

The Fiction

The Multiverse - there are many Universes - lots of them, probably infinite, certainly more than anyone is able to count. This means that we all must deal with the fact that we exist in multiple versions. Each one will be recognisably the same but with their own subtle variations. And these variations, like the beating wings of a butterfly, cause ripples that make each of the lives a little different. This is what lies behind the Fiction.

Our education system has two main goals, to make everyone extremely intelligent and to guide everyone to their true vocation or life goal. When we get to twenty-one we are given our first opportunity to write our Fiction. Your Fiction is a description of how you would like your life to go from that point forward. Once a year, everyone who has written a Fiction takes it to a special building. In this building an amazing thing happens. Your Fiction is read by a machine, processed and, here's the cool bit, your chosen life is matched against all the Universes in the multiverse.

You enter a room with three doors, one entrance two exits. The entrance locks behind you. You pass your Fiction into a scanner and sit on the single chair. If a suitable and allowable match is made, a green light comes on above the left door. Exit by that door and you enter the alternate matched Universe. If no match is found your Fiction is deemed invalid, a red light comes on above the other exit and you return to your own Universe to try again next year.

There are limits to what is allowed in a Fiction. It can't simply be aspirational or plain greedy. You can't say "I want to be rich" and you can't try to superimpose yourself into another life so you can't say "I want to be a Colombian Drug Lord or the Sultan of Brunei". In the multiverse you are still you, so you're maybe not going to become Heavyweight Champion of the World without a lot of training. The Fiction is about picking the version of the Universe that has the best chance of achieving your aspirations. Crucially, you can't involve anyone else in your Fiction, so you can't volunteer yourself to marry a supermodel or, in my case, a girl who wore long socks.

Sometimes your Fiction is blocked by a lack of suitable substitution. You can't enter a Universe where the other you isn't moving too. Duplicate yous are avoided for obvious reasons. This is why the Fiction is yearly and everyone has an allotted time. Not only does the machine have to match your Fiction to a Universe, it has to work out what all the other versions of you are trying to do. Some may have already gone before you and, for obvious reasons, you can't jump into a Universe where you are already dead because that particular variation of you wasn't very good at crossing roads.

Because of the vastness of the multiverse, suitable substitution is almost always possible. Although it only partially explains the red light that greeted all my attempts. There seemed little point in anyone having a go at making a better job of my existence. Not that people get locked in - they all try to trade up, the conditions that suit their Fiction are subtle and varied and not just about being a better you. So the brochure they give you says.

The Fiction is a good thing for most people. It's a privilege and something that shouldn't be wasted on trivia or pointless quests. Shouldn't, of course, isn't the same as isn't.

When you are young life stretches out before you as if it is infinite. You are happy to waste time as each hour not usefully spent is, like any fraction of infinity, nothing. A summer alone can be its own forever, time slowing to a hazy crawl and each day stretching far into the night. Much of my life has been such a hazy crawl, the purpose indistinct, the progress, well, what progress?

One of the first learning simulations you do as a child is a slightly fanciful portrayal as the spider before Robert the Bruce repeatedly failing to build its web. Why they chose to put a child in the mind of a spider is anyone's guess but, when you do finally build the web and the face of the Bruce lights up as he strides off back to eviscerate some people with a sword, you are meant to learn the benefits of persistence. Perhaps I loved being the spider too much. Perhaps I loved too much. Perhaps I didn't. I knew I loved Leah. I didn't know where that simple delusion would take me.

Leah's presence is at the periphery of this story but she is also the centre of it. The first of many paradoxes. Or, as quantum physicists would have it, knowing where she is is of very little use. Quantum physics is confusing that way. I am no great scholar. We are accelerated beyond the first stage of school in under a minute using direct learning implantation at the age of five. By the age of seventeen you are already at least a mediocre student of most forms of advanced science. One day they'll find a way to implant all of that too and the world will be awash with precocious, bored teenagers. Can you imagine that horror? It's bad enough that I live in a world where everyone doesn't just assume they know everything, they pretty much do.

Unlike me, Leah is exceptional. Exceptionally bright, exceptionally gifted at sport, exceptionally well, pretty. That sounds weak. Ideals of beauty vary so much over time that I'm not sure how my adjectives will stand the test of the millennia. After all, if looking from the time of the Neolithic Venuses I would be saying something like "she was the most amazing woman I had ever seen, her buttocks blocked out the sun and her breasts hung like the udders of cow with blocked nipples - can't really remember her face".