



Unlikely Stories, Mostly

Alasdair Gray

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With his first collection of short fiction, *Unlikely Stories, Mostly*, Scottish artist and author **Alasdair Gray** perfected the blend of visual and verbal elements which has since characterised his work.

The book's dust jacket advertises the cocktail of surreal, macabre and mock-historical writing that readers will find between the covers. Title and author's name are printed in bold roman type. Next to the author's name is the image of an "improved duck" (a device invented by Vague McMenamy, protagonist of the story "The Crank that Made the Revolution", to enhance duck mobility). Arranged around the lettering is a grid of black and white squares. In each one, a winged foetus nestles within the cross-section of a skull. A horizontal strip across the bottom shows a recumbent child attached to a kite, floating over a Chinese city in flames – an image echoed in the story "Five Letters from an Eastern Empire". On the spine, a naked woman is the object of amorous attention from the legendary beast in the tale "The Comedy of the White Dog".

Unlikely Stories, Mostly Details

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From Reader Review Unlikely Stories, Mostly for online ebook

Monica says

Laughed out loud at the erratum the second I opened the book and found myself smiling all through the first two stories.

1/5/09

Alistair Gray was recommended to me but not a specific title. I got half way into this and realized I had no idea wtf was going on, so I went on to read something else.

Does anyone prefer one of Gray's books over his others?

Darren says

I love Alasdair Gray's writing so much. He is a singular talent. Read this and learn about bear cults, hand carved toad clogs, dog transmutation, domestic disputes and 18th century linguistics.

Jake Regan says

Really funny, clever writing. Beautiful illustrations by the author. Class.

Karen says

I preferred the shorter stories at the beginning and ending of this book to the few longer and boring stories in the middle. I did like how creative the whole book was, though. The stories were strange but extremely creative, and I liked that the author included his own illustrations and had an artistic approach to the layout of the book.

C.m. says

I think this author should have greater recognition. His works are semi-fantastic and quite imaginative, many stories are stylized as fables and dispatches from far away lands. But to describe does not do the work justice. He is original, fresh, and hard to pin down. I admire him a great deal.

Maria says

The illustrations really add to this odd novel.

Branduno says

I'd honestly never heard of Alasdair Gray until recently, when I saw his unique art staring out at me from the shelf of the library. I took it and flipped through; it was filled with Gray's illustrations, and with idiosyncratic typography. Reading the first few stories, I saw that this nicely framed his writing style, which in this collection at least makes the odd and fantastic--sometimes the startlingly, unthinkably weird--seem downright normal. A chance remark made one afternoon that literally shatters the planet; charts comparing a mundane duck with a certain Mr. Vague McMenemy's "Improved Duck"; the startling continuation of a pagan fertility ritual in a modern Scottish suburb; the script of a BBC documentary on the "bear cult" that you may or may not remember sweeping Britain in the early 1930s; these are the sort of things one encounters in Gray's stories.

I ordered a used copy as soon as possible, and took it with me to read on a train trip. That weekend my friends and I spent an entire night reading to each other from the book, taking turns reading a short story aloud, or making attempts at translating "Logopandocy", a text that I can best describe as "oddly shaped" and parts of which claim to have been eaten by mice.

There are books best read by oneself in a comfortable chair while rain pounds on the windows, or by the fireplace in a snowstorm, or on the beach in the heat of summer. Focus on Gray's illustrations and design sensibilities at times like those; the stories, I've found, are best appreciated loudly, while pacing up and down in a performance with friends.

Pamela Scott says

I became a fan of Gray's when I read his novel *Lanark* about a year ago after a friend and fellow book worm gave me a spare copy and badgered me to read it. I didn't think it was my thing and was proven wrong. In my humble opinion *Lanark* is one of the greatest novels ever written. It blew me away. I've wanted to read more of Gray since then.

The stories in *Unlikely Stories*, Mostly remind me of the best bits of *Lanark*. This is a good thing believe me. Gray's imagination, skill and style as a writer are quite unlike anything I've ever come across before. I'm sort of in awe of him. The collection contains many of Gray's own impressive illustrations.

The *Star* is a charming fable about a young boy who sees what he believes to be a star fall to earth and land in his back garden. He finds it and hides it in his pocket. A teacher finds it and tells the boy he can't bring marbles to school to play with. Gray leaves us wondering if the boy found a star or just a marble. The *Star* is an unusual choice for a collection of stories aimed at adults but is so well written and charming it doesn't matter.

The *Spread* of Ian Nicol is about a man, Ian Nicol, who discovers he's splitting in half one day. He sees strange marks on the back of his head that look like a face. His doctor confirms this. Ian splits in half,

creating two thin versions of himself who get into a fist fight. I found this story hilarious.

The Cause of Recent Changes is part fantasy part fable about a bored art student who suggests digging an escape tunnel into the foundations of the art college. This is meant to be sarcasm but other students take this literally and the tunnel becomes a reality and a focus of obsession for other students and staff. I thought this story was also very funny.

A Unique Case is about an elderly man who is hospitalised after a serious road traffic accident. The doctors discover he has hundreds of tiny people inside his head gradually repairing his injuries and helping him heal. I thought the story was great and really liked the illustrations.

The Comedy of the White Dog is my favourite story from the collection. The story is steeped in myth. A house party is interrupted by the appearance of a strange large white dog that causes havoc and kidnaps a female house guest. The guest turns up later looking very happy and more attractive. A man plans to wed the woman who threw the party and researches the strange dog. He uncovers a legend about a strange white dog mating with frigid women. The night before the wedding he finds his bridegroom in bed with the dog, post-coital. He flies into a rage and transforms into another white dog himself. I thought this was a great and very original story.

The Answer is about a young man who's concerned by his girlfriend's cold attitude toward him on the phone. He goes to visit her and discovers their brief relationship is over and she isn't interested in him any longer. I liked this story but felt it was too ordinary compared to others in the collection.

The Problem is also steeped in myth and fantasy. A man has relationship with the sun that appears in the form of a beautiful woman. The sun becomes jealous when the man mentions seeing the moon every night. The lovers have a spat. I thought this was a funny, clever story.

The Crank that Made the Revolution is a funny fable about a crack-pot inventor's experiments with boats, crankshifts and ducks. This story was hilarious. I have no idea if Gray based this on actual events but I sort of hope he did.

The Great Bear Cult is part myth, part fable and party fantasy and written in a very experimental style. A filmmaker attempts to get a documentary made outlining Britain's obsession and affection for bears in Victorian times that included people walking about in public dressed as bears. The cult ended following a series of killings committed by a real bear. I thought this story was great even though the structure didn't completely work.

The Start of the Axletree is part myth and is the first of a two part parable. Gray offers us his version of a creation myth steeped in the world and rituals of Ancient Egypt. I also thought this story was great. I'm fascinated by mythology especially Greek and Egyptian so this story delighted me.

Five letters from an Eastern Empire is an impressive tale I enjoyed reading. It's much more complex than other stories in the collection. The story deals with a wide range of themes including etiquette, government, irrigation, education, clogs, kites, rumour, poetry, justice, massage, town-planning, sex and ventriloquism in an obsolete nation and comprises of a series of letters from the poet Bohu concerning his journey to and arrival in the capital and his task – one which he has been raised from birth to accomplish – of writing a poem exalting the Emperor.

Logopandocry didn't work for me on any level. I hated it. Gray uses a very experimental style and writes in

columns and various text sizes. The story is a parody of an actual person, Thomas Urquhart, a Scottish writer and translator. I hated the formal language used and found the whole story very long and tedious.

Prometheus is Gray's version of the famous myth and includes loud echoes of Shelley's magnum opus, Prometheus Unbound, in stagey blank verse. I enjoyed this story but not as much as some other tales in the collection. It was a bit too much to read after struggling through Logopandocy. I would have preferred a larger break between both stories.

The End of the Axletree is the concluding part of two part parable that opened with The Start of the Axletree. I enjoyed this as well but thought part one was a better story. The illustrations impressed me.

The concluding stories, A Likely Story Outside a Domestic Setting and A Likely Story within a Domestic Setting are comedy stories that mirror each other. The stories are farcical and offer alternative viewpoints of a lover's argument. The stories are one paragraph long and most of each page is taken up with an illustration. I thought the stories were funny and realistic.

s says

This is by far the best of Gray's short story collections, provided you don't read the first story in the book, which is for babbies anyway. Also the 1984 King Penguin edition is the nicest.

Vit Babenco says

Blending surrealism with absurdist comedy **Alasdair Gray** manages to create a unique mythology starting from the modern times and all down through the ages...

“Well known references to the white dog occur in Ovid's 'Metamorphoses', in Chaucer's unfinished 'Cook's Tale', in the picaresque novels of the Basque poet Jose Mompou, and in your Scottish Border Ballads. Nonetheless, the white dog is the most neglected of European archetypes, and for that reason perhaps, one of the most significant. I can only account for this neglect by assuming a subconscious resistance in the minds of previous students of folk-lore, a resistance springing from the fact that the white dog is the west-European equivalent of the Oedipus myth.”

So in the brilliant *Comedy of the White Dog* **Alasdair Gray** boldly and vividly fills this hiatus in the world folklore. He also bravely fills up blank pages of history of empires, destiny of ancient gods and biblical myths...

...the emperor slept and was assaulted by horrible nightmares. He was among slaves killing each other in the circus to the wild cheering of the citizens. He saw his empire up on edge and bowling like a loose chariot-wheel across a stony plain. Millions of tiny people clung to the hub and to the spokes and he was among them. The wheel turned faster and faster and the tiny people fell to the rim and were whirled up again or flung to the plain where the rim rolled over them. He sobbed aloud, for the only truth in the world seemed to be unending movement, unending pain.

So emperors have their hard times too... even if it all happens in their dreams.

Genesis shows the Satanic snake flattering our first mother with falsely gorgeous hopes until, by the filching of an apple and breaking of a law, sin, sadness and new knowledge all enter the world together, the fall of man being a fall into knowledge of his own wilful divisions from Goodness.

The serpent was so magnanimous presenting us with a free will, the only thing left to us is to learn how to use it correctly.

Fort says

Good collection of short stories. Only one was totally unreadable.

Laurahamill says

The first story I read from this collection was "Five letters from an Eastern Empire" which was published by itself by penguin as part of its 60th anniversary. "Describing etiquette, government, irrigation, education, clogs, kites, rumour, poetry, justice, massage, town-planning, sex and ventriloquism in an obsolete nation" the letters are wonderfully funny and sad. The stories are set in widely different times and place but all have absurd moments and a dreamlike distance.

Alan says

Alasdair Gray is, by his own oft-repeated admission, a terrible writer who has been committing not-very-likeable prose, drawings and other miscellanea to paper while tucked away in an obscure and tiny corner of the British Empire for several decades now. But then, Gray is also utterly unreliable, especially when talking about his own fiction—and, in fact, *Unlikely Stories Mostly* turns out to be quite entertaining after all. Parts of it are even brilliant.

This is an early collection of shorter work, published in 1984 but extending back to the 1950s. The pieces collected are wildly uneven in length and tone, but each is recognizably, uniquely Gray. His drawings infiltrate the text, and his typical typographical tricks, especially in "Logopandocy," the longest single story, must have driven the typesetters to drink here the way they did in *Lanark*, and the way they would in subsequent work.

Gray also leavens his stories with social commentary. Though "Logopandocy" ostensibly comes from the pen of Sir Thomas Urquhart in 1645 A.D., it carries sentiments that could, if orthographically updated, easily describe today's dupes of the one percent, those

[...]who were perswaded to support the superiour stance by the usual publick lie: that the overexaltation of some would in time lead to the benefit and happiness of all[...]

Another strong story is Gray's meditation on the Tower of Babel, "The End of the Axletree." This one (along with its predecessor "The Start of the Axletree," also in this volume) is a fantasy that in its aggressive reimagining of an oft-told tale reminded me of Ted Chiang's "Tower of Babylon," about which Chiang wrote, "The characters may be religious, but they rely on engineering rather than prayer. No deity makes an appearance in the story; everything that happens can be understood in purely mechanistic terms. It's in that sense that—despite the obvious difference in cosmology—the universe in the story resembles our own." The same could be said of the Axletree.

My favorite story here, though, has to be "Five Letters from an Eastern Empire." The Emperor of this unnamed Empire has appointed a poet, Bohu (two poets, actually, but poor Tohu is not the focus) to write a poem "celebrating my irrevocable justice" (p.113). The society in which this command is given is, in detail, unlike any that has existed on Earth, and hence is Gray's fantasy—but each individual detail seems plausible, seems like something that a human society *could* have come up with. "Five Letters..." is therefore a work of sf as well, a speculative fiction, and the playing out of Bohu's assignment proceeds as inexorably as anything by Chiang or by George Orwell. The poem (for Bohu succeeds in his set task) is a powerful statement that does, in fact, speak to the Emperor's justice; the story as a whole is a creative *tour de force*.

Which is not to say that the rest of the book should be ignored. There are a couple of one-page stories (with illustration by Gray) that carry a sudden impact as well, for example. As an introduction to Alasdair Gray's style, *Unlikely Stories Mostly* functions quite well. Or, as it says on the back cover in a quote from "Col. Sebastian Moran,"

"Too clever for its own good in parts, but otherwise a damned good read."

Iain Watson says

Unlikely Stories, Mostly (Canongate Classics, 81) by Alasdair Gray (1998)

Kenneth says

I registered a book at BookCrossing.com!
<http://www.BookCrossing.com/journal/13797065>

Jessica says

This collection of short stories really astonished me with how good it was and has made me a fully converted Alasdair Gray fan. Other than one largely unreadable story ("Logopandocy," which consists of enormous lists composed by a madman), this collection is a must-read. The stories could almost be described as sci-fi or fantasy, since they're often set in some sort of alternate reality, but they're really something all their own.

They're kooky and surprising and delicious.

Noran Miss Pumkin says

I wish you could see this weird cover-it sold me on the book. I did not care what was inside the pages. Then I flipped the pages, and what strange illustrations delighted me! The cover has open skulls, with babies or cupids growing in them! This is awesome!!!!

MJ Nicholls says

Unlikely Stories, Mostly is stressfully sandwiched between *Lanark* & *1982 Janine* in the Gray oeuvre, and meets the expectations of neither masterwork. The best stories date from his time in obscurity. In pieces like 'The Comedy of the White Dog' and 'The Great Bear Cult' his voice is playful and surreal. These are charming little satires and fables, taking up about one quarter of the book. 'M. Pollard's Prometheus' is among the more engaging stories written close to publication.

Unfortunately, the collection is heavily weighed down by 'Five Letters From an Eastern Empire,' an attempt at an epistolary socialist fable. Even worse is 'Sir Thomas's Logopandocy' which takes the postmodern typography from *Lanark* and stretches it to the apex of the mundane. It satirises a historical document and a pre-war Scottish blustering style, but is far too indulgent for even the most patient reader.

This leaves 'The Origin of the Axletree' (printed in two parts). This story is similar to his 1994 novel *The History Maker* with its fabulist, dry-as-dust storytelling. The problem is that Gray rarely blends entertainment with the serious business of building nations and lecturing on politics, and this story fails to match the artwork in terms of content. Having said this, I can think of no other writer who designs his books with the care, attention and dazzle of Mr. Gray. A shame often the books themselves are such a letdown.

Windfield says

This book came to me after I mentioned that I liked book not about day-to-day life. Sometimes books for adults become so mundane, as if all we care to read about is love, sex and lies. Books for children on the other hand may be written on lies and a little love but are mostly immune to such problems, they may be untrue in our little world, not something you could see every day, but a whole new world that is true to itself and wonderful for it.

Unlikely Stories, Mostly on the other hand is not a children's book, written about things beyond our life, ideas and imagination, I found it wonderful.

This review is less about this book and more about my taste in general.

Brian Boyle says

Good short stories, mostly. Alasdair Gray's quirkiness and subversive wit shines through in this excellent collection of short stories.

