

## *Moore Magic*

by Marco Abate

I was fourteen, fifteen years old, at most. A winter vacation, one of the few in my life, probably the last with my parents. A Dolomiti resort, of the type with a lot of wood and a lot of kind people speaking Italian with a strong German accent. That night, I decided to take a short stroll before going to bed. I've always liked walking, and there was something in the night asking me outside. Only a short walk, nothing more, just to get a taste of the nocturnal air, just to feel the dry cold so to later enjoy more the warm of my room (did I have a room of my own, didn't I? I don't remember. I don't remember anything else of that trip, beside this story).

A road started just outside the hotel. Well, it wasn't exactly a road; more of a wide track, possibly. Anyway, it was very easy to follow, and after a few hundred meters and a few sharp turns I lost sight of the building. The air was chilly in a pleasant way; it made you really feel breathing. The snow was white, and blue, and all in between; the track was a dark line in an undulating field of blue/white shadows. No artificial lights, but there was no need for them; the full moon reflected by the snow lighted all was there to be seen.

And then there were the mountains.

The track was cut across the side of a steep valley, and I was halfway up. Down, it was very dark, or so I suppose; to be honest, I don't remember looking down. I was looking straight in front of me, and then up, to the mountains. They were there, white and blue, all around me. Huge, aloof and majestic, almost too beautiful to behold. Sharp lines of solid rock underlined by the snow, reaching at a sky full of light.

They were alive.

I was sure of that. It wasn't a game I was playing with myself. I felt their presence deep inside me; I felt awed by them. It is difficult to express my sensations exactly, even though I remember them very clearly; they went beyond words, somehow. I was in presence of primeval gods; scores of them, all around me. I looked in all directions; the space became so vast, the air so clear, the snow was light, the rock pure darkness. I opened to the night, and I gave myself to the mountains.

When I got back to the resort, I found my parents slightly worried. It appeared that I was gone for almost two hours; to me, it was like only fifteen minutes were passed, twenty at most. I don't remember what I told them, probably nothing specific, at that age you don't explain much to your parents. But I knew then, and I know now, what I experienced that night.

Magic.

Now I'm forty years old. Last January, I spent some time in Zimbabwe. Two weeks in a work camp in the eastern part of the country, working in a model farm; ten days traveling all over the state, on my own. I fell in love with Africa.

I met and talked to a lot of people. Around the fire in nights filled by the song of giant crickets—or, once, by the cries of hippos playing. In a train running along elephants toward a storm. Eating a mango fruit, smiling to a young mother surrounded by her frightened and yet curious children. In a car looking for a tantalizing black rhino. In several backpacker lodges, sometimes drinking, sometimes not. On the surface, Zimbabweans seemed westernized as the rest of us; Coca-Cola was everywhere (bread might be scarce, but Coca-Cola wasn't), and pubs in Harare, the capital, were exactly like pubs in, I don't know, Atlanta, for instance. But just a bit of scratching on the surface, and you ended up in a completely different world.

I was talking to Beoula that day. She was the twenty years old daughter of Mr. Jura, the owner of the model farm I was working in. (Mr. Jura was a fascinating man; the principal of a high school in Harare, he left everything to teach the people in the country the best ways of farming. But that's another story.) Beoula was the daughter of his father: intelligent, curious, full of opinions and ideas, a pleasure to talk to. We were in a “luxury hut” in the farm. Most of the lodgings in the work camp were in a dormitory (a vast, empty, one-room building, which I shared with seven local young men), but there also were a few more comfortable bungalows, mostly reserved for that commodity fast disappearing in Zimbabwe, the tourists. These huts were built in the traditional way, round white walls with a hay roof (whose only problem was that the monkeys liked to dig holes in it to see what was inside); there was no electric light, or running water, but they were very clean, and really cool even in the heat of the day—and the landscape was fantastically beautiful, and in the morning you could wash yourself under the waterfall...

Anyway, that afternoon I was in a hut talking to Beoula, of this and that and the lake. Serengeti five, the farm (even the name had a story attached to it), was one hour walk away from Lake Rusape, a beautiful artificial lake dotted with small islands (characteristic of the eastern part of Zimbabwe are lonely boulders in the plain, from half a meter to thirty meters high; and the small islands were the tips of the highest boulders, partially submerged by the lake). Well, according to the elders of the local community, Lake Rusape was inhabited.

By mermaids. Male mermaids.

Every year, usually around September or October, somebody in the community disappeared, kidnapped by the mermaids. Only one, at most two every year, no more. It was very important that family and friends didn't grieve for the departed; otherwise the mermaids, enraged, would come back, killing somebody else or, even worse, trashing the cattle (the affluence of a family in Zimbabwe is still mostly measured by the amount of cattle possessed, even in the cities). The kidnapped people weren't really dead; they just went to live with the mermaids, in the lake. It was even possible to call them back, there was a special rite for that. But the rite was so difficult that nobody had ever been able to complete it successfully.

Looking at Beoula telling this story was fascinating. It was clear that she couldn't *not* believe it. The mermaids were part of her life exactly as the rainbow lizards running around the farm. Being an intelligent and outspoken girl (definitely an exception in Zimbabwe, where the polite way of a girl talking to a man is not looking at him, which makes for an eerie experience), she had asked the elders the natural question: from where were the mermaids coming from? I mean, the lake was only ten years old or so, and they couldn't possibly be there before... They came from other lakes, it was the answer. Now, *all* the lakes in Zimbabwe are artificial, and most of them pretty recent too. But, on the other hand, local state boundaries are completely artificial too, and there are lakes in Mozambique, and who knows how (and how far) mermaids travel... Nothing in Beoula's life was definitely against the existence of mermaids. And being there, listening to her, listening to her father explaining why it was impossible for him to accept Christian beliefs (and he tried, for love of a woman, but that's yet another story), listening to the camp leader telling how his aunt communicated with dead relatives to get suggestions on solving family crises... it was easy to believe in mermaids, in Zimbabwe.

Magic.

In my everyday life, I'm a professional mathematician (even though I spend part of my everynight life writing comics, which is the reason you are reading this now). Years ago, Martin Gardner used to write a wonderful monthly column on *Scientific American*, called "Mathematical Games". When Douglas Hofstadter replaced him, he renamed the column "Metamagical Themas", which is a perfect anagram. And a very apt one.

My work consists in the study of very abstract objects, often obtained by a process of generalization starting from situations which already are very abstract and (apparently) very far away from the physical world. These objects might be just figments of my imagination; but they feel very concrete to me. They are just there, incredibly beautiful and enticing, waiting for us to discover them, to describe them, to explain them—and we cannot modify or change them. They are not ours to dispose as we please. As soon as they are discovered, they exist on their own. We cannot see them with our eyes, or taste them with our tongue; but we have other senses, a whole logic apparatus of senses, to explore them. It is mostly a matter of exercising the mind in thinking in the right way. And the understanding we get as a reward is apparently essential for understanding how the physical world works. The unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics.

Magic.

You are probably starting to wonder what all of this has to do with Alan Moore. Or maybe you don't. He *is* a magician, after all, in at least two ways. He is able to conjure stories out of thin air, and to build castles full of beautiful and fearful symmetries trapping the readers inside, forever. The mathematical side of myself is just awed by the perfect structure of most of his tales, while the writing side of myself is amazed by the perfect construction of most of his sentences (okay, he also wrote lame tales and awkward sentences, sure, but there is something to be learned even there. And I still have to find a single defect in *Watchmen*). I'm not very original in saying that the weaving of stories is a sort of magic, transporting the reader in new worlds he couldn't have visited by him/herself, but this is particularly true in Alan's case. For instance, every chapter in *Voice of the fire* (a wonderful book, in my opinion) really brings the reader inside the mind of a different person, in a different (pre)historical period. It allows us to perceive reality through the eyes and the mind of that person, in that time. It feels true. It works like...

Magic.

But Alan claims to be a magician in a much less metaphorical way. He claims to be an actual magician. I must admit that the first time I read this I was troubled. Here there was a man that I'd always admired, whose opinions I found intelligent, well-thought and researched, whose writings had been a continuous source of inspiration and learning for me, claiming to be a *magician*? You know, hocus-pocus and the like? Aleister Crowley and theosophy? Come on, he must be joking... But evidently he wasn't, and even if it was not clear to me what he was actually doing then, I started to think. Well, here is a man that I've always admired, whose opinions I find intelligent, well-thought and researched, whose writings have been a continuous source of inspiration and learning for me, claiming to be a magician... there *must* be something there. I don't know exactly what, clearly not the fortune-teller sort of magic, but I cannot exclude that thinking in a different way, exercising the mind in a novel way, one could reach a state where it could be possible to experience something different, something magic. Is it real? Is the equilibrium measure of a 27-dimensional holomorphic dynamical system real? Do these questions make any sense? I don't know; but, on a closer inspection, Alan's descriptions of his frame of mind when encountering ethereal beings bear too many similarities with my own way of dealing with mathematical objects to let me dismiss them as patently unfounded. I still don't know, but there *might* be...

Magic.

So when I was offered to write a piece for this well-deserved tribute to Alan, I decided to tell (some of) my encounters with magic. One of the best praises I know is completely true in his case: he made me think, and in several ways. I cannot say whether my magic and his magic are one and the same thing; possibly not, but it is not relevant. Thanks to you too, there is magic in the air, Alan, I do agree.