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📖 [Lesley Nneka Arimah](#) on August 24, 2015 in [The Butter](#) 1 Comment



Raised in a rustic house in the woods of North Carolina by parents who discouraged televisions and other such modern entertainments, Kendra Fortmeyer describes a “gorgeous childhood” complete with a story-telling grandfather who would type the tales she narrated to her dolls.

Now a fiction editor for *Broad! Magazine* and recipient of an MFA from the University of Texas at Austin, Fortmeyer has established herself as an emerging writer of note, with publications in *PANK*, *One Story*, *The Literary Review*, and many others.

Good stories linger like guests who have over-stayed their welcome and Fortmeyer’s [Mermaids at the End of the Universe](#) is one such story. When I encountered it, I was immediately taken with the humour and horror of the piece, the thread of sadness lingering underneath. Much of Fortmeyer’s work is known for this quality and much of it deploys the surreal. Over the course of a few weeks, we talked about the pull of surrealist fiction, isolated women and the fiction we create with our online selves. What follows is my conversation with this goddess of the short form.

Lesley Nneka Arimah: Okay, so in preparation for this, I totally cyber-stalked you and read just about everything you’ve written that’s available online. I first came across your work with [Mermaids at the End of the Universe](#), but let’s track back a bit, to when you were just a wee tyke.

Kendra Fortmeyer: It’s funny, though, that you mention the mermaids piece—the first story I remember writing was about mermaids as well.

My grandfather, the great patron saint of writing in my family, always encouraged me and my sister to tell stories. There was one about Ariel (my favorite doll and Disney princess), though I’ll admit the other surviving one, about Barbie, was more memorable. It included a subplot in which Barbie got pregnant because her mother, Midge, told her she was old enough.

LNA: I think the first story-telling I did was with my older siblings. We would roleplay different lives for ourselves and flip through my mother’s giant mail order catalogue, picking out what we wanted for our imaginary houses.

down to the cutlery. (We grew up with intermittent electricity is what I'm saying.)

Did your first mermaid story bare any resemblance to the one published in *The Toast*?

KF: Ha ha, not in the slightest—"Mermaids at the End of the Universe" is much darker, and grapples with loneliness and shallowness and infinity in a way that I couldn't have considered at that age. (Also, there are no dinglehoppers.) But I did write the story because of that deep childhood love. I'd been working on a realistic novel, struggling with publication and the vague, infuriating concept of marketability, and had a mini-breakdown and declared (this is more or less verbatim) I WANT TO WRITE ABOUT SOMETHING I LOVED WHEN I WAS SIX.

I went on a week-long mermaid binge—I was only reading mermaids, writing mermaids, thinking mermaids. If anyone asked me how I was, the word "mermaids" inevitably popped out.

But you know, it felt so liberating. I hadn't written anything in a long time that felt that vital and worthwhile. Which was really refreshing, coming out of the world of Serious Literature and the MFA. I went through the New Writers Project at the University of Texas at Austin, and there's some really great surreal work coming out of that program, both from the professors and the students.

It was a relief for me, because I felt like I'd been trained in undergrad to aspire to Serious Literature, which always seemed to take the form of Multiple Generations In This Family of Miserable People Quietly Being Miserable.

LNA: Yes! The quiet turns of emotions and feelings so underwritten they turn into meaningless whispers. Ack.

Give me a story with the obnoxiousness of Scarlet O'Hara. **(Ed. Note: Specifically the *drama/personality* of Scarlett O'Hara, not the content. Dear goddess, not the content-LNA).**

KF: Discovering writers like Aimee Bender and Miranda July encouraged me to really pursue writing. I do feel like there's still an emphasis on that (well put!) Meaningless Whispers literature in many programs and journals, and I don't know if it's going away, per se, but it seems like the literary world is opening up to weirdness in a new way, and that's super heartening.

Because how many of us are writers because we loved to read when we were little? And what were we reading?

Actually, no hypothetical—what did you read?

LNA: Fantasy, sci-fi and romance novels.

KF: Me too! Mostly the former two. I was a huge fantasy nut.

LNA: And Shakespeare. I memorized *Hamlet* cover to cover.

KF: I just finished teaching it to my high schoolers.

It was so intimidating—to do *Hamlet* justice is a huge undertaking.

LNA: I bet they loved and/or hated it. I can never tell with kids that age.

KF: I regret to say that I didn't sell many of them on Shakespeare. But they (claimed they) enjoyed the discussions.

LNA: Going back to the whole Whisper Moments thing and stories that are so quiet they disappear and how we don't like that. I noticed that there is a thread of hyperbole in many, if not most, of your stories, a controlled exaggeration with specific purpose. Is this something you've always done, a way you naturally interpret the world, or have you actively built this skill?

KF: It's definitely not something I've actively cultivated—it's more of a mode of play. I love writing stories whose characters are archetypes, and trying to subvert or delve more deeply into or shed new light on those archetypes.

I grew up (as we alluded to earlier) deeply steeped in imaginative games. My parents were very anti-television.

I grew up (as we used to call it) deeply steeped in imaginative games. My parents were very anti-television, anti-video games, etc—my sister and I spent most of our time playing in the woods and making up stories about trees and rocks and our creek. So I think there's always been this undercurrent of belief that there's more to everything than meets the eye—that there genuinely IS magic in the mundane, and that appearances shouldn't be taken for granted.

And so sometimes the monster under your bed is lonely. And the vampires are tired of being vampires. And it is really, really hard and lonely to live forever, even if you're the most beautiful creature alive.

LNA: My siblings and I used to play “magic” something I'm sure would have horrified my very, very Christian parents. The concept of the supernatural was a very strong force/idea in our minds. It's what drew me to fantasy, a certain recognition that this is how the world is/is supposed to be.

KF: I grew up as a Jew in the Bible Belt, so while my family was pretty secular, I completely understand where you're coming from.

LNA: We moved from Nigeria to Louisiana and ended up at a small, very right-wing Christian high school
solidarity fist bump

KF: Wow. That's a mind-boggling transfer. How did you handle it?

LNA: Um, not very well, but that's a (super long) story for another day. I'll just say that I left the state as soon as I could and have a complicated love/hate relationship with it to this day.

I read somewhere that you were shy and bookish as a kid but had a sort of awakening at one point, can you tell me what brought that on?

KF: Oh gracious, in a lot of ways, I feel like I'm still coming out of that. One major step was doing martial arts as a teenager. I was such a shy kid, and one of the hardest parts for me, at first, which I came to be very proud of, was learning to shout.

LNA: In [Mermaids, Continue](#), and [The Vesuvius Infant](#), especially in the latter two, you write women who are struggling against the inevitable, their “destiny” if you will. What draws you to this theme? Is it something you find yourself addressing deliberately or is it an unconscious impulse?

KF: I resist the idea that writing can (or should) be written with a “message” and still be a really great story—by which I mean, have characters you care about deeply, and a world you immerse yourself in without cynicism, and so on. But sometimes a message arises from the story, and that's powerful and lovely and inevitable.

I guess what I mean is, this is the way I see (unconsciously or no) the world, and so it necessarily comes to light in my characters.

I think women don't have a destiny necessarily, but I do think women must struggle mightily against forces beyond their control in order to live the lives that they want to live, or even to know what those lives would look like. Sometimes it feels like everything is stacked against women—like all of our society is a great pool of gravity pulling women in one direction. It's a great feat to pull oneself out of it.

I originally thought “Continue? Y/N” would be a humor piece. It became apparent pretty quickly that it would be incredibly sad and boring to be an NPC in a video game. The feminist ghost hovering over everything kind of solidified as I wrote. (Also, the “gay” cousin! Can I just say, I LOVE the cousin. My heart breaks when I think about it.)

LNA: There's a thing you do in your writing that I love. The reader will be skimming along, enamoured by your skillful, evocative language and then BAM! horrifying detail. This is not really a question, per se, but that blending of the beautiful and the visceral is something you do very well.

KF: Thank you! (is promptly run over by a city bus)

LNA: Ha, I know, why do people have to compliment? What are you supposed to do with it? Dive into it like Scrooge McDuck, that's what.

KF: Mv dear. you make me feel bathtubs-of-monev awesome about mvself.

...my dear, you make the real business of money, and come about myself.

LNA: As you should.

We touched briefly on the idea of the isolated woman in your work and I'd like to expand on that. When women are "alone" in popular culture they are often framed as trying to be anything but alone, whether it's alone in their life or even alone in the room. In your work, women seek out aloneness and I wondered if you could talk about that.

KF: My first impulse was to think, "Do they?" with the same sort of embarrassed, hand-flying-to-the-chest gesture as when someone tells you there's something in your teeth, and you gasp, "There IS?"

LNA: They do though! Mermaid, Gamer Girl, even the girl who was a shark until she met the bear, they all consciously or subconsciously sought solitude.

KF: Looking back on them as a body—they are often alone. But, desperately, I think, they'd rather not be. The shark girl in *Squaline* is incompatible with humans in a way she can't understand; the Wife in the "X" stories gets left—even the Flower Girl's first impulse when she gets her freedom is to run into the village and try to connect with anyone else, but when no one gets it, she strikes off on her own.

The mermaid, though, you're right, is generally disinterested in everyone but herself.

I think the challenge for each of them (whether they realize it or not) is grappling with a world with which they are fundamentally incompatible, and building solace in themselves when they can't find it with others.

On an extremely related note, I'm a rotten writer of love stories. I guess I think that every woman's romance is actually with herself.

LNA: Ah! I'm clearly reading in a way that validates me (me, me!), as I often seek solitude and find that if I don't frame it in the borderline cutesy "I'm an introvert who prefers Netflix and dust motes to people!"/INTJ way, it's generally unacceptable that a woman would prefer to be alone.

But I like how you phrased that "fundamentally incompatible with the world". This encompasses how feel when I move about in the world, although as I get older I find more and more of my tribe to ease the passage.

KF: It's true—the narrative girls are fed since the time we're toddlers is very Prince-Charming oriented.

The heteronormativity/subservient gender role combo is all kinds of problematic, but it also sets us up with the sense that someday, the person who will understand us and complement every sense of our being will just appear. The real struggle (and the struggle I apparently make my poor sharks/mermaids/girls on fire go through again and again) is becoming that person for yourself first.

LNA: I think that could tie back into the "odd woman" out narrative that came up in the first half of this conversation, how we seem drawn to writing characters that don't quite fit in.

KF: That journey is so evident in your work, as well. So many of your narratives feature young women struggling to find their places in the world with/despite their mother's legacies.

Their mothers (or lack of mothers) seem to inform this great divide for them—like they're stranded on one side and peering at the "real world" on the other side

LNA: Oh shit. Stop analyzing me so correctly. I do love a complicated mother daughter story. The world our mothers grew up in is so different from the world we grew up in and I find myself trying to figure out how different sets of mothers and daughters navigate/create their legacies.

KF: We've been talking a lot about magical realism. I'm interested in the way you deploy it to explore this mother-daughter divide. Your realistic pieces are so, so vivid ('Windfalls,' in *Per Contra*, nearly made me eat my own fingers out of anxiety), but in 'Second Chances,' the tension manifests as a ghost story.

Given our conversations about magic—what made you decide to explore this relationship in a supernatural mode?

LNA: I wanted to take the grief we feel when we lose a loved one, specifically that mantra we often say about how “if I had just another minute I would tell them how much they meant to me” etc, etc, and turn it on its head. I often think that we imagine ourselves as so much better than we actually are. So what if this young woman is faced with the mother she didn’t get along with? Is she (are we) able to put aside every complicated feeling we’ve ever had towards a person if they suddenly rose from the dead to revisit us? Can we truly forget every time they’ve hurt us or every time we’ve hurt them?

KF: Her reaction to seeing her mother again is EXTREMELY human, and not romanticized at all—she’s pretty selfish and petty, to be honest. Which isn’t the way we like to think of ourselves.

LNA: Right, like there’s the easy answer “of course we’d be lightness and joy” and there’s the real answer, the “well now that you’re back from the dead, can you give me the \$1,500 I lent you a month ago”. That’s who most of us really are.

KF: When presented that way, it seems nakedly obvious that this had to be a ghost story—that there was no non-magical way to explore this element of humanity.

Not to get all soap-boxy (spoiler: I am about to get a little soap boxy), but this is why magic is so vital to storytelling.

LNA: Right, it had to be magical, and that’s where I think magical realism can transcend realism in a way that’s still very down to earth.

KF: We talked earlier about the “Meaningful Whisper” brand of realism, and it certainly has an important role to play in storytelling. But I just can’t believe that it can represent the entire (realistic) array of human experience because of stories like yours. We know what it means to declare, “Our love is eternal!” ...until you actually put it up against eternity.

Working outside the bounds of our reality help throw that same reality into clearer focus.

LNA: Yes, I forget which writer coined the phrase “tell it, but tell it slant” **[Ed note: Emily Dickinson. Kendra knew it, damn her – LNA]**. Supernatural is about as slant as it gets. Even straight realism is a form of hyperbole, because we still try to render the ordinary in a way that is more interesting than the actual lived experience. Which is why, say, we write “So and so had breakfast” instead of spending a page narrating their every motion from 6:30am till they get to work at 8.

KF: I felt so betrayed as a kid that the Boxcar Children never used the bathroom—books were supposed to be about REAL PEOPLE, right? I didn’t understand the narrative implications until much, much later. We’re painting reality with a pretty specific brush.

Magic just adds a new element. I’m not sure where it fits in the metaphor. Sort of like a fun house mirror—you see yourself, but slant. Warped, but recognizable.

LNA: It’s like Twitter (bear with me) we’re all tweeting pretty ordinary stuff, but we try to make it interesting so that our Twitter feed isn’t a verbal rendition of an Instagram feed with every lackluster meal we had that day (I think I hit the SEO jackpot with that).

KF: In my Information in Society and Culture class for library school, we’ve had a lot of great discussions about the way we create identities online (and also how they differ from one platform to the next—who you are on Facebook vs. Twitter vs. LinkedIn, etc). It’s exactly the same. You cherry-pick to create a narrative.

So we’re essentially creating fictions of ourselves, too. My online self is pithier than my real self, more clever, rarely frustrated or defeated. I think that’s true of most of us, actually—online, we all seem Happy and Successful, and our hair is always pretty great.

It’s so dangerous, because then when your writing sucks, or you hate your job, or you’re grappling with depression, you feel like you’re the only one, which makes you certain that something’s wrong with you.

I feel like it’s okay to complain about getting splashed by a bus driving through a puddle on Twitter, or announce that you’re eating pizza for breakfast, or whatever. But real vulnerability rarely makes it into the narrative.

LNA: Yes, it takes courage to be publicly vulnerable. There's a woman I follow on Twitter who is completely open about herself in a way that I find brave and wonderful. People *hate* her and it's so odd and terrifying to see how they consume her vulnerability and shame her for it.

Thinking about vulnerability as it relates to art, what would your perfect piece of art hope to accomplish? Like if you wrote the best thing you'd ever written, what would you want it to look like? What would you hope it did to the reader? Do you think it's something you've already written, or something you've yet to create?

KF: It's so tempting to give a snarky answer (like "WEALTH AND GLORY,") because it's so easy for me to hide behind snark when the truth seems too intimate. But really:

It gets back to the question you opened our conversation with—the lonely women I find myself writing again and again. I feel I've spent most of my life brushing up against the world in baffling, bewildering ways: feeling lonely, or like an outsider. Sometimes reveling in it, and sometimes just feeling damned sad.

And so the absolute best outcome I can hope for (and it's actually happened once! which is amazing!) is to have a complete stranger reach out of the woodwork and say, "I read this and I felt like you knew me and thank you."

I just want someone else to feel less lonely for one damned second.

(And sometimes that looks like a mermaid or office worker with an invisible snake on their desk or a video game character because that's much more fun.)

How about you? What would your perfect piece of art look like, and what would it accomplish?

LNA: My perfect piece of art would be daring and unapologetic in a way that is vulnerable, and would be a mirror that reveals the grotesquely human parts of ourselves. I like to throw stones into the calm rivers of "tradition" and see what happens. I often hear the advice of "write the book you've always wanted to read" and that's what I think I'm doing, but I also want to write the book I didn't know I needed to read and for someone to read that work and find that it's what they didn't think they needed, too.

I know that part of being able to create that sort of art is to hold nothing back and I think, beyond the creation of the art, I want to get to a place where nothing holds me back, not societal or familial obligations and expectations. Women are taught to care too much and to cultivate acceptance and approval in ways that are often destructive, but goddamn if that isn't the biggest pyramid scheme on earth. Pretending to be something you're not will never ever get you anything you really truly want.

One last question: You've written a magical realist novel about girls and their bodies. I'm thinking about everything of yours I've read and it sounds so amazing I want to gather all my American dollars and throw them at you. Can you elaborate on that?

KF: That's the kindest sentiment I've ever heard. The main character of the novel is a sort of grumbly, misanthropic artist named Morgan who's got a hole in her torso—it goes straight through from front to back, so that if she's standing in front of a bookshelf, you can read the titles behind her.

There are obviously a lot of metaphorical implications for the hole, but really, a lot of the book is about body-shaming, and feeling like you're a weirdo for having a body that doesn't look like everyone else's (and how knowing that everyone else feels exactly the same way doesn't prevent you from feeling like yours is still uniquely weird/terrible).

But because of the unusual aspects of her body, she gets a lot of media attention and is trying to grapple with this in the public eye. There's also a boy, of course.

LNA: This sounds so strange and lovely.

KF: I really love magical realism. Like I said, I genuinely feel like there is magic in the world, even in the mundane real world. Being alive is magic. Knowing the people that you know (as opposed to the people you may have met if you'd gone to a different school, or not left Nigeria, or if your mom had been in the mood for Italian food the day she met your dad at a Mexican restaurant, or whatever) is magic. And it's great gorgeous fun to

literalize that.

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