



WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY

SPOT: Modern Fantasy Miniature Worlds, Eccentricities, & Literary Lore

*Jumping Into Genre: Fantasy
(developing wide reading)*



Fantastic Stories

Fantasy requires the reader to willingly suspend disbelief. Authors create other worlds for characters and readers, asking readers to believe this imaginary world could and does exist within the story. In order for the reader to accept it as so, the author must make the imaginary characters or the imaginary universe so credible that the reader wishes it were true.

Fantasy Play

Young children, as young as two, enjoy fantasy play. They pretend to be animals or other persons that could be real (cat, daddy) or imagined (unicorns, Superman) and use real objects as something other than what they were intended (box as a car). This type of play often mirrors the fantasy stories children enjoy at bedtime. Researchers have found that fantasy play is the leading type of play in which most children engage during their pre-school years. This fantasy play typically progresses from reality play (use of objects for their intended function) to object fantasy play (attributing a new identity to an object, e.g., cupboard as an oven) to person fantasy play (pretend roles). By the time children enter kindergarten, fantasy play decreases, as they begin to play board games and participate in other rule-based play.

Fairies and Monsters – Telling the Difference Between Reality and Fantasy

It appears that emotions play a part in causing children difficulty understanding the difference between what is real and what is make-believe. Although children do not eat plastic cookies they are less sure of the perceived monster under the bed.

Researchers have found that children are very accurate when determining the difference between a physical object used in pretend play (a block) and a representation of the object (a car). They are also capable of imagining an object that they have never seen. They are less able to tell the difference between emotionally charged fantasy and reality. When asked to imagine that something was in a box (puppies, monsters) that was emotionally significant, both younger and older children thought that the fantasy items were real. When given a choice of a box to approach, most children chose the imagined positive (puppy) rather than negative (monster). Similarly, when children were asked to imagine a positive (fairy) in one box and nothing in the other box, they were quicker to open the box containing the fairy than the one containing nothing. By mentally creating an image, it was more difficult for children to determine whether it was real or fantastic.

Researchers also found that children had more difficulty telling the difference between reality and fantasy depending on if the event was happy or frightening. Regardless of whether the content was fantasy or real, children were more likely to believe that neutral and happy events (two cats talking; a woman picking an apple) could really occur more often than frightening and angry events (a giant chasing a boy, a boy being arrested). Emotion clearly affected children's judgments.



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There are two thoughts as to why this occurs. First, it is suggested that when children generally become absorbed in fantasy, they suspend the idea that the fantasy is not real. However, when the fantasy elicits fear or negative feelings, children remind themselves that the information is not real in order to reduce their anxiety. Adults use a similar strategy when while watching a horror film by stating, "It's only a movie." Since children also said the frightening or angry real events could not happen, it seems they were applying a general strategy of detaching themselves from negative information, rather than evaluating whether the event was real or not. A second explanation is that children's judgments reflect their wishes for positive events to occur and negative events not to occur. For example, children may know that bunnies wearing dresses and dancing cannot occur, but they may think that it is an appealing idea and want it to occur.

Parents and Reading Habits Influence Children's Beliefs

When researchers compared children's engagement in and beliefs about fantasy with their social and family background, it was clear that children's beliefs were influenced by cultural traditions and parent encouragement. Parents often read books and teach their children about Santa Claus, Tooth Fairy, and other entities, and promote children's beliefs in them. As a result, these children have an increased belief in positive fantasies.

Similarly, parents do not encourage children's belief in monsters. Instead, they read books about characters that overcome their fears. Parents dissuade children from believing in negative fantasy entities as a means of reducing children's anxieties. As a result, children were less likely to think negative fantasy entities were real.

References:

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