



# This Is My Letter To The World: The Omikuji Project Cycle One

*Catherynne M. Valente*

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For two years, acclaimed novelist Catherynne M. Valente has been sending stories out into the wild. Every month, for twenty-four months, a new tale has appeared in mailboxes all over the world.

Here, for the first time, these stories have been brought together in a single anthology. Two years of detectives, fairy tales, frost giants, lost moon colonies, furies and minotaurs.

Two years of magic.

Accompanied by fantastical illustrations created by the subscribers of the project, these hitherto unpublished stories paint a landscape of fiction, family, and a new kind of connection between author and reader.

Open the book and become part of a secret world.

## This Is My Letter To The World: The Omikuji Project Cycle One Details

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## From Reader Review This Is My Letter To The World: The Omikuji Project Cycle One for online ebook

### Ry Herman says

As is true of many short fiction collections, these vary in quality. However, unsurprisingly for a writer of Valente's talents, in this one even the worst of them is interesting and the best of them is fascinating.

As a minor note, although it has not affected my rating, the formatting in the e-book version of this collection has some problems.

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### Nikki says

The stories in this collection are all from letters that Catherynne M. Valente sent to her fans. They're a varied bunch, mostly fairytale-like things, all of them written in Catherynne Valente's signature style, but somehow all the more precious for their origins, being sent out into the world the way they were.

I think the last one, with the winged people, got to me most. It's an image I've held in my head, too, and Catherynne Valente brought it to life wonderfully.

I think I might like her short stories more than her novels, in one sense. They're more easily digestible, easier to follow. No less poetic and mythic, but a bit... easier.

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### Alexis says

I really enjoyed the short stories in this book. My favorite was almost certainly The Consultant, but I don't think there was a bad story in this book.

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### Ana Karina Gourmeitte says

I'm not big on reading poetry but I stumbled upon this and decided to give it a try. I really liked it. The author has a very unique voice and her poetry kept me hooked.

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### Alexandra says

Oh my goodness I loved this collection so much. I wanted to give it 4.5 because it's not \*quite\* a 5 - there were a couple of stories that didn't hit the right note for me but overall it's just loooovely.

I've had a hit and miss record with Valente over the last few years. The novel Palimpsest did absolutely nothing for me - I found it impossible to get into and the premise didn't interest me that much either. I could, though, appreciate the beauty of her language, which made it perhaps more frustrating not to enjoy it as a

piece of writing. I've liked her short stories more, although again not all of them - there have been a few which frustrated me, a couple because I think they were trying too hard and a couple of others because I just didn't GET what she was trying to do.

And then there's this collection.

I signed up for the Omikuji Project recently, because I found out about it when Valente was considering shutting it down for having too few subscribers. The deal is, you pay a certain amount and you get a short story - written just for the subscribers - every month, on beautiful paper with an envelope sealed with wax (apparently; haven't got my first one yet). This collection is the first two years' worth of those stories, made available via Lulu, and I figured I would buy it to have nearly the full set.

Many of these stories are riffs on fairy stories, which can be a dangerous thing to approach, but I don't think Valente hits a bum note with any of them.

I would normally just talk about my favourites in a collection, but I feel like I want to mention every single one of them... so the TL; DR version is just: it's beautiful. Well worth getting from Lulu.

"The Glass Gear" is a delightful, wistful and bittersweet spin on Cinderella, while the three parts of "A Hole to China" are about a child who attempts to dig just that, and what she discovers at the centre of the earth (hint: not what you were expecting. Whatever you were expecting, not that). "The Kunstkammer of Dr Ampersand" is a travel guide explaining a curio cabinet and OH I WANT that novel! Love triangles, heart-of-darkness experiences... it would be poignant and beautiful, like the cabinet. "How to Build a Ladder to the Sun in Six Simple Steps" takes the idea of planetary spheres of influence in intriguing directions, while "The Pine Witch Counts her Knuckle Bones" takes the idea of natural witchcraft and makes it... greener. Valente gets vicious on Chaucer and Boccaccio with "The Legend of Good Women," and although I've not read all of either of the male-authored accounts I know exactly what she is stabbing at here, and she does it well. "Mullein" is one of the most poignant of the collection, a rather heart-breaking little story about the lengths someone might go to for love, and the reader is definitely left wondering whether it's worth it or not (although I don't think the characters are). "That Which lets the Light In" is probably my least favourite, perhaps because I am not as familiar with the Russian stories that she is playing with. A story, or set of stories, I am more familiar with feature in "A Postcard from the End of the World," which combines Norse and Greek myths into a homely little story about apples (kind of), and "How to raise a Minotaur" sees your Cretan labyrinth, picks it apart, and puts it back together again with added nuance, contemporaneity and a little bit more hope. "The Economy of Clouds" reverses the traditional perspective of Jack and the Beanstalk; "The Still" is a slightly creepy story about girls and plums. I adored "The Wedding" - the idea of the mismatched couple, or mismatched families, is a banal staple of romantic comedies but this - a human and a rime giant? Delightful. "Reading Borges in Buenos Aires" reminded me that I have been meaning to read more Borges - I've only read one collection, and that many years ago - and it also connected in a weird way to *The Dervish House*, because of its ideas of cities as books with social geography that can be read. "The Folklore of Sleep" didn't work particularly for me, although I appreciated what she was doing both with the idea of sleep as fundamental but more deeply with the idea of what makes individuals and how others react to that. I think the only clearly SF story in the collection is "Oh, the Snow-Bound Earth, the Golden Moon," and it would make a wonderful novel too: children and an abandoned lunar colony, where they're all given lunar names and don't understand the Earth. Two of the stories in the collection are actually first chapters of novels finished over this period, from *Deathless* and *The Habitation of the Blessed*. As a result of reading them here, I **must** read the former and will be avoiding the latter studiously (which I already guessed based on their blurbs). I only understood the title of "The Opposite of Mary" as I was looking back over it today, and that because last week at church the sermon was about Mary's response to the annunciation. In this story, there is no announcement of imminent divine arrival, but rather just a divine presence... in the shed, with the tools. And the human interaction is humanly motivated. It's quite an interesting take, for me, on the idea of such interactions. Valente apparently wrote "Blue with those Tears" almost as a challenge to herself because

she loathes other stories of Atlanteans so much - and in typical Valente fashion she cannot leave the idea unproblematised. "The Consultant" was inspired by a friend suggesting the need for a fairy tale consultant, and showcases Valente's depth of knowledge about the subject. And finally, "Grandmother Euphrosyne" is a wonderful, slightly cranky story - just like a grandmother - that brings in Greek myth and family relationships in a beautiful, beautiful way.

The last thing to say about this collection is that aside from the glorious prose, there are pictures to go with every story - which I believe are largely from the community of Omikuji recipients (can't wait to join them!), and also the beginning of the letters that Valente sends with each story, which contribute to the larger meta-narrative. This is a really special set of stories.

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## **Terra says**

Catherynne M. Valente has a pretty distinct "voice" and you're not going to enjoy this collection if you haven't enjoyed her other work. Personally, I've adored most of what she's written, but she's not for everyone. She is not known for her transparent prose style. But if you like lush, lyrical prose, you might love this. That said, the stories aren't strictly concerned about playing with beautiful language and imagery. Most of them are layered and complex, and several in this collection resonated with deep places in me. Lovely stuff.

If you've never read her other work and you're considering this collection, but don't know if it's right for you, you're in luck. A lot of her short fiction is available to read free online. Run a search for her name and read a few of her other short stories. Then you'll know if her work appeals to you or not.

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## **Dreamybee says**

I'm not much of a short-story person, but overall, I really enjoyed this collection. Many of Valente's stories are twists on the classic fairy tales we all know and love, but many are pure originals.

If you're like me, and not sure if a whole book of short stories is where you want to spend your money, you can check out Valente's writing at her blog, and you can subscribe to her Omikuji project and receive one short story a month. This is how I discovered her writing; and in full disclosure, I received a free copy of her book as a token of apology in regard to a billing mix-up, which was awesome and way more than was necessary. So, not only do I like her writing, but now she seems like good people, which never hurts!

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## **David says**

This is a self published anthology of Catherynne M. Valente's subscription-story service. It's Valente so the stories are, of course, excellent. I got the kindle edition, however, and the formatting is not great. No chapter breaks, random headers appear in the middle of the text, and there moments when pronouns get switched. There could have been a little more care given to the book itself, considering how much care was put into the prose. That said, at \$2.99 it's well worth it.

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## Kopratic says

Yes, it always comes back to the apples. An apple a day keeps the doctors coming because they're probably concerned that you're only eating apples. A story a month, my dears? Don't mind if I do. Let's explore the truth behind giants and beanstalks. I hear Red's a horrible speller. Oh, you need a fairytale consultant? I got you covered. But don't you dare try and move the story along yourself. I'm the puppet master. I'm the baker.

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## James says

lovely stories, everything she writes is so wonderful and captivating...

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## Earl Solper says

Since I often read free, out-of-copyright ebooks, a few typographical or formatting errors don't bother me. If the errors are too egregious, I can usually find another free version or pay 99 cents for a cleaner copy. In the Kindle edition of *The Omikuji Project*, however, errors are pervasive: the title of every story starts on one page and continues to the next; the first word of each story is decapitated; indentation of paragraphs seems largely a matter of chance; other formatting errors chop pages of prose into chunks of bad poetry; and page numbers (when they appear at all) turn up in the strangest places (sometimes attached to the author's name, sometimes to the chapter and title, sometimes alone). It's the last of these that bothered me the most – it added a mad-lib quality that shattered my suspension of disbelief and dragged me back to reality (a dubious pleasure, at best). From there, I'd seek the lost thread and grumble my way to the conclusion, but only rarely did I regain the sense of full immersion in a fantasy world.

Here's a particularly jarring example from "The Legend of the Good Women":

"...Lucretia  
Weeping virgin's blood—what a good girl,  
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the best of girls exempla to all the rest!"

It takes the intrusive narrator too far.

As for the content, I enjoy both old and new fairy tales. When reading modern tales, I mentally classify each according to my own Aarne-Thompson system (aside from the obvious distinction between fairy tales written for an adult audience, and "adult" fairy tales).

- \***Traditional Tales** – these include: traditional stories with traditional characters told in a modern style, original works told in a traditional style, and traditional stories told from a non-traditional point of view
- \***Propaganda Pieces** – where the author contorts the story until it supports the moral of the moment
- \***Subverted Stories** – the good guys are bad, the monsters are misunderstood, the princess rescues herself (or the prince, who is neither handsome nor charming)

\***Modernized Variants** – these include the purely symbolic story (a sort of Anti-Magical Realism, where magic becomes metaphor – the fairy godmother is a wealthy relative, the wolf is a sexual predator), Urban Fantasy (sometimes magic is an everyday fact of life as accepted as electricity, sometimes it is hidden and practiced by the elect), and Science Fiction (where a sufficiently advanced science takes the place of magic)

\***Metafiction** – the characters are aware of being in a fairy tale and either modify their behavior with this knowledge, or fatalistically trudge to a foregone conclusion

I've read both good and bad stories from every category (even the purely symbolic stories – “Rats” by Veronica Schanoes re-imagines Sleeping Beauty with the spindle replaced by a heroin needle and the enchanted sleep as the ensuing drug haze). It's the writing that makes the difference. Usually, the fairy tales fit neatly into one of my categories. With the individual works of The Omikuji Project, however, the categories merge, one fairy tale bleeds into another, and the universe of fairy tales overlaps with various mythologies (Eastern and Western). Each story resists classification; each is a Platypus of literary taxonomy. Sometimes this mishmash of overlapping Venn Diagrams works out beautifully, as in “A Postcard from the End of the World”, where all the forbidden fruit of myth and legend grow on a single tree (with peculiar guardians – aphids that suck immortality and death, good and evil, discord and beauty from the fruit). Conversely, “The Economy of Clouds” (an amalgam of Japanese goddesses, Norse giants, a Judeo-Christian heavenly bureaucracy, and Jack and the Beanstalk as a parable for the bad economy and a “Just-so” tale for why the British Empire collapsed) falls flat though it's played for laughs.

I read elsewhere that Valente is “in love with words” – and that love shows through with phrases like “archetypical architecture”. But she can also be a fickle and sometimes an undiscerning lover. No sooner has she introduced us to synaesthesia (gleaming gold in his extroversion), then she's off with a dazzling simile, then on to some dark and brooding imagery. Occasionally, the words are interesting but out of place, and stand out like a tattooed biker at a debutante's ball. Other times, she's enamored of a phrase she shows off to her friends, who smile for her sake, but privately whisper among themselves that she could have done better.

“A Hole to China” provides examples. Tristram, the morbidly shy heroine, seeks to “dig a little highway” to China, but understands “you could not just leap onto the interstate wherever you liked—you needed an on-ramp”. The problem is that the heroine is twelve, and twelve year-olds (even exceptional ones) don't think in terms of highways and on-ramps. Their thoughts are more pedestrian. When Tristram later speaks to an anthropomorphic crow, the crow opines that “It's very hard to push a figure of speech into the world, as hard as a child” – considering the speaker is a bird and the audience is a child, the simile, while interesting, isn't particularly apt. Deeper in the world, in a blisteringly hot subterranean city where the natives run around naked, Tristram dresses from head to toe in black salamander skin for protection from the heat, and exclaims that she looks like “a sort of hooker-y ninja”. The ninja I understand, but ninja child prostitution is an unhelpful fragment of imagery (is it still imagery when it suggests no mental image?) that a shy child would not have said aloud even had her imagination suggested it.

Additionally, some of the modifiers are misplaced just enough that the initial image conflicts with the intended meaning: “a dream of falling mirrors” becomes “a dream of falling mirrors depression in the patient”.

Finally, two of the short stories are actually chapters from longer works (Deathless and The Habitation of the Blessed). Had they been appended to the end of the work (as is usual with previews), they would have seemed like bonus material, but mixing them in with the text made me feel as though I had been cheated out of two stories. I am glad these excerpts were included – I will buy Deathless, but The Habitation looks sufficiently disturbing to avoid completely.

Most of my complaints stem from the Kindle edition. Had I not been periodically jarred back into reality, I doubt I would have noticed as many flaws. Some of the stories were quite interesting ("Mullein", "A Postcard from the End of the World", "How to Raise a Minotaur") and rest were at least novel. It was a good introduction to her writing.

People bothered by formatting errors in professional etexts, though, should avoid the Kindle edition.

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### **Robert says**

THE GLASS GEAR and A HOLE TO CHINA are my favorite stories from a wonderful assortment of Catherynne's work. Her stories touch me or move me in ways that are totally new to me, and I'm left wanting more.

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### **Lisa Grabenstetter says**

Valente's short story style is one part deconstructed myth, folktale, or trope, one part introspective societal analysis, and one part exuberant, lyrical prose poem. Her enthusiasm for writing is obvious in every sentence, in her vivid characters and gorgeously detailed settings.

One of the most perfect short story collections I have read to date. I will be canceling one of my other magazine subscriptions and signing up for Omikuji instead.

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