Imagining Fictional Contradictions

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Abstract: It is widely believed, among philosophers of literature, that imagining contradictions is as easy as telling or reading a story with contradictory content. Italo Calvino's *The Nonexistent Knight* (1962), for instance, concerns a knight who performs many brave deeds, but who does not exist. Anything at all, they argue, can be true in a story, including contradictions and other impossibilia. While most will readily concede that we cannot objectually imagine contradictions, they nevertheless insist that we can *propositionally* imagine them, and regularly do, simply by entertaining a text which prompts us to do so. I argue that this narrative does not bear scrutiny for two main reasons. First, because propositional imagining is beside the point, where truth in fiction is concerned; evaluating truth in fiction engages the cognitive architecture in ways that prohibit the mobilization of merely propositional imagination to that end. And second, because it is not obvious, given the strategies usually suggested, that we ever propositionally imagine contradictions in the first place—in fact, it seems we go out of our way to avoid directly imagining them.

Imagining Fictional Contradictions

1. Introduction

Imagine a rompo by a waterfall.[1]

No? I can't, either. The best I can do, with some effort, is to imagine a shadowy creature romping around at the base of a waterfall (the waterfall is the easy bit).

Now imagine a creature with a hare's head but human ears, a horse's mane and a skeletal body, badger arms and bear legs, and imagine it by the waterfall from before. Oh, and bear in mind that it feeds on human corpses. Armed with all that information, we can do a much better job of imagining our rompo—although again, with some effort, since—if you're at all like me—we have to spend a little time remembering which parts go where.

One last time: imagine a unicorn rearing to fend off a dragon. Presumably, you had no trouble picturing a magical horned horse standing on its hind legs facing a winged (and legged?) fire-breathing serpent, and extrapolating from there. My horse was white, and my serpent green; I suspect yours were, too. It is striking—though hardly surprising—that we were able to start imagining the unicorn *immediately* and with ease, whereas the rompo took some work, and could only really be imagined at all once we knew *what* we were instructed to imagine. These cases demonstrate that the less familiar the thing we are asked to imagine, the harder it is to actually imagine it; the more familiar it is, the easier to imagine, since we are accustomed to doing so and can rely on conventions to help us fill out the content of the imagining.

Now: what happens when Graham Priest asks us to imagine a box that is empty and contains a figurine, when Italo Calvino asks us to imagine a knight who doesn't exist but acts all the same until he ceases to exist in some more fundamental sense, or when Douglas Adams tells us that the probability of rescuing Arthur Dent and Ford Prefect was two-to-the-power-of-infinity-minus-

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[1] Lest I be accused of having an over-active imagination, the rompo is a creature from African and Indian legend (but possibly a reference to the porcupine).

one to one against (an irrational number)? Philosophers of literature typically take it for granted that we can imagine anything we like, including contradictions and other impossibilities, and therefore argue that anything at all can be true in our stories. The proof, they think, is right in front of our eyes: we have these stories, we read them, and we understand them. And since engaging with a story clearly involves imagining its events, we must be able to imagine contradictions and other logical impossibilities, especially when a talented writer holds our hand.

Unfortunately, this narrative does not bear scrutiny. Broadly speaking, we can distinguish between two general characterizations of the imagination: objectual and propositional imagination. While most philosophers will happily grant that we are incapable of objectually imagining contradictions or other logical (and perhaps also metaphysical) impossibilities, quite a few think that we can propositionally imagine them. The limits of propositional imagination, they argue, are given by our ability to formulate propositions, and nothing more. I think this is not only wrong, but also entirely beside the point.

I will argue, first, that even if defenders of propositional imagination are correct that our propositional imagination is unconstrained, propositional imagining is beside the point as far as truth in fiction is concerned. Even if we *can* imagine contradictions (and I will argue that we cannot), contradictions cannot be true in fiction. Truths in fiction are true upon reflection, not upon belief or imagination. Second, I will argue that closer inspection casts doubt on our ability to propositionally imagine contradictions in the first place. What we actually do, instead, is imagine something *other* than a contradiction. Ultimately, I will suggest that the case for imagining propositional contradictions boils down to arguments from ignorance and conflations of directly and indirectly imagining that some description of events is satisfied.

2. Impossible is nothing

In keeping with Adidas's tortured slogan that 'impossible is nothing',[2] most philosophers of literature think that we can imagine anything at all which we might care to, including contradictions. The proof, they think, is staring us right in the pudding, if you'll forgive the equally tortured mixed metaphor: far from being an imaginative impossibility, the possibility of contradictions being true is a hallmark of fiction. Here, for example, are some representative samples, starting with Kendall Walton explaining the difference between his pretense theory of fiction and Lewis's possibilist treatment:

> But fictional worlds are not possible worlds. Two differences, especially, have been discussed elsewhere: Fictional worlds are sometimes impossible and usually incomplete [...]
>
> There is nothing to stop anyone from telling a story about an elf who squares the circle. Can one imagine impossibilities? Not, presumably, if imaginability is a good test of possibility. But then can contradictory or metaphysically impossible propositions be fictional, on our account? I am inclined to think that even contradictions can be imagined in the relevant sense (Walton 1990: 64).

And here is Graham Priest reporting on his short story, *Sylvan's Box*, which he thinks illustrates the fact that the logic of fiction is paraconsistent since it features a box that is empty and contains a figurine:

> (1) The story above concerns objects and events some of which are inconsistent. The inconsistency is no accident but is essential to the plot. Yet it is a coherent story. [...] The inconsistent happens.
> (2) In particular, anyone who misapplied the principle of charity to interpret the story in a consistent way, would have entirely misunderstood it (Priest 1997: 579-80).

Finally, here is John Woods, enumerating some *explananda* for a theory of fiction:

> I want instead to put on the record a further trio of peculiarities that make fiction philosophically interesting. [...]:
>
> > *The inconsistency-problem thesis*: Readers experience themselves as knowing that fiction is inconsistent.
> >
> > *The undisturbing inconsistency-problem thesis*: In their experiencings of known inconsistency, neurotypical human beings betray no sign of cognitive dissonance.
> >
> > *The problem inconsistency poses for knowledge thesis*: How could our knowledge of the objects and events of fiction be transmitted by sentences that are concurrently true and not (Woods 2018: 40)?

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[2] The slogan is standardly taken to mean that the 'impossible' is not real—in other words, that nothing is impossible.

Because imagining is widely considered central to our engagement with fiction, these and other philosophers of literature conclude that if we can tell contradictory stories, then it follows that we can imagine contradictions (see, e.g., Walton 1990, Currie 1997, and Stock 2017). Indeed, they adopt a positively nonchalant attitude towards fictional contradiction. But should they?

There is no doubt that the imagination is heavily involved in our engagement with fiction; on that much, at least, everyone agrees. Just what its particular role is, however, is a matter of some debate. The default analysis of fiction today is in terms of Walton's (1990) theory of make-believe, according to which texts are resources which readers use as props in games of make-believe in which they imagine that the world is as the text says it is. Crucially, on the Waltonian model, authors use texts to prescribe imaginings to their audiences. Our imaginative capacities are thus front and centre, and it matters little whether we can actually satisfy the author's prescription: the author has made the contradiction true in the story, and if it turns out that we cannot properly take up her prescription to imagine it, then so much the worse for us.

Imagination plays a similar role according to make-believe's main competitor, the fictive utterance theory: according to fictive utterance theorists, authors write their texts with the fictive intent that we make-believe a text's content (see Currie 1990, Lamarque and Olsen 1994, Davies 2007, and Stock 2011). For Gregory Currie, this make-believing requires readers to simulate being readers of factual reports (1990: 144); for Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, audiences adopt the fictive stance towards an author's utterances, which requires them to imagine that her utterances are perfectly ordinary real-world utterances (1994: 43). Fiction, for these theorists, is a communicative act whose goal is to generate a game of make-believe in which the audience imagines the author's story (Currie 1990: 701-1). When an author tells us something contradictory, their communicative act breaks down and we must pause to determine just what it is that they want us to do in the game of make-believe. If the contradiction is deliberate and irremediable, as in *Sylvan's Box*,

then we are forced to attribute contradictory beliefs to the fictional author (Currie 1990: 87-9); what follows in the story is less clear, but we can at least be sure that it is a story like any other, and governed by the same kinds of communicative norms.

Some philosophers have argued for a sharper contrast between pretense and imagination. Gregory Currie and Ian Ravenscroft, for example, argue that imagining is a primarily mental recreative activity, while pretense is primarily behavioural. As a result, imagining is more directly and intimately connected to subpersonal processes (2002: 32-3). Pretending always involves at least one other action that stands between the pretending and the subpersonal level, such as doing things like calling 'Troll!' when faced with a pile of rubble; to *imagine* a troll, by contrast, all we need do is imagine a troll. In a similar vein, Elizabeth Picciuto and Peter Carruthers have argued that pretense is embodied imagination (action-as-if minus belief) (2016: 317). Further distinctions can be profitably drawn concerning the difference between imagination and simulation, supposition, and stipulation, but unfortunately doing so would take us too far afield.[3] For my present purposes, what matters is just that philosophers commonly link our imaginative capacities to our experience of stories. On both of the accounts above, for instance, 'make-believe' or pretense is synonymous with imagination, or with imaginative engagement. On the Waltonian model, we use stories as props for imagining along the lines sketched out by authors; on the fictive utterance theory, authors suggest the outlines of a scenario and ask us to imagine the rest for ourselves.

If imagination is an essential element of lectoral experience, as these accounts suggest, then it stands to reason that anything which constrains our powers of imagination will also constrain our lectoral experience. Some of these will, of course, include countervailing motivations or meta-awareness of the pretense (see Leslie 1987 and Picciuto and Carruthers 2016: 317). If you do not

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[3] Interested parties should consult Peacocke (1985), Goldman (1989), Currie and Ravenscroft (2002: Ch. 2, p. 111-33), Kung (2010), Kind (2013), Balcerak Jackson (2016), Stock (2017: Ch. 6, p. 175-207), and Arcangeli (2019).

wish to engage in make-believe, after all, then you usually need not do so;[4] and even though I cannot read Arthuriana without weeping, the fact that I am aware of reading a novel means that I take no steps to warn Arthur against Morgan's machinations, Mordred's ambition, or Lancelot's betrayal. Therein lie the roots of the puzzle of imaginative resistance and the paradox of fiction, respectively.

But there are other, internal, limitations on our imagination, too.[5] Recall that at the start of this essay I asked you to—I *prescribed that you*—imagine a rompo. If you struggled to do so absent further instruction, then I think that you found yourself in exactly the same position everyone finds themselves in when we read a story about a square-circler or a Gödel-disprover—that is to say, we cannot follow the prescription to imagine such things, because we have no idea how to do it successfully.[6] I cannot rely on your imagination to fill in the details of a rompo-riffic story if you have no idea what a rompo is and I do nothing much to help you; similarly, we cannot imagine contradictions and other logical or metaphysical impossibilities because we have no idea how to do so directly—and neither does any author. We can easily *describe* such impossibilities by relying on a meta-language, and can perhaps represent them to ourselves indirectly by such means; but we cannot use our imaginations to directly represent them, and thus cannot embed them into the living fabric of our stories. The question of what is true in a story cannot be answered simply by imagining things; it is a question which can only be answered by asking ourselves what it is that we know about a story, upon reflection. Allow me to explain, briefly.

According to both the make-believe and the fictive utterance theories of fiction, a story's content is shaped by our games of make-believe (our imaginative activity), which themselves proceed along the lines explicitly outlined by the author and implicitly suggested by our knowledge

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[4] Although some imaginings may be involuntary, as when we actively try not to imagine pink elephants.

[5] Indeed, there is good evidence from social psychology indicating that the real world constrains our ability to creatively imagine new things; see e.g. Ward (1994) and Brédart, Ward, and Marczewski (1998).

[6] Several strategies for doing so have been suggested. I shall consider these in §5.

of the way the world really is.[7] I have argued elsewhere that auctorial say-so (sometimes called the 'principle of poetic license') is constrained by background and, in particular, the logical laws (such as non-contradiction) which form part of that background (Xhignesse 2016, forthcoming). The result is a 'Says-Is Gap', such that what is true in a story depends on more than just the author's say-so. As Brian Weatherson puts it, "there is a strong default assumption [that this real-world background is imported into stories and imaginings], meaning just that an author cannot cancel the assumption by saying so" (2004: 17). In other words, every source of story-content is constrained in some way: auctorial say-so by the story's primary and secondary content, the story's background by the Reality Assumption, and lectoral imagination by whatever constraints actually govern the imagination. All of these factors combine to constrain our games of make-believe, which in turn constrains the scope of what can be true in our stories.

In the rest of this paper, I will argue that Adidas got it wrong: 'impossible' *is something*. It is a hard limit on our ability to imagine both in and out of storyworlds (at least where logical, and perhaps also metaphysical, impossibilities are concerned).

3. Imaginary architecture

If these observations are correct, then when reading Graham Priest's *Sylvan's Box*, we *do not* really imagine a box that is empty and contains a figurine, just as we do not imagine that in Italo Calvino's *The Nonexistent Knight* Agilulf exists and does not exist, that God proved himself out of existence in Douglas Adams's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, or that in Djaitch da Bloo's (very) short story *The End* nothing does or could happen, including this fact. It remains to be explained, however, just

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[7] Stacie Friend characterizes this as the 'Reality Assumption', which she argues underpins all our principles of generation (2017). Philosophers of literature are more or less unanimously agreed on this point, although they have articulated slightly different versions of the principle; see e.g. John Woods's 'fill conditions' (1974: 63-5), later reconfigured as his 'world-inheritance thesis' (2018), and Marie-Laure Ryan's 'principle of minimal departure' (1980). Tamar Szabó Gendler (2000: 75-6) and Brian Weatherson (2004: 17) likewise commit to something like the Reality Assumption.

what it is that we do when we are faced with these impossibilities. And to do that, we first need to have a closer look at the machinery of the human imagination.

One dominant view of imagination treats it as belief-like, minus the motivational connection to action (see Stich and Nichols 2000, Currie and Ravenscroft 2002, Nichols and Stich 2003, Picciuto and Carruthers 2016). So, when I read Bernard Cornwell's *Excalibur*, I imagine that Arthur is grievously wounded by Mordred at the battle of Camlann, and the content of that imagining is just as it would have been if I actually believed (and I'm not sure I don't!) that these events really took place. The core idea here is just that our imaginings are subject to the same mental processes as our ordinary beliefs; this is the so-called 'single code' hypothesis (see Stich and Nichols 2000, Currie and Ravenscroft 2002, Nichols 2004 and 2006, Weinberg and Meskin 2006, Weinberg 2008, Langland-Hassan 2012, and van Leeuwen 2013).

The single code hypothesis maintains that there is a close (evolutionary) connection between our imaginative capacities and our inferential mechanisms, such that belief and pretense are parsed by the same cognitive processes (Nichols 200: 131 and 2006: 249). One important piece of our cognitive architecture is sometimes called the 'belief box', and it simply names whatever mechanism stores our beliefs; the 'imagination box' is a functionally distinct piece of our cognitive architecture, and it refers to whatever mechanism governs our ability to imagine (Weinberg and Meskin 2006: 179-80). Crucially, on this hypothesis the information stored in the belief and imagination boxes is subject to the same monitoring and inference systems, and to a mechanism which updates the contents of the relevant box in light of new information (the "UpDater"). Other cognitive processes allow us to insert new content into the imagination box and to fill in the inexplicit aspects of imagined scenarios (the "InPutter" and "Script Elaborator", respectively) (see Stich and Nichols 2000: 124-5 and Weinberg and Meskin 2006: 182).

Encountering a story-level contradiction (especially of the deliberate kind) produces what philosophers of the imagination call imaginative blockages (see Blackburn 1993, Nichols 2006: 246, and Weinberg and Meskin 2006: 185). On this architectural model of the imagination, blockages happen when different pieces of the cognitive architecture, such as the InPutter and the UpDater, get in each other's way. Faced with such an intractable problem, all we can do is refuse the invitation to imagine, unless we are offered some kind of trick or workaround (Weinberg and Meskin 2006: 190; Meskin and Weinberg 2011).[8] For this reason, single-coders typically accept that we cannot imagine contradictions. This is consistent with evidence from the psychology of imaginative cognition, which indicates not only that readers read against a background supplied by the real world (as posited by the Reality Assumption and other such background literary principles), but that readers treat scientific and mathematical facts as largely invariant across fictional worlds, including worlds which are radically divergent from the actual world (Weisberg and Goodstein 2009). Mathematical facts, in particular, seem especially robust; more so, even, than established scientific facts. On the architectural model of the imagination, these results come as no surprise.

Such accounts of the imagination are rather like David Lewis's initial gloss on truth in fiction, according to which what is true in a story is whatever is told as known fact in some sufficiently close possible world (Lewis 1978).[9] Nor should this come as a surprise, since Lewis's treatment of fiction is based on his treatment of counterfactuals; and, indeed, many of the standard treatments of the imagination draw close links to our understanding of modal reasoning. In order to determine the exact content of our imaginings, we combine our modal beliefs with our background beliefs, any or all of which may be used inferentially in conjunction with our explicit beliefs about

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[8] Ultimately, however, Weinberg and Meskin do accept that we can imagine *some* irremediable contradictions, such as that twelve is and is not the sum of five and seven (2006: 191).

[9] This is especially true of Lewis's Analysis 1, although even his Analysis 2 retains the structure of 'being told as known fact'.

the story, save those which are inconsistent with the story's premises (Stich and Nichols 2000: 124-5, Weisberg and Goodstein 2009, and Stock 2017: 176-7).

Alternately, it has been suggested that we should distinguish strictly propositional imagining, with its belief-like structure, from *objectual* imagining, which concerns particular objects or individuals (perhaps with the accompanying sensory imaginings[10]) (Yablo 1993 and Kung 2010). When I follow Cornwell's prescription to imagine Lancelot as a self-serving coward who paid bards to build his reputation, I am imagining it propositionally: I am simply representing these facts to myself as being the case. But when I imagine Derfel Cadarn throwing Excalibur back into the sea, I am directly representing the situation to myself: I am objectually imagining it (see Peacocke 1985, Yablo 1993, Noordhof 2002, and Gaut 2003). Objectual imagination is sensory or perspectival:[11] it can simply involve imagining feeling, hearing, seeing, smelling, or tasting something, or taking a perspective. But as Kathleen Stock has observed (2017: 24), objectual imagining is underpinned by propositional imagining, so that if I objectually imagine Derfel throwing Excalibur into the sea, I also (propositionally) imagine *that* Derfel throws Excalibur into the sea. The converse, however, does not hold: propositional imagining does not entail objectual imagining.[12]

It might be suggested, then, that although we cannot objectually imagine contradictions (since we cannot actually represent them to ourselves), we *can* propositionally imagine them simply by entertaining the relevant propositions, or failing to notice their falsity.[13] Peter Kung and Kathleen Stock have both made suggestions to this effect, but where Kung thinks that propositional imagination is unconstrained in its ability to assign content to impossibilia suppositionally, Stock

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[10] These have sometimes been referred to as 'mental imagery', but Margherita Arcangeli (forthcoming) persuasively argues that the equation of mental imagery with sensory imagination results from a confusion between two senses of 'mental imagery'. To avoid such confusion, I have adopted her locution of 'sensory imagination' for the attitudinal sense of 'mental imagery'.

[11] 'Attitudinal', in Arcangeli's terms (forthcoming).

[12] Note, however, that Kind disagrees in her (2001); in fact, Kind argues that we should not be so quick to distinguish sensory imagination from the kinds of tasks we perform with the help of propositions.

[13] I consider some strategies for objectually imagining contradictions in §5.

argues that it is only in some contexts that propositional imagination is unconstrained, depending on the agent's goals in so imagining (Kung 2010: §4 and p. 645; Stock 2017: §4.7, §6.5, and p. 193). But even if Kung and Stock are correct—and I will argue in §5 that they are not—the ability to propositionally imagine contradictions is beside the point, where fictional truth is concerned. In order to see why, however, it is necessary to first distinguish between two ways of reading and engaging with a text.

4. Occurrent vs. reflective reading

As I see it, there are different ways of reading stories, and these ways of reading mobilize the imagination in different ways. One way of reading (or otherwise engaging with a story) is primarily for pleasure; another way of reading is primarily for propositional content. Pleasure reading is what Waltonians call "prop-oriented make-believe", and what I prefer to call *occurrent* reading, since its primary (though not exclusive!) aim is simply to get the reader through the story and (hopefully) enjoy it. I do not mean to imply that occurrent reading involves merely cursory engagement with the story; it is perfectly possible to engage imaginatively with a story in a substantive and rich way. The point is just that *this* is our concern when reading occurrently; we are not preoccupied with figuring out all of the story's nuances. When we pursue the kind of imagining required to read for pleasure, the text's imaginative content is usually delivered to us automatically, as when we imagined the unicorn earlier. We do not typically pause long to consider what we are told, at least, not if the story is compelling; instead, we are immersed in the story and absorb it as it comes. Stock herself seems to endorse this distinction, although she thinks that propositional (occurrent) imagining is really quite thin (2017: 185).

Propositionally-oriented reading,[14] on the other hand, is what I call *reflective* reading; it is the kind of reading we do for the classroom, when we try to figure out how a story's different parts relate to one another, how we can productively mobilize an interpretive framework to shed light on the story and its background, and so on. Reflective reading is reading for (deep) comprehension; it requires us to deliberately assent to, or reject, particular propositional content. This is reflected in my own experience of reading: I generally read novels occurrently, and philosophy reflectively; once I am done with a novel, however, I usually shift into a more reflective mood while I figure out what I think of it, or develop a critical take.

Occurrent reading is characterized by generally taking a text's propositions at face value; such readings are not especially concerned with the text's global coherence, or with the causal relations between events in the story; readers typically ignore inconsistencies unless they are in very close proximity, and do not waste energy considering the reasons for a character's behaviour, nor do they worry overmuch about how those actions are performed (McKoon and Ratcliffe 1992 and Graesser, Millis, and Zwaan 1997: 183).[15] For example, when I read David Bischoff's incomparable choose-your-own-adventure, *Time Machine 2: Search for Dinosaurs*, I don't worry about whether the fictional world is subject to the A- or B-series; I just accept that I, the protagonist, am moving through time.[16] Upon closer reflection, however, the philosopher in me is forced to posit a tenseless view of time—or maybe it is tensed *world*-travel instead. Whatever works.

This is not to say that there is no imagining going on when we read occurrently; quite the contrary, usually. But our imaginings are circumscribed by the text we are engaged in reading, which directs our imaginings; by the goal of our activity, which sees us primarily absorbing the text for pleasure; and by the background of real-world knowledge that, as Stacie Friend has argued, is

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[14] i.e. reading focused on propositional *content* (not to be conflated with propositional imagining).

[15] More recently, in a study of how people construct fictional worlds, Weisberg and Goodstein suggest that we may well encode different facts into fictional worlds on occurrent vs. reflective readings (2009: 75-76).

[16] My thanks to Hannah Kim, who pointed me to worries about fictive A- and B-series in conversation.

absolutely essential for basic story comprehension (2017: §3 and §4). Nor do I mean to suggest that occurrent and reflective reading are wholly disconnected activities. On the contrary, appreciating a good mystery, for example, requires us to engage in what Noël Carroll calls 'erotetics', the question-and-answer model of narrative (1985, 2007). Mystery readers must identify and reflect on the evidence, exclude suspects, and ask and answer any number of other pressing micro-questions and presiding macro-questions. All that takes some reflection in the service of consuming the story. When we ask philosophical questions about the story, however, we are being maximally reflective, and in service of other aims. My point here is not to affirm that reading is exclusively occurrent, or exclusively reflective; rather, it is to note that the epistemic standards we apply are lower the more occurrent our reading, and higher the more reflective it is.[17] Reading for consumption is more lenient than reading for deep comprehension. We should think of these two kinds of reading as anchoring the ends of a continuum.

In fact, the distinction between occurrent and reflective reading should be familiar from similar kinds of distinctions which we routinely draw. Writing about conceivability, for example, David Chalmers distinguishes between what he calls *prima facie* and ideal (or *secunda facie*) reflection, and cautions us that different notions of conceivability are tied to different notions of imagination, so that something can be *prima facie* conceivable at first glance without being conceivable upon reflection (2002: 150, 154-5). At the occurentmost end of the spectrum, occurrent reading maps quite neatly onto what Stock has more recently called 'F-imagining'. F-imagining only requires the "reading and processing of lines of text":

> F-imagining involves, minimally, taking a certain attitude of 'thinking that' to a given content that one reads, without a commitment to its truth, any automatic integration with one's belief set, or any automatic relevance to one's behavior. It may not involve a substantial phenomenological aspect. It can be largely passive and involve little deliberate activity on part of the reader other than reading and processing of lines of text (2017: 27).

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[17] As Weatherson (2004: 17) might put it, the level of detail required of our acts of imagination varies with the goals of the endeavour in question.

The exact same things are often true of occurrent reading, which typically does not involve extensive rumination on the story's background or implications, encoding causal relations, or even noticing contradictions; it mostly just involves getting lost in the story.

Amy Kind has argued that F-imagining is a radically minimalistic way of imagining which places us in a rather sketchy relation with the text (2019: 216-7). There is not much skin on those bones, beyond the occurrent act of reading a text and following along with it; it can be a largely passive activity, with little phenomenal character to speak of. And as Stock observes, such a minimalistic conception of imagination is not subject to the same constraints and principles of generation as ordinary belief. Nor should this come as a surprise to anyone since, when reading, we all defer to the author's (reflective) imagination as it is embodied in the text. We may later take a step back, take stock of the evidence, and pursue particular imaginative paths, but that is a separate matter. Our initial textual engagement is often bare-bones F-imagining. The upshot is that F-imagining—and much of what I call occurrent reading—is not at all belief-like along a number of dimensions.

This explains why, when I read *Time Machine 2: Search for Dinosaurs* I am quite content to accept the text's explanation that I am travelling back and forth through time searching for an archaeopteryx. It also explains why I am largely untroubled by the text's constant violation of its prescription that I cannot leave equipment from the future behind in the past.[18] While I am F-imagining my quest to photograph an archaeopteryx, I am quite simply not committed to the literal truth of my travelling through time, my instantiation of various paradoxes, and so on. I am just reading, just imagining, as the text's intended audience would. But when I put the book down and start thinking about it, I am doing something different, and subject to different constraints. I bring

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[18] To be fair, I only notice the violations because I am a stickler for detail. I doubt most readers ever notice these violations, even upon reflection.

all of my reflective philosophical powers to bear on a text written for eight-year-olds, and maybe doing so is asking a bit much.

The upshot is that, at least according to Stock, it is quite a simple task to imagine an impossibility: one need only F-imagine the relevant propositional content. Imagining *that* something is true is distinct from imagining *what* makes it true, and even when the latter is prohibitively difficult, the former comes cheap.

Reflective reading is a different beast, however; and it is reflective reading that we, *as philosophers*, are interested in. To talk about what *is true* in a fiction is already to have shifted into the fully reflective mode of reading; it is a philosopher's interest. When we ask what is true in a story, we are not interested in what the reader occurrently took to be true; we are interested in what *is* true, *all things considered*—that is to say, in light of background, inter- and intra-textual carryover, the story's explicit claims, its genre and the conventions underpinning that genre, etc. In other words, we are interested in much more robust imaginings than those we typically engage in occurrently. These imaginings must survive a high degree of critical scrutiny. Similarly, when we articulate or adjudicate principles of generation, we are not interested in what readers imagine willy-nilly as they engage with the story or game of make-believe; we are interested in what they *should* be imagining, given the constraints we take to be operative on our fictive activities. Determining these things requires us to reflect on the text, the author's goals, our own commitments, and on and on.

In the reflective mood, we have no time for bare-bones imaginings; we are concerned with the propositions readers take to be true in the story or game of make-believe *upon reflection*. This means that readers must consider the totality of the story (or of the story so far), and must strive to weave its various threads together, to locate it against the appropriate background and reconcile its different claims. Stock herself is happy to grant as much, if not in so many words: "What does seem true is that thinkers may fall back upon belief-like imagining when prompted to try in the course of

philosophical discussion, partly because they do not have a clear idea of the purpose of the task" (2017: 185). Reflective reading is thus triggered by noticing a text's so-called silly questions, by noticing its inconsistencies or asking how its different parts fit together.

Consider the tale of Othello's ill-starred handkerchief.[19] When I read Act III Scene IV, I take it at face value that Othello was given the magic handkerchief by his mother, who herself obtained it from a sorceress who charmed it to make her attractive to her husband. Then, when I read Act V Scene II, I likewise take it at face value that the handkerchief was a gift to Othello's mother from his father. Was Othello lying earlier on? It is only when I stop to reflect on events that I notice that these two handkerchief origin stories are incompatible; and so I must decide which to believe, and on what grounds. In doing so, I resort to belief-like imagining rather than the more minimal F-imagining mobilized during my occurrent reading.

If stories are invitations to make-believe, contradictions are invitations to *disbelieve* and to revise our erstwhile beliefs. This is what Umberto Eco meant when he wrote that an impossible world "is in fact *quoted*, but it is not *constructed*" and that "as a matter of fact, the proper effect of such narrative constructions [...] is just that of producing a sense of logical uneasiness and of narrative discomfort" (1979: 234). Rather than take impossible stories at face value, we are instead prompted to question our common beliefs about the storyworld and its logical underpinnings.[20] This is because we embrace the Reality Assumption and use it to populate the story's background, and, as far as we are aware, the real world is governed by the law of non-contradiction. As Kendall Walton observed of postmodern texts, which delight in such inconsistencies, the experience of reading such a story is one of "appreciation without participation" (1990: 243)—in other words, even Walton recognizes

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[19] I am indebted to Brandon Polite for this example.

[20] I suppose such a story could instead prompt us to question our beliefs about the real world. That stories do not typically do so, I think, is due to the fact that our understanding of stories is necessarily shaped by the demands of the Reality Assumption, which sees us encode the world as it is. If paraconsistent logicians (for example) are right that the logic of the world is paraconsistent, then it turns out that the demands of the Reality Assumption—and thus the limits of storytelling—are not as we thought them to be.

the importance of distinguishing between the kind of immersive reading which characterizes our occurrent experience from the detached, sober consideration characteristic of reflective reading. Jonathan Weinberg and Aaron Meskin have likewise recognized that such 'puzzling descriptions' are "treated merely as initial descriptions of a set of phenomena for which the philosopher must now seek a good explanation" (2006: 177). Impossibility and contradiction draw attention to the story as a story, in a way that unproblematic events do not.[21] Noticing the inconsistency takes us out of our occurrent engagement with the story and prompts us instead to reflect on the story's content in a critical and reflective mood. Instead of relying primarily on someone else's imagination (the author's), we are forced to do the imagining for ourselves, and thus run into an imaginative blockage.

When we read occurrently, we are not usually troubled by Walton's "silly questions"—e.g. we do not wonder what is going on in Cabot Cove, whose murder rate has been estimated at a staggering 149/100 000 (Townsend 2013). Indeed, Tamar Szabó Gendler writes that "To ask these sorts of questions is to demonstrate an ignorance of what it is to engage in games of make-believe" (2000: 71). On the contrary, such questions are not at all silly; they are simply appropriate to a different kind of engagement with the story than the one which we typically adopt while reading. It *would* be silly to ask whether Agilulf is perhaps a disembodied, rather than strictly-speaking nonexistent, knight—unless we put on our philosopher's bascinet, in which case not only is the question fair game, but it scratches a different itch altogether, with different epistemic standards. (Perhaps we might call it a 'Fitch', or a philosopher's itch.)

Similarly—and I can only speak for myself here—when I finish a particularly good novel and set it down, I need to take some time to reflect on it. There is a great deal of sorrow involved,

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[21] This claim is borne out by evidence from the psychology of text processing, notably Prentice, Gerrig, and Bailis (1997) and Wheeler, Gerrig, and Brock (1999), and is predicted by the architectural model of the imagination (see Meskin and Weinberg 2011: 242-6 and p. 246 fn. 6).

because I am leaving behind characters whose company I enjoy; but I also need to take some time to sort through what I think about the novel, the character arcs, the world and its future. I have to spend some time thinking about which threads were tied up, and which not, and I endeavour to think about how the storyworld fills in its incomplete elements, even though describing it all may have fallen beneath the author's notice. All that is reflective engagement with the text, and it is no sillier than what we do when we read works of philosophy.[22]

More generally, it is worth observing that imagining *that* something is true is distinct from imagining *what* makes it true, and even when the latter is prohibitively difficult, the former is inexpensively expansive. Occurrent reading calls for cursory imagining-that; reflective reading, by contrast, demands imagining-what. Nor is this a knock on occurrent reading; once again, the point of reading occurrently is to consume the story, and to do so we must defer to the text we are given. There is no shame in that. But reflective reading requires us to pay attention to all of the details we are given, and if those details are inconsistent, then they are subject to our standard inference mechanisms, including the Inputter and its logic apps. Put differently, we might say that to read occurrently is to read for belief; to read reflectively, however, is to read for *knowledge*. Once again, I do not mean to suggest that this distinction is strictly dichotomous; the point, rather, is to observe that we bring different standards to bear in different modes of engagement with a text. The more occurrent the engagement, the lower the epistemic stakes are, and the more reflective the engagement, the higher the epistemic stakes.

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[22] There is no reason to suppose that occurrent/reflective modes of engagement are limited to our consumption of stories and narrative art. In fact, I think it quite likely that we slip in and out of them when engaging with music, for example, or visual art. Someone who notices that their eye has been fooled, for example, might shifts from occurrently appreciating a painting to reflectively appreciating it *qua trompe l'oeil*, just as noticing Nirvana's use of assonance might trigger more musicological reflection on their songs.

5. Imagining contradictory stories

Most of the beliefs we form about fictions are automatically generated, just as most of our ordinary-world beliefs are; but when faced with inconsistency or outright contradiction, our 'belief box' stutters and its gears stick; so too with imagination. It is almost trivially easy to imagine most anything—there, I just did it!—but it is incredibly difficult to imagine a squircle (a square circle), or a nonexistent knight. A large part of that difficulty, I have argued, stems from our not being able to figure out exactly what is being asked of us, beyond imagining a square and a circle superimposed, or an empty but animate suit of armour. So what happens, exactly, when we encounter such stories?

Once again, we should distinguish between what happens at the occurrent and the reflective levels. If p and $\neg p$ are not presented to me together, then I will almost certainly default to the Lewisean and Waltonian strategy of treating a contradiction as separate prescriptions to imagine (Lewis 1983; Walton 1990: 64-6). So, for example, I first imagine that Sylvan's box is empty, then separately imagine it containing a small figurine. For my own part, when I read Priest's story I imagine Sylvan's box flickering between the states of being empty and containing a figurine, like a malfunctioning cloaking device in a work of science fiction.

When I am told, in the same breath, that Sylvan's box is empty and non-empty, this statement may or may not trigger a shift toward the reflective mode of reading, depending on whether I notice and care (as any self-respecting philosopher should). If it does—that is, if I notice and care about the contradiction and its violation of the background I import via the Reality Assumption—then I will shift toward reflective imagining and start to run my error protocols: is the narrator lying or mistaken? Is there some force at work which I do not fully understand?[23] The problem is that different parts of my cognitive architecture are coming into conflict: the InPutter is trying to insert the representation suggested to me by the text, while the UpDater notices the

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[23] See e.g. Meskin and Weinberg (2011: 242).

conflict with the Reality Assumption and tries to remove or reject it, thus leading to imaginative blockage. The only ways out are through an error-theory, which is not always easy to come by, or by delaying the inputs from various cognitive systems until the text can clear up the conflict (Meskin and Weinberg 2011: 244).

If I do not care or notice, however, then it triggers no such shift and I simply read on and process the text, accepting it at face-value—as Stock would put it, I F-imagine that the box is empty and not. As Weatherson puts it, "sometimes we simply ignore, either in fiction or imagination, what goes on at some levels of detail" (2004: 17). Perhaps, if the story is especially engaging, I even go so far as to imagine the look on Priest's face as he relates the discovery, or imagine the headline on CBC, and take that as evidence that the claim's fictional truth is satisfied. This is exactly what happens in cases like Gendler's *The Tower of Goldbach*, for example, which claims that "[…] God's word was made manifest, and twelve was no longer the sum of two primes" (2000: 67). I am compelled to read on because Gendler's is an engaging story, and she cleverly builds in convenient excuses I can make to myself to postpone imaginative blockage. I am no mathematician, but I *can* imagine mathematicians, and I can imagine one discovering, to her astonishment, that we are wrong about exactly which numbers are prime, or perhaps how prime numbers add up; mathematicians are strange creatures, after all. Better yet, I needn't imagine a mathematician at all—I need only imagine the ultimate *deus ex machine*—the *deus* itself—and who can begin to fathom what lies within a god's knowledge or purview? I thereby take myself—however wrongly—to have satisfied the relevant prescription to imagine. What I have really done, however, is passed the imaginative buck.[24]

In doing so, I am acting much as I do when I take a perceptual illusion or one of Escher's drawings as satisfying the conditions for experiencing a contradiction: I mistake the malfunctioning

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[24] In Weatherson's term: I have imagined a higher-level claim at a (sufficiently low) level of detail that does not also require me to imagine the lower-level claims it would need to be true—which I am prevented from doing in any case by the background assumptions governing my and our engagement with fiction (2004: 20-1).

of my visual system and its automatic judgements for what I know the world to contain, upon reflection.[25] In both cases, the strategy can give us some grip on what it would be like to truly imagine a contradiction; but in neither case are we *actually* imagining a proper contradiction. Similarly, my ability to imagine a 30-sided die gives me some imaginative grip on the phenomenology of imagining a megagon (a million-sided figure)—enough, perhaps, to imagine myself imagining one, but not enough to actually do it for myself. The point of stories like Priest's or Gendler's is to get the reader to reflectively wrestle with their central contradiction, and that is something they achieve regardless of whether they succeed in fictionally making it the case that the box is empty and not, or that five and seven are prime and sum to twelve. I can imagine a higher-order fact without also imagining the lower-order facts upon which it depends for its truth; and it is only upon reflection that I realize that I cannot actually imagine those more fundamental facts at all (Weatherson 2004: 17).

For a different example, consider *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, according to which both September 1, 1994 and September 2, 1994 were Mondays (in fact, they were a Thursday and a Friday, respectively). The chances are very good that most people will not notice these errors as they read, since (1) the Monday confusion lies many pages apart, and (2) most people cannot associate days of the week with past dates with any degree of certainty. We thus have no trouble managing the inconsistency during occurrent reading, since we know what it is for a day to be September 1 (or 2), and for it to be a Monday. But when we notice that we are being asked to imagine that consecutive days are Mondays, it is no longer clear exactly what it is that we are being asked to imagine, or how to do it. This is clearly just a case of an author being a little sloppy, but the same cannot be said for cases of *deliberate* inconsistency, which we cannot write off as simple errors. In such cases, we are left

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[25] Priest (2005: 57-61) suggests that some visual illusions, such as the waterfall effect or Penrose's Figure, are cases where we really do see the inconsistent. Meskin and Weinberg offer a convincing architectural explanation of what is going on in such cases in their (2011: 245). To my mind, these are paradigmatic cases of what Roy Sorensen calls 'meta-conceiving' (2006), on which more below.

with no clear idea of what we are being asked to imagine, or even how to do it. To follow the author's prescription we must first think about it, and bring our knowledge of the story and its background to bear. This is why, for instance, Potterheads have postulated that Merlin must have possessed a Time-Turner, since he is said to have attended Hogwarts—which was founded more than 500 years *after* his exploits in the Arthurian era.[26]

A number of ruses have been suggested to enable us to deke out our imaginations so that we can imagine impossibilities. Marcello Fiocco, for instance, suggests that we need only stipulate that whatever we are imagining satisfies the impossible prescription to imagine, and *voilà!*—the task is accomplished (2007: 376)![27] Likewise, Dominic Gregory argues that we can obey the prescription to imagine at least some impossibles by combining sensory imaginings with supposition (2016: 99); so, for example, imagining a megagon is easy enough so long as we first visualize a regular polygon, and then suppose a million-sided figure of the same general kind as the regular polygon.[28] But while this kind of bare-bones imagining[29] works well enough where epistemic or physical impossibilities are concerned, it is not especially helpful for imagining logically or metaphysically impossible things, such as squircles and other outright contradictions.

Alternately, Chalmers has suggested that we can satisfy the prescription to imagine a contradiction by imagining it in something less than full detail—e.g. by imagining a newspaper headline announcing the discovery of the contradiction. He is quick to note, however, that doing so does not make the contradiction *true* (even in the fictional world); it merely gives us *evidence* for it

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[26] To be clear, this is almost certainly another inadvertent error on Rowling's part. But the strategy deployed by Potterheads neatly illustrates the kind of tack we take when faced with properly deliberate inconsistencies.

[27] Priest makes the essentially same suggestion (in terms of 'conceiving') in his (2016: 2658-2660).

[28] Just what the relation is between supposition and imagination is a fraught issue which need not occupy us here, though interested readers should consult Peacocke (1985), Gendler (2000), Weinberg and Meskin (2006), Kind (2013), Stock (2017), and Arcangeli (2019).

[29] S-imagining, in Peacocke's parlance (1985: 25); F-imagining, in Stock's (2017).

(2002: 152-3).[30] In fact, he thinks that closer inspection shows us that such contradictions cannot apply to the world in question (2002: 154).

A third option, if it is one, is simply to be unaware of the impossibility of the task, and to proceed as usual. This suggestion comes from Peter Kung, who unifies the different approaches above into a single strategy. Inspired by a suggestion from Stephen Yablo (1993), Kung argues that we can run an end-run around our beliefs by failing to know that they are actually false (2010: 634).[31] So, for the ordinary reader who is not well-versed in Arthuriana, Merlin was a *mediaeval*, rather than a fifth-century, wizard; and if all you know is that Merlin was mediaeval, and Hogwarts was mediaeval, then there is no problem imagining that Merlin attended Hogwarts. Similarly, I should have no problem imagining the completeness of mathematics until I learn about Gödel's proofs; or, alternately, as long as I'm not sure that it is *not* possible for Agilulf to be nonexistent *and* perform the deeds he does (perhaps because I do not yet have any training in formal logic), then I should have no difficulty imagining Agilulf and his exploits—perhaps by stipulation, as Fiocco and Gregory suggest, or by adopting Chalmers's dodge. But this is not so much imagining impossibilities as it is *argumentum ad ignorantiam*.

These strategies all fall under the umbrella of what Roy Sorensen calls 'meta-conceiving', or meta-imagining (2006). Meta-imagining is a handy way of dodging imaginary constraints; rather than directly imagine the impossible in any kind of detail, we need only indirectly imagine it, by means of the cursory process of imagining that we imagine it. We forgive ourselves for not directly picturing something which we have no idea how to begin picturing, and instead picture some more-or-less familiar object which allows us to infer the satisfaction of the impossible prescription.

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[30] In (Xhignesse forthcoming), I argue that such evidence is defeasible and, in fact, typically defeated.

[31] It is worth noting, however, that Yablo clearly thinks that being ignorant of a thing's impossibility does not do much to explain why someone would or should think that thing possible (1993: 36).

A great deal of what we think of as 'imagining', at least where impossibles are concerned, is actually meta-imagination. This can involve imagining an entity for which the task is plausibly within cognitive reach—for example, if asked whether a megagon is conceivable, I might imagine an alien mathematician for whom the feat is trivial, and thus answer in the affirmative, even though I myself cannot so conceive (and presumably no human being can, either). Or it might involve imagining something which we take as standing in for the satisfaction of the prescription to imagine—so, for instance, rather than imagine a square circle, I might instead imagine a newspaper headline announcing the discovery of the squircle in n-dimensional space, or, where Agilulf is concerned, I might imagine an empty suit of armour which goes around saving maidens. Or, indeed, I might imagine a god's pronouncement, as in *The Tower of Goldbach*. Meta-imagining allows us to outflank our cognitive architecture and prevent imaginative blockages by *avoiding* imagining. In this respect it closely resembles Stock's F-imagining: it is a cursory and rather minimal act of basic, unreflective reading comprehension. Stock herself endorses just this strategy for imagining impossibilities: we need only take an image and assign it some propositional content stipulatively so that we count as imagining the relevant thing (Stock 2017: 193 and Kind 2019: 218). Gendler recognizes as much when she observes that "When we imagine the things that, on reflection, we realize to be conceptually impossible, we imagine them in ways that disguise their conceptual impossibility" (2000: 69). What is missing is the further recognition that the kinds of truths we take ourselves to imaginatively encode may differ depending on whether we are reading occurrently or reflectively. Indeed, Gendler later adds that "unlike ideal rational reflection, make-believe depends upon precisely the sort of abstraction that may well leave out conceptually relevant features of the situation at hand" (2000: 70). That is all well and good for the F-imagining we mobilize in occurrent readings, but Gendler is right to observe that it will not cut much reflective mustard!

If engaging with fiction involves prescriptions to imagine, then we have good reason to believe that authors typically think it is possible for readers to comply with their prescriptions. But when we are asked to imagine the metaphysically or logically impossible, it is not at all clear what we are being asked to do, beyond trying to reflectively puzzle it out like we would a Zen koan. And where such stories are concerned, it seems that the very point of asking us to imagine the impossible is not to ensure that we storify the impossible fact, but rather to have us engage in just this kind of reflective process.

Consider Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*, whose titular impossibility clearly is not meant to be read as part of the story; indeed, it is not clear just what we should imagine upon reading the title, unless it is a speaker with a puzzling penchant for passive constructions. The point of the title, rather, is to prompt readers to reflect on the nature of the novel and the protagonist's relation to the mother in Kincaid's other novels, *Annie John* and *Lucy*.[32] And these dialectical aims are easily satisfied despite our failure to satisfy the title's imaginary prescription.

Similarly, it is not at all clear what Graham Priest thinks we should imagine with respect to his dead friend's spooky box. His purpose in telling the story is clear, however: Priest wants his readers to reflect on the possibility that the logic of fiction is paraconsistent. To get us to do so, he must first tell us to do so, but he needn't succeed in actually making it so in the story we read. The satisfaction conditions of his goal are distinct from the satisfaction conditions of its being true in his story that logic is paraconsistent. It is one thing, after all, to show us that some principle applies generally, and quite another to show that a particular story actually satisfies it. The failure—even the necessary failure—of some story to secure the truth of its fictional claims clearly does not entail the failure of the author's extra-textual goals. *Sylvan's Box* is a tidy and interesting thought-experiment offered to advance Priest's dialetheic and noneist agendas, and *The Nonexistent Knight* is a satirical

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[32] I am indebted to Frank Boardman for suggesting Kincaid's work to me.

meditation on personal identity; the truth-value of some uncanny fact in their respective storyworlds has no bearing on the success of these extra-textual endeavours. It is entirely beside the point, and a good thing, too.

6. Conclusion

Most accounts of the imagination do not concede that we can imagine contradictions. On the architectural model of the imagination, a prescription to imagine a contradiction will put different cognitive processes into conflict, resulting in an imaginative blockage. On the objectual construal of imagination, too, there is widespread agreement that we cannot imagine contradictions, since to do so objectually would require us to fill in details which we cannot hope to fill. The only kind of imagining which is regularly empowered to imagine contradictions is propositional imagining. So perhaps that is what philosophers of literature have in mind when they tell us that it is a fundamental property of stories that they can be contradictory.

I have argued that propositional imagination is simply not cut out for this kind of weightlifting. First, even if we were to grant that propositional imagination is unconstrained, the fact remains that truth in fiction is a matter of our reflective, not our occurrent, reading and imagining. Fictional truth is all-things-considered and *secunda facie*, and thus not dependent upon our propositional imagination. And, for that matter, so is truth in the real world. As in other areas, our investigative interests constrain the domain of relevant discourse. And when philosophers try to determine what is true in a story, we are simply not at all interested in the reader's occurrent, surface-level beliefs; we are interested in what readers take to be true in the story upon suitably-informed reflection. And that means that the law of non-contradiction, among other things, acts as a topic-specific constraint.

But second, closer inspection reveals that the strategies involved in propositionally imagining contradictions radically undermine their characterizations as satisfying the prescription to imagine a contradiction in the first place: instead, we are tasked either with not realizing that the task is Sisyphean, with shrugging our shoulders and (propositionally) imagining that there is a good explanation for the apparent contradiction, with stipulating the satisfaction of the relevant conditions, or with imagining a situation which seems to entail the prescription's satisfaction. In none of these cases are we actually imagining the contradiction itself; we are just imagining things in its vicinity.

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