

Plausibility Matters ... yes, even in fantasy

Is writing plausible fiction essential?

It is an oft-remarked comment by editors that such-and-such doesn't work because it isn't plausible. This type of comment can, if improperly communicated to a fiction writer, cause angst, irritation, or even downright hostility.

Sure, the writer might think. *I hear you: but this is fiction. Plausibility doesn't matter, does it?*

For better or worse, plausibility does matter. It matters even—perhaps in spite of—a genre. In some genres, such as fantasy, plausibility and coherence matter more than in others.

What exactly is 'plausibility'?

Before getting to the whys and wherefores, let's examine what plausibility actually is. 'Plausible' is an adjective. What it does is describe something as 'having an appearance of truth or reason', or as 'fair spoken and apparently worthy of confidence' (Macquarie Australian Dictionary, 3rd Edition).

In terms of fiction, plausibility is vital on both counts. What you write must have an appearance of truth or reason, and your characters must, somehow, be 'worthy of confidence'.

What plausibility means is less that your story is plausible in terms of the outside world, but that it has a sense of inner coherence that is verified in the reading.

The truth of the matter is that if these are lacking, your prose will feel unconvincing to your readers. It is possible, of course, to write well enough that your characters lack plausibility but that in the scheme of the story it doesn't matter; or that the story is implausible but your characters are sterling. The ability to pull them off, however, is rare.

So why does it matter?

Back to our title question: why does plausibility matter in fantasy? Or, to put it more broadly, why does it count when the writing at hand doesn't relate to Real Life?

The short and sweet answer to this is that it matters internally. That is to say, your story and its characters need to be plausible within the confines of the story or its construct. There is a real futility in writing fantasy if in doing so it is not internally faithful to itself, if it does not have an 'appearance of truth or reason' in relation to its own laws.

Similarly, if you write fantasy but your characters are not plausible, are not 'worthy of confidence' in some way, then it lets your entire premise down from the beginning. It's always best to get readers to warm to your characters, not to turn off them.

The issue of plausibility can be a difficult one in genres that encourage far-out concepts or a new approach to fiction, but it is always important; if not for your sake, then for that of your readers.

Recommended reading

Le Guin, Ursula K. Plausibility revisited.

ibid. Plausibility in Fantasy.

Falconer, Kim. Fiction in another world.

