



Novelties & Souvenirs

..... Collected Short Fiction

JOHN CROWLEY

Award-winning author of the *New York Times* Notable Book *The Translator*

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By John Crowley
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Introduction

John Crowley's *Novelties & Souvenirs: Collected Short Fiction* brings together fifteen stories and novellas written over a span of twenty-five years, and offers readers a astonishing range of fictive experiences. From an "inconstancy plague" spread by mummified Egyptian cats to a visit from beyond the grave by Virginia Woolf, anything can happen in a Crowley story. What will happen, how it will happen, and what it may mean are questions the stories -- and often the stories within those stories -- explore with tremendous intellectual and formal dexterity.

Reality in these stories is a malleable substance. In "Great Work of Time," the ability to travel back in time to alter the course of future events is only the first of the fantastic possibilities the story entertains. In "Missolonghi 1824," an English lord and poet recalls an encounter with a wild man who seems to be a representative of Homer's bronze-age Greece. In "The Green Child," a pair of fairy children appear at a place called the "Wolf-pits" and one of them goes on to marry and -- possibly -- have children with an ordinary man. The narrator reassures us that, "If there were children, and children of those children, so that in some way that green land elsewhere ... entered our plain human race, it must surely be so diluted now, so bound up and drowned in daylight and red blood, as not to be present in us at all." And yet one wonders. In "Snow," a recording device called a "wasp" follows a woman through her life and stores 8,000 hours worth of footage. But when her husband searches it after her death, he is confronted with the limits of technology, and of memory itself. "The Nightingale Sings at Night" offers a wonderfully inventive creation myth, in which we learn why the Nightingale has come to sing at night and in which the Moon reveals the essence of what it means to be human and mortal.

In these and in the other stories of *Novelties & Souvenirs*, and in writing that is richly metaphoric, wildly inventive, and always engaging, John Crowley takes readers on journeys that they would never have planned for themselves, and will likely never forget.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why has John Crowley titled the collection, *Novelties & Souvenirs*? In what ways are the stories novel? In what sense might they be seen as souvenirs?
2. In what ways do the stories in *Novelties & Souvenirs* bend the rules of reality? Are the strange phenomena Crowley writes about -- time travel, fairies, a "plague of inconstancy" caused by mummified Egyptian cats, a race of obsequious house-servant robots, etc. -- completely implausible? How does Crowley make them seem real?
3. What origins does "The Nightingale Sings at Night" explain? How is it similar to and different from the Biblical story of Eden?
4. "Snow" describes a device that can record and store 8,000 hours of one's life. If such a device really existed, would you want to record your life? Would you want to be able to view the life of a loved one after his or her death? Why or why not?
5. The writer in "Novelty" has only one subject: "the idea of a notion or a holy thing growing clear in the stream of time, being made manifest in unexpected ways to an assortment of people" [p. 43]. In what ways do nearly all the stories in the collection involve time, and things "growing clear in the stream of time"? How do past, present, and future get jumbled in *Novelties & Souvenirs*?
6. Near the beginning of "Great Work of Time," Sir Geoffrey says that "we ruminate endlessly, if, what if, if only ... The world seems always somehow malleable to our minds, or to our imaginations anyway" [p. 130]. In what ways does that statement turn out to be true, or not true, in the story? In what ways do the stories themselves treat the world as malleable to the imagination?
7. In "Gone," the narrator describes the Elmers as "sinking and melting like ... snowmen ... shriveling into a sort of dry flocked matter and then into nearly nothing at all, like cotton candy in the mouth" [p. 305]. What does this kind of highly metaphoric writing add to the stories? How does it help you grasp what Crowley is describing? Where else do such metaphors appear in *Novelties & Souvenirs*?
8. At the end of "An Earthly Mother Sits and Sings," when Ineen Fitzgerald sees the stranger who had visited her returning to the sea, "she knew whom she had had in her. She had known all along, but now she knew to see and to think: to think what would come of this, now and in the months and years to come" [p. 332]. Who is he? What will be the result of their union?
9. Why is Lord Byron in "Missolonghi 1824," so affected by the capture of the wild man? Why does he free him? What does this Greek who appears to have arrived from the world of Homer represent for the British poet?
10. In what ways do the stories in *Novelties & Souvenirs* differ from most short-story collections? How are they unlike realistic fiction? What similarities and differences did you notice between the stories in the collection? What distinctive qualities might identify them as Crowley stories?

About the author

John Crowley lives in the hills above the Connecticut River in northern Massachusetts with his wife and twin daughters. He is the author of *Daemonomania*; *Love & Sleep*; *Little, Big*; and, most recently, *The Translator*.