



# An interview with Catherynne M. Valente

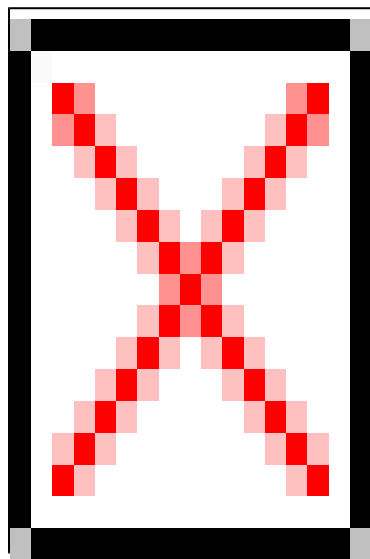
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[194](#) [2]

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Catherynne M. Valente talks about her award winning fantasy adventure.



An interview with Catherynne M. Valente

**Q. The Girl who Circumnavigated Fairyland in a Ship of Her Own Making is first mentioned as a book in your novel Palimpsest, and then published serially online. When did you decided to write the book and what prompted you to do it?**

When I was touring for Palimpsest, everywhere I went people asked me about Fairyland - was it a real book, where could they buy it? And I'd always say no, it's just a literary device, something we cool postmodern kids do sometimes. But ultimately, this was the beginning of 2009, and the economy in the US was in a tailspin. My husband lost both his jobs and I couldn't sell a book. It came to a point where we didn't know where the next month's rent was coming from, and I decided that doing an online serial novel was a way to get us through until better plans could be made. I chose Fairyland because so many people had asked about it, so many seemed to want it to be a real thing that existed in the world instead of just within the pages of Palimpsest. The response was more than I could ever have imagined. Sometimes it's still hard for me to believe that Fairyland now has a life of it's own.

**Q. How did this form of publishing affect the story and your writing?**

I think you can certainly see its nature as a serial in the structure of the chapters - each ends on an exciting note, to bring the readers back week by week. The chapter descriptions, which so many people seem to find wonderful, began as a way to get viewers to click the chapter link - though of course the technique is quite old. Everything old has new clothes these days.

It's also much more tightly planned and plotted than my usual process allows - I couldn't go back and change anything, so I had to know where the plot was headed quite early on. Usually I like to take a more organic approach and see where

things lead, double back if I have to, take a more circuitous route. But the nature of the serial meant I had to have a map.

**Q. Where you surprised at the online response to the book? What do you think it is about the book that prompted such an extraordinary response**

I was totally floored. The speed and energy with which it went viral was like nothing I'd seen. I do think it was a bit of a perfect storm--an already established author with a compelling story behind the serialization, as well as a book for young readers, which was something I'd never done before, and a story that had unusual elements, strangeness and humor and a classic feel, like books we'd read as children but somehow different and riskier. I'm not sure I could ever repeat the incredible performance of *Fairyland*. It was unique.

**Q. What effect do you think electronic publishing or crowdfunded books will have on publishing? Will it affect the way authors write?**

I think when everything settles out--to the extent that anything really settles in the world of art and publishing - it will be one of many tools. Maybe even the primary one, but I do think publishers will be around. It is an astonishing amount of work to both write a novel and perform all the labor of publishing it as well, even online. It will always be in the interests of authors to have someone else to do that for them -there is only so much time in one life. However, for projects that don't find publishers, for weird and risky books, for backlist titles and experiments, crowdfunding and self-publishing are powerful tools.

We have this idea that there was a time when it was easy to write, publish, and make a living at both. But I don't think that time ever really existed. It was always hard, everything was always being shaken up by some new technology, and in ten years we'll be worrying about an entirely different paradigm and ebooks will be completely run of the mill and accepted. Even considered old media. That's the way the world works.

**Q. This is your first book for younger readers. Did you consciously set out to write a teen/YA novel? In what ways does it differ from your novels for adults?**

I did, because *Fairyland* as conceived in *Palimpsest* and on its own is essentially and entirely a children's novel. It engages with the whole framework of western children's literature that I and many others grew up with. It is deeply concerned with issues of growing up and finding one's place in the world.

To write for younger readers, I've certainly simplified my language and tightened my plots--kids don't have as much patience for meandering narratives. The chapters are shorter and there's something new in every one. The protagonist is a young girl and there's more straight-up adventure. But the themes I often deal with in my adult work are still there: creating a new sort of family, loneliness and connection, bringing out the harsh reality in fairy tales and folklore. Just with fewer sub-clauses.

**Q. The book begins with September climbing out of her kitchen window, over the washing up. Is her kitchen window a modern day wardrobe or a looking glass?**

You know, I'd never thought of that! But of course you're right, she's still going through a pane of glass, passing through a liminal space, a part of the house that separates her world from the new one. I'd say yes--the house is always this magical thing that separates the interior from the exterior, the civilized from the wild. And you always have to figure out how to navigate it to get to the otherworld--which is often a metaphor for adulthood. We have to circumnavigate our childhood home in order to find our way toward growing up. And the way out is rarely so simple as a door.

**Q. Is there a question you've never been asked that you're waiting to answer?**

You know, I think I've been asked just about everything when it comes to Fairyland! Instead I'll share a little bit of trivia--September is from Omaha because that's where my grandfather is from and where he grew up.

Page Number:

42

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**Source URL (retrieved on Sep '19):** <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/194/childrens-books/articles/an-interview-with-catherynne-m-valente>

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