

“Mrs. Todd’s Shortcut” by Stephen King

The title reminds me of Mr. Toad’s Wild Ride at Disneyland.

Before I grew the beard, I was routinely mistaken for Stephen King. I am not a big fan of horror, so the only novel I have read by King is *The Shining*, and I didn’t finish it. However, King is a master storyteller who keeps us turning pages.

The POV is unusual in that we have an involved narrator (Dave Owens, p. 100) telling the story of another character, Homer Buckland, telling a story about Ophelia Todd. The POV shifts from the narrator to Homer pretty inconspicuously. It is a story within a story, but both stories unfold simultaneously.

The story is written in past tense except for a couple of moments on page 84, when the story is interrupted by a customer buying beer and lotto tickets. There is some dialect, such as “ast” for “asked” but it is generally not sustained.

A number of binary distinctions are introduced. The first is the current Mrs. Todd versus the past Mrs. Todd, Ophelia, who disappeared. Ophelia drove faster, Homer says.

The second distinction is locals versus tourists.

The third distinction is time versus money. The tourists are willing to raise money, but not give their time. This is one of the things in Ophelia’s favor, because she gave the town her time.

The fourth is time versus distance. Ophelia wants to save time by finding the absolute shortest route between two points.

The fifth is maps versus real land. Homer says you can fold a map, but you can’t fold land. Ophelia Todd disagrees, it would seem.

A sixth is perhaps who you are versus who you could be. Ophelia Todd is the wife of a rather boring man. But when she drives she becomes more alive, more beautiful, and more like Diana, the huntress and goddess of the moon. (104)

And a seventh, though there are probably more, is reality versus the fantastic. On the wild rides, we encounter monstrous creatures and strange moving plants. We ride in places that do not exist in Castle Rock, Maine, or any other place on Earth.

Homer is a handyman and the caretaker of the Todd estate. He is married and about twice Ophelia’s age. Yet they have a bond of some kind, and eventually, some sexual tension develops. A question to think about is “What creates this bond?”

The story also explores how we think about the places around us and the routes we take. On page 88 Homer asks, “Do you think a man could just forget about a road?” And the narrator says, “The turnpike is easy to think of.” We often take the same route over and over without thinking about it. Today, if our

GPS suggests an unfamiliar route, we might reject the advice and take the familiar one. Does this story make us think differently about the possibilities of the space around us?

Another question to think about is the idea of “transformation.” Early in the story, our narrator thinks that Homer in telling the story begins to look like Ophelia. Ophelia, when driving, transforms into Diana. And Homer, at the end, appears to transform into a younger man. What drives these transformations?

As in many fantasy stories, another question is “Where does the fantastic begin?” Does it begin on page 95? (Read from 1/3 up from the bottom). Or are there earlier hints?

Ophelia is very comfortable with the fantastic. (Read from 101-03).