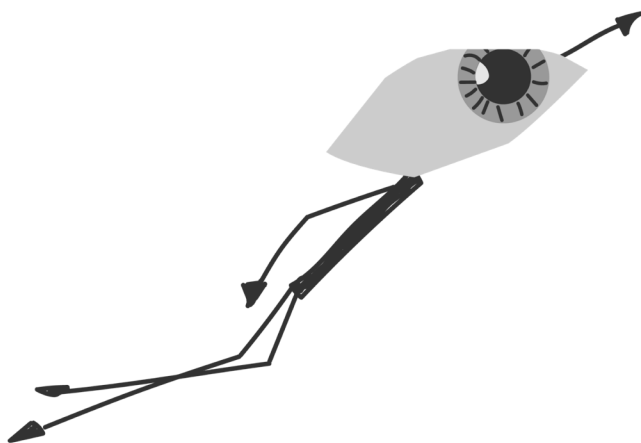


commendable
DELUSIONS



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Tales of Meaning and Imagination

A. T. French

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The Library of Congress has catalogued *Commendable Delusions* as follows:

French, A.T., author. — Commendable delusions : tales of meaning and imagination / A. T. French. — Osawatomie, KS: A.T. French, 2022. — LCCN: 2021922057 — ISBN: 978-1-7379500-0-4 (hardcover) — 978-1-7379500-1-1 (paperback) — LCSH Storytellers--Fiction. | Time travel--Fiction. | Short stories. | Fantasy fiction. | BISAC FICTION / General | FICTION / Magical Realism | FICTION / Short Stories (single author) | FICTION / Fairy Tales, Folk Tales, Legends & Mythology | FICTION / Fantasy / Humorous — LCC PS3606.R458 C66 2022 | DDC 813.6--dc23

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KDP Paperback ISBN: 978-1-7379500-2-8

First KDP paperback edition: April 2022.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

FOR THE MAD ONES

NOTE TO THE READER

As beings who inhabit primarily the third dimension (sometimes descending to the second or ascending to the fourth), we *sapiens* and creatures of similar intelligence are generally unaware of the possibility-field around us. In fact, our awareness is still considered negligible, lagging a measurable distance behind that of trees and fungi. What we are equipped with, however, that no other known life form has, is imagination. Using our intuition and propensity to wonder, we have within us unknown capabilities to mobilize this apparatus of epic proportions, to, for all intents and purposes, turn the lights on in the universe. If only we were to dust it off. Anything we can imagine, however absurd, is useful if it can lead us to conceive the world in new ways. Our ancient ancestors looked to the peaks of mighty mountains and found gods. These gods (of their own designs) enabled them to make sense of

the world around them in ways we could do well to understand today. As a direct result of the rituals, sacrifices and worship of these gods, our predecessors found the first germinating seeds of truth, connection, beauty and above all, meaning. These very qualities revealed to them the foundations of the universe: its physical properties, its fundamental logic, the essential rational code of thinking out of which sprung forth the future we now live in. In the epochs since passed, we have summited the very peaks on which these gods were first conceptualized. It is time to descend to the valley below, for it is teeming with things long forgotten. Down there, in that beautiful unrivaled Eden, there is the bank of a flowing river from which we could look up again to see that we still have many mountains left to climb, each of which is capped with a god we do not yet know.

DEFINITION

com-mend-able de-lu-sion

| kə'mendəb(ə)l - də'lʊʒHən |

noun phrase

an expansion in perception experienced when imagination is used to reinterpret ordinary phenomena with the intent to discover hidden truths about reality: *the commendable delusion of discovering one's internal pantheon of storytellers.*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ORIGINS	1
<i>THE MAD ONES OF AUX FOLIES</i>	
AUGURIES	25
<i>THE CHOCOLATE OLIGARCH</i>	
SPECTACLES	57
<i>THE CORN SHOW</i>	
ABOMINATIONS	107
<i>SKULL TREE</i>	
ESCAPADES	131
<i>GANGWAYS OF THE MIND</i>	
CRUCIBLES	147
<i>THE DIORAMA MAKER</i>	
LUMINARIES	173
<i>ALL HAIL THE PLUMBER OF THE SKY</i>	
CHIMERAS	199
<i>A SNOWGLOBE, SHAKEN</i>	
DREAMSCAPES	221
<i>PROOF OF PARADISE</i>	
SINGULARITIES	263
<i>SPEAK, STORYTELLERS</i>	
STORY NOTES	273
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	289

The dream must secede to reality, and then the dream reigns supreme, then the dream becomes life, then life becomes the dream.

—ALEXANDRE DUMAS, 'THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO'

UN BAR AUX FOLIES BERGÈRE

THE ONLY KNOWN ILLUSTRATIVE EVIDENCE OF A 'MAD ONE'



A Bar at the Folies-Bergère, Manet, Édouard, 1832–1883,

Photo credit: Courtauld Institute

ORIGINS
THE MAD ONES OF AUX FOLIES



*In a cold, flat, colorless world, madness is a virtue. When
the whole of civilization suffers a shared delusion, it is
only those who've lost their minds who are seekers of the
truth.*

THE MAD ONES OF AUX FOLIES

A ONCE UPON A TIME TALE

It was story time. Tick-tock. My heart was throbbing, ticking. Aux Folies was at last before me, towering, twisting, gothic and futuristic simultaneously, the long-awaited terminus through all the chaos I'd endured.

'Is that really you in flesh, sir? Or have you arrived here in your ghost?' said two wooden sentries at the door, in unison.

The sentries were carved from rare Bornean lumber: Kalimantan Ironwood. They each put out a hand to touch me. With haste they withdrew them when they felt that I had substance.

'Sir, how did you make it here without giving up your bones?'

'I followed the roman candles,' I said, as the sentries bowed to me in fits and spasms. 'Those sparks that fly when nature's secrets are exposed.'

Those flashes across the eye when a mind ignites with something beautiful.'

From the film of dust across their shoulders I could tell that they'd been standing guard for quite some time. Were they weary? It seemed improbable, for out their ears rolled smoke. Their eyes were smoldering like embers. The sentries trembled as they spoke, two possibilities trapped in purgatory finally coming to fruition:

'To find this inner sanctum, so off the charted map, you must have persevered. What force, good friend, so fed the flame within you?'

'Along my way here I became overwhelmed with the suspicion that I have things inside me I have not produced, which have produced themselves and are leading parallel lives of their own volition. At last, I sense my time has come to meet these forces face to face.'

As if I'd said some secret code, the sentries opened their jaws mechanically, like nutcrackers, and bid me to pass through.

'Welcome to your internal pantheon of storytellers.'

Behind the first door I found another. The café had a small dark outer vestibule. The space was crosshatched with golden light beams that pierced me from every angle and formed something like a latticework. Engraved upon a pewter plaque hanging chest high in the web of light was a message reading: *Behold all ye who enter: Listen. The Mad Ones are*

within. A set of wind-chimes was fastened to the arch above the entry's small black door. I ran my fingers through them, then stepped into Aux Folies for the first time in my life.

I am not quite tall but am above average in height and had to duck my head to enter. Once inside, contrary to what I'd envisioned, I was the only person there. I was greeted by nothing other than the strong fresh scents of vanilla, cinnamon and burning firewood. As I walked across the worn-out chess-board floor, each step rang hollow to the metered clicks of my boots.

'Hello?' I said.

No one answered.

Despite there being no apparent staff or clientele, the café's interior was candlelit and aflame with splendor. It was warm, welcoming and infused with the very life it lacked. Along its walls were floor to ceiling shelves of silk bound books, an upright piano, a collection of figurines and a half-dozen marionettes, each of which were gently swaying on the strings from which they hung. An Edith Piaf record was playing on an antique gramophone, the volume so low I had to wince my ears to hear it. There were high tables, low tables, coffee tables, card tables, fringed and softly muted lamps.

'Hello?' I said.

But still, no answer.

There was a toy train chugging overhead on suspended ceiling tracks, a Berber rug, a rocking

chair (considerably rocking for the fact that it had no sitter) and a selection of bonsai trees with limbs that seemed to be imparting secrets. There were busts made of marble and onyx so animated they appeared to want to twitch, a periodic table, a row of grandfather clocks, a cuckoo clock, clocks with their gears exposed that were set to every time zone of the world and a vast array of orchids.

I sat in a leather chair that faced a window with a view. Outside were trees reflecting every color: blue cedars, silver sycamores, cottonwoods the color of pale gold. Sparrows raced through the sky above them, like moments of fleeting memory. Moments of fleeting memory passed through me one by one: a stunning view across a cornfield, a lone tree atop a hill, all the most arresting sights that had seized me as I made my way here. I chose not to contest the dissonance I felt rearranging me; the strange reformulations giving new interpretations to my memories. I released the reins that held me stable and surrendered. I let the world flow through me, a revolt against my constitution. Ideas were coursing through me: voices, visions, riddles, stories looking for a home. I closed my eyes and let the music slither into me. *I listened.* I began to tap my foot.

‘Excuse me, sir,’ a waitress said, after what felt like only seconds. ‘Would you like a drink?’

The waitress startled me.

‘Was I humming?’ I said.

‘You’ve been humming now for several minutes.’

‘Your music must have carried me away.’

‘Edith Piaf does the same to me,’ she said. ‘I don’t know how anyone could listen to her and not have the sensation they were flying.’

In that instant, the vast assembly of clocks began to ring and whistle together in a fabulous cacophony, as if story time had not already started. A little figurine in overalls then burst out from a cabin door in the cuckoo clock and spun stiffly in a circle. This amused me. I asked the waitress for a coffee, raising my voice to speak above the drove of dinging bells.

‘This is not what I expected,’ I said once I placed my order.

‘Is it less? Or is it more?’

‘It is more... *More real*. The textures. The sounds. The smells... Say, you look familiar. Have we met somewhere before?’

‘Everyone you’ll meet here, whether you’ve noticed or not, you’ve met prior, out there in your ordinary life, in the solid world of things. We’ve been passing by you on the street, standing next to you in crowds, providing you with subtle hints and clues that far more exists than you can fathom. Not all who you engage with in the irrational world of logic belongs to that realm. We haven’t spoken until now, but we have crossed orbits.’

The waitress had atop her head a bun of chestnut hair that was loosely held together. As she walked back to the bar, she untied it and let it cascade over shoulders, like a silent waterfall. The floor creaked

like a songbird as she walked — above the clocks and music — and her dress swayed from side to side as if to tick-tock to the same sweet songbird rhythm.

‘It’s a shame you don’t remember,’ she said, calling back to me over her shoulder. ‘Your entire soul was twinkling.’

Aux Folies was filled with endless splendid things. Within arm’s reach from where I sat there was a miniature palace made of copper, a model submarine, a snow globe, a shimmering harp and a spyglass. And just beyond my grasp there was an enigmatic painting of the waitress (the same painting I’d seen hanging in a museum years prior), a row of brightly colored tulips, an aquarium with exotic fish of the same vivid colors and a winged unpolished hourglass that appeared to have the sand inside it stuck. (Suspended grains of sand hung frozen in a line that descended as straight as a ruler into its bottom bulb.) No matter where I looked I saw too many curiosities to count. Along a small section of the east wall alone there was a mounted mastodon, a rack of snuffboxes, spittoons and porcelain ash trays, a music box that sat atop a stack of suitcases, bones of various species and a mannequin that wore a Revolutionary Era powdered wig. There were swords, arrowheads, seashells, snail shells, cannonballs and medieval armor breastplates that were pierced from their fronts to their backs with gaping cannon holes. There were sets of red velvet caribou antlers, kudu

horns, ibex horns and also several sets of bull horns and ram horns as well as crystal vials of perfumes and unlabeled oils that were arranged alongside a collection of daguerreotypes of strangers who I knew that I'd encountered but precisely when and where I couldn't quite recall. And where there were not shelves of books and gilded frames with strange and interesting ephemera, the walls were covered with a jungle themed wallpaper which seemed to be depicting a whole mysterious saga of its own.

I was observing all of this and more as three gentlemen in long wool coats stepped into Aux Folies. I'd seen them each before, in separate occasions, performing for loose change on city streets. *Wearing rags and glowing.* Between the three of them, they were carrying an upright bass, an accordion and a silver alto saxophone.

'Good morning,' said the man with the accordion. 'At last, it is time to tell the tales of our origins.'

I gestured agreeably, half engagingly, unsure if the announcement was made to me.

'We missed you last week,' said the waitress. 'The stories were in top form.'

The shortest of the three gentlemen — the one with the silver sax — walked swiftly to the gramophone and raised the stylus. Birdsong filled the silence. He then approached where I was sitting and ran his fingers over the harp strings, creating an effortless glissando.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I didn't do this alone. This work was born out of the love and support of the giants whose shoulders I stand on.

I owe a great debt, first and foremost, to my wife, Annabelle. You are the order to my chaos. Without your unwavering encouragement, my dream of writing a book would still be just that — a dream. Life with you is an electric fairy tale come true. Thank you also to my siblings, Abby, Andy and Annie. I like to think of you as clones. (We are four divergent iterations of one another, traveling different roads.) Thank you to Taylor and Lindsay, friends who I admire, respect and wish to emulate. Thanks also to my mentors, Kenny and Mehdi. Kenny, not a day passes in which I don't think of the selfless guidance you gave to me when I was in a time of need. And Mehdi, you believed in me, you gave me confidence to write and you told me things about myself of which beforehand I was blind to. And finally, I'd like to thank my parents, David and Lori. The two of you have made an enormously positive impact on the world. You've taught not only me,

but an entire community, how to dream and do good deeds. My heart is overwhelmed with gratitude.

LETTER OF FAREWELL TO THE READER

YOU WHO HAVE PASSED THROUGH THIS OTHERWORLDLY
LABYRINTH,

Before you return to the solid world of things, I
implore you to consider this:

*...a delusion is false and therefore not commendable if
the vision it portrays is implausible in dimensions of
higher order. Therefore, when you grasp at things beyond
your senses, make sure to consider the most intricate of
details.*

With my head in the clouds
and my feet on the ground,

—A. T. FRENCH

P.S. *Always dream commendably.*

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