

That's Absurd—Of Course There Are Rules!
An Interview with A.S. King on Surrealism in Young Adult Literature

By: Tiffany Rook



Figure 1: Third Eye by Tiffany Rook

Rules of Surrealism

Rule 1: There are no rules.

Rule 2: Of course there are rules. There are always rules.

Rule 3: The rules are always changing.

Rule 4: Ask an expert.

Surrealism is a genre that has no rules. In surrealism, a man can wake up as a giant insect (Kakfa) and people can wear avocado suits and have conversations with snowwomen (Schomburg). Surrealism doesn't make sense and it doesn't have to.

In her lecture, “We Are Mental,” at Vermont College of Fine Arts in January 2020, A.S. King, surrealist and young adult author, spoke about the connections between writing, emotions, trauma, and surrealism. She said, “all emotions are survival emotions” and explained the importance of tapping into emotions when writing for young adults. She also said, “experimental writing and adolescence go well together. It’s a way we can talk in code about things that really matter. Emotions. Secrets. Trauma—you know, the Truth. My tool of choice is surrealism.”

King explained how “surrealism was born in a military hospital in Paris in 1917 when André Breton and Louis Aragon were volunteering during the first World War” and referenced a photo from a field hospital where dying young men were being entertained by a stage show, illustrating the traumatic origins of literary surrealism.

In preparation for my interview with King, I researched surrealism as a literary art form. Surrealism evolved into a full artistic movement after World War I as a response to the horrific violence and losses caused by technological advances that broke the rules of warfare. The weapons of mass destruction employed during World War I and the global pandemic of 1918 caused large-scale trauma for populations around the globe. Between 1914 and 1918, five centuries of social order were upended in less than five years, shattering rules of class structure under Western colonialism and imperialism. World War I broke all the rules, and the response from poets and writers was to throw out literary rules, too. As a movement, Surrealism aimed to find the meeting point between reality and nonsensical images and feelings that plagued the unconscious realm following the war. “Above all, it was through man’s unconscious mind, free from any logical restraint, that this group of artists hoped to liberate the human spirit” (Surrealism: The Search For Freedom).

Despite the changes in society brought on by the destruction of World War I, including the disgust for structure and rules, it turns out there actually is one rule for writing surrealism. According to André Breton, a poet widely considered the leader of Surrealism, the one rule applies to a writer's process. Breton wrote in the *Manifesto of Surrealism*:

Have writing materials brought, once you are settled in a place as favourable as possible for focusing the mind on itself. Put yourself in the most passive, or receptive state you can. Forget about your genius, your talents, and those of others. Tell yourself repeatedly that literature is one of the saddest roads leading to everything. Write swiftly with no preconceived subject, swiftly enough that you cannot retain it, and are not tempted to re-read (Breton).

In literature, the method of writing surrealism is to forget rules and write whatever flows through the stream of consciousness.

Since I discovered writing surrealism requires at least one rule, I wondered if other rules might apply. Every other genre requires “rules of the world” (Black). This is true for realistic fiction including contemporary and historical fiction, for speculative fiction such as science fiction and fantasy, and a blend of both as is found in paranormal fiction and magical realism.

The rules of the world are a key function to any story, and each genre has its own structure for worldbuilding. In science fiction and fantasy, rules are clear and consistent throughout the story revolving around setting, magic, technology, and social structure. In contemporary and historical stories, the rules must match those of the time period. In blended stories, the setting is the realistic world but with a few specific kinds of paranormal or magical elements, which stay the same throughout the story. In each of these genres, the rules of the world apply and stay consistent for all characters. As Holly Black described in her lecture

“Creating a Working Magic System” at Vermont College of Fine Arts, characters may gain or lose, use or misuse, magical elements or powers, but the rules for magic must stay the same.

In nearly all literary genres, then, “the rules” established by the writer form the consistent reality of the characters and of the reader, from beginning to end. This is not true for surrealism¹. In the young adult surrealistic stories I studied, I noticed one common element they shared, the element that set them apart from other writing: inconsistent rules.

Within surrealistic stories, magical elements or world rules are unclear and inconsistent. Furthermore, the rules often don’t apply to every character. This is different from magical realism or superhero stories where characters have different special powers, which still have to have a clear origin and must stay the same throughout the story. The point at which a story with magical elements becomes surreal is when the rules of the world are broken or become inconsistent for the characters within the world.

Printz Award winning author, A.S. King calls *I Crawl Through It* her only truly surrealistic book. It focuses on contemporary teen-specific trauma while paying tribute to the “late-twentieth-century TV show M*A*S*H about a mobile army surgical hospital unit during the Korean War” (7). From the very beginning of this novel, King sets up a world with inconsistent rules which creates a sense of confusion and curiosity in the reader. First, we learn that “Gustav is building a helicopter” (1). This seems like a relatively normal thing a person could do even though it is not a common teen activity. What is not normal nor immediately believable is that “Gustav believes his helicopter is invisible, and because he believes it, it is so” (1). Now the reader has been introduced to a world where anything Gustav believes is real just

¹ See Online Etymology Dictionary, the term came from the French *surréalisme* in which “sur” means “beyond” and “réalisme” means “realism”. The term was first used by Guillaume Apollinaire in 1917. Andre Breton used the name for the movement he launched in 1924 with his work “*Manifeste de Surréalisme*.”

because he believes it, and where his helicopter is invisible. This could lead the reader to either suspend any disbelief and go along with whatever Gustav believes, or to question whether Gustav is reliable and believable. The reader gets to make a choice in either direction until more information on the next page suggests that maybe Gustav and his beliefs are unreliable because Stanzi, the narrator for the section, says, “Gustav is building a red helicopter. It’s not invisible” (2). The rules of the world are already inconsistent between these two characters, but King establishes even more inconsistencies in the next line from Stanzi: “If I want, I can see it on Tuesdays. Other people can see it on other days, but I can only see it on Tuesdays, which is when the #10 combo is the dinner special at Las Hermanas.” All of these details grounded in seeming reality and juxtaposed with each other is what creates a surreal experience, leaving the reader to puzzle it out on their own.

A.S. King Interview Part 1

Q: You mentioned in your lecture at January 2020 residency that someone suggested you were a surrealist. Do you consider yourself a surrealist?

A: I do, and I was very grateful for that diagnosis for two reasons. Since my very first book, I was mislabeled as a magical realist and my books as magical realism. So, I had to adopt that term when I was talking to interviewers, and they would immediately talk about magical realism. I would have to refer to it as magic realism and it always felt—I guess it felt wrong. I love magic realism, but I’m a white lady from Pennsylvania, and magical realism is really known as the post-colonial voice from colonized people, and I am not one of those. I was mislabeled as fantasy as well. I didn’t know quite where I fit. Surrealism, I always liked, but I didn’t know I was doing it. I don’t think in my early books, I was doing it.

Q: What are the rules of surrealism?

A: There are no rules except to make sure the reader can follow the stories of your subconscious.

Q: What is the difference between magical realism and surrealism?

A: The difference is magical realism is set in the real world. Surrealism can be set anywhere. It's its own thing. Surrealism is limitless. I feel limited to being a human on earth and I have to at least connect with my characters and sell the book based on that. We are limited to what we can sell. If I had my own press sitting right here and I could print some of the shit Zachary Schomburg has in *The Man Suit*, I'd do it. But I can't. So, um...I might be able to now that I've won the Printz for *Dig*. I don't know. We'll have to see. Surrealism is far more limitless than what I'm using it as. It could be anything. But the idea is making a connection with the reader based on trauma. It doesn't matter where it's set because it's based on trauma. Whereas magical realism is not.

Q: Are there books of your own that you don't think are surreal? I have a stack of them, maybe we can go through. Vera Dietz—do you think that's surreal?

A: We'll do it the other way because that one's shorter. *I Crawl Through It* is the only pure surreal book I've written. That's pure surrealism. That's surrealism. *Still Life With Tornado*—I wouldn't call that surreal. I'd say it has splashes of surrealism. Or splashes of whatever that is. I don't know what that is. Someone once described magical realism to me as sort of the half-jump into surrealism. I don't think that's true, either. I think they come from two different places and I think they're two different things. I don't think *Dig* is even that surreal. Really, without spoilers

[BUT TOTALLY WITH SPOILERS, AMY!] you're really looking at someone who is speaking to the reader from beyond the grave. I mean how many books do we have like that? Loads, actually. So, she's on the page. Fair enough. She flickers. That's more like *Still Life With Tornado*. It's weird. It's different. *I Crawl Through It* is a surrealist book. That's the only one that fits that label. The rest are whatever it is I do. I don't know what to call it. But I will call myself a surrealist because of the way the process is described. Which you put perfectly on this piece of paper. Because I work the way I do, I work the surrealist way. Completely. Oh look! There's my process [holds up paper with interview questions and quote from André Breton on how to write surrealism].

Andre Breton, who is considered the leader of the surrealism movement, gave this advice for writing surrealism: "Have writing materials brought, once you are settled in a place as favourable as possible for focusing the mind on itself. Put yourself in the most passive, or receptive, state you can. Forget about your genius, your talents, and those of others. Tell yourself repeatedly that literature is one of the saddest roads leading to everything. Write swiftly with no preconceived subject, swiftly enough that you cannot retain it, and are not tempted to re-read."

Quote from Breton

André nailed it. And it's perfect. Focusing the mind on itself—which is what it is. And especially on itself, so it's very personal. And then you put yourself in a passive or receptive state. I always said—Bob Marley always said, “Jah, write all dem songs anyway.” That's kinda how I feel except I don't believe in god, so I just think it comes from The Consciousness or the Universe or something. And then I certainly don't think I'm a genius, so forget about your genius and your talents—that all goes. That's never here. That doesn't live in this office. Just the elliptical that never gets used. And then write swiftly with no preconceived subject and swiftly enough that you cannot retain it and are not tempted to re-read. Most of the time I forget what happens in the first part of the book. That's why if I have to stop in the middle of the book, like I did with this one [current project] then I'm like, “Uh oh. This could wreck the whole book.” And

then I luckily can find my thing again. So, if that's how surrealists write then I'm absolutely a surrealist. And I have been on every book whether the book itself is a surrealist book.

Q: So with that, maybe we can talk about *I Crawl Through It* a little bit. What makes it a surrealist book?

A: I think an immediate suspension of belief. So, in *I Crawl Through It*, you're immediately asked to believe that there's a red helicopter. Immediately you're thrown into this red helicopter thing, and right after that you have [Stanzi's] trauma that her parents go to the sites of school shootings. You don't know why, and she doesn't give you a sniff that there is a reason why, which is in a way, the buzz of writing the way I do because I didn't know why either. There's one early mention of the scar on her leg—that wasn't there until I got waaay to the place when I found out why her parents go to visit school shootings sites. I had no idea why. I never do. I don't know what's going on in the books.

I think in very choppy cuts—think about film like a cut to the next scene. A real choppy cut gives a feel of surrealism. This book is very choppy because it has several points of view. And it's sort of sparse. Spare. Sad. It's got an air of all that stuff to it. The sparseness adds to it. We cut directly to her frog dissection. We have a cast of characters where something's up. Lansdale's hair grows when she lies. Stanzi's a tetragametic chimera. China is a walking digestive system—literally. At least the way it's written literally. So today China is an anus; these aren't good days for China. So you get a laugh out of it, but you get the connection to the trauma out of it. And that's been one of the other things humor—not humor but irony is part of it, too. Lansdale is sort of fluffy, but there's a reason someone lies like that.

The only one who seems the least bit okay and together is Gustav, and he's introduced as building an invisible helicopter, so how fucking together can he have it? All the parents are bonkers—except for technically the one who you think is going to be the least responsible and is the one who has the best answer in the whole damn book. And it was the last thing I wrote because I was so scared to write it. But it was China's mother who's walking around in a latex body suit the whole time being sort of dominatrix—you know, with inner dungeon clothes. When China finally tells her she was raped, her mom answers the way I hope I can and the way I wish people had for me if I ever had the balls to even say it. Well, not people, because I only had one mom. But nobody thinks their mom is gonna take it well. No one tells their mom. From my friends I've asked. Y'all tell your mom? No.

What makes it surrealist? Tone? Style? Characters? The plot? The structure? The fact that we have those interviews in between? And the way it was written, which is the way I write all my books. It's interesting the way [Breton] talks about the saddest of things. "Tell yourself repeatedly that literature is one of the saddest roads leading to everything." Fuck. Okay. I'm not going to put that on my wall because I'll just be sad. But in fairness, this is the book I wrote because I was quitting writing. I had quit writing two days before it. I was sure, I was just sure I was never going to write again. I was burned out. I was at a bottom as a human being. And as a writer I was not okay. And then two days later I wrote literally that first chapter. I don't think it's changed at all. And I was like, oh, this is what I would like to do now. And it was because all those years I was kind of dipping my fingers in it, but I couldn't sell that. How could you sell that? You couldn't sell this as your first book. No one can sell it as their 8th book either, but don't tell anyone.

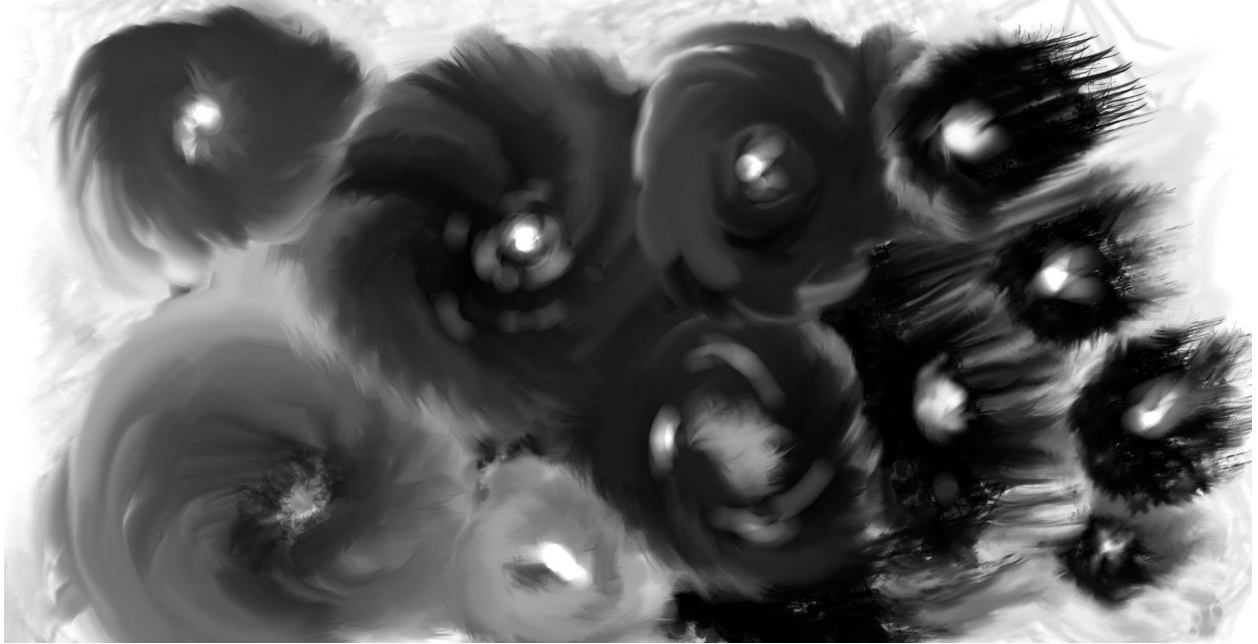


Figure 2: Blackhole flowers by Tiffany Rook

Trauma, Connection, and Healing

Rule 1: Trauma is surreal.

Rule 2: Trauma changes brain function by disconnecting neural pathways.

Rule 3: Resolving trauma can reconnect neural pathways.

Rule 4: Connection gives readers healing and empowerment.

Rule 5: Connect with an expert.

Rule 6: You might need a therapist.

Loneliness, isolation, and feeling disconnected from others are among the most dangerous and destructive mental states people can experience. This is particularly true for teenagers experiencing hormonal and physical changes while also transitioning socially and functionally from dependent children to independent adults. When teens experience trauma, their brains and bodies are affected in ways that are overwhelming and nonsensical. In *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, Bessel Van Der Kolk explains:

The essence of trauma is that it is overwhelming, unbelievable, and unbearable. Each patient demands that we suspend our sense of what is normal and accept that we are dealing with a dual reality: the reality of a relatively secure and predictable present that lives side by side with a ruinous ever-present past (197).

Broken. Cracked. Unsettled. Groundless. Like the world dropped out from under me. Like I can't breathe. These are words and phrases people often use to describe the chaos of traumatic events. When a person experiences trauma, their perceptions of reality shift in the confusion. It's not uncommon for emotionally violent experiences to result in intense side-effects such as night terrors, mood swings, and hallucinations making it even more difficult to distinguish between reality and the strange concoctions of images and feelings trauma creates in our brains. Those suffering trauma might frequently wonder which parts of their lives are real and which are not because traumatic experiences take a significant toll on the mind and body. Trauma has the power to create distorted senses of reality, not just in our perceptions, but literally in our brains.

“Whenever people have been physically, emotionally, or sexually abused, brain changes take place. Being in a fire, car accident, earthquake, or flood can also change the brain. In our imaging work we have seen specific scan patterns associated with emotional trauma. The limbic or emotional centers of the brain tend to become overactive, making people vulnerable to obsessions, anxiety, and depression, all things that interfere with our ability to connect with others...” (Amen 215).

Surrealism purposefully distorts reality by teetering on the edge of healthy skepticism and blind suspension of disbelief by juxtaposing reality and imagination in contradictory and evocative ways. Trauma and grief often cause apathy, irritability, and disinterest. These things make it more difficult to connect with other people and to feel understood. Without words, we

feel isolated, alone, and disconnected. Because surrealist literature presents juxtaposed imagery and puzzling metaphor, literal translation of realistic words and phrases lose their meaning, making unnamable emotions accessible through a reader's interpretation of impossible things.

Sometimes a world can appear to be fully realistic at first because it is set in what seems to be the real world, and then later there are elements which distort this reality or cause some confusion as to what is really happening or not happening. In the earlier part of this interview, King noted the way she switches points of view through different characters in *I Crawl Through It*. When we meet China, it is unclear as to whether her experiences are really happening or just a metaphor for how she feels. "I am China-who-swallowed-herself. I'm China-the-walking-throat. I'm China-being-digested" (143). This seems as though it is just a metaphor for a girl who has experienced something so bad that she wishes she could swallow herself.

Even when we see China from Lansdale's perspective, it seems as though China's experience really is just a metaphor for something. "If I had guts, I'd go to college parties and drink vodka, like China used to. She's gutsy. She swallowed herself and now she's a walking digestive tract. She digests on paper and we can see what she ate that day. Usually it's the past" (52). China writes poetry—so it seems safe to assume that the way she is processing or digesting her harsh experiences is through poetry and metaphor. But later in the story, China goes back to being a girl. "When I get to school, I find Lansdale and she is shocked that I have become a girl again and not a digestive system on legs" (114).

All of the references to China being swallowed or inside out, in combination with all the other incongruous aspects of the novel's world, make it unclear whether or not this is a metaphor or a literal thing. Each bizarre aspect of the story alone could symbolize a concept such as fear, but when combined and revised multiple times per page, the whole becomes surreal. Whether the

intention from the author is literal or metaphorical, a reader can take away whatever meaning they choose. Surrealism creates a space where metaphor and association allow readers to identify their own trauma within the story.

A.S. King Interview Part 2

Q: What expectations do young adult readers bring to books about trauma?

A: I have no idea what expectations young readers bring to anything. I'm not sure they have a goal for specifically reading about trauma. But I would guess that if they DID, then they might be looking for some connection or relief from feeling alone.

Q: Do you have any books that you would recommend that are surreal or just bizarre or you feel speak your language?

A: Before we talked, I was thinking, can I recommend any other YA surrealist books? And No, Amy, you can't because you don't know any. *I Crawl Through It* was a huge risk. Nobody else would have bought this book. This was bonkers. And I think this could only happen because it was my 5th book with Little Brown.

As far as adult stuff, there's always one that I recommend, but it's out of print so you have to get it used. It's called *The Man Suit* by Zachary Schomburg. It's very short. It's kind of poetry. It's kind of really strange. I have no idea how to explain this book to you. All I know is in the middle there's a white telephone and a black telephone that have conversations with each other and it's frickin awesome. The one that really helped me understand surrealism in a larger way was a book called *Daniel Fights a Hurricane* by Shane Jones, and he's about my age or a

little bit younger. When I think about Vonnegut—he's not a surrealist, but he's also dealing in trauma and cultural commentary.

All writers call things into question. That's our job. To question authority, rules, everything. But he does it in such a fucked up way. And it's so compassionate. That's what brought me back to that hospital in 1917. Really think about what World War I field hospitals looked like. There were people on stage dancing to entertain these young men. If war isn't surreal, I don't know what is. That's where Vonnegut came from for me. I think all of his writing—though none of his books could be considered surrealist in that box— all of his writing is surreal. That's how I feel because he's bringing it from a place where he actually had to dig charred dead bodies out of Dresden the morning after the place was bombed. You're never going to be the same after that. You're *never* going to be the same after that.

Q: Do YA authors writing about trauma have to follow different rules than authors writing for adults? If so, what is an example?

A: I don't really do rules, so these questions have been hard to grasp. But if there are rules, I'd say it depends on the age group. Look at *Hey, Kiddo* [by Jarrett J. Krosoczka] as an example. JK could have written deeply traumatic things into that book, but the aim was MG and graphic and reluctant readers, so he made the book more about how he became an artist versus graphic images of his addicted mother. (Compare to *Stitches* by David Small.) But that's a MG audience. For YA, I don't think there are rules. See also: Ellen Hopkins. The reason readers so connected to her early verse work are many. She doesn't hold back the gory details. Those who have been through trauma appreciate that. It's not trauma-lite. It's real. I guess that's the best part of surrealism. It's real, but also twisted into something surreal that can help you grasp the real.

Q: What makes something a surrealist book?

A: I guess what makes a surrealist book is somehow being able to knit together trauma inside and outside the book. Somehow knit together the setting or the landscape and the characters. For me it's like capturing shock. You know. You've been through shock. Your job as a wildland firefighter absolutely. You must go through shock more than once a year. And shock is hard. So for me, it's something I've been doing since the beginning of my books. Much of my life I've lived in a state of shock. And I think I'm still in a state of shock when it comes to the planet I landed on, the body I landed in, the culture I landed in, and I just always want to get that out of me. Regardless if it's some unpublished book in my attic or [*I Crawl Through It*], I'm always trying to tap shock.

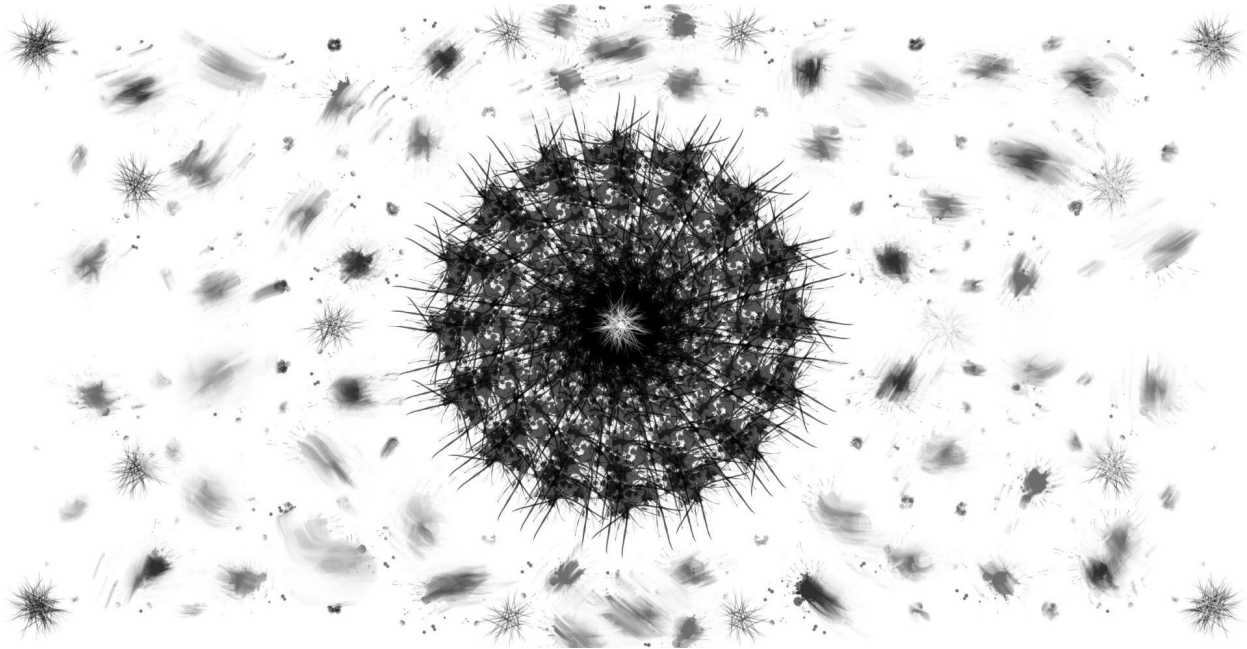


Figure 3: *The deep, deep past* by Tiffany Rook

The Elements of Surrealism

Rule 1: Reality is distorted.

Rule 2: Someone sees visions.

Rule 3: There are gaps in time.

Rule 4: Confusion abounds.

Even though it's a genre with no rules, or inconsistent ones at least, there are some general concepts frequently used in surrealist literature. I found in my reading that the young adult books which felt most surreal were the ones that had one or more of the following four elements of surrealism: *distorted reality, visions and dreams, gaps in time, and confusion* (Gentry and Licciardi).

The concept of a distorted reality in surrealist literature can be indicated by a wide variety of techniques. Distorted reality, in the simplest of terms, is a character's reality or perception of reality that does not align with the reality other characters experience. In realistic terms, a distorted reality could be having separated or divorced parents while other families have

two parents in the home. A more bizarre distortion of reality is an example from King's novel, *Still Life with Tornado*, when sixteen-year-old Sarah sees and talks to her ten, twenty-three, and forty-year-old selves. "A woman walks up and sits down next to me in the bus shelter. She says hello and I say hello and that's not original at all. When I look at her, I see that she is me. I am sitting next to myself" (5). At first, this seems as if it could be a story about a girl who is crazy, especially because she thinks of herself as crazy, and can't remember things from her past: "I don't remember what Bruce said in Mexico. I suddenly feel stupid. Like maybe I'm going crazy beyond sitting next to myself on a bus" (22).

As we read on, we find out that her distorted reality, where she interacts with her other selves, isn't just in her own mind. While Sarah is talking with ten-year-old-Sarah, "A woman stands in front of us and we look up at her. She says, 'Would you girls mind moving so I can get into my house please?'" Sarah and the reader both realize that, "This is not an hallucination" (49). Her strange reality is shared by others. Later on, ten-year-old Sarah goes home with Sarah, and after her parents have a fight, Dad walks past them. "He looks at us—both of us—from the doorway between the kitchen and the study and he says, 'I didn't know you had a friend over'" (71). Whether Sarah is having hallucinations or not, they are being confirmed by other characters, which is what helps create that distortion of reality.

Similarly, visions and dreams are a main component of the surrealist movement, and are a tool used to create a surrealistic feel in literature. In her novel, *Glory O'Brien's History of the Future*, King uses visions as a device to create a surreal setting and an opportunity for the main character, Glory, to process her mother's suicide and her own potential suicidal thoughts. Glory and her best friend, Ellie, have visions of the future and of the past—supposedly brought on by drinking a dead-bat-turned-to-dust mixed up with warm beer. After drinking this concoction,

Glory looks at Jupiter and reports, “I saw its history and its future all at once. I saw a huge explosion. I saw the planets and stars each take their place in the blackness. I saw the speed of light. Then darkness again—as if everything had died. It made me want to cry” (53).

As the story goes on, Glory continues to have visions, but this time they are the futures and histories of people she sees in parking lots and at the mall. “Transmission from the woman parking next to me: *Her mother was in jail. Her grandmother loved jazz. Her grandson will flunk out of high school*” (57). Her friend Ellie has visions, too, though they’re not the same as Glory’s: “I see people living in trees. I saw that. And there was this one thing I didn’t really understand, but everywhere was flooded and people used boats. It was the future, though, so the boats were really cool. It was hot, too, and no one could use air-conditioning anymore because there was no more oil” (132). Glory can see visions of Ellie’s future, but the fact that neither Glory nor Ellie can see Glory’s future echoes Glory’s trauma from losing her mother to suicide. In surrealistic stories, visions fracture reality and create a realm where readers are never quite sure where they stand in time or location, a common symptom of traumatized brains.

In addition to distorted reality, and visions or dreams, gaps in time or writing out of sequence is another effective surrealistic technique because it mimics the way traumatized people access memories of trauma. “Traumatized people simultaneously remember too little and too much” (Van Der Kolk 181). Authors create this aspect of surrealism by writing stories out of chronological order, using choppy scene changes, and employing multiple points of view (Gentry). In her latest novel, *Dig*, King uses choppy scene changes and multiple characters to create a surreal world for the reader. The novel opens on page one with a third-person point of view of an older couple, Marla and Gottfried. It then shifts to a third-person point of view for brothers Jake and Bill on page three, and by page five, King introduces a character called The

Shoveler, who has no real name, but narrates in first-person and seems to be the main character because he has the most sections. Even though the overall story is in chronological order, the multiple and sudden shifts in point of view give the feel of huge gaps in time for the reader. Over the course of the entire novel, there are a total of seven different points of view. Each shift creates another gap for the reader, but the surrealistic gaps in *Dig* don't stop there.

Confusion is a fourth key element of surrealism. Every time the character The Freak shows up, she always seems to flicker away again, which leaves the characters and the reader wondering about her. When The Shoveler meets The Freak, he doesn't know where she came from. They strike up a conversation, and before he knows it, she's gone:

She just vanished. Bummed a cigarette, smoked half of it, then I looked up and she was gone. Her cigarette is still burning on the curb where she left it, but it's wet from snowfall, which seems impossible—a burning, wet cigarette. She isn't sitting on the front porch. She isn't sneaking through the side alleys. Her footprints stop where she stopped. It makes no sense (31).

The way The Freak flickers throughout the book gives a sense of gaps both for her and the other characters. These gaps add to the sense of confusion King sets up for the reader after each character interacts with The Freak, and this forces the reader to look for patterns.

According to brain researchers Ian Krajbich and Arkady Kononov, when humans see images, our minds try to identify and categorize the items or objects in order to predict what we will likely see next. This type of thinking is called probabilistic learning. Krajbich and Kononov conducted a brain research study using MRIs of subjects identifying pictures and patterns and “found different parts of the brain were active depending on two kinds of uncertainty that the participants faced” (Grabmeier).

Unsurprisingly, they found that on the question of which image was coming next, the probabilistic learning parts of the brain lit up. But “the other kind of uncertainty concerned whether there was a pattern in the images presented. As the participants worked out this question, a different part of the brain—the ventromedial prefrontal cortex—was activated. This part of the brain has been shown in other research to be associated with reward” (Grabmeier).

In other words, the human brain treats a certain amount of confusion as a puzzle. When we search for patterns, we experience a sense of emotional reward. Surrealism purposefully juxtaposes contradictions to create impossibilities so that our mind experiences confusion (Licciardi). Surrealism asks readers to willingly engage with the literature, trying to puzzle out these unexpected elements.

A.S. King Interview Part 3

Q: Let’s go over the elements of surrealism. I looked up the aspects of surrealism and came up with Gaps in Time, Distorted Reality, Visions and Dreams, and Confusion. Are these elements used in *I Crawl Through It* and in your other work?

A: There are not really gaps in time. But there are choppy breaks in between. We have these interviews throughout that break up the narrative. There are no large gaps in time, but the scene changes are choppy which makes it feel like there are gaps in time. You can make your writing in a surrealistic style if you cut from one scene that almost doesn’t feel finished. Make it an uncomfortable space by stopping at a place just a little earlier than you normally would. You can almost not stop, but you have to stop. That’s what gaps in time do—they make it an uncomfortable space.

Distorted Reality? That's certainly all over that book. Why is distorted reality important? I think distorted reality is important because as human beings our realities or perceptions are often distorted. All of ours are. Except not all of them. There are certain things that are perception and certain things that aren't. I think throughout the book you look at someone like China who thinks that she's just going to be a useless piece of trash for the rest of her life, but for some reason she's able to turn it around and understand that she's not one. And Stanzi finally comes to her trauma. And Gustav comes to Stanzi's trauma with her.

Distorted reality is where I think it leaks into the other books like *Still Life with Tornado*—that's a pretty distorted reality to be able to hang out with your ten-year-old self. That chunk of it is surreal.

Visions. *Glory O'Brien's History of the Future* has visions. And then there are dreams in *Everybody Sees the Ants*. The one thing about surrealism—when I started looking into it—is dreams. I've always had really weird dreams. Everybody has weird dreams, right. Who doesn't? But I've had very recurring dreams since my childhood. Messed up recurring dreams. There were systems in my dreams. Very surreal magical systems. I would have dreams in this same system of magic but with different things. That's how I dealt with my trauma as it was occurring. I've always had a dream journal next to my bed. I always keep track of my dreams. I have prescient dreams. I've always had prescient dreams since I was a kid. One of the recurring dreams was that system dream, which was a really cool concept for a book and that's where [*Glory O'Brien's History of the Future*] started. Dreams are a huge part of what I dig for information. For actual information. It's funny because I put dreams in books, which of course everyone says, don't ever start a book with a dream and don't ever put dreams in books. I don't care if someone says I can't do it—apparently, I can.

Q: What I'm trying to figure out is, how do you make it work so well?

A: Well, that's in the revision. Not going back and rereading before it's time is so important. But once you do go back and read, the way you do it is: trust the order it's in and try to figure it out. It's like a puzzle. You fit it together. You puzzle it together. Usually it involves a lot more cutting than adding. Once I get confused, once I don't know what the hell is going on, once I think it's shit—it's shit, it's boring, I'm done, I don't know what's going, this is ridiculous, I hate this book—that means I should read it from the beginning. And fix it.

Q: So, you said “once I get confused.” There are four surrealistic elements I identified, and the last one is confusion. So even you get confused by your own stories, and that's when you revise. Do you think that's a good element to maintain throughout the book for your readers?

A: Only a certain amount. If you confuse the reader too much, they're not going to be interested.

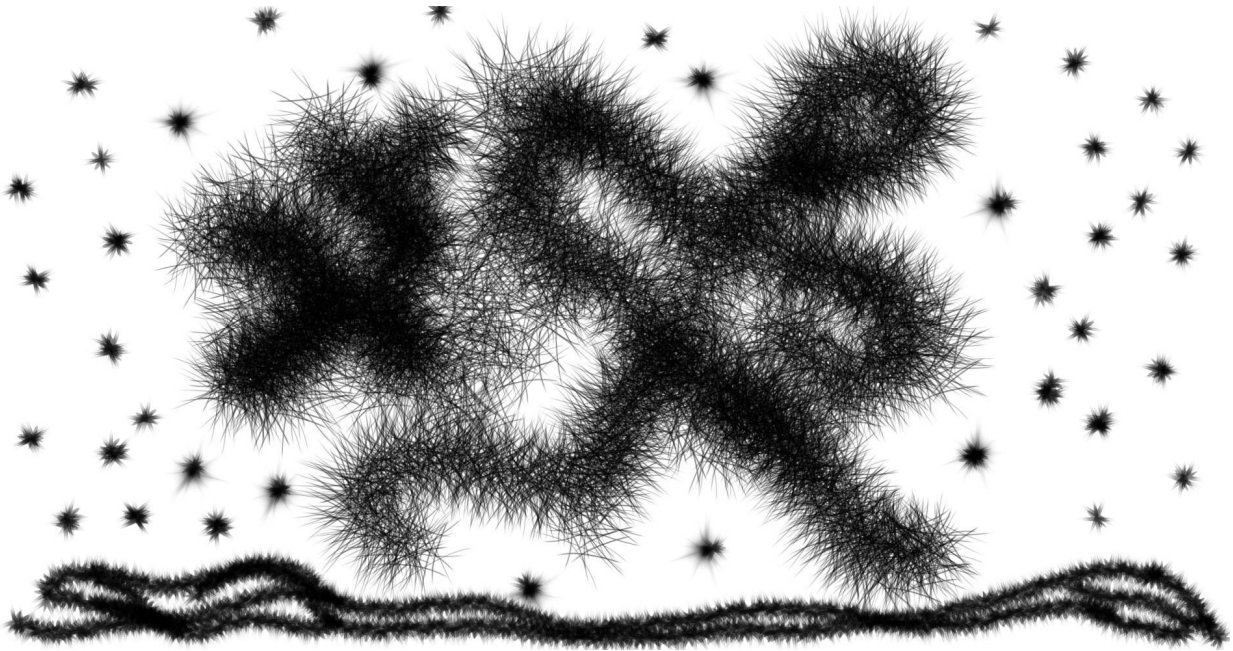


Figure 4: Prickly Runner and Jumping Dog by Tiffany Rook

Empowering the Reader

Rule 1: There are characters.

Rule 2: The characters share experiences.

Rule 3: The characters don't share experiences.

Rule 4: The reader decides.

Surrealism in fiction can provide an otherworldly feeling for readers regardless of the world setting. Writers use surrealism to create a sense of bewilderment and a reality capable only of being described in metaphor. Surrealism in stories makes readers question and think outside the limitations of reality by providing a sense of wonder and skepticism, while also allowing them to suspend disbelief. Thinking outside the limitations of reality and approaching a story with a sense of skepticism can help readers process experiences which might seem too freakish or unexpected to be real. This mixture of suspending disbelief but maintaining some skepticism allows room for imaginations to experiment with different ideas and create the story that makes the most sense.

In her introduction to *The Milk and Bowl of Feathers: Essential Surrealist Writings*, Mary Ann Caws identifies the most important concept of surrealism. “Essential to surrealist behavior is a constant state of openness, of readiness for whatever occurs, whatever object might be encountered by chance that has something marvelous about it, manifesting itself against the already thought, the already lived” (Caws 5). This aspect of being ready and open for whatever might occur applies to both the author and the reader.

First, the author must do as Breton, the founder of surrealism, and King, contemporary YA surrealist, suggest about the writing process: let everything flow and proceed without stopping or looking back. Second, the reader must come to the story with enough openness to go along with the bizarre happenings of a mind-boggling text, but enough careful thought to question the point at which bizarre meets real life. Caws states further that, “surrealism has, at its highest moments, a combination of the startling and the lyric, in an unmistakable and sensational style. It opts to occasion and to welcome surprise, for a poetic sense of openness to chance, including the mystery of human encounters beyond the reach of the rational” (7).

Magical or fantastical fiction often provides readers with a sense of escapism by allowing them to suspend all disbelief and go along with the rules of the world as it is established. But because it gives the reader the power of pushing their own imaginations, surrealism can grant readers a much bigger boon than escape.

Surrealism as an artistic device can allow readers to find an ephemeral connection through symbolism and to process their own perplexing and uncanny experiences. It can unlock the bizarre areas of imagination, giving the reader power by generating more questions than answers. Is this real? Is it unreal? Is it a metaphor? What does it mean? The reader gets to

decide. This power to decide is what makes surrealism different from other works of speculative fiction.

A.S. King Interview Part 4

Q: What makes surrealism in YA literature different from surrealism in literature for adults?

A: Adult surrealism can be called surrealism and marketed that way. In YA, reviewers (and publishers) often mislabel it, call it magic realism or fantasy, call it whatever they decide it is. Also, it's a harder sell in YA, I think. But it's not an easy sell in adult realms, either.

Q: I've found in reading books directly focused on mental illness that I don't feel as connected to the main character. But with surrealism, where there's weird shit going on but not necessarily a specific trauma I have to identify with, I can begin to insert my own trauma into it. How do we actually get people—teens especially—to pay that kind of attention?

A: I don't ever do anything on purpose. I'm an awfully frustrating interviewee because I do nothing on purpose. Now I do revise with purpose, absolutely. And I have to make sure the book works structurally. It must be by accident for me, but there is a gap between reader and main character so that you don't only have to be the main character. The idea is you're still removed from it and you can insert your own bits and pieces. The distance has to be there. If you don't have the distance you're too close.

Q: Would you say surrealism is helpful to teens? And how or why?

A: No one really talks to teens about trauma on the level. If they try to talk about mental illness in health class, it's not about trauma. It's about mental illness. It's about learning the names of things, the definitions of things and taking your test. Knowing what adverse child experiences (ACEs) are and what they can do would make a big difference. I think if we learned [our ACEs] at a young age and we could count our ACEs, count our experiences, add when need be, sadly, then by the time we're not a child anymore—which I think for me the ACEs should go maybe to 23 or early twenties—with the knowledge of ACEs, you know your number AND you know how it affects you AND you know you might need therapy AND you know you might need to read a book AND you know maybe you shouldn't hang out with that guy who wears the choker and the eyeliner—you know all these things we are just not told.

We just don't talk about trauma at all in our culture. I was talking to my kid last night about a really shitty thing that a friend of mine had gone through as a child. And I didn't name the person, but I was just explaining it. It wasn't a scare thing; we were talking about something that was related to it and my kid was able to talk about that. "Aw man, that's harsh," my kid can say and sort of understand it. My kid is in 7th grade and has a good friend who was assaulted earlier this year and missed a month of school. Sexually assaulted from what I understand. 7th grade. So many of us have these things happen before 7th grade.

Kids are experiencing the trauma before anybody teaches them how to talk about it. Depending on where they are getting their trauma, it can seem like love to them. Depending on who is giving it to them. If we are not educating kids about ACE scores, about trauma—then they're not going to know about it. Why would they? If you don't teach them the truth about

Christopher Columbus—they're not going to know that, either. And they're not going to know the truth about any of the other things we don't teach them about.

Why is it important? I think books are the one place kids find themselves. That's where I found myself. It wasn't necessarily a weird book, but it did cover trauma. Weird books were where I went, "ahhhh." I could *feel* in those books. I could exist in other books, but when I found the weird ones it was like someone was speaking my language, and I could finally understand it.



Figure 5: *Tornados in a Jar* by Tiffany Rook

Conclusion

Rule 1: Stories begin.

Rule 2: Stories middle.

Rule 3: Stories end.

Rule ∞ : There are no rules.

Surrealism is a crucial tool that allows readers to connect with characters they might not otherwise be able to understand. For readers who may have never experienced serious trauma, surrealism can provide a glimpse into what it might feel like for those who do. And for readers who live with the impact of trauma every day, surreal fiction helps them feel and deal with what they have not been able to name or confront on their own.

As the most well-known, and arguably the only, surrealist writing and publishing young adult literature today, A.S. King is paving the way for young adult authors in making surrealism accessible and empowering for teen readers. Surrealism in young adult fiction brings to life the

seemingly crazy or unbelievable feelings that come with trauma and can illuminate the confusing feelings associated with these kinds of experiences. When used in young adult literature, the four aspects of surrealism can create an authentic emotional experience for the reader that pushes ideas to new depths. Distorted reality, visions and dreams, gaps in time, and confusion can all be used to create symbolic and metaphorical narratives which connect readers and characters through skepticism, wonder, and imagination. This connection has the potential to give readers possibilities for processing their own ineffable experiences or gaining empathetic perspective.

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