

Much of the most biting and profound fantasy is written in reaction to other works. This story, in conscious imitation of Fritz Leiber's Fahrd and Grey Mouser world, reacts against stories in which characters living in the distant past or in a world wildly different than our own think and act like twentieth-century Americans, JOANNA RUSS makes her point by posing the question: What if all those wild accounts of devils, angels, demons, and other creatures that we find in myths and legends are based upon realistic observation by people whose perceptual systems were different than ours are today? Her answer is disturbingly plausible. The best known of Joanna Russ' fantasies are among her "Alyx" stories, some of which are fantasy and some of which are science fiction. Others of her fantasy stories from the last twenty-five years, of ghosts and vampires and werewolves, are collected in her book, The Zanzibar Cat. Here she manipulates setting and character in a wholly original manner, giving us a jolt of additional wonder at the end.

The Man Who Could Not See Devils **BY JOANNA RUSS**

My father, who saw devils at noonday, cursed me for a misbegotten abortion because I did not see them. But I saw nothing. Incubi, succubi, fiends, demons, werewolves, evil creatures of all sorts might do what they pleased for all of me; I could not eavesdrop on them and holy water turned to only water in my hands, though I have seen the victims carried in, bloodless, the next day, and indeed I carried one home myself, a boy with his throat cut from ear to ear, and that was the only time I got gratitude out of the pack of them. And for nothing.

My neighbors, I mean. "There! There! Don't you see?" they'd cry, the girls tumbling to get away from the hearth, the houselady fainting. "Don't you see?" But I saw nothing. Cats were possessed, strange shapes hovered in the air; in broad daylight one head turned, and then another, and then another, as I tried in vain, always in vain. "Don't you see?" Until I was twelve I lived terrified that I might bump into something some broad morning, out of sheer ignorance, and was never let abroad by myself. Then, when I was twelve and a half (if I had not been an only son, they might have let me alone, but I was too precious) a neighborhood conjuror tried to de-hex me of what he assured my parents was a particularly virulent curse—and failed—and I spent a night alone, by pure mistake, in a haunted

ravine, trembling at every sound but emerging whole, and then repeating the experiment with a growing conviction that if I could not see the devils, perhaps it was because they could not see me.

When I told my father, he beat me.

“Those who cannot see devils, cannot see angels!” he roared.

I replied in a desperate fury that I should be glad enough to see some human beings, and when he reached for the poker I asked him, with mad inspiration, if he would like to spend the night in the ravine with me.

He turned pale. He said I was probably crazy and ought to be put to bed.

I said he would have to chain me up; but he could not do that every night; and as soon as I was free I would spend every night out in the woods and tell him about it in the daytime.

He said suicide was a sin.

I said I did not care.

“My poor boy,” he said, trembling, “my poor boy, don’t you see? Satan is deceiving you and giving you a false sense of security. Some day-”

“Show me Satan,” I said.

“A ghost passed through this room three nights ago,” he said, getting down on his knees, his beard wagging. “A ghost shaped like the body of a drowned girl, shining with a green light and we all saw it.”

“I saw *you*,” I said. “And pretty fools you looked too, let me tell you, gaping at nothing.”

“And it was wearing a white dress covered with seaweed,” he went on in a singsong, “that shone in the darkness, and it passed through the candles and one by one they went out” (I had not seen that either) “and when it passed them they sprang up again and we saw each other’s faces and we were all pale, all, all, except you” and to my amazement he burst into tears.

“I can’t help that,” I said, feeling uncomfortable.

“Didn’t you see anything?” he said.

“Nothing.”

“Anything?”

“Nothing.”

I had never seen my father cry before, or since; in fact, this incident is my one even vaguely pleasant recollection of him, for the next day he was altogether himself. He thrashed me, thoroughly and formally, for no particular reason, and began that monotonous series of cursings that I have mentioned before. The story of the ghost (a distant cousin of my mother’s) went the rounds of the village but with improvements—she had hovered over me, calling me by name; she had passed right through me; she had apostrophized me as one deaf and blind-

In three days no one would speak to me.

When I was sixteen, I ran away, got caught, and was brought back. They could beat me as much as they liked in the daytime, I said furiously, but they knew what would happen at night.

When I was seventeen, I ran away again, this time compounding the offense by stealing six silver pennies which is no more than the price of one-quarter of a not very good horse. I had the money wrested out of my hot hand (actually it was tied up in a tree and someone found it) and was set hoeing beans as a penance.

At nineteen I ransacked the house in a long, leisurely afternoon’s search (by now they were terrified of me), locked one cousin securely in a closet (into which he had fled at the sight of me), pinned another to the wall with an old rapier I had found in the attic, stuffed the price of three farmhouse estates into the front of my shirt, and rode off humming to myself bitterly between my teeth. I had escaped for good—or so I thought.

It was the money, of course. It had to be the money. It was too much to lose, even with ten thousand imps clinging to each coin. I was thirty-five miles away, eating my soup like a peaceable citizen in a neighborhood inn, when I felt a hand descend on my shoulder and sprang to my feet to see—my uncle! the most tough-minded of the lot, who always said, “A good man need fear nothing,” though in what his goodness consisted, his wife—God help her!—and his maidservants and his black-and-blue children

did not seem quite able to tell. But here he was with twenty men with him, and a priest. It was the priest that made them so brave.

“Be careful,” I said. “You don’t know what may happen.”

“My boy, my boy,” he said, excessively kind, “we’ve had enough of this.”

“Not half as much as you will have,” I said while I tried to size them up and remembered bitterly that the money was still on me and so I was in a bad bargaining position—also there was no back door. “Not half as much,” said I, “as-”

“You shall come home at once,” said my uncle softly, “and we will find a way to cure you, my dear boy, oh we will.”

“With my allies?” said I. He was moving closer.

“You have no allies, poor boy,” said he, sweating visibly. “Poor boy; they are only the deceitful fancies of the-” But I, knowing them by now, made for the priest, and then there was a frightened row, with much cursing and screaming (though the money made them desperate) and in the end the poor holy man was sitting in a chair having his bleeding head bathed with vinegar and water, and there I was under a heap, or rather clump, of relatives. They found the money immediately and my father (who had hidden behind them in his fright) began sobbing and saying “Praise be to God” for his estate come back.

I told them fervently what would happen to them.

“Let him up, let him up,” said my father, and they let me scramble to my feet, each retreating a little as the heat of the fight wore off.

“Give me a tenth and let me go,” I said, out of breath.

“A tenth is for the church,” said the priest, uncommonly keen all of a sudden, “and it would be blasphemous to do anything of the kind.”

“I’ll break your neck,” I said intently, looking from one man to the other, “I’ll break your spine, I’ll make you die in slow torments, I’ll-”

“Give it him, give it him,” said my father, shaking all over, and he began to fumble among the money which my uncle immediately snatched away from him with the stern reminder that some people were too

weak-minded for their own good.

“There is only one way to deal with this,” said my uncle importantly, “and that is to take the boy home and exorcise him” (here his eyes gleamed) “and thrash him” (he tucked the money up neatly and buttoned it into the inside of his coat) “and make sure—sure” (said my uncle, hitting one fist into the other with slow relish) “make sure—sure, mind you—that this spell or devil or whatever it is, is driven out. Driven out!” added my uncle, loudly, to everyone’s approbation. “Driven out! If we let him go, heaven only knows what may become of us. We may die in our sleep. Othor.” Here he pushed a reluctant kinsman forward. “Tie him up.” And, seeing that I was not to get away, not even penniless—I drove my head into the nearest stomach and called down such imprecations on them that they begged the innkeeper for a blanket to throw over me, the way you’d bag a cat, for my prophesying and cursing (as I could do nothing else) became every moment more frightful to their ears, seeing that I cursed them in curses they had never even heard before—as indeed they never had for I was making them all up.

“My God!” cried my uncle, “shut the boy up before it all comes true!” and as the innkeeper refused to interfere, someone went outside and got a horse blanket and it was with that abominable smell in my nose and throat that I stumbled blindly outside where I threw myself forward, I cared not where, and struck somebody’s boots—or strongbox—or wall.

And that was the end of that, for the time.

I woke up sitting bolt upright on a stool set in the center of a room that looked vaguely familiar—it was my uncle’s small estate—with a vague memory of riding dizzily in saying, “That’s right, that’s right, I’m only a servant”—and then a blur in one corner resolved itself into a small, redheaded cousin of mine, a brat so ugly and unpleasant that even his own mother disliked him, God help him.

“What?” I said stupidly. I saw the imp jump a little, and then settle back onto his feet. He was watching me suspiciously. He was hung all over with charms: bangles, crosses, hearts, locketts, medals, rings, bells, garlands, and staves, until he looked like a dirty, decorated Christmas tree; I suppose they had put him to guard because he was the most expendable member of the clan, for he was only thirteen and very scrawny.

“Well, they’ve got *you*,” he said, with a certain satisfaction. “They’re inside, deciding what to do with you.” I shut my eyes for a few minutes, and when I opened them he was lounging against the wall, picking his teeth. He

sprang to attention.

“What time is it?” I said, and he said, “Late,” and then colored; I guessed that he was not supposed to talk to me. I had not thought I had slept when I shut my eyes and my head was still ringing; it occurred to me that I was perhaps still a little out of my mind, but that seemed quite all right at the time; I took out of my shirt one coin they had not found, a gold piece given me by my nurse when I was a child, and I held it up and turned it round so the candlelight made it twinkle. I could see my little cousin licking his lips in his corner.

“This could be yours,” I said. He looked doubtful.

“Nyah,” he said, and then he said, “Is it real?”

“It won’t disappear,” I said, “if that’s what you mean. It’s not bewitched.”

“Don’t believe it,” he said, standing virtuously upright, on guard again.

“Then don’t believe it,” I said, and I tossed it on the floor in front of him. It rang on the stones and lay, winking.

After a short hesitation he picked it up. He whistled ecstatically.

“Say, you don’t want this,” he said.

“Yes I do; give it back,” I said. He snorted.

“Nyah! Nyah! Feeble-mind!” he crowed. “Feeble-mind! Now I have it,” and he tossed it up and caught it deftly backhand, as if to prove that it was real.

“You don’t have it,” I said.

He stuck out his tongue at me. I got off the stool and was at him in two strides; I covered his mouth and plucked the coin out of his hand; then I put it back, went back to my stool, and sat down. He stared at me dumbfounded.

“Do you really think,” I said, “that they would let you keep it, if I told them about it?” (He thrust it into his coat.) “And do you think I wouldn’t tell, if I felt like it?” (He threw it on the floor.) “No, no, keep it,” I said carelessly. “Keep it. For a favor.”

“Wouldn’t do you a favor,” he muttered, patting his magical garlands that encircled each wrist in the manner of a sacrificial lamb. “Wouldn’t be right.”

“Bah! nonsense,” said I.

“*I’m safe,*” he said, shaking his garlands, and tinkling all over. “Pooh,” he added. He began to recite under his breath, imitating his father’s nasal twang to perfection, a poor persecuted man whose crops always failed, whose babies always had the croup, whose attic leaked-

I took the boy by the arms and shook him till his teeth rattled.

“He-he-hel-” he said.

“Listen,” I said, shaking him, “You numb-headed, misinformed baboon! You’ve known me all of your wretched life, you beast!” He began to cry. He stood there in the rags and tatters of his charms, bawling.

“Oh for God’s sake,” I said in despair, “shut up.” And I sat back down on my stool and put my head between my knees.

He stopped crying. I said nothing. Then, after a considerable silence, he said: “You stole all that money?”

I nodded.

“Boy!” he said. There was a further silence.

“Hey, you wanna get out?” he said. I shook my head. “Sure you do. You wanna give me that gold money and get out?”

I shook my head again.

“Ah, come on,” he said, “sure you do.” And he sidled up to me and stood there in friendly fashion, his bells and jingles bumping lightly against me.

“Ah, come on,” he said. I held up my hand with the coin in it. He took it and sprinted to the door, clanging; he flung open the door with spirit.

“I’m going to tell a story,” he said. “I’m going to lie down and pretend to be dead.”

“Bully for you,” said I.

“I’ll carry on,” he said. “It’ll be smashing. Shall I tell it to you?”

“No,” I said, “and for God’s sake, lower your voice.”

“But it’s so nice,” he wheedled, “and it’s—” So partly to shut him up and partly in a sudden liking for him (he was smiling a kind of gap-toothed, ecstatic smile and his orange freckles were aglow) I pulled off my ring—a cheap thing but my own—and gave it him.

“Hide it,” I said, and slipped out into the courtyard.

Now I had a rough idea of where I was, but only a rough idea; so I went to the stables by taking what proved to be the longest way, hugging the walls and stumbling now and again against household remnants left out to freeze or dry, with a noise that I thought must waken the dead. I even saw the council through a window, and stood horribly bewitched for a moment, as if at my own funeral, until the sight gave me the shivers and I crept on. At the deserted stable I slashed the reins of all the horses, searched through saddlebags with my heart knocking at my teeth, found a small moneybag (my uncle’s, one-quarter of a sheep this time) and mounted, snatching a torch from the wall, spurring toward the farm gate, dashing at the two guarding it, and firing the thatch above their heads.

What a blaze in an instant! What an uproar! Behind me in the court the freed beasts dashed effectively back and forth, barring everyone from the gate and then (in the most sensible manner possible) streaming behind me, leaving their owners horseless and homebound until someone should round them up the next morning. No one—not even my little cousin—would go out *that* night! The picture pleased me. As I rode through the windy black, I imagined uncles and cousins and grandfathers huddling uncomfortably in the dark of their charred and roofless rooms, seeing specters with every moan of the wind. It was damned cold. I was in my shirt. I stopped and searched the saddlebags again and heaven provided me with a jacket, knit by a suffering aunt. I became hysterical. The horse was stepping warily in the dark (we seemed to be traversing rocks) and we went around in circles until he simply stood still. I roared and rocked in the saddle. When I came to my senses, I headed south by the stars (who else but I even knew the stars? who else had spent nights in the open?) and saw the beautiful sun come up on my left, over gravelly hills, found a stream, washed and drank, and went on very much improved. But heaven proved to be remarkably improvident in the matter of food, and it was the next midday

before I found a farm, stopped at it, and asked the hired girl-

She was off like a shot. I took advantage of my infamy and the sudden terror it produced to rifle the kitchen and change horses, leaving my uncle's to be de-hexed, de-bewitched, have chants chanted over it and expensive charms hung upon it and finally (I hoped) adopted and fed. Very likely my uncle would have to pay to have it back. I rode on in better spirits, but miserably fed, and finally, my infamy running out and reduced from a werewolf to a beggar, I sold the horse, proceeded on foot, sold my clothes and bought others cheaper and lighter and found—to my distress—that I had no money. None at all. In the north, where there was no food, I could have lived half a winter on that little bag. In the south, where the ricks ran over, I starved.

I do not like to remember what happened to me then. It was the only time in my life I saw things in simple truth. It seemed to me that the country was feeding off me, for as I got sicker I walked farther south and the spring came, and I fancied the wild mallows and the roses got their color from my blood; I was very sick. If I had not walked into houses at night and stolen, I think I would have died; for the people of the south do not disbelieve in demons, despite their cultivation; oh no. They would watch me, trembling behind the wall, as I stared at their pantry shelves, stared at the loaf in my hand, even forgetting why I had come. Sometimes I would put it down like a sleepwalker; once I lay on the grass by the open highway and wept for no reason, looking up at the stars. Someone saw me then, at dawn; someone (once!) gave me good-day. It was as I walked up to the gates of my first city, low and gray in the wet dawn mist, that I knew I was going to die. As I went through the gates, they closed over me like the dull roar of water over one's head, and I lay down (as I thought) to quit this world.

But the world had other ideas.

I woke on a stone floor, with two faces bending over me, one thin, one fat; the fat man plump as a pig and oily, delighted, writhing, pious, all at once. I thought I had gone to heaven. Then he said, "My dear boy." He beamed. "My dear, poor boy, a treasure! A find! A find! What a find!"

"He needs some more," said the other face, laconically, and disappeared to fetch something. Somebody put a pillow under my head and I tried to sit up.

"No, no, no, no," said the fat face, serenely, twiddling a finger at me. "Lie down. That's good. Here" (to someone outside my field of vision), "here, help him up," and they propped me against a wall. "Dear boy"

(someone drew a blanket over me), “dear foolish boy, you didn’t even have the sense to beg,” and began feeding me something I could not taste, smacking his lips as if I were a baby, and muttering to himself. I am seeing visions at last, I thought, and they are angels, and with this thought (which was rather distressing) I came bolt awake.

“Who the devil are you?” I croaked. Fat-face wreathed and writhed in delight and thin-face next to him put hands together and cast eyes piously upward. Then he scuttled out of my field of vision.

“Friends,” said fat-face, beaming; “Orthgar, get me a napkin” (presumably to someone in the room, for I was lying on the floor of a kind of office, with ledgers open on a table and parchments and such gear all about the walls), and he began feeding me some more. Then he stopped and, ecstatically shutting his eyes, kissed me on the forehead.

“You,” he said, “are going to make a lot of money.”

“What?” said I. He patted my cheek, still beaming as if I were a prize pig.

“Later,” he said. “Do you think you can sit up?” and I said possibly and they propped me in a chair where I could see (wonder of wonders!) a garden, and a gardener clipping fruit trees.

“My dear fellow,” said fat-face, “you must tell me your name.” And I did, and he said, “I am Rigg and this is Orthgar. Orthgar, get me a brandy.” Orthgar disappeared. I stared up at my fat host in bewilderment (it grew no less in the next ten years!) and asked him—well, asked him—He put up one hand for silence.

“You mustn’t talk,” he said fondly, “you’ll exhaust yourself. You sit there like a good little boy and I—” (he heaved himself ponderously off the table, where he had been perched like a great, fat finch) “and I will explain everything.” He smiled. “I am a banker,” he said, shutting his eyes and then, opening them, he added delicately, “but not a banker,” and looked modestly at his hands, which were fastidiously picking up pages and turning them over.

“Well?” said I.

He looked beatific. “I,” he said, squirming with modesty, “I—that is, we—all of us—we are Appropriators.”

“What?” I said. He shrugged.

“Thieves,” he said. “But that’s a nasty name. Call me Rigg. Ah! the brandy,” and he poured from his glass into another and gave the second to me.

“I am not a good thief at all,” said I.

“You will be,” he said. “You will be. Besides, my dear-” (and here he and Orthgar smirked at each other) “think of your great talent.”

“Talent?” I said dully.

“Oh yes,” he said, sliding off the seat and walking expansively around the room. “Orthgar found you at dawn in the city cemetery. Orthgar is protected by very strong charms. There you were, sleeping like a baby, obviously unharmed except for semistarvation, of course, perfectly oblivious to the danger you ran. That is, you didn’t run. That’s the point. It’s a ghastly place; people go mad there, cut each other’s throats, hang themselves on empty air, really dreadful.”

“City ought to do something,” interposed Orthgar.

“Certainly they ought,” said my host emphatically. “But they won’t. Who can? Only our friend here.” He beamed. “And he won’t, either. He’ll be too busy. The present administration,” said Rigg heatedly, “is rotten! Rotten! Luckily.” He stopped. “Am I boring you?” he said.

“How can I be useful?” said I.

“The clever fellow reaches conclusions more quickly than the stupid one,” said Rigg, scratching behind his right ear and looking very piglike. “You ask good questions. Very. You see, when Orthgar brought you here—dear, brave fellow, Orthgar! I owe him a great deal—when Orthgar brought you here, we gave you all sorts of tests to see if you were suited to the job. We spoke Awakening Spells over you. You snored. We conjured up your spirit. You snored. Finally I had Thring-- Thring’s a friend of ours, very useful fellow, Thring—go out and get a priest to exorcise you, cleanse you and anoint you. Nothing. Finally we put you to the ultimate test, pronounced a frightful malediction upon you, several frightful maledictions, in fact-”

“It was a strain to be in the room,” said Orthgar.

“But nothing happened,” said Rigg. “In fact, you opened your eyes and said something unprintable about your uncle.”

“Yes,” said I, thoughtfully.

“So then,” continued Rigg excitedly, drinking his brandy and mine too, “so then we *knew!* My dear fellow, we *knew!* One man like you is worth a hundred of us! Do you know how many lockmakers there are in this city? Well, there are twice as many magicians. And there you have it.” They clinked glasses. At this I laughed, and then I said that I wanted some brandy, too.

“You’ll throw it up,” said Rigg warningly, “it’s too soon,” but he gave me some anyway and keep it down I could not, and made a mess that the landlady had to clean up.

“Beggars,” she said, and then she said, “You owe three weeks’ rent.”

“Madam,” said my host with dignity, “I shall give you six. Do you see this paper?” and he showed her a page of a ledger.

“I can’t read,” said the landlady sullenly, going out the door with the slop basin. “But I can count,” she said, putting her head in at the door, and then vanishing.

“I feel sick,” I said, and Rigg took from a pocket a small green vial with a brass stopper.

“Here,” he said, smiling shrewdly. “Oil of peppermint. Good for the stomach.” He gave it to me. “Even yours,” he said, with meaning. I drank some and closed my eyes. It burned and numbed my mouth and it made me feel a little better that there was medicine in the world for me, for me, yes, even me.

“Well?” he said.

“Well?”

“What share will you take?”

“One-quarter,” I said.

“One-eighth,” he said.

“One-quarter,” I said. “You have to give me reasons for living.”

He looked unhappy.

“One-sixth?” he said.

“Done.”

“I told you,” said Orthgar, and he cleared away the ledgers. “You’d best put them back on the shelves,” he said. “They don’t belong to us.”

I laughed again.

“The unholy alliance,” I said.

“Mm?” said Rigg, over his brandy.

“Nothing,” I said.

“Well,” said Rigg, “if you feel better, let’s get you to bed. The proper soup and in three days you’ll be on your feet.”

“We’ll have to travel,” said Orthgar. “All six of us. His life won’t be worth anything once they find out.”

“Oh it’ll take time,” said Rigg serenely, his eyes sparkling. “It’ll take time. They’ll try spells first” (and he giggled) “and by then we’ll be somewhere else.” He looked out the window and sighed. “I hate the provinces,” he said. He strolled over and helped Orthgar get me to bed. “Wait,” he said, patting my cheek. “Drink soup. Think of wine, women, and song.”

“I have never heard songs,” I said, “and I hate women only a little less than men, I assure you.” My foster father patted my cheek again.

“You’ll like music,” he said. “It shows in the shape of your ears.” And waving gaily, he gathered up the brandy, bottle, glasses, tray and all, and strolled out. Orthgar stood at the door for a moment.

“He’s not too bad,” said Orthgar. “You can trust him.” And then he too went out.

But I was not thinking of money. I was thinking rather of the oddness of the world and how strange it was that people bothered themselves with

spells and counter-spells and did not investigate the really compelling questions, such as whether the sun's fire burned the same material as ordinary fires, for anyone can look into a wood fire, even a goldsmith's, but it is common knowledge that the sun dazzles the eyes for even a moment. And the moon must burn still another thing, for its fire in the daytime is pale white.

I remember my nurse, when I was little, asking me whether when the sun rose I did not see a great company of the heavenly host all crying Holy Holy Holy and I had said no, I saw only a round, red disk about the size of a penny coin. And then I wondered, drifting off to sleep to the sound of the gardener's shears, whether it might not be an advantage not to see demons and angels, and if it was, whether my children might not inherit the trait and pass it on to their children; and perhaps eventually (here the garden and its blossoming fruit trees wavered in the undulations of drowsiness) everyone would be like me, and if you asked people about the afreets, the succubi, the vampires, the angels and the fiends (very vaguely, far away, I could see the gardener cry out and back away from something, yet I knew I was safe; it might put its teeth into me and rage and roar and stamp—all silently—but I could sleep on), they would say *Those creatures? Oh, they're just legends; they don't exist...*