CREATING MAGIC AND REALISM IN AIMEE BENDER'S FICTION: CONTINUITY OF A FAIRY-TALE TECHNIQUE

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By

Amber Rookstool
The Honors College
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East Tennessee State University

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Mark Baumgartner, Faculty Mentor

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Michael Cody, Faculty Reader

Fairy-tale scholars and magical realist critics have studied and explored the techniques fictional writers use to create stories that combine magic and realism. Nancy Canepa, Jack Zipes, and Lewis C. Siefert are all fairy-tale experts within the Italian, French, and German traditions. Their scholarship explores complete translations of original tales, including cultural factors in translating, analyses into historical factors reflected in the tales, the historical development of fairy tales, and how the fairy-tale genre works. While the fairy-tale scholars seem to focus on the historicity of the fairy-tale tradition, magical realist scholars dissect and delineate the term "magical realism" due to its ambiguous and complicated origins. Maggie Bowers, Wendy Faris, and Leo D'haen discuss the historical development of magical realism and define the genre in terms of its representation of postmodernism. In studying these scholars' work I have discovered a mechanical similarity between the narrative techniques present in fairy tales and magical realism. Both narrative modes exhibit similar approaches to creating magical tales with realistic descriptions so that the two dissimilar experiences—magic and realism—intertangle. This relationship is easily recognizable in Aimee Bender's contemporary fiction.

Aimee Bender, author of *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake, Willful Creatures, The Girl in the Flammable Skirt, The Color Master*, and other fictional works, exhibits a continuation of the fairy-tale method of storytelling. Despite being labeled as magical realist, Bender acknowledges the presence of fairy-tale elements in her work. In an interview with Sarah Johnson for *Conversations with American Women Writers*, Bender states, "I feel like somewhere along the line I ate fairy tales, I ingested and digested them, and now they're a part of my whole person" (Carney 211). Because of her explicit recognition of the influence of fairy tales on her

writing as a whole, her work creates an intersection of postmodernism, magical realism, and the literary fairy-tale tradition.

To understand the intersectionality of Bender's work, it is important to define and delineate characteristics of her fiction. Postmodernism is a term that describes the literary era post-WWII. This work celebrates fragmentation, defamiliarizes familiar objects, and recognizes itself as a work of literature, a phenomenon called metafiction. Postmodern critics analyze the subjectivity in a writer's representation of the world and how the writer blurs a distinction between genres (Barry 82). Magical realism exists within the postmodern tradition. It combines magic and realism, so that the magic descriptions become strange in nature. Magical realist critics, too, follow the pattern of subjective representation and the blend of magic and realism. Realism, the literary mode to which magical realism references, provides details of realistic impressions and attempts to represent life (Bowers 22). The magic in magical realism refers to extraordinary circumstances that cannot be accounted for through science (20). The first magical realist critic, coining the term in 1923, Franz Roh, was concerned with how an object or world was portrayed by an artist and how it exists in the real world (Reeds 47). As an experimental form, magical realism also draws from the fairy-tale tradition. Most readers are familiar with the fairy tales classified as children's stories or animated in Disney films. However, the reference of fairy tales here pertains to the experimental narrative form established by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European writers, who draw on the oral storytelling tradition and cultural folk tales. Authors within this tradition include the original fairy-tale writer Giambattista Basile, French authors like Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy and Charles Perrault, and German authors like Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. Among others, these authors perpetuated the use of fairy tales and

added new narrative techniques into the genre. Like these authors, Bender, too, continues these techniques and adds to the tradition.

Before discussing the change and continuity that takes place between the fairy-tale tradition and Aimee Bender's fiction, it is important to note the similarity between fairy-tale and magical realist scholars when they discuss the mechanics that create magical tales out of realism. A comparison between Lewis C. Seifert from his essay "Marvelous Realities: Reading the *Merveilleux* in Seventeenth-Century French Fairy Tales," and Wendy B. Faris from her essay "Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction," will show how both fairy tales and magical realism work similarly to create fictional stories where magic is inextricable from the real.

Dr. Seifert, professor of French literature at Brown University, discusses the system of *vraisemblance* that French fairy-tale writers use to compose their stories. *Vraisemblance* translates as "plausibility" or "verisimilitude," meaning "next to real." This system operates on an imitation of the real, using analogy or allegory that specifically references empirical reality, meaning the readers' and writers' world (135). These realistic references include contemporary social structures and values and historical events (132). From the use of metaphor, through analogy and allegory, writers present the real as marvelous and the marvelous as real. The marvelous, in other words, the magical, as created by the metaphors, reproduces what is familiar in an unfamiliar, exaggerated form. Fairy tales cannot be reduced into a purely allegorical system. They use the magic for a purpose, and therefore, are innately unreal and magical. This fusing of realistic and magical features is a part of the folkloric narrative (131). Seifert's conversation on the system of *vraisemblance* and the blending of magic and realism, insofar that

the two elements are indistinguishable from one another, demonstrates a forward movement of these techniques as they are also used in magical realism.

Wendy B. Faris, professor of comparative literature at the University of Texas at Arlington, explores the nine main characteristics of magical realism, three of which are magic, descriptions, and blending. The magic, as it exists in magical realism, is any circumstance that cannot be accounted for by the laws of the universe or ordinary logic. She states, “[T]he magic in these texts refuses to be assimilated into their realism,” meaning the magic refuses to be explained by realism so that the real becomes strange and bizarre (168-169). The descriptions, as Faris calls them, constitute realistic details, or references to the real world. She calls these a mimetic quality, which seems to reference the notion of *vraisemblance* as a system of imitation (169). Like the fairy tales, magical realism, too, is grounded in historical events, or events that could have occurred in reality. The genre blurs the images of magic and reality so that a single image presents both magical elements and realistic references. Referring to the real and magical images of magical realist stories, Faris states, “[they] tend to reveal their motivations—psychological, social, emotional, political—after some scrutiny” (171). If a system reveals a motivation, then it is metaphoric by nature, much like the allegorical and analogical system of the fairy-tales.

Through this comparison of Seifert’s and Faris’s explanation of the fairy-tale composition and magical realism characteristics, it is evident that the two genres exhibit a similar use of magic and realism. To achieve the inherent magic within realism, both genres use two approaches: one is the structural use of the frame narrative, the other is the metaphoric system of representation.

The frame-narrative is a structural technique used to box magic and realism in their own places. Composed of stories-within-a-story, the realism is present in the frame story and the magic exists within the embedded stories. This boxing system allows early writers to transition into a form that exploits the real and magic. The historical uses of the frame narrative are to delay acceptance of death and to contextualize the magic within the real. The classical use of the frame-narrative comes from 500 CE. Middle Eastern tale, the *Panchatantra*, translated as *The Five Heads*, is the first known tale to use the frame-narrative. Its Greek, French, and Latin version, called *The Seven Wise Masters*, is one of the first European collection to use the frame-narrative as well. Both stories employ the frame-narrative construction to delay death by execution (McWilliams lix). A more familiar example of this historical use is found in the Middle Eastern tale *One Thousand and One Nights*. In the frame story, a king is paranoid that his wife will cheat on him, so each night he takes a new bride and each morning he kills her. The vizier's daughter, a friend of the king, offers her hand in marriage, and she survives by telling him new stories every night so that he must keep her alive until the next night for her to finish the story. In doing so, the vizier's daughter delays not only her own death, but also, the death of all the maidens in the kingdom (al-Shaykh). When the frame structure came to Italy, an anonymous author uses it in the *novellino*, which is an early form of the novel (McWilliams lix). Then, Giovanni Boccaccio uses the *novellino* as an example and creates his collection of tales called the *Decameron* in twelfth-century Italy. His collection of tales, which contains early forms of fairy tales, uses the frame-narrative structure to both delay death and contextualize the storytelling within a cultural pretext. The storytellers within the collection gather in gardens and outside towns to tell stories while avoiding the reality of the bubonic plague. The black plague

was prominent during Boccaccio's time; therefore, he situates his tales in real details while his characters use stories to distract themselves from the reality of death from the plague (lix).

Heavily influenced by Boccaccio, Giambattista Basile, the first fairy-tale writer, uses the frame-narrative to place the storytelling in real context. In his collection of tales, called *Lo Cunto de li Cunti,* the king gathers storytellers to make the princess laugh (Canepa, *Tale* lv). The stories they tell are all fairy tales, thus making Basile the first fairy-tale writer in seventeenth-century Italy. Basile uses details from seventeenth-century Italian aristocracy and courts that his audience would recognize from their culture (lv). From the sixth to the sixteenth century, writers transition the purpose of the frame-narrative construction. Early forms use the structure to delay death, while later stories use it in contextualizing the storytelling into a realistic reality. Instead of changing the purpose of the frame-narrative after four hundred years, Aimee Bender recalls the historical purposes and continues the use of the structure in both delaying an acceptance of death and contextualizing the events of her stories in realism.

In all of her stories, Aimee Bender uses some form of the frame-narrative construction; however, she does not use the traditional story-within-a-story format. Bender mimics the structure of the frame narrative through flashbacks, foreshadowing, anecdotes, and conceits. The use of these techniques blurs real and magic within a single plotline. The flashbacks and foreshadowing provide realistic details, while the anecdotes and conceits offer relatable metaphoric side-stories.

Flashback and foreshadowing are easiest to recognize in Bender's novel, *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*. The story is told by twenty-two-year-old Rose Edelstein. Rose recounts her childhood memories and explains how she discovers a supernatural ability to taste emotion in food. Rose struggles to maintain a relationship with her mother, father, and brother; and she is

often jealous of the relationship her brother, Joseph, has with their mother. As storytelling techniques, Rose uses flashback and foreshadowing to provide realistic details and characterization of her family members or explain her relationship with them. Rose opens the memory, stating, "It happened for the first time on a Tuesday afternoon, a warm spring day in the flatlands near Hollywood, a light breeze moving east from the ocean and stirring the black-eyed pansy petals newly planted in our flower boxes" (Bender 3). Rose's opening statement provides realistic content for the reader to believe the story is real. Through flashbacks, the reader sees Rose's perception of her parents' relationship and how disconnected she feels towards them. After a passage about the hometown and house, Bender uses a space break to signify Rose is moving back in time when she says, "My birthday is in March" (4). Rose continues the passage and describes an encounter she has with her parents the previous year when her mother wanted to quit her job. Another space break brings the narration up to the current time. This flashback allows the reader to visualize Rose's relationship with her parents. Beginning in the first chapter, the reader understands that Rose's mother is possibly depressed, but as a nine-year-old, Rose sees her mother as always bouncing from occupation to occupation. This detail, revealed during a break in the timeline, demonstrates the distance of Rose's relationship with her mother. In episodes of foreshadowing, Rose reveals details that become important later in the novel. The most important foreshadowing technique Rose uses is the delay of details about her brother's supernatural ability. She states early in the retelling that she only asks her brother for three favors. She saves the revelation of the third one until the last few pages of the novel. This delay of detail allows Rose to delay her acceptance of Joseph's disappearance and symbolic death. Through these examples of flashback and foreshadowing, Bender uses Rose's childhood and adulthood experiences to provide realistic details and create a realistic frame-narrative.

Additionally, Bender employs anecdotes and conceits to provide metaphoric images that offer the magic of embedded stories. In *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*, Rose tells her father a story about a nonexistent student named John Barbaducci (171). She tells her father this story during an awkward moment with him after a practice drive before she takes the test for her driver's license. John Barbaducci could not read because his mother could not afford glasses. His teachers raise money to buy him a pair, and he learns how to read, but when he accidentally steps on them, he no longer learns to read and drops out of school (170-172). This anecdote distracts Rose from feeling like she will eventually disappoint her father. It acts as both an embedded story and a symbolic story. Where the anecdote is used to distract from the natural timeline, Bender uses conceits for readers to better understand relationships through metaphors. The final conceit of the novel explains Rose's relationship with Joseph and their relationship with their magical abilities. Like Rose, Joseph too as a supernatural ability, but his ability allows him to disappear into his environment. Rose compares both of their abilities to a large tree that fell into the ocean. This tree grew on an island, and the islanders worshipped it as a symbol of survival. Rose connects the tree as a symbol of survival for islanders to vending machines as her means to survive tasting emotions to Joseph's means of survival, which was to disappear into a chair. She states, "Was it so different, the way I still loved to eat the food from factories and vending machines? Was it so different than a choice of a card-table chair, except my choice meant I could stay in the world and his didn't?" (Bender, *Lemon Cake* 291-292). This last passage explains the difference between Rose and Joseph. The final comparison of survival through metaphorical connections allows Rose to accept her brother's disappearance as a death, as he no longer exists in the world. In *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*, Bender uses flashbacks and foreshadowing as the frame-story for realistic details, the anecdotes and conceits as embedded

stories for metaphoric details, and all four techniques to delay Rose's acceptance of her brother's death.

In contrast to novel-length stories, Bender uses larger image-level metaphors in her short fiction in addition to flashbacks, foreshadowing, and anecdotes. In the story, "The Girl in the Flammable Skirt," the protagonist describes a story she heard (*Flammable Skirt* 174-175). In this story, two rats discuss eating sugar cubes. One rat becomes disabled with a distended belly and complains about the pain the sugar cubes cause him. The other rat reacts sympathetically, but he is feeling no effects from the sugar. When the first rat asks how the second rat is so fine, the second rat responds, "I didn't, I'm the dog" (175). This conceit offers a purely metaphoric picture, operating on one level as an anecdote within the story, "The Girl in the Flammable Skirt," and on another level as a representation of the narrator and her relationship with her father. Both characters have the same experience, but one becomes hurt because of it and the other transforms. The anecdote and conceit from *Lemon Cake* and conceit from "Flammable Skirt" demonstrate two levels of metaphoric images Bender uses to create magical side-stories. Therefore, Bender uses the frame-narrative structure of fairy-tales in both novel-length stories and short fiction, so that all her stories operate on a fairy-tale structure.

Where Basile's collection of fairy tales uses the frame-narrative to compartmentalize metaphor and real, magic and real, Bender uses the structure to blend magic and real within a single story. On a language level, both fairy-writers and Aimee Bender use word-level, phrase-level, and image-level metaphors to provide the blurring of real and magic. The use of word-level metaphors begins with Giambattista Basile and his formal experimentalism in seventeenth-century Italian literature. Basile's contemporaries wrote in either Latin or Tuscan Italian, as they were the established language for writing. However, Basile writes his collection

of stories, *Tale of Tales*, in Neapolitan, a dialect of Italian spoken in and around Naples (Canepa, *Tale of Tales* xix). Nancy Canepa, Italian and French fairy-tale scholar and translator of Basile's work, describes the language: "The Neapolitan of the *Tale of Tales* articulates itself as the language of both the marvelous and of experience, the language of oral folktales and of childhood" (xviii). The use of the dialect created new possibilities for language to explore its poetic and metaphoric values. The new use of language allows for strange and grotesque descriptions of real objects.

The grotesque descriptions work as word-level metaphors in both Basile's and Bender's stories. Ross Murfin and Supriya Ray identify *grotesque* as

> a term first used in English in the sixteenth century to refer to decorative painting or sculptures mixing human, animal, and supernatural figures … In the seventeenth century, grotesque came to be used more broadly to refer to strangely unusual things or artistic representations, particularly ones involving bizarre or unnatural combinations of characteristics and images. (210)

Where Murfin and Ray explain that painting and sculptures mix human and animal figures, Basile too mixes human and animal figures in his literature. A passage from his story, "The Old Woman Who Was Skinned," describes two old women who look like Billy goats.

> Two old women had retired into a garden overlooked by the King of Strong Fortress's quarters. They were the summary of all misfortunes, the register of all deformities, the ledger of all ugliness. Their tufts of hair were disheveled and spiked, their foreheads lined and lumpy, their eyelashes shaggy and bristly, their eyelids swollen and heavy, their eyes wizened and seedy-looking, their faces yellowed and lined, their mouths twisted and

> deformed and, in short, they had beards like Billy goats, hairy chests, round-bellied shoulders, distorted arms, lame and crippled legs, and hooked feet. (Basile 92)

Basile practices a linguistic approach to the metaphoric representation of these two women. He not only compares them to Billy goats, but also moves into images of body decay. In an article about translating Basile, Canepa describes his use of grotesque imagery: "[T]he specific baroque flavor of even this first passage cannot escape us, with extravagant metaphors and its striking images of a human body in decay" ("From the Baroque" 265). This type of bizarre imagery is also demonstrated in Aimee Bender's fiction. In her story, "Dearth," Bender describes potatoes who resemble human children:

> By the eighth month it was raining outside, and she was having stomach cramps and the potatoes were fully formed, with nails and feet, with eyelids and ears, and potato knots all over their bodies. They rotated their position so that their heads faced the mouth of the pot. On the ninth month, they tumbled out of the pot on the date of their exact birthday and began moving slowly across the floor. (Bender 161)

This passage demonstrates the human-like qualities of these potatoes. They have arms, legs, ears, eyes, faces, and mouths. Bender mixes images of human and potato much like Basile mixes images of woman and goat. However, in this passage, Bender's metaphoric language works on two levels. She uses word-level metaphors to create the grotesque like Basile does, and she uses image-level metaphors to mix the real and the magic. The real detail comes from the descriptions of a symbolic birth. Human fetuses start preparing for birth around eight months so that their heads face the exit. The human gestation period of pregnancy is nine months, so when the potatoes exit the pot on their own after nine months, they mimic a realistic human birth. Through these details of the real, Bender mixes realism and a strange, grotesque existence. The realistic

actions of the magical entities become real in their characteristics, thereby making the magical real.

Bender's imitation of human images and birth within descriptions of the potato children recalls the system of *vraisemblance*, a metaphoric system of representation, established by French fairy-tale writers. The French writers drew from Basile's experimental form. As a result of the metaphoric values of Neapolitan, Basile was able to use the newly available metaphors to reveal, "an ideological subtext in which social practices of the time are parodied and critiques" (Canepa, *Woods* 14). During the sixteenth century, Italy encountered economic and political stress. Spain occupied Italy and the Renaissance was declining. Canepa refers to this time as, "an age wrought by socioeconomic turmoil" (*Tale* xlvii). She explains how Basile parodied the occupation of Spain, stating, "Basil parodically disfigure[s] representatives of social and political authority and the hierarchies of power in which they operate" (xlvi). Because of the contemporary unrest, Basile included autobiographical themes such as anti-colonial sentiments and social mobility (xlv; xxxvi). Born in the middle class, Basile worked most of his professional life in the courts, which allowed him to gain an understating of the social pressures of the upper class (xxxvi). His audience was familiar with realistic details from the courts and surrounding communities, details that pertain to life in and around Naples and local celebrations (xxxvii-xliii). The French, too, confront social and political dissatisfaction while using contemporary details. Writers, like Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy, critiqued the absolutist and exorbitant rule of Louis XIV (Zipes, "Cross-Cultural Connections" 860). Jack Zipes, a fairy-tale scholar and folklorist, explains, "[French writers] reacted to social and political events with sensitivity, and since this was a period of Louis XIV's great wars that devastated the country and also a period of famine" (860). Louis XIV's reign was wrought with unnecessary expenditures

on *divertissement,* which included efforts to present France as the grandest country and himself as the grandest king. He created decorative medals, statues, monuments, arcs, and parades (Burke 1-37). He also censored art, so that no artist or writer could speak ill of him or France (Zipes, *Beauties* 7). Because of his rule, French writers created the system of *vraisemblance* to both entertain and critique him. Zipes considers Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy to be "an excellent example of how writers regarded the fairy tale as a narrative strategy to criticize Louis XIV" (Zipes, *Beauties* 7). In her tale "The White Cat," Aulnoy comments on Louis XIV's expenditures. In the story, the White Cat hosts a mock naval battle between the cats and rats. She ends the battle when the cat general eats the rat general. Then she tells her guest that it would be a waste to finish the battle and they will save the rats for food later (Aulnoy). In this excerpt, Aulnoy imitates King Louis XIV's mock naval battles that he would hold at Versailles, and in doing, comments on his wastefulness of resources. Aulnoy mixes details of real, historical events with magical creatures, like a princess who was turned into a white cat, and civilized cats and rats. In this way, both real and magic co-exist, and one cannot exist without the other.

The metaphoric system of representation, as demonstrated through Basile and Aulnoy, uses word- and image-level metaphors, both of which combine elements of magic and realism that cannot be separated. The metaphors create a sense of magic, magic that is irreducible, magic as defined by Faris, which means, "something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as we know them" (168). Bender continues the methods of this metaphoric system in her fiction. However, where fairy tales use historical events to create realistic references, Bender uses psychological anxieties. Jo Carney, professor at the College of New Jersey, explains this contrast.

> Canonical fairy-tale protagonists are sent out to conquer visible, monstrous enemies, but the marvels and grotesqueries that Bender's characters confront are manifestations of more daunting but ordinary psychological challenges: how to love and be loved, how to endure grief, how to survive traumatic illnesses and accidents. (224)

The historical realism in fairy tales allows for characters to encounter natural external conflict, like cats fighting rats, but the psychological realism in Bender's tales forces characters to face physical manifestations of internal conflict. Bender's tales actualize the interiority of characters to create external conflict, and she achieves this through metaphors. Bender creates metaphors so that personality traits become a special skill or ability, disability becomes an unnatural or strange struggle, the inability to communicate or an inability to process emotions is represented by an extra burden, a physical deformity, or a bizarre pregnancy.

In the previously discussed novel, *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake,* and a story from *The Color Master* called "Tiger Mending," the characters develop magical abilities from within their personality traits. These traits are unexplainable by science and function on a metaphoric level, thereby continuing the metaphoric system of representation. In *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake,* Rose's brother, Joseph, develops his ability from his personality. Joseph likes to exist on the periphery of society, meaning he seldom has any friends, and he always stays in his room. He becomes a recluse. This character attribute manifests as his ability to disappear. Rose describes his ability as a means to disappear into an object, a rejection of the physics concept that two objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time.

> He was sitting in the chair, the same way a normal person sits in a chair, but when I looked very closely, it seemed like the chair leg vanished right into his shoe. That the chair legs went inside both legs of his pants, and when I looked even closer, I could see

> that he had actually cut holes of the correct size in his pants to place the chair legs through the pants. (188)

It seems as if Joseph disappears into the space of an object. Rose reveals later, “that at other times, he had been the bed, the dresser, the table, the nightstand” (288). He absorbs into the space of an already existing object so that it seems as if he becomes the object. Joseph’s ability to shift inside an object and disappear from the world is a manifestation of his reclusive personality. His magical ability comes from something within himself, and the actualization cannot be explained by science. In the same way, the narrator’s sister in the story, “Tiger Mending,” develops a skill from her personality as a fixer. She listens to people’s problems and helps them in any way she can. Her ability to help people fix problems develops as an external, physical skill. The protagonist explains, “she went to med school for two years before she decided she wanted to be a gifted seamstress” (*Color* 27). The protagonist’s sister has extreme precision and supernatural focus. Because of her extreme talent, the sister is called upon by two Amazonian-looking Malaysian women. They bring the sisters to a natural tiger habitat where the sisters discover that the tigers are arriving “with backs split open, sort of peeled, as if someone had torn them in two” (32). The women ask the seamstress sister to help them sew the backs of the tigers. Only two other women at the site sit with extreme patience to mend the tigers, and the seamstress is needed to help. The seamstress asks her sister to find out why the tigers were arriving with split backs. The narrator explores the wilderness and discovers the tigers yawn so wide, it splits their own backs (36). Because of her personality and supernatural skill, the seamstress helps mend the tigers. Both Joseph and the seamstress develop their abilities from their personality. Joseph, as a recluse, blends into his environment, and the seamstress, a fixer, mends tigers’ backs. The magical talents are a result of real personalities and offer a strange and

magical element to Bender's fiction, reflexive of the metaphoric system of representation established by fairy-tale writers.

Similar to the development of supernatural abilities from personality, a characters' in-born disability manifests as an unnatural struggle, a struggle that leaves the character secluded from society by an uncontrollable defect. In the story, "Faces," the protagonist, named William, cannot read faces. His mother believes he cannot tell his friends apart and worries about him because their relationship is not as close as hers is with her daughter. When she takes him to the doctor, William is unable to distinguish between happy and dead soldiers or find the grandfather and young man in a photograph of a black family. When he narrates his thoughts while looking at these pictures, he states he cannot find the old man because no one has white hair (48). The doctor diagnoses him with "facial illiteracy," explaining that William cannot read emotions on faces. This disability comes from two sources. On one hand, the "facial illiteracy" could be a result of a lack of relationship with his mother. On the other hand, it could be a disability he was born with. The narrator never clarifies a certain point when William develops "facial illiteracy," so it is unclear when this disability originates. It is clear, however, how the disability works. William says,

> There was a moment, once. I was eating dinner with Mom…and Mom looked at me, and then all of the sudden it was like her face melted; the lines around her eyes all pointed down, arrows down her face to the lines around her mouth, which pointed down, and then her chin caught it all like a net, trapping all the down arrows and feeding them back into her jaw and lower lip, which drooped and sank from the weight. (Bender, *Color* 52)

The magic is based on how William sees the world. His vision is distorted as this passage exemplifies, and through the diagnoses of "facial illiteracy" the reader understands his mother's

face does not actually melt. The disconnect between the character and the reader is a characteristic of magical realism, but the linguistic metaphors present here relate back to the grotesque imagery of Basile. William's disability is an unnatural struggle with realistic elements. In addition to manifestations from personality, ability, and disability, Aimee Bender uses two more psychological anxieties more often than the others. Where the personality and ability manifest as productive skills, an inability to communicate or develop a relationship and an inability to process emotions result in more graphic metaphors as strange objects, physical deformities, and bizarre pregnancies.

A common motif in Bender's fiction is communication or lack thereof. If a character has an inability to communicate or develop a relationship, then magic creates an avenue to communicate or symbolizes the struggle to communicate. Referring once again to *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake*, Rose's ability is a manifestation of her familial relationships. Rose is not close with either parent. Her inability to emotionally connect with her family is the realistic detail that leads to the actualization of her emotion-tasting ability. Specifically, Rose does not understand her mother, but through tasting the food her mother cooks, Rose discovers her mother's emptiness and depression when she tastes the lemon cake her mother bakes for her birthday.

> But the day was darkening outside, and as I finished that first bite, as that first impression faded, I felt a subtle shift inside, an unexpected reaction. As if a sensor, so far buried deep inside me, raised its scope to scan around, alerting my mouth to something new. Because the goodness of the ingredients—the fine chocolate, the freshest lemons—seemed like a cover over something larger and darker, and the taste of what was underneath was beginning to push up from the bite … in drifts and traces, in an unfurling, or an opening,

> it seemed that my mouth was also filling with the taste of smallness, the sensation of shrinking, of upset, tasting a distance … [T]here was a kind of lack of wholeness to the flavors that made it taste hollow. (Bender, *The Particular Sadness* 9-10)

The particular words of "smallness," "shrinking," "distance," "lack of wholeness," and "hollow," unconventionally describe the flavor of cake. From this moment forward, Rose tastes every emotion in every food she eats. Unlike nine-year-old Rose, the reader recognizes the described taste as depression. Because the reader can understand but Rose cannot, Bender demonstrates Rose's inability to connect with her mother. The magical ability to taste emotion becomes Rose's avenue to understand her. A child's inability to connect with their parent is also evident in the story, "The Girl in the Flammable Skirt." In this story, the narrator lives with her paraplegic father. She struggles to maintain a relationship with her father, and this conflict manifests itself as a stone backpack. The daughter repeatedly tries to understand her father, but when he does not respond to her efforts, she becomes nervous. Her father fusses at her for this, further distancing their relationship. Their relationship is so dysfunctional, the daughter hides a boy in her closet because she cannot talk to her father about boys or healthy relationships. The mental anxieties and inability to effectively communicate that exist within a relationship such as theirs manifests itself as an impossibly heavy backpack, described as, "solid rock. And dense, pushed out to its limit, gray and cold to touch. Even the zipper handle was made of stone and weighed a ton" (Bender, *Flammable Skirt* 173). The backpack appears in the story with no pretext: "When I came home from school for lunch my father was wearing a backpack made of stone" (173). The girl does not question the composition or magical existence of the stone backpack but accepts the explanation that it is a thing her father owns, and she takes it from him, stating, "Take that off, that's far too heavy for you" (173).When the daughter takes on the weight of the stone backpack,

she symbolically takes on the pressures of her disabled and ailing father. The stone backpack acts as an avenue for communication because with taking on its weight, the girl takes on the weight of her father's health conditions. Although she relieves him of the weight of the backpack, the father does not act appreciative or acknowledge her efforts for a relationship; thus the stone backpack becomes a physical representation of their inability to relate. As presented in *Lemon Cake* and "The Girl in the Flammable Skirt," Bender draws magical abilities and magical objects out of dysfunctional parent-child relationships in an attempt to create a pathway for understanding.

Where parent-child relationships grow magical avenues in attempt for reparation, Bender explores the physical ramifications from lack of communication in husband-wife relationships. In the story, "What You Left in the Ditch," the husband, Steven, returns home from war without lips (Bender, *Flammable Skirt* 21). Steven's missing lips symbolize the effect war had on him, and his inability to communicate with his wife on the matter. His missing lips perpetuate their inability to communicate and provide a magical event based on real conflict. While Steven was away at war his wife, Mary, had rejected any notion of hope for his safe return. She prepared for his death and imagined his stiff legs and color-drained body while she knitted sweaters for him. These sweaters become a symbol of her rejection of hope for his safe return. His lipless return left her feeling unloved, and she hungers for affection. She expresses her desires with the store clerk when she asks him if he would give her mouth-to-mouth if she was drowning (29). Mary never cheats on Steven. When Mary buries the sweaters she had knitted, she finally allows herself to feel hopeful about Steven's return. Not only were Steven's missing lips a symbol of their communication, but they were also a perpetuator in continuing a lack of communication. After Mary accepts the changes in their relationship and communication, she can move into a

new relationship with him. Instead of using the magical phenomenon as an avenue to connect the two as with the parent-child relationships, Bender uses the deformity to continue the conflict between husband and wife.

Lastly, Bender creates physical deformity and bizarre pregnancies from a character's inability to process grief, grief also being a realistic psychological anxiety. In the same way that Bender forces Mary to process her emotions through Steven's deformity, she forces other characters to process death of a family member. As mention previously, in the story, "Dearth," the potatoes undergo a symbolic pregnancy, fully forming as anthropomorphic potato children at nine months. Their birth represents a bizarre pregnancy for the unnamed protagonist of the story. Before their human-like formation, these potatoes randomly appear in the pot on the woman's stove. The woman, who despises potatoes, tries to give them to her neighbor, throws them out, runs them over, mails them to Ireland, chops them up, and eventually eats one. Except for the one she eats, the potatoes continuously return (*Willful Creatures* 154-156). After their birth, the woman grows fond of the potatoes. Eventually, the potatoes remind her of a memory she had repressed.

> She had never seen them wet before, and rain, falling on their dirty potato bodies, smelled just like Mother at the sink, washing. Mother who had died so many years ago, now as vivid as actual, scrubbing potatoes at the kitchen sink before breakfast. How many times had she done that? Year after year after year. Lighting the new fire of the morning. Humming. Her skirt so easy on her waist. Her hands so confident at the sink. They were that memory, created. Holding their potato hands up, they let the rain pour down their potato arms, their potato knees and legs, and the woman breathed in the smell of them,

> over and over, as deeply as she could. For here was grandmother, greeting her grandchildren. (169)

Through this revelation, the reader infers that the woman's mother used to bake potatoes a lot when she was a child. It seems as if the woman stopped liking potatoes when her mother to avoid coping with her death. Therefore, the presence of the potato children forces the woman to be reminded of her mother and cope with memories she had long repressed. Through this symbolic and bizarre pregnancy, Bender provides the character with a vehicle to cope with grief. In another story, "Marzipan," Bender represents coping with grief in two ways: one way is through a bizarre birth, and the other constitutes a physical deformity. The physical deformity is presented first and perpetuates the circumstances for the pregnancy. The narrator begins:

> One week after his father died, my father woke up with a hole in his stomach. It wasn't a small hole, some kind of mild break in the skin, it was a hole the size of a soccer ball and it went all the way through. You could now see behind him like he was an enlarged peephole. (Bender, *Flammable Skirt* 39)

The father becomes disfigured due to the death of his father. The realism, here, is that the reader understands death is accompanied by feelings of emptiness, and these feelings become manifested by a physical deformity where the father's abdomen completely disappears. In the same way that Steven's lips prompted issues with his wife, the father's missing stomach prompts the mother to cope with grief over the death of her mother? Soon after the father develops the hole, the mother learns she is pregnant at age forty-three (41). When she gives birth, she does not push out an infant, but a grown woman. The mother identities the woman as her mother who had passed away the year before and for whom they had already had a funeral. The appearance of the grandmother comes from the mother being forced to cope with grief once again. At the birthing

the father states the appearance of the grandmother is his fault and lifts his shirt (43). This action indicates the two metaphors are intricately related. Because of his father's death, the father feels empty. Because of their relationship, the mother must witness her husband's emptiness as a physical deformity. Seeing the manifestation of emptiness caused by grief, the mother is forced to process her own grief caused by her mother's death, a grief she seems to have repressed for a while. The repression of the emotions is symbolized in the marzipan cake from the funeral hidden in the freezer. After the birth of her mother, the mother takes the cake out and the family eats some slices (49-53). The bizarre birth that occurs here is a manifestation of the grieving process. Just as the woman from "Dearth" is reminded of her mother's memory, the mother in "Marzipan" confronts her mother post-death and together they deal with her death. In both stories, Bender creates a magical phenomenon—a physical deformity or bizarre pregnancy—from the reality of the grieving process.

As demonstrated in each story, Bender continues the fairy-tale system of imitation of reality through the use of grotesque imagery and psychological realism. Every supernatural ability, circumstance, deformity, or pregnancy is grounded in a real human emotion that readers recognize even when the character may not. Although Bender changes the realm of realism used, she preserves the metaphoric system of representation in her contemporary fiction.

Not only does Bender continue the use of a metaphoric representational system, she also maintains the baroque style of fairy tales and the amending purpose of magic. The stylistic mode of fairy-tales is pessimistic. Canepa, describing Basile's work, states, "[He] seasons fairy-tale optimism with a healthy dose of baroque pessimism" (Canepa, "From the Baroque" 281). This description of Basile also works for Bender. Jo Carney describes Bender's work in her article, stating, "Bender refuses her readers the proverbial fairy-tale ending, focusing on her characters'

faltering quests rather than facile resolutions" (Carney 224). In each of Bender's tales, the characters are confronted with what they despise most or that with which they cannot cope. Despite the contrasting mode, the magic in fairy tales and Bender's fiction serves to help the characters. Fairy-tale writers and Aimee Bender use magic as a vehicle for social or personal achievement. Canepa calls the literary fairy tale "a reality where magic became the only viable means to achieve social betterment and a privileged life" (*Tale* lxvi). Primarily written during times of sociopolitical crises with an aristocratic audience, fairy tales often attack themes of dissatisfaction with courtly life, the struggle of the upper class, and an inability to control social standing. The magic exists to provide control to the characters' lives. In the previously mentioned story from *Tale of Tales*, "The Old Woman Who Was Skinned," two sisters live alone. When the king hears one of the sisters singing, he falls in love with her. She tricks him into sleeping with her, but upon discovering how ugly she is, he throws her out a window. She survives and seven fairies transform her into a beautiful young maiden who marries the king. In the example of "The White Cat," the existence of the White Cat allows for the prince to control his fate. The White Cat gives the prince the prizes he needs to win each challenge his father gives him and his brothers. Because of the White Cat, the prince becomes king. In both instances, the protagonists move up the social ladder with the help of magical creatures. Similarly, the magical entities in Bender's work aid the protagonist to accept whatever it is they fear, ignore, or hate. The daughter in "The Girl in the Flammable Skirt" faces her father's inability to connect, and the wife in "What You Left in the Ditch" grows to accept their marriage will never be the same. Husband and wife recognize their failed marriage in "The Red Ribbon." Mothers cope with their mother's death, as in "Dearth," and "Marzipan." Fathers grieve, as in "Marzipan," and parents face child-defects and the resulting death in "Ironhead." Mothers

discover their children's disability as in "Faces." Protagonists realize the potential of their extraordinary talents in "Tiger Mending" and "The Color Master." In this metaphoric and fundamental way, Bender carries on the style and methods of magic-building and the purpose of magic from the fairy-tale tradition into the magical realist genre.

Aimee Bender's fiction demonstrates a connection between fairy tales and magical realism through structural and linguistic construction. Bender preserves the models established by the fairy-tale tradition in postmodern literature. The frame-narrative, a nearly one-thousand-five-hundred-year-old technique, survives through her work using postmodern techniques. The early frame-narrative structure set up storytelling situations that allow magic and realism to be separated by conventional boundaries. Magic exists within the embedded stories, and realism exists within the frame-story. Bender mimics the structure of the frame-narrative through flashbacks, foreshadowing, anecdotes, and conceits. These techniques mix magical and realistic details and blur the line between the frame story and embedded stories. The constant movement from story to story using these techniques creates a sense of fragmentation and disturbs the natural timeline. Faris and D'haen claim this phenomenon as both postmodern and magical realist in that it causes discontinuity and disruption of time (173,192). Although Bender changes the format of the frame-narrative, she maintains the integrity of the structure and continues its historical purpose to both delay death and contextualize magic within realism. Before the European fairy-tale was established, the frame-narrative was used to delay death. When Basile begins the fairy-tale tradition, the frame-narrative is employed to contextualize realism. Now in modern literature, Bender uses the structure for both reasons.

Furthermore, Bender continues to use a metaphoric representational system to create magic out of realism through language. Beginning with linguistic experimentation from Basile,

which leads to the system of *vraisemblance* in French fairy tales, Aimee Bender uses the metaphoric system to create grotesque, strange, and magical images from realistic references and details. Her use of the metaphors demonstrates a new system of representation, looking at psychological and personal details to provide realism, rather than historical events. The difference can be explained by the properties that define her work as magical realist. Metaphoric images, as presented in magical realist work, is “tempered by the more playful mood of surrealism” (Faris 168). Surrealism, a contemporary literary movement to magical realism, opts to explore the non-realist, non-physical aspect of life, like memory, and often creates images to demonstrate the properties of the non-corporeal subject (Bowers 23). Magical realism, on the other hand, creates the paradoxical relationship between magic and reality. Rather than demonstrate properties of psychological anxieties, the magical images form from psychological realism that Aimee Bender uses offer a visible, physical manifestation of a character’s inner conflict. Therefore, Bender’s use of psychological realism is postmodern. Despite this difference of realism from fairy tale to magical realism, Bender still maintains principles of the representational system established by the fairy-tale tradition, using grotesque imagery, metaphor, and employing magic for amelioration.

The techniques used in early fairy-tales are postmodern in nature. Nancy Canepa states, “Basile’s narrative strategies suggestively foreshadow certain postmodern techniques” (*Tale* li). Her claim is evident in the frame-narrative structure and metaphoric language. Within the frame-story, the characters are aware of the storytelling; therefore, they serve as an early form of metafiction, a story aware that it is a story. The metaphoric representation system offers a parody on historical reality as fairy-tale writers used it to critic sociopolitical issues of their nations. Grotesque language, developed by Basile, creates a world familiar and unfamiliar to the reader.

The grotesque element is a characteristic of magical realism, in that “the grotesque necessarily evolves out of humorous representations of a world familiar to the reader” (“Grotesque” 210). Magical realists tend to focus on the representations of the world by the artist, including grotesque representations, and postmodernists recognize grotesque as a technique for defamiliarization. Therefore, the language, too, offers an example of early postmodern parodic, metaphoric, and grotesque literature. The techniques that create a co-existence of magic and realism are also the techniques that represent early forms of postmodern characteristics. Aimee Bender’s use of these techniques—frame-narrative and metaphoric representational system—to mix real and magic signifies intersectionality between magical realism and fairy tales. The narrative strategies as explored in this essay, demonstrate that magical realism, as Aimee Bender uses the genre, is the postmodern fairy-tale.

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