



**Fabula / Les Colloques**  
**Impossible fictions / Fictions impossibles**

---

# Are Impossible Fictions Possible ?

**Marie-Laure Ryan**

---



## **Pour citer cet article**

Marie-Laure Ryan, « Are Impossible Fictions Possible ? », *Fabula / Les colloques*, « Impossible Worlds / Mondes impossibles. Impossible fictions / Fictions impossibles », URL : <https://www.fabula.org/colloques/document11299.php>, article mis en ligne le 19 Novembre 2023, consulté le 12 Août 2024

---

---

# Are Impossible Fictions Possible ?

**Marie-Laure Ryan**

---

Whatever answer we give to the title of this article<sup>1</sup>, it leads to a dead-end. If impossible fictions are all possible, there are no such things as impossible fictions, and this collection of essays is about something that does not exist. On the other hand, if they are all impossible, they do not exist and this collection is again about nothing. In this article I propose to unravel this paradox by exploring what could be meant by the term "impossible fiction."

If we adhere to an ontology that recognizes only one world, the real world, then impossible fictions are easy to conceive : they are fictional texts that represent events that could never take place in the real world. For instance, animals being able to talk, princes being turned into frogs, traveling through a wall, or computers writing better novels than humans.<sup>2</sup> Literature is chock-full of this kind of impossible fictions ; in fact, children are exposed to impossible fictions long before they are presented with possible ones. Under this conception, an impossible fiction is one that challenges the laws of nature, and there is no real difference between the impossible and the unnatural.<sup>3</sup>

But how do we know that the unnatural phenomena I have described above are really impossible ? They may be impossible on planet Earth, but there is more than the earth to the universe. Consider a cosmology outlined by physicist Max Tegmark, a strong supporter of what is known in physics as the Many Worlds cosmology. Tegmark distinguishes several levels of possibility. Level 1 is the extension of the space in which the earth exists. If this space is infinite, it has room for all the different possible combinations of elementary particles that make up the observable universe. In fact, it has room for more than one realization of a given combination. There is consequently a good chance that the combination that describes our planet or our universe is realized more than once, and that we have

---

<sup>1</sup> This text includes passages from a chapter of my book *A New Anatomy of Storyworlds : What Is, What If, As If* (Ohio State university Press, 2022) on impossible worlds. The beginning and ending are different.

<sup>2</sup> I wrote this before becoming acquainted with ChatGPT. Though I still believe that computers will never write better novels than humans (from a human point of view), I am no longer so sure.

<sup>3</sup> A current school of narratology concerns itself with unnatural narratives, but there is no agreement among its proponents as to what constitutes unnaturalness : is it a transgression of the laws of nature (Alber), a rejection of mimeticism (Richardson), or the adoption of narrative techniques that differ from those of "natural narrative", i.e. conversational storytelling ? (most members of the school).

counterparts of ourselves somewhere in the multiverse. There will also be close copies of our universe in which our counterparts undergo a different fate (Tegmark, 2003). On this level, there are worlds where Napoleon wins the battle of Waterloo and worlds where Donald Trump gracefully accepts the result of the 2020 election. Counterfactual fiction (such as Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*, or Laurent Binet's *Civilizations*) takes this kind of possibility very seriously.

While the parallel universes of level 1 exist in the same time and space as our universe, those of level 2 are found in alternate spaces. They are born as the result of violent events that tear up the fabric of space-time, such as passing through a black hole. These universes may differ from those of level 1 in much more radical ways than the worlds of level 1 differ among themselves. They may have a different number of elementary particles, or their space may have a different number of dimensions. Tegmark believes that they may also differ in the value of constants, but they follow the "same" laws of physics as the worlds of level 1 : you just plug in different numbers into the same equations, and you get different behaviors—behaviors that may look like magic from our earthly perspective.

On level 3 even the laws of physics break down. Tegmark believes that there is no absolute necessity for the laws of physics to be the way they are. "How about a universe," he asks, "that obeys the laws of classical physics, with no quantum effects ? How about time that comes in discrete steps, as for computers, instead of being continuous ? How about a universe that is simply an empty dodecahedron ?" (p. 49). Tegmark suggests that on this level, universes are the realizations of all the structures that can be mathematically described. The only laws that level 3 universes cannot breach are those of mathematical logic, namely excluded middle and non-contradiction. "If the universe is inherently mathematical," Tegmark asks, "then why was only one of the many mathematical structures singled out to describe our universe ?" (p. 50). Thus, if we take a cosmic perspective, there is only one type of impossible fiction : a fiction that does not respect the laws of logic. Fairy tales, science-fiction and the fantastic are all within the reach of the possible.

This cosmological model bears some similarity with Possible Worlds Theory.<sup>4</sup> Possible Worlds (hence PW) Theory is based on an opposition between one world, the actual world, and an infinity of possible but non-actual worlds that correspond to unrealized possibilities. Tegmark's cosmology by contrast makes no distinction between an actual world and merely possible ones, because it claims that that all possibilities are realized. But both theories extend possibility way beyond what can happen on planet Earth, or in the solar system. According to a version of PW theory (Kripke, 1963),<sup>5</sup> merely possible worlds are connected to the actual world through

---

<sup>4</sup> The pioneers of the fictional application of PW theory are Lewis, Pavel, Eco, Doležel, Ryan and Ronen. For a general presentation of PW theory in its relation to narrative theory, see Bell and Ryan, 2019).

so-called accessibility relations. The higher the number of these relations, the closer the possible world is to the actual world. For instance, the worlds of realistic novels obey the same laws of physics, and they have the same history and geography as the actual world, but they also include some individuals who do not exist in the real world. Fairy tales and the fantastic are many steps further removed from the actual world since they change the laws of physics and include not only individuals, but also species that do not exist in the real world. But what lies on the frontiers of the system ? Are texts that break the laws of logic and that include contradictions still imaginatively accessible from the actual world ?

Authors can bring words together any way they want, as long as syntax remains sufficiently correct for an interpretation. They can write in a fiction “Colorless green ideas sleep furiously” or “Sherlock Holmes squared the circle.” Do these semantic constructs create impossible worlds ? Or does worldness preclude logical contradiction ? If there were such things as impossible worlds, wouldn’t every collection of propositions create a world ? Alternatively—and this is my position, — there can be texts that do not construct a world, or do not fully do so.

Logicians claim that if even one contradiction penetrates a system of propositions, the entire system collapses, because every proposition and its opposite become true (Goldstein, 2005, p. 92). There is no way to construct a world under such conditions. But what is a world ? As I understand the term, a world is a coherent totality populated with individuals and objects. It exists in space and time, and it is ruled by the laws of causality. The global state of the world can be changed by either accidental events, such as fires and earthquakes, or by the deliberate actions of agents. These agents, who are called characters in narrative worlds, have roughly the same reasons for acting as people do in the real world (Schaeffer and Vultur, 2005) : they associate certain states of affairs with positive or negative emotional values—in other words, they have wishes and fears ; and they act in order to realize the positive states and to avoid the negative states.

This assumption is what enables readers of fiction to rationalize the actions of characters and to construct a plot. Any text that makes this operation possible I call mimetic, whether or not it describes events that are possible in the real world. *Harry Potter* and *Little Red Riding Hood* are no less mimetic than *War and Peace* or *Madame Bovary*. Now to return to the logician’s conception of contradiction : if there is a single contradiction in a text, the whole system collapses, and it does not create a world. Therefore, the text is anti-mimetic. This is what the proponents of unnatural narratology, more particularly Brian Richardson, might say.

---

<sup>5</sup> That of Kripke ; for an application to fiction, see Ryan, 1991, chapter 2.

The logicians' claim is however far too radical for fictional texts. There are many reading strategies that allow readers to deal with contradictions. These strategies, several of which have been described by Jan Alber (2016),<sup>6</sup> fall into several broad kinds. First, there are strategies that attempt to salvage a coherent world, to explain away contradictions. Second, there are strategies that accept contradictions, but try to work around them to salvage a plot. I call these strategies the "Swiss Cheese" conception of storyworlds : it presents areas of unexplainable phenomena, but these areas are surrounded by solid, coherent areas, and they do not infect the whole world, as logicians would have it. And third, there are strategies that give up the notion of world and any attempt at explanation. These strategies may say "this text is pure nonsense" or "this is just words." But they do not necessarily deprive the text of meaning. Readers may find meaning on a metafictional level, or find enjoyment in the inventiveness involved in the creation of nonsense. Alber calls this attitude the Zen way of reading (Alber, 2016, p. 54-56).

## Levels of contradiction

To illustrate the various strategies that allow readers to make sense out of contradictions, let's look at some concrete texts that assert mutually incompatible facts. Contradiction in literature can present various degrees of granularity. On the largest scale, it opposes substantial segments of text to each other. An example is *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) by John Fowles. The last two chapters contain different endings : one in which the lovers, Charles and Sarah, commit to each other after a long separation, and one in which Sarah rejects Charles because she has found a fulfilling life without him. Obviously the two endings cannot be true at the same time, but if we look at them separately, each of them takes place within a perfectly consistent world. The device does not ask the reader to accept logical impossibility, but rather, to weigh the two endings against each other based on such criteria as literary merit or consistency with the personalities of the characters. I call this way of rationalizing the text the "plural worlds" or "forking paths" approach.

A second level of contradiction occurs when individual sentences, rather than entire narrative segments, clash with each other, producing what Brian McHale calls a "world under erasure" : a semantic domain so thoroughly infused with ontological instability that readers cannot tell what exist and what does not. This is a favorite

---

<sup>6</sup> Here is Alber's list. Explanations in square brackets are mine ; those in parentheses are Alber's : A. The blending of frames. [=imagining hybrid entities]B. Generification (evoking generic conventions from literary theory)C. Subjectification (reading as internal state)D. Foregrounding the thematic [as opposed to the mimetic]E. Reading allegorically. F. Satirizing and parodyG. Positing a transcendental realm [such as hell, purgatory or paradise]H. Do it yourself (using the text as construction kit to build your own stories)I. The Zen way of reading [=an aesthetic experience that foregoes logic](Alber, 2016).

technique of the French New Novel. For instance, in Robbe-Grillet's *In the Labyrinth*, a description starts with "outside it is raining" and ends it with "outside the sun is shining" (Robbe-Grillet, 1965, p. 141) without suggesting a passing of time that could explain a change in weather. In another French New Novel, *Le Libera* by Robert Pinget, a female narrator repeatedly contradicts the facts that she reports without apparently realizing the inconsistency of her tale. For instance, the same accident is said to kill a teacher, then to kill a certain student ; it is however not this student who is killed but his brother ; the brother is also found strangled in a field ; a cook is first described as wonderful, then as a disaster ; a school trip takes place both in the spring and the summer. In the case of *Le Libera*, the contradictions could perhaps be explained by assuming that the narrator suffers from dementia, though I don't think this naturalization is very convincing. But in the case of Robbe-Grillet, no world-preserving explanation seems possible. All one can say is that the text presents fragments of different worlds, but these fragments cannot be assembled into a coherent whole. Some readers may rescue the text by interpreting it metatextually as a literary manifesto. According to this reading, the text liberates *écriture*, i. e. writing, from the constraints of representation in order to assert its sovereignty and autonomy. Such an interpretation implicitly rejects narrativity, because there is no narrative without mimeticism,<sup>7</sup> that is, without world-construction. But if one judges by the lack of posterity of the New Novel, fewer and fewer people are willing to read page after page of anti-narrative prose for the sake of a metatextual message that rejects all that makes fiction pleasurable—plot, characters, emotions and suspense—and leaves intact only descriptions, fiction's most dispensable component, judging by some readers' tendency to skip them.

The smallest unit of contradiction is the sentence itself. This is what happens in nonsense poetry :

One tall midget reached up high,  
Touched the ground above the sky,  
Tied his loafers, licked his tongue,  
And told about the bee he stung.<sup>8</sup>

A midget cannot be tall, a loafer, by definition, is a shoe without laces, the ground, also by definition, is below the sky, you cannot lick your own tongue, and while a man stinging a bee is not impossible, it certainly represents an upside-down reality system.

---

<sup>7</sup> Brian Richardson (2016) disagrees with this statement : he believes that anti-mimetic texts can be narrative. This is because he does not distinguish narrativity from fictionality. If one makes this distinction, as I do, texts that systematically build on contradictions are fictional but not narrative.

<sup>8</sup> Posted at Writing Freelancers, <https://writingfreelancers.blogpost.com/2014/12/one-tall-midget-reached-up-high.html>

Another example of sentence-level contradiction is a text by Jonathan Safran Foer titled “Here We Aren’t, So Quickly.” (I do not dare to call it a story). Since “here” is a deictic referring to the speaker’s present position, it is incompatible with the negation of this position expressed by “aren’t” ; and aren’t indicates a static, timeless position, which is incompatible with “quickly,” an adverb that suggests speed of movement through time. Here are some other gems from that text : “I was always struggling to be natural with my hands” “I was always destroying my passport in the wash” ; “Everything else [beside the narrator and his wife being killed in a car accident] happened—why not the things that could have ?” (Foer, 2010, p. 72-73). On this level all possibilities of word-building vanish : the appeal of these verbal artifacts lies in the inventiveness of their absurdity.

None of these examples illustrates what I have called the Swiss Cheese approach : closing one’s eyes on logical impossibilities because they are necessary to the plot. Before I present some examples of this strategy, I propose to take a closer look at what constitutes impossibility with respect of time and space.

## Impossible space

As works by Escher or Magritte have shown, there are many examples of impossible space in the visual arts. What makes these spaces impossible is the violation of the logical law of non-contradiction : not (p and not p). A certain object is both in front of and behind another ; an object occupies different planes of depth ; a staircase goes both up and down from the same point of view. But it is difficult to turn these features into a good story, because a story needs a plot, and a plot is an action that extends in time and not purely in space. There are admittedly many kinds of strange spaces in literature, but being strange does not mean being impossible, especially if we accept Tegmark’s suggestion that the universe could be an empty dodecahedron. Consider these examples :<sup>9</sup>

1. A world with only two, or one dimensions, such as the Flatland and Lineland described in Edwin Abbot’s *Flatland : A Romance of Many Dimensions*. Such worlds are certainly different from our world, but they are easy to imagine, since all it takes to visualize them is to flatten our representation of reality.
2. A world made of more than three dimensions. Such a world can be mathematically described (string theory postulates a universe of 8 to 10 dimensions), but it is impossible to represent for the imagination, if by represent one means “mentally picturing.” In Abbot’s *Flatland*, when the hero A. Square asks

---

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of impossible spaces in literature, see Gomel, 2014. By my criteria however, some of these spaces are unnatural rather than truly impossible, or they exceed human scale.

the inhabitants of a three-dimensional world to take him to a four-dimensional one, they reply that there is no such world. Their refusal suggests that there are worlds that are possible, but that cannot be imagined. These worlds will never inspire illustrations.

3. A world that scrambles real-world geography. Jan Alber, in his discussion of unnatural spaces, mentions a short story by Guy Davenport, "The Haile Selassie Funeral Train," "that turns Europe into an unnatural collage-like zone: from Deauville in Normandy the train passes through Barcelona along the Dalmatian coast, through Genoa, Madrid, Odessa, Atlanta (Georgia, U.S.A) and back to Deauville" (Alber, 2016, p. 199). According to Possible Worlds theory, there is no reason why there could not be a world where the counterparts of real-world cities are distributed in the way suggested in the story.

4. A wormhole universe, allowing one to pass into another universe through black holes, rabbit holes, or secret passages in the back of closets. This is a common theme in fairy tales and young adult literature, for instance "Jack and the Beanstalk," *Alice in Wonderland* and the *Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis, and it does not lead to logical inconsistencies.

5. A world with very strange objects, such as the floating island of Laputa in the realm of Balnirabi in *Gulliver's Travels*, an island that defies the laws of gravity. This one is easy to imagine, and it has inspired many illustrations.

Actually, if one reads the complete description of the coordinates that specify the geographic position of Balnirabi with respect to its neighbor Luggnagg, Luggnagg is both northwest and southwest of Balnirabi.<sup>10</sup> Of course this is a joke, part of the satire of science and cartography that permeates the novel. This logical contradiction does not infect the entire storyworld, and it does not prevent the unfolding of a coherent plot. Rather than accepting impossibility, we can apply one of Alber's strategies : satire and parody.

In *Gulliver's Travels* the impossible coordinates of Luggnagg and Balnirabi are just an isolated example of absurdity, and most readers will not bother to check the description for geometric consistency. In Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, by contrast, spatial impossibility is a central theme. It is represented by a house that is larger on the inside than on the outside. Even though the measured difference remains constant—about an inch—the inside expands into a hallway and then into a labyrinth of seemingly infinite dimensions. An expedition is sent to measure this labyrinth and to create a cinematic record of its configuration, but the exit is never

---

<sup>10</sup> Luggnagg is located at 29 degrees N. and 24 degrees E., and Balnirabi at 46 degrees N. and 177 degrees W., yet the two islands are only separated by 150 miles—something impossible on a globe the size of the Earth. These observations led the geographer John Robert Moore to conclude that Luggnagg is both northwest and southwest of Balnirabi (1941, p. 226).



found, and many of the explorers disappear or become insane. The structure of the house is replicated on the level of the book as a material object through an outside—the cover—visibly shorter than the pages of the inside. The impossible character of the house does not extend to the rest of the storyworld : it is the only one that violates the laws of geometry. But it opens the door to other kinds of paradoxes. For instance, the novel is heavily focused on visual media, but its narrator is supposed to be a blind man, a connection that challenges verisimilitude. The novel consists of several stories within stories, but it lets characters communicate across ontological levels. And its typological presentation divides the page into multiple subspaces that prevent the linear reading protocols traditionally required by both narrative and books. Quite often, the reader does not know what text should be read first. Yet the novel retains enough of a plot to avoid being overtaken by contradiction. In its limitation of the impossible to specific areas, without letting contradiction contaminate the entire storyworld, it is a classic case of Swiss-cheese world. Frankly, I have no clue what a narrative with a completely impossible space would be like.

## Impossible time

It is very difficult to tell what an impossible time would be because we know so little about the nature of time. As St Augustine wrote : “What then is time ? If no one asks me, I know : if I wish to explain it to one that asketh, I know not” (*Confessions*, book xi) It seems intuitive that time flows, but its directionality is debatable : does it flow from the past to the future, or from the future to the past ? The laws of physics are neutral on that matter, they work the same way one direction or the other. The only law that presupposes a directionality of time is the second law of thermodynamics, which says that the entropy of a close system is steadily growing. Translated in lay terms, this means that systems evolve from order to chaos, so order is in the past and chaos in the future. On the other hand, if time is the fourth dimension of a totality called spacetime, as Einstein conceived it, time does not flow at all, and it becomes possible to travel through time in the same way we travel through space.

Staying true to my principle that impossible time requires logical contradiction, I would regard as unnatural rather than impossible a story by Borges titled “The Secret Miracle.” In this story a writer is condemned to death before he can finish a play that will justify his life. He asks God to give him time to finish it before his execution, which is planned for the next day, and his wish is granted. While a day is measured by the clock, an entire year passes in the character’s mind, and he is able to finish his play. Is this a case of impossible time ? I don’t think so. It is rather an extreme case of a contrast that most of us experience occasionally, the contrast between subjectively experienced time and objectively measured clock time.

On the other hand, I would regard as impossible the treatment of time in the film *Groundhog Day*. In this film a cranky TV weatherman named Phil Conner must travel to Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, to broadcast the annual event on February 2 of a groundhog who comes out of his burrow to predict the weather. If he sees his shadow he will retreat into his burrow and there will be 6 more weeks of winter. The event has become a popular folk festival. But Phil Conner finds it stupid and behaves unpleasantly toward everybody. When he wakes up the next day it is still February 2, and he must repeat the ritual. And so on for many days, until he becomes more pleasant and falls in love with a woman on his TV team. Then when he wakes up, miraculously, it is February 3 : he has been freed from the time loop. What makes this use of time impossible is that Phil Conner is the only one who relives the same day over and over again ; while he participates for the umpteenth time in the silly ritual, the other characters do it for the first time and are all excited. For Phil Conner, this is not a matter of subjectively experiencing time but of objective repetition. It follows that on any morning in the time loop, the emerging of the groundhog from his burrow has/has not yet happened.

What about novels in which time moves backwards, as in Martin Amis' *Time's Arrow* and Philip K. Dick *Counterclock Time* ? If time has no inherent direction, aren't these novels just as possible as narratives where time moves as we know it ? To give a feeling that time moves backward, these novels must invert several arrows : the biological arrow, which makes life proceed from death to birth ; the arrow of social scripts, which makes healthy people get sick when they go to the doctor, and the chronological arrow, which inverts the order of historical events, so that the defeat of Germany in WWII precedes the rise of Nazism (see Ryan, 2009). But these novels never manage to follow all the consequences of a reversal of time. For instance, they do not reverse the cognitive arrow, according to which we know the past but not the future. If they did, the characters would be not only amnesiac about their past, they would have no reason to act, since the purpose of action is to influence the future. If the cognitive arrow is inverted, the future is already written and there is no way to avoid it. Amis recognizes this by making his hero a completely passive character. Still, I don't think that it is possible to represent a reversal of time in all its implications, and therefore, all these novels present logical loopholes. This is why they can be considered a case of impossible time.

For most people, the first idea that comes to mind as example of impossible time is time travel. Actually, Einstein's special theory of relativity from 1905 suggested the possibility of time travel into the past ; and the mathematician Kurt Gödel pondered the possibility of time travel into the future. And indeed, if time is conceived as the fourth dimension of a totality called spacetime, travel through time poses little problems to the imagination, since we can move across it as we do across space. As

long as the time traveler remains a passive observer, time travel is merely unnatural, but if the time traveler can change the past, this leads to logical contradiction. This situation is epitomized by the grandfather paradox : you travel into the past and kill your grandfather. Therefore, you are never born and cannot travel into the past. Therefore, your grandfather is not killed, you are born, and you travel into the past. And so, on ad infinitum. The film *Back to the Future* is a playful allusion to this scheme. The hero, Marty McFly, time-travels from a shopping mall in 1985 called "Twin Pines," and lands in 1955, crashing into one of the pines. There he has an affair with his future mother, but he soon realizes that if he wins her over, she will not marry his future father and he will never be born. Therefore, he arranges for his father to save his future mother from attackers and win her love. Then he returns to the future, but when he gets there the "Twin Pines" shopping center has been renamed "Lone Pine." And Marty's whole family have become successful individuals rather than the losers they were before. The Twin Pines/Lone pine contrast symbolizes the logic-defying potential of time travel, but the narrative places the phenomenon of time travel in the service of a good plot, and it limits contradiction to specific holes in the fabric of the storyworld.

The same can be said of a novel by Emmanuel Carrère titled *La Moustache*. It is considered an axiom by philosophers that the past is written once for all and cannot be changed. Carrère's novel explores the trauma that would result if the past could be changed for one person, but remained stable for all others. A tragic chain of events is set in motion when the narrator decides to shave the moustache he has been wearing for ten years to surprise his wife. But when his wife comes home, she shows no surprise at all. The narrator suspects that she is playing a trick on him, but the next day at work his colleagues also behave as if nothing had changed. This is only the beginning of an inexorable process that disintegrates the narrator's personal history piece by piece and replaces it with another life. At the end of the novel, even events told at the beginning are negated : the novel has become a self-destructing artifact. Its tragic character derives from the fact that the narrator is the only person who loses his past life ; for all others, what happened cannot be changed. Here again, impossibility is restricted to certain areas, and it does not prevent inferences based on logic or life experience for the areas that remain unaffected. In other words, it does not cancel what I have called the principle of minimal departure (Ryan, 1991).<sup>11</sup> Contradiction is not used for its own sake, as it is in the New Novel or in nonsense poetry, but as a foundation for a plot that grabs the reader's attention with suspense, emotional involvement, and a deeply

---

<sup>11</sup> The principle of minimal departure posits that when constructing a fictional world, readers should construct it as close as possible to the real world, and accept only those changes mandated by the text (Ryan, 1991, ch. 3). The principle is inspired by David Lewis' "Truth in Fiction" (1978).

philosophical question : What would happen to your sense of identity if your past were taken away from you ?

## Impossible texts

All the texts I have discussed so far actually exist ; while they describe unnatural or partially impossible worlds, or even no world at all, they remain writeable, and they are therefore possible fictions. But what about texts so paradoxical that they could never be written ? Inventing texts that can only exist in the imaginary mode is one of the favorite games of Jorge Luis Borges' imagination. Most of these fictional fictions involve a form of infinity. The most celebrated of them is the novel "The Garden of Forking Paths," written by the Chinese author T'sui Pen and mentioned in the eponymous short story.

In all fictions, each time a man meets alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others ; in the work of the virtually impossible-to-disentangle Ts'ui Pen, the character chooses—simultaneously—all of them. *He creates*, in this way, 'several futures,' several times, which themselves proliferate and fork. This is the explanation for the novel's contradictions. ...In Ts'ui Pen's novel, all the outcomes in fact occur ; each is the starting point for further bifurcations. Once in a while, the paths of the labyrinth converge : for example, you come to this house, but in one of the possible pasts you are my enemy, in another, my friend. (Borges, [1944] 1999, p. 95)

The basic principle of "The Garden of Forking Paths" is the spatialization of time. This is what creates contradictions. In space, you can come to a house through different routes, because space has three dimensions. But in time, since time has only one dimension, you can only reach a certain state through a unique history. If you could reach a house through both a path where you are my friend, and a path where you are my enemy, this would mean that you have two distinct pasts and two distinct biographies. But since you can have only one past, the two paths must collapse, which means that you must be both my friend and my enemy—an obvious contradiction. Possible Worlds Theory would take care of this problem by saying that there are two distinct worlds, two distinct houses, and two counterparts of the same individual. In one world you come to the house as my friend, and in the other your counterpart comes to the house as my enemy. But in Borges' description, there is only one world, therefore this world is full of contradictions. In fact, one could say that there is no world at all, because in the Garden of Forking Paths, all propositions and their negation are true. But the contradictions created by the merging of paths is not the only reason why T'sui Pen's novel is an impossible text. What makes this

text impossible to write is its ambition to capture possibility in its totality, a task that would require infinite time.

Another of Borges' impossible creations is the Book of Sand, also mentioned in an eponymous story. This book has neither beginning nor end : wherever one opens it, there are always some pages between the cover and the current page, and when one turns a page, one lands at any distance from the previous page, so that a complete and sequential reading becomes impossible.

In "The Book of Sand" infinity concerns the book as a physical object. In my next example, infinity involves the act of narration. In an essay titled "Partial Magic in the Quixote," Borges claims that in *The Arabian Nights*, on the six hundred and second night, Scheherazade tells the Sultan her own story. This leads to infinite recursion :

On that night, the King hears from the Queen her own story. He hears the beginning of the story, which comprises all the others and also—monstrously— itself. Does the reader clearly grasp the vast possibility of this interpolation, the curious danger ? That the Queen may persist, and the motionless King hears forever the truncated story of *The Arabian Nights*, now truncated and circular. (Borges, [1962] 1993, p. 193-196)

If Scheherazade really told her own story on the six hundred and second night, *The Arabian Nights* would endlessly repeat itself, and it would never get beyond that night. That's why it is truncated. But *The Arabian Nights* exists, it is a finite book, and it has one thousand and one nights. How can this be explained ? I checked the book and found out that on the six hundred and second night Scheherazade continues the story of the preceding night, which has nothing to do with herself and the Sultan. The whole scenario was made up by Borges.

While impossible texts cannot exist in the real world, because of their infinity, they can be described, and as my examples demonstrate, they can exist in fictional worlds. Tsui Pen's novel "The Garden of Forking Paths" is a real object within the world of the story by the same name. The same can be said of "The Book of Sand." In both cases, the world of the embedding story is a relatively realistic world that contrasts with the impossible nature of the virtual embedded text. These impossible fictions are therefore the holes in a Swiss Cheese configuration.

\*

The preceding discussion has covered several types of fictions :

1. Texts with a normal ontology : these texts project a world similar to the real world, and they represent events that could happen in the real world. Example : *Madame Bovary*.

2. Unnatural texts : these texts project a world that changes the physical laws of the real world or introduce new supernatural species. Examples : Fairy tales, Kafka's "Metamorphosis."

3. Texts with multiple worlds of type 1 or 2. Example : *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

4. Swiss cheese configuration : these texts project a world that involves some contradictions, but these contradictions are placed in the service of an otherwise coherent plot. The reader adopts an attitude of not asking too many questions. Examples : *La Moustache*, Time travel stories.

5. Texts without a world or only world fragments : contradictions are created for their own sake, and meaning can only be metatextual or fragmentary. Examples : New Novel, nonsense poetry.

6. Texts that cannot be written and do not exist. But they can be described, and they exist virtually in texts of type 4. Examples : Tsui Pen's novel *The Garden of Forking Paths* in "The Garden of Forking Paths."

If all these types of text are considered fiction, and I think they should, the case of type 5 poses a problem for those definitions of fiction that rely on the concept of world. For instance, PW theory defines fiction as a story told as true of a world other than the actual world (Lewis, 1978). But in type 5, there is no world of which the story can be told as true. This problem can be solved through a broader definition that regards as fictional both world-creating and worldless texts. World-creating texts will then be a special case, a subset of all fictions. The broader definition could go like this : [A] *A fiction is a text that is openly not told as true of the actual world (therefore, not told to be believed)*. The special case would be definition [B] : *A fiction is a text that is openly told as true of a non-actual possible world (therefore, told for make-believe)*. Worldless texts satisfy A, and world-based texts satisfy both A and B. Or to present this in terms of set theory, the set of all fictional texts contains a very large subset that occupies most of its area : the texts that create a world.

## BIBLIOGRAPHIE

---

Abbot Edwin A., *Flatland : A Romance of Many Dimensions* (1884), New York, Dover Publications, 1992.

Alber Jan, *Unnatural Narrative : Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2016.

Amis Martin, *Time's Arrow*, New York, Vintage Books, 1991.

Augustine, St. *Confessions*, Book XI. <https://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/confessionsaug/full-text/book-xi/>

Bell Alice, and Marie-Laure Ryan, eds, *Possible Worlds Theory and Contemporary Narratology*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2019.

Binet Laurent, *Civilizations*, Paris, Grasset, 2019.

Borges Jorge Luis, *Labyrinths* (1962), New York, Modern Library, 1993.

Borges Jorge Luis, *Collected Fictions* (1944), trans. by Andrew Hurley, London, Penguin Books, 1999.

Carrere Emmanuel, *La Moustache* (1986), Paris, Folio, 2005.

Danielewski Mark Z., *House of Leaves*, New York, Pantheon, 2000.

Dick Philip K., *Counter-Clock World*, New York, Random House, 1961.

Dolezel Lubomír, *Heterocosmica : Fiction and Possible Worlds*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.

Eco Umberto, *The Role of the Reader : Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984.

Foer Jonathan Safran, "Here We Aren't, So Quickly", *The New Yorker* (June 14 and 21, 2010), p. 72–73.

Fowles John, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), Chicago, Signet Books, 1980.

Goldstein Rebecca, *Incompleteness : The Proof and Paradox of Kurt Gödel*, New York, Norton, 2005.

Gomel Elana, *Narrative Space and Time : Representing Impossible Topologies in Literature*, London, Blackwell, 2014.

Kripke Saul, "Semantical Considerations on Modal Logic", *Acta Philosophica Fennica* 16 , 1963, p. 83–94.

Lewis David K., "Truth in Fiction", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15, 1978, p. 37–46.

---, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1986.

McHale Brian, *Postmodernist Fiction*, New York, Methuen, 1987.

Moore John Robert, "The Geography of Gulliver's Travels", *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 40 (2), 1941, p. 214–228.

Pavel Thomas, *Fictional Worlds*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1986.

Pinget Robert, *The Libera Me Domine (Le Libera)* (1968), trans. by Barbara Wright, New York, Red Dust, 1978.

Ramis Harold (dir.), *Groundhog Day*, prod. Trevor Albert and Harold Ramis, 1993.

Richardson Brian, *Unnatural Voices : Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2006.

---, *Unnatural Narrative : Theory, History and Practice*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2016.

Robbe-Grillet Alain, *For a New Novel : Essays on Fiction* (1963), trans. by Richard Howard, New York, Grove Press, 1965.

---, *Two Novels by Robbe-Grillet : Jealousy and In the Labyrinth*, trans. by Richard Howard, New York, Grove Press, 1965.

Ronen Ruth, *Possible Worlds in Literary Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Roth Philip, *The Plot Against America*, New York, Vintage, 2005.

Ryan Marie-Laure, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory*, Bloomington, University of Indiana Press, 1991.

---, "Temporal Paradoxes in Narrative", *Style* 43.2 (2009), p. 142-164.

Schaeffer Jean-Marie, and Vultur Ioana, "Mimesis", in David Herman, Manfred Jahn and Marie-Laure Ryan (eds.), *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, London, Routledge, 2005, p. 309-310.

Swift Jonathan, *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), London, Penguin Classics, 2003.

Tegmark Max, "Parallel Universes", *Scientific American* (May 2003), p. 40-51.

Walton Kendall, *Mimesis as Make-Believe, On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 1990.

Zemeckis Robert (dir.), *Back to the Future*, prod. by Bob Gale and Neil Canton, 1985.

## PLAN

---

- [Levels of contradiction](#)
- [Impossible space](#)
- [Impossible time](#)
- [Impossible texts](#)

## AUTEUR

---

Marie-Laure Ryan

[Voir ses autres contributions](#)

Independent Scholar, marilaur@gmail.com