Introduction

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There is a genre of fiction that does not, so far as I know, have a name. It’s not historical fantasy, because the history isn’t accurate enough to deserve that name; it borrows historical trappings, but mixes and matches them to create a never-was land of adventure unconfined by inconvenient facts.

Disney’s Pirates of the Caribbean films are an example -- they happily mix and mangle three different centuries, playing fast and loose with geography as well as history. Several westerns also blur various decades of the 19th century, and ignore differences between, say, Texas and Kansas and California, treating them all as “the West.”

Zorro’s adventures take place in a California that doesn’t happen to match any actual time. There are samurai movies that don’t correspond to real history, and innumerable stories set in a China that never was. Stories of ancient Rome often fail to distinguish one century from the next.

Purists may complain that these stories mislead and confuse readers, but the truth is, it’s much easier to just have fun with a story when you don’t worry about whether the setting makes any sense.

In an earlier version of this book I called these “pseudo-historical fantasy,” but I’ve decided that they’re really just tall tales, not meant to be believed.

I don’t write them very often; I prefer to invent settings from whole cloth and write straight fantasy, or actual science fiction. Sometimes, though, I indulge myself, and this is a collection of those stories.

“The Final Folly of Captain Dancy” is set in days of sail, among islands that include British outposts, but it makes no attempt to be historically accurate. I don’t even know whether it’s set in the Caribbean or the Pacific, or in the 18th century or the 19th; it doesn’t matter. It’s a fantasy.

“Windwagon Smith and the Martians” is set in the 1850s, and starts out in Missouri, and I tried to get every detail about Thomas “Windwagon” Smith as historically accurate as I could, but once he gets to Ray Bradbury’s Mars (used with Mr. Bradbury’s kind permission), all bets are off.

The places visited in “My Mother and I Go Shopping” are loosely based on the history of New England, but only very loosely.

“One Million Lightbulbs” is set in 1905 New York, and everything about Steeplechase Park and Dreamland and Luna Park is accurate, but Miracle Park never existed.

“Unicornucopia” takes place in an unspecified college town, “Best Present Ever!” in Arizona, “Jim Tuckerman's Angel” starts in Kentucky and winds up in Washington D.C.; “When Hell Froze Over” is, of course, set in Hell, and all of them take place roughly in the present day—but only roughly. They're deliberately not tied to any specific time.

“Three Days Late for the Hanging” nominally takes place in Colorado in the 1870s, but there is no pretense of accuracy whatsoever.

I honestly don’t know where “The Girl Who Couldn’t Fly” is set. When I started writing it I thought of it as post-apocalyptic, where the apocalypse was magical in nature, but I don’t know if that’s where it wound up—and I don’t much care, either.

So here are ten stories that play fast and loose with history for the sake of fun. I had fun writing them, certainly, and I hope you’ll have fun reading them.

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*May 2011*

*Takoma Park, Maryland*

*Revised February 2023*

*Bainbridge Island, Washington*