

MAGIC IN THE WORLD

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I was probably ten or eleven when I got my first taste of Anne McCaffrey's imagined world of Pern via her YA series, the Harper Hall Trilogy.

What pre-adolescent girl would not thrill to the rare combination of feminist empowerment tale, adventure, and vindication of the heroine's specialness against all the bullies and meanies who tried to smother her gifts and make her ordinary?

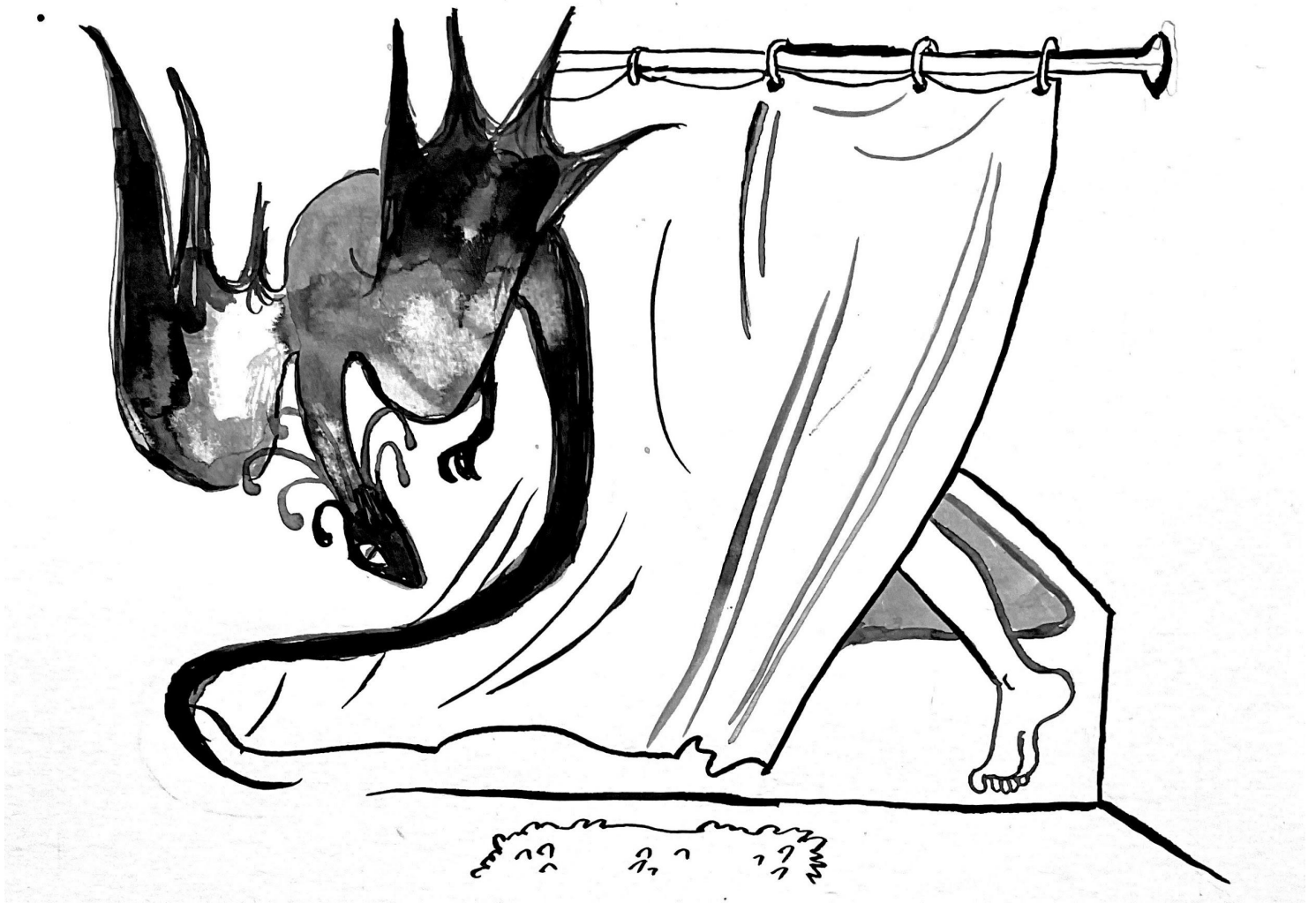


I went on to read, and re-read McCaffrey's Dragonrider books, entranced by their weird combination of epic fantasy adventure, telepathic dragons, and fake-science geekiness.

If you ever wondered what was going on in the mind of nerdy girls in the early 80s, before being nerdy was even a little bit cool, it was something like this...

Pern had all the neat stuff about sci fi without so much of the dick-ish stuff, plus lots and lots of girls and women who did actual things and talked to each other about stuff other than men. (Though there were some weirdly awkward sexual themes, too – and a lot of knife fights).

There was one point at which I believed so fiercely in the reality of the books that developed a complex ritual involving the shower....



It worked (okay, it did not work) like this: before getting into the shower, I would close my eyes, then step under the water, and get completely wet before I could open them. Some ritual chanting might have been involved.

Theoretically, when I opened my eyes, I would no longer be on dull old Earth where there were no dragons...

At school, I kept my head down, quite literally, as I went through the halls, a frizzy-haired, wrong-jeans-wearing stick insect in a world of kids who were somehow my chronological age, but who looked like characters on TV with their perfect outfits and their effortless hairstyles.



In reality, I was only seeing maybe a quarter of “the school” when I saw these people as the defining crowd – in fact, I went to a public middle school that was more than 60% Black and only about 20% white.



Like an early 80s middle school, a dragon weyr on Pern was a hotbed of racing hormones, and misogynistic heteronormativity.

On the other hand, in the medievalish world of the Crafthalls and Weyrs of Pern, being good at stuff like engineering, math, music, and art was valued in a way it simply was not at Washington Middle School. Though, by the same token, the society of Pern was barely on par with medieval Europe in its technology, despite heavy hinting that the humans of Pern descended from technologically sophisticated space-travelers who had colonized the planet long ago.

The novels were full of incomplete and inconsistent information that sometimes puzzled me, many of the characters were less than fully fleshed out personalities, and I never did manage to teleport to Pern via the shower portal. But the hours I spent immersed in reading and thinking about this unobtainable otherworld and the gaps that McCaffrey left up to the reader to fill exercised my imagination, building muscle for future, heavier lifting



I left Pern behind in high school, started reading Austen, Faulkner, Orwell, and Nabokov. Then I went to college, my nerdy dragon-girl deeply concealed beneath wooly sweaters, conformist corduroys, and Bean boots.

I started sneaking speculative fiction back into my diet, and thinking about how it intersects with history and the humanist enterprise more generally. But I also started reading art history in the spirit of imaginative world-building. What were the unspoken things that a painting, a building, or a piece of jewelry contained, I wondered?



My freshman year, I took a class on Byzantium and Islam from Christine Kondoleon. The world of the medieval eastern Mediterranean she introduced to us was, like the otherworlds of fantasy and sci-fi, almost incomprehensibly distant and fragmentary. But the fact that its material traces remained very much tangibly in the present seemed like the missing piece to the imaginative puzzles that had so captured my attention when I was younger.

In the past and its objects shone the same glow of otherworldliness that had once drawn me to Pern, through the unlikely portal of my shower curtain. My time as an aspiring denizen of Pern taught me that you can yearn for something unobtainable in a productive way, and that otherworlds, be they historical, cultural, or fantastical, are powerful tools for thinking about the treacherous shoals of the thisworlds I (and we all) inhabit.

