

## The Friends of English Magic

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It's probably safe to say that almost no historians of magic actually believe in the literal efficacy of what they're studying. Rather, magic is something that other people, especially in the past, believed in (or at least were immersed in) and their belief has in turn had significant effects upon the world, whether or not it was founded on what we might regard as a correct perception of the world. And there are plenty of reasons to think that that's an entirely sane and viable position to adopt. And yet ... I at least have often found myself yearning for more, wanting to know what it was like to believe, perhaps even unquestioningly believe, in magic. Enter Susanna Clarke's astonishing 2004 novel, *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell*, which, I'd like to propose, can allow us to have an experience that "should" be impossible: that of gradually coming to dwell in a world in which magic is not only real, but obviously and uncontroversially so. That is, Clarke's work provides us with the means and opportunity not so much to ask "What if magic were real?" (which for most of us is always going to be shadowed by "But it's not"), but rather to think "as if" magic were real and so understand how a world in which that was true—or at least widely held to be true—might work and what that would look and feel like. Indeed, I suggest that while reading *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* we can temporarily suspend our disenchantment enough to momentarily think and feel as if our world had never been subject to it. The novel produces these mind-bending effects through two clusters of narrative techniques. The first cluster is comprised of a broad array of devices familiar from historical fiction: ventriloquizing of period style; a careful attention to the manners and social structure of the period; passing references to lots of historical figures and cameos from some of the best-known examples; and a general deployment of the sorts of information that can ward off the feeling of anachronism and give readers confidence that a writer has done her homework. None of these are particularly unusual, although Clarke deploys them well and with an engaging wit. The second cluster offers a complex and intriguing twist on alternate history, in which the past of the storyworld was much different than the past of our own world; the present of the storyworld (Autumn 1806 through Spring 1817) involves the same major events as those years in our world, but with different explanations for why they happened; and the anticipated future of the storyworld looks like it will unfold much differently than the corresponding period in our world did. All three types of temporal difference revolve around an invented tradition of English magic devised by Clarke and presented largely in the novel's 186 footnotes. But that tradition is itself presented as a kind of alternate history with some curious absences when compared to the history of magic in the England of our world (most notably, in *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* the history of magic contains no witches and almost no Christianity). Collectively, these techniques can disarm and absorb us enough that magic can come off as extraordinary, but not impossible. We may not be able to reverse the respective positions of a book and its reflection in a mirror, the way *Jonathan Strange* can, but while in the mental state that I am describing, we can at least half-accept that such a thing could be done and that it doing it would be a matter of possessing the right talents, rather than violating the laws of the universe. This is where the true value of *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* for historians of magic lies: it can induce such an absorbed acceptance of its world and how it works that we can momentarily be in the position of people like the ones we study, people who might not themselves be able to do magic, but who accepted its existence as

part of the world. We've had decades in which to consider various objects and concepts as "good to think with." I think it might be time to embrace things that are "good to imagine with" as well.