expects such a book to come to fantasy is in the description of story elements that the historical characters might view as fantastic, but the modern reader will not (see Stephens 1992, 84). Lawrence uses these techniques in her spin-off series for younger readers, *The Roman Mystery Scrolls*. There is no actual fantasy or even any slightly fantastical elements in *The Roman Mystery Scrolls*, but instead these books use language relating to monsters and other scary phenomena to spice up the story while maintaining absolute realism in the actual plot.

For example, in the first book in the series, *The Sewer Demon*, Lawrence plays on ancient beliefs and superstitions to create exciting sequences that nevertheless produce a mundane (if surprising) explanation in the end. The title refers to the 'demon' that a rich client of Floridius the soothsayer believes is haunting her house. About halfway through the book the protagonist, Floridius' apprentice Threptus, falls into Ostia's sewer and Chapter 6 ends with Threptus facing an unknown thing in the sewers, and the statement, 'He knew with terrible certainty that the thing in the water was a sewer demon' (Lawrence 2012, 46). However, the 'demon' floating towards Threptus turns out to be Floridius' satchel, hard to see in the dark sewer, while the 'demon' haunting their client's house turns out to be an octopus that had got into her toilet and well. In this story, Lawrence manipulates the ancient belief in demons and spirits to produce exciting sequences for her readers, while avoiding implying that there is any truth to such beliefs.

Actual fantasy content, however, is more unexpected, especially in books for children that are not marketed as fantasy stories. Perry Nodelman has suggested that children's literature may form a genre in its own right, beyond merely sharing an intended audience (Nodelman 2008, 242-243). Viewed this way, *The Roman Mysteries* are already triple-genre-ed as children's-historical-mystery before we ever bring fantasy into the equation. One of Nodelman's 'long list of shared characteristics' of children's literature is that the texts are, to a degree, didactic (Nodelman 2008, 81). Modern children's literature is not usually didactic in the same way as nineteenth century literature for children, which placed 'didacticism against pleasure... true stories against fantasy' (Rose

1984, 55). However, authors of historical fiction for children are usually aware that the historical fiction read by children is likely to shape their view of that particular period for the rest of their lives, with the result that there is, inevitably, a didactic dimension to their work. Rosemary Sutcliff, for example, suggested that ‘children can surely get a truer picture of the past if something that breathes life into the bare bones [of taught history] is given to them (Sutcliff 2001 [1989], 112). De Groot suggests that the historical novel in all its forms has often been considered broadly educational on some level, and in historical novels for children, this is a particularly important interpretative framework (de Groot 2010, 47-48, 90). Lawrence herself is clear that ‘I try to fit in as many facts as I can and make them as accurate as possible’, so that her books introduce children to Roman history as well as offering an enjoyable adventure (Harrison 2011).

This awareness of the potential significance of historical novels in shaping children’s world-views is not necessarily constrictive. Historical fantasy exists as a sub-genre in its own right, including in works for children. This group includes a number of well known works for children from across the last century, from Rudyard Kipling’s *Puck of Pook’s Hill* (1906) to Joan Aiken’s counterfactual novel *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase* (1962), as well as numerous stories of King Arthur (see Shippey 2009). As noted above, Lawrence’s more recent work has taken even further steps towards the fantastical through Ursula’s use of Druidic magic. However, historical fantasy is rarely separated out from other fantasy novels for marketing purposes. As Elizabeth Wein has put it:

When people ask what kind of books I write, my honest answer is “sort of historical fantasy”—a categorization that is both evocative and apt, but doesn’t actually exist as a library shelf (Wein 2009, 163).

Historical fantasy is a separate genre – a different journey on the part of the writer, marketed differently to the reader. Wein described how her ‘agenda is different... from that of a true writer of historical fiction’ (Wein 2009, 167). Although the technical details are as accurate as possible, the placing of the story as fantasy allows the author to incorporate elements not just of magic but of folklore and tradition that an historian or even a writer of non-fantastical historical fiction would not include.

The closest historical fantasy gets to non-fantasy historical fiction is timeslip stories. These include both fantasy, such as Philippa Pearce’s *Tom’s Midnight Garden* (1958), Penelope Farmer’s *Charlotte Sometimes* (1969) or Helen Cresswell’s *Moondial* (1987) and science fiction, for example Susan Price’s *The Sterkarm Handshake* (1998) and its sequels, and it is not restricted to children’s literature (the popular *Outlander* series by Diana Gabaldon is a well known example aimed at adults). In a timeslip story, the only fantastical element may be the means by which a character travels in time (usually backwards, though there are exceptions, such as Françoise Elman’s French children’s novel *La*

*Double Chance de Juliette*, in which the protagonist escapes Nazi-occupied France by travelling forward in time; Elman 1992). The story then functions as an historical novel with a modern commentary, eliminating the need for historical characters to embrace anachronistically modern opinions in order to provide a sympathetic viewpoint character (as Anne Scott MacLeod has put it, the protagonists of historical novels for children often ‘experience their own societies as though they were time-travelers (*sic*), noting racism, sexism, religious bigotry, and outmoded belief as outsiders’, in an attempt to provide a sympathetic protagonist and a commentary on the past; MacLeod 1998). Lawrence’s own forthcoming novel, *Time Travel Diaries* book one, is her first complete historical fantasy, a timeslip story. However, the presence of a means of travelling through time means that it is always possible, if desired, to include further fantasy elements without breaking that ‘social contract’ with the reader about what sort of book the story is, since it already includes fantastical elements – in the fourth *Outlander* book, for example, the protagonist Claire encounters the ghost of another traveller in time (Gabaldon 1997, 354-355).

However, *The Roman Mysteries* do not go so far as to become historical fantasy, nor are they marketed as such. And yet, the inclusion of prophetic dreams takes them a step beyond simply using fantastical language to describe non-fantastical elements of a story. Following the precedent set by Graves, these dreams do bring an element of fantasy to these otherwise mimetic stories.

The place of supernatural and fantastical phenomena in historical fiction brings into sharp relief the issue of what fantasy fiction *is*, in the first place. Mendlesohn and Edward James offer four different methods for defining fantasy; by the way books are marketed by publishers and booksellers; by the definitions of academics and scholars working on fantasy fiction; by what has historically been understood to be ‘fantasy’, and, the ‘most obvious’ definition, ‘the presence of the impossible and the unexplainable’ (Mendlesohn and James 2009, 3-5). It is this ‘most obvious’ way of delineating fantasy that is of significance here – *The Roman Mysteries* are clearly not marketed as fantasy, nor studied as fantasy, nor have they been historically understood as fantasy.

John Clute suggests that fantasy literature tells a story which is ‘impossible in the world as we perceive it’, and further elaborates that ‘fantasy’ as a genre did not exist before the sixteenth century, because although stories were told which both their authors and readers considered to be impossible, this ‘perceived impossibility’ was not the point of the stories (Clute 1997, 338). On the existence of literature defined as ‘fantasy’ under this definition before the sixteenth century, Brett Rogers and Benjamin Stevens have pointed to the existence of several texts from the ancient world which deliberately present the impossible (Rogers and Stevens 2017, 8-9). Equally importantly, though, the question of what is or is not perceived to be possible in the world is not so

simple, neither for the world before the sixteenth century Enlightenment, nor after it.

The chief difficulty with this ‘most obvious’ definition is that relies on the idea of ‘the world as we perceive it’ – but, of course, different people perceive the world entirely differently. As Mendlesohn and James point out, temporal or geographical distance can result in a different world view. They point to *The Pilgrim’s Progress* as a work usually considered fantasy in a modern context, but considered ‘divinely inspired vision’ by its seventeenth century author, and to magic realist literature from Latin America and the American South, which reads as fantasy literature ‘to fantasy readers’ but is not written as such, but rather with a ‘firm sense’ of a supernatural world that exists along with the natural (Mendlesohn and James 2009, 3).

These examples focus on temporal or geographical distance, but beliefs are not held in the same way by a unified group in any place or at any point in history. For example, in 2007, a small Baptist congregation in Texas were surveyed about their beliefs on a range of theological issues including God, God’s judgment, heaven and hell, and New Age ideas and aspects of the paranormal (cited above). While there some issues on which 100% of the congregation agreed (the existence of God and of heaven), even major aspects of Christian theology did not provoke absolute universal agreement (7.8% of respondents only thought Satan ‘probably’ existed) while any issue that was not a fundamental aspect of Christian theology provoked varying levels of belief, including ideas about Armageddon, who might or might not get in to heaven, or haunted places (Dougherty et. al. 2009, 327-330).

It is true that there are certain ideas that may be rejected by a majority of the members of a particular group – the Southern Baptists almost (but not quite) universally rejected astrology, for example, with only 1.6% of respondents agreeing that astrology can foretell the future (Dougherty et. al. 2009, 330). In the Anglophone Western world in general, it is probably safe to say that a negligible number of people – if any – believe in the sort of magic you find in, say, the Harry Potter books, by which a witch or wizard can wave a wand and move an object or turn someone into an animal (this kind of magic is considered so unlikely in the general cultural imagination that questions in the type of surveys referred to here generally do not test for it). A certain amount of literary fantasy can be clearly placed under the category of things ‘impossible in the world as we perceive it’.

However, as we have already seen, a small but not insubstantial number of people in the contemporary Western world believe in the possibility of significant or prophetic dreams. This belief is not confined to the Christian population. A number of hypotheses have been put forward for the relationship, if any, between traditional or orthodox Christian beliefs and ‘unconventional’ beliefs or beliefs in ‘the paranormal’, a category which includes phenomena

such as ghosts, telepathy, UFOs, astrology, and, in some surveys, prophetic dreams. Several scholars have argued for a positive correlation between religious and paranormal belief, with those subscribing to one set of beliefs more likely to subscribe to the other (see for example Orenstein 2002, 309; McKinnon and others have argued that, while the correlation is largely positive, lack of church attendance is also a significant factor, making belief in the paranormal more likely; McKinnon 2003, Mencken et. al. 2009). Others have argued for a negative correlation, with paranormal belief in competition with traditional religiosity (see for example Bainbridge 2004, 393). Others still have argued that there is no correlation at all. For example, a 1998 poll from the Southern United States demonstrated no correlation – responses from those surveyed suggest that belief is more unpredictable and more personal than either model would suggest (Rice 2003, 105; see further Bader et. al. 2012, 706, for a summary of the scholarship in this area).

However significant the overlap with Christian belief is, there is data demonstrating that belief in the paranormal, though held by a minority, has not gone away. Data from the Southern Focus Poll, weighted to provide a national American sample, suggested that 33.3% of the United States population believe in astrology, while 42.1% believe in ghosts (Rice 2003, 100). Levels of belief in both conventional religious ideas and the paranormal in Britain are, on the whole, much lower than in the United States, but not non-existent; the 2001 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, for example, found that 50% of respondents believed in ‘a pattern of events as if they were meant to happen’ and 22% believed in ‘a feeling of being in contact with the dead’, though only 6% believed in ‘astrology as important’ (Glendinning 2006, 588). Outside the Anglophone world, in predominantly Catholic Italy, a 1994 survey suggested 31.5% of the population believed or partly believed in astrology (notably higher than the US or UK data), 28.2% believed or partly believed that communication with the dead was possible, and 16.7% believed or partly believed in palmistry. The lowest belief figures in the Italian survey were for ‘sorcery’, an area not included in the Anglophone surveys, with 8.7% expressing belief or partial belief (Bader et. al. 2012, 712).

Scientific explanations for these phenomena are available. Ghosts may be draughty windows, premonitions the result of paranoia, significant dreams a coincidence, near-death experiences hallucinations resulting from a traumatised brain (see for example Geiger 2009, 237-253; Shermer 2010 and Herman 2011 on the phenomenon of the ‘sensed presence’). John Allan Hobson has confidently declared that, thanks to sleep science, ‘the mystery of dreaming is largely stripped away, leaving the content nakedly open to understanding without complex interpretation’ (Hobson 2002, xiv).

However, no amount of theorising can definitively prove to those who believe in them that ghosts, visions and dreams are not exactly what they appear

to be. The 2005 Baylor Religion Survey in the United States suggested that 54.6% of the population agreed or strongly agreed that ‘dreams sometimes foretell the future or reveal hidden truths’ (Mencken et. al. 2009, 76). A few minutes browsing a shop selling scented candles and incense sticks will reveal several books such as Russell Grant’s *The Illustrated Dream Dictionary* (1995), Gillian Holloway’s *The Complete Dream Book* (2006) or Denise Linn’s *The Hidden Power of Dreams: The Mysterious Power of Dreams Revealed* (2009), which continue to make sales. Websites offering similar dream interpretations are even easier to find by spending just a few seconds on Google. Belief in all these phenomena, while by no means as high as it may once have been, can still be found in a small but by no means negligible proportion of the population in the Western world.

I want to propose a tripartite division of fantastical or supernatural elements that may be incorporated into the general fiction, whether mimetic or marketed as ‘fantasy’. The three main categories of what we might broadly call ‘the fantastic’ are, I suggest, the definitively not-possible, the almost certainly not-possible, and the probably not-possible. In the first category belong imaginative phenomena invented by specific authors. These are not only absolutely and definitively not possible in, to use Clute’s phrase, ‘the world as we perceive it’, but they have never been considered possible in any known period of history. In this category we find hobbits, marsh-wiggles, Borrowers and Bertie Botts’ Every-Flavour Beans. None of the fantastical elements incorporated into *The Roman Mysteries* come under this category.

In the second category, we find those phenomena that people in the past may have believed to be real, or at least possible; elves, vampires, dragons or the kraken, even the gods of religions that no longer have large numbers of followers in the modern world. As far as ‘the world as we perceive it’ is concerned, having explored, recorded and catalogued most of our planet and even a little beyond it, we now know that nowhere on earth can you find dragons of the sort that appear in Western folklore, or portals to the land of elves. There is no longer a space beyond the edge of the map where we imagine monsters live – we have circumnavigated the globe and not found them. *The Roman Mysteries* includes some elements of this type of fantasy but very few – the Ark of the Covenant and, from the spin-off series, the Druid ‘magic’ Ursula gets involved with are the chief examples.

The third category is a liminal category, existing somewhere in between the ‘possible’ and the ‘not possible’ in ‘the world as we perceive it’. In this category belong those phenomena that the majority of the population in the modern Western world consider ‘impossible’, but that a significant minority consider ‘possible’ – thus placing these *topoi* in a liminal space that is neither strictly fantastical, nor strictly mimetic. The use of dreams in *The Roman Mysteries* is designed take advantage of this liminal category. Because some people believe



in the possibility of these elements, their inclusion does not entirely break the mimetic illusion of reality in the novels. On the other hand, because many readers do not believe in the real possibility of these elements, they introduce a sense of magic or fantasy into the story, justified by the ancient belief in the possibility of such things.

Prophetic dreams are, then, uniquely well placed to offer authors of historical fiction an opportunity to introduce an element of fantasy into their work. As a phenomenon believed to be possible both by some people in the past, and by some people in the present, they straddle the line between fantasy and reality. Sceptical readers may scoff, but can suspend their disbelief to accept the world-view of the historical characters. Less sceptical readers, meanwhile, may embrace the possibility of these phenomena and consider them ‘possible’ elements in the world as they perceive it. Both are, in this way, able to enjoy a mimetic historical story with fantastical elements without feeling that the unspoken contract between author and reader promised by the novel’s genre has been broken.

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