

Cognitive-Artistic Space in Twenty-First-
Century Fantasy: A Psycholinguistic
Comparison of Patrick Rothfuss's *The Name of
the Wind* and Lev Grossman's *The Magicians*

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INTRODUCTION

*Fantasy literature of the twenty-first century no longer treats the secondary world primarily as an external stage for heroic adventure. Instead, the imagined world increasingly comes into being through the protagonist's memory, inner speech, and self-narration, so that the boundary between the "world represented" and the "mind representing it" becomes difficult to draw with any precision (Attebery 1992). Patrick Rothfuss's *The Name of the Wind* (2007) and Lev Grossman's *The Magicians* (2009) are two of the most widely discussed examples of this tendency. Although the two novels differ sharply in tone, narrative structure, and cultural reference, both construct what can be called a cognitive-artistic space: a fictional space that exists simultaneously as an ontological setting, a linguistic construction, and a mental model built inside a character's – and a reader's – consciousness (The concept of cognitive-artistic space as used here draws on the possible-worlds and text-world traditions discussed in Section 1 below, rather than on a single source)*

This article examines how that cognitive-artistic space is assembled in each novel through a psycholinguistic lens: language treated as the medium through which memory, inner speech, and self-narration organize experience into a coherent fictional world. Read together, the two novels reveal two distinct but related psycholinguistic models of how contemporary fantasy builds its worlds: A model based on

retrospective narration, naming, and musical memory in Rothfuss, and a model based on unfulfilled desire, academic discourse acquisition, and intertextual memory in Grossman.

1. FROM SECONDARY WORLD TO COGNITIVE-ARTISTIC SPACE

J. R. R. Tolkien's classic account of fantasy as an act of "sub-creation" describes the fantasist as someone who builds a "secondary world" with its own internal laws, one capable of producing "secondary belief" in the reader for as long as the reader remains inside it (Tolkien 1947: 48-50). Tolkien's model, however, locates the imagined world largely on the side of authorial construction: the world is made, and the reader either believes in it or does not. Later theory relocates part of that world-building activity into the act of reading itself. Marie-Laure Ryan's possible-worlds approach to narrative argues that a fictional world is reconstructed by the reader as a mental model built out of textual instructions, so that the narrative world is never simply "in" the text but is continuously assembled in the recipient's mind (Ryan 1991: 49). Lubomír Doležel's theory of fictional worlds develops a parallel argument from a narratological and logical-semantic angle, treating fictional worlds as entities authenticated by the text but only fully realized in the process of interpretation (Doležel 1998). Paul Werth's text-world theory supplies the operational vocabulary for this process, describing how deictic markers, reference, and incremental information allow a reader to build up a "text world" clause by clause, together with the character-bound sub-worlds that open inside it whenever a character remembers, imagines, or narrates (Werth 1999).

Cognitive poetics adds a further piece needed for a fantasy-specific model. Peter Stockwell treats literary understanding as a process in which linguistic and stylistic choices activate schemas, image-scenarios, and attention patterns already present in the reader's conceptual system, so that reading a text is inseparable from building a simulated experience of it (Stockwell 2002). Applied to fantasy specifically, Farah Mendlesohn's typology of portal, immersive, intrusive, and liminal fantasy is useful because

it distinguishes fantasy texts according to how the reader's point of entry into the secondary world is organized, which is itself a cognitive as much as a structural distinction (Mendlesohn's 2008). Rothfuss's novel corresponds most closely to the immersive mode, in which the fantastic is simply the ordinary furniture of the narrated consciousness; Grossman's novel begins as a portal fantasy inherited from childhood reading and only gradually becomes immersive, a shift that is itself thematized within the story.

Taken together, these frameworks justify treating the cognitive-artistic space of a fantasy novel as a composite structure containing at least three interacting layers: an ontological layer (the rules of the fictional world), a linguistic layer (the naming, imagery, and deixis that construct it), and a psychological layer (the protagonist's memory, inner speech, and emotion through which the world is filtered and, ultimately, communicated to the reader). The remainder of this article traces the psycholinguistic dimension of this structure across the two novels.

2. THE PSYCHOLINGUISTIC DIMENSION: RETROSPECTIVE NARRATION VERSUS DEFERRED DESIRE

Psycholinguistics studies the relationship between language and mental processes: how speech is produced and understood, how memory and association organize meaning, and how inner speech mediates thought (Aitchison 2008). Lev Vygotsky's classic account of inner speech as an abbreviated, self-directed form of language provides a useful starting point for literary narratives that are structured as extended acts of self-narration, since such narratives externalize precisely the kind of internal verbal processing Vygotsky (1986) describes. Jerome Bruner's related notion of narrative thought – the idea that human beings organize experience into story form as a basic mode of cognition, alongside logical-scientific thought – helps explain why a hero's retrospective account of his own life, rather than a neutral external description, can function as the primary architecture of a fictional world (Bruner 1986).

The Name of the Wind is built directly on this principle. The novel is framed as an act of oral autobiography: Kvothe, now living under an assumed name, narrates his own history to the Chronicler, and the bulk of the text is this retrospective account. The world the reader enters is therefore not a neutral secondary world described from outside but a world reconstructed through one character's memory and self-interpretation. Events are not simply reported; they are emotionally reprocessed as Kvothe speaks them, so that the University, Tarbean, and the road are all already inflected by the meaning the narrator has since assigned to them. This is precisely the operation Werth's sub-world theory anticipates: the frame narrative opens a temporal and epistemic sub-world (the moment of telling) inside which a second, larger sub-world (the remembered past) is nested, and the reader must track both simultaneously.

Naming performs an equally central psycholinguistic function in the novel. The idea that knowing the "true name" of a thing – most famously the wind – grants power over it treats language not as an arbitrary label system but as a direct route to the hidden structure of reality. This is consistent with a psycholinguistic view of naming as an act that organizes perception and memory around a stable verbal anchor: once a phenomenon has been named correctly, it becomes cognitively available for control and recall in a way it was not before. Music performs a related but distinct function: for Kvothe, musical performance is bound up with autobiographical memory, loss, and identity, so that musical recollection becomes a further channel through which inner experience organizes the fictional world. Finally, the Tarbean episodes recast an ordinary urban space as a psychologically charged terrain of hunger, fear, and survival, demonstrating that in this novel, geography is inseparable from the trauma of the character who moves through it and narrates it.

The Magicians organizes its psycholinguistic space around a different structuring principle: the gap between an imagined ideal and an unsatisfying present. Quentin Coldwater's persistent belief that "real life" is happening somewhere else – first in the fictional land of Fillory that he has read about since childhood,

later at the magical college of Brakebills, and finally in Fillory itself once it turns out to be real – is less a plot device than a psycholinguistic condition: a mental model built out of prior reading that competes with, and repeatedly fails to be displaced by, lived experience. Bruner's account of narrative thought is again relevant here, but in an inverted form: where Kvothe narrates his own past to construct meaning, Quentin has already absorbed someone else's narrative (the Fillory books) as a template through which he interprets and finds fault with his present. Brakebills adds an academic register to this structure: acquiring magic is represented as acquiring a new technical vocabulary and disciplinary discourse, a process that psycholinguistically resembles second-language or specialized-register acquisition more than traditional fairy-tale apprenticeship. The novel's persistent undertone of dissatisfaction and low mood is carried largely through Quentin's inner monologue, which colors every space he occupies – Brakebills, New York, and eventually Fillory itself – with the same affective flatness, so that the fictional world's emotional register is inseparable from the narrator-focalizer's psychological state.

A further psycholinguistic thread in Grossman's novel is intertextual memory: both Quentin and the reader approach Fillory already carrying an internalized schema for portal fantasy derived from earlier reading, particularly of the Narnia type. This prior linguistic and narrative knowledge functions as a kind of ready-made mental model that the novel deliberately activates and then frustrates, so that the reader's own psycholinguistic history with the genre becomes part of the meaning-making process.

Read side by side, the two novels model two different psycholinguistic routes into cognitive-artistic space. Rothfuss constructs his world through retrospective narrative reconstruction, naming, and musical memory, all channelled through a narrator who is actively making sense of a completed past. Grossman constructs his world through the unresolved gap between a previously internalized fictional model and an ongoing, unsatisfying present, channelled through a narrator-focalizer who has not yet made sense of anything, and reinforced by the reader's own genre memory. In psycholinguistic terms,

one is a poetics of memory achieved; the other is a poetics of desire deferred.

3. TWO PSYCHOLINGUISTIC MODELS OF FANTASY COGNITIVE SPACE

The comparison suggests that twenty-first-century fantasy does not produce a single new psycholinguistic model of cognitive-artistic space but at least two distinguishable ones, both departing from the externally focused, morally clear secondary worlds of earlier fantasy description. In Rothfuss, the world is organized around a completed, narrated past: memory, naming, and musical recollection are the primary instruments through which a mature narrator reconstructs and makes sense of an already-finished sequence of events, and the reader is invited into a space that is emotionally intense but epistemically stable, since the narrator already knows how the story ends. In Grossman, the world is organized around an unresolved, ongoing present: desire, academic discourse acquisition, and intertextual memory are the primary instruments through which a still-confused focalizer fails, repeatedly, to close the gap between the imagined and the actual, and the reader is invited into a space that is epistemically and emotionally unstable throughout.

Despite this difference, both novels confirm the same basic theoretical claim: that in contemporary fantasy the secondary world is inseparable from the psycholinguistic processes — memory, inner speech, naming, and narrative thought — of the character who inhabits it and the reader who reconstructs it. Neither Kvothe's University nor Quentin's Brakebills and Fillory can be adequately described as an externally fixed setting; both are, in Ryan's and Doležel's sense, textual instructions for a mental model that only becomes complete through the psycholinguistic activity of narration and reading.

4. CONCLUSION

This comparative reading has argued that cognitive-artistic space in twenty-first-century fantasy is not a uniform phenomenon but

takes at least two distinct psycholinguistic forms even within a single generation of writers working in closely related traditions. Rothfuss's *The Name of the Wind* constructs its world through retrospective narration, naming, and musical memory, producing a psycholinguistically coherent space anchored in a narrator who already understands his own story. Grossman's *The Magicians* constructs its world through deferred desire, academic discourse acquisition, and intertextual memory, producing a space anchored in a focalizer who has not yet achieved that understanding. Both cases, however, support the same broader claim: that the analytical tools of psycholinguistics, developed originally to study ordinary language processing, can be productively extended to literary fantasy, where the imagined world is never simply described but is continuously built, remembered, and revised through inner speech and narrative self-interpretation.

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