

Fiction & Fantasy in Dharma Dissemination:

A Literary Look at Dr. Frederick P. Lenz

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Fantasy is true, of course. It isn't factual, but it is true. Children know that. Adults know it too, and that is precisely why many of them are afraid of fantasy. They know that its truth challenges, even threatens, all that is false, all that is phony, unnecessary, and trivial in the life they have let themselves be forced into living. They are afraid of [fantasy], because they are afraid of freedom.¹

-Ursula K. Le Guin

Fantastical Foreword

“What is it? *Where does it end? What's on the other side? How does all of this stuff just...float in it?*” Questions we might ask of mind or consciousness I grew up asking of the night sky—my first teacher, and an easily accessible one in rural Missouri where I grew up. As a child I noticed that the longer I laid still with the blackness, the more subtle and smaller stars emerged. That emergent light fell to earth as well, circling in the brambles around our pond. Fireflies. Growing up with this teacher, it was and remains comfortable to launch off this planet and go learn with her. My favorite home away from earth? *Antares*. This bright star is the heart of the Scorpion constellation, and he is my heart as well. How can a star be my heart? Wrong question. The Scorpion constellation masters alchemy and transmutation; she turns from a scorpion to a snake and then to an eagle. How? That is a good question, but it won't yield a logical answer. The answer is found in the experience of the heart, in Antares. And that journey has been quite an adventure.

In the years since I began courting this royal star, I spent my time cycling through lives as a tigress, a timid scholar with large glasses and fanciful scarves, a homeless wanderer, an artist, a celibate brown skinned desert snake adept at camouflage, and an exuberant tropical orchid adept at unabashed theatrical display. For many years, those various iterations each had their own way of studying and immersing in Vajrayana Buddhist tradition, a religious system which has given quite a bit of ground to the groundlessness of such shapeshifting. Around the time I was living as an old witch in a redwood forest, I first encountered the work of Dr. Frederick Lenz.

At that time I was expanding my therapeutic repertoire by studying movement and expressive arts at the Tamalpa Institute in Northern California. One day, while sweeping the outdoor deck at the studio, the thoughts came quite gently: “I want to study Dharma. I know there's an MDiv at Naropa. I think there might be a scholarship for that.” This was accompanied

¹ Ursula Le Guin, *The Language of the Night*. (New York: Perennial, 1989), 40.

by a sense of lightness, as if I myself were a small leaf being swept along by a much larger force. At home that night I found the Frederick P. Lenz Foundation merit scholarship “to support the studies of those who will go on to make significant contributions to American Buddhism.”² Filled simultaneously with prescience, awe, gratitude, and humility at the potential to continue this work, I began the application. Over a process of several months, I transitioned back and forth from witch to Buddha, courting the wisdom of the lineage I sought to study. I rested in the sense of deep purpose and peace, trust and action. Through the grace of this mandala and Dr. Frederick Lenz, I received the scholarship—an enormous boon to my life and life’s path.

Two and a half years later, I am entering my third and final year of the Master of Divinity program here at Naropa. Not necessarily an old witch or a desert snake or a heart star, and yet perhaps still all of them all at once, I now sit to explore the teachings of Dr. Lenz. My approach will mirror what feels equally alive and vibrant in my studies here at Naropa: the meta-view of how we know, learn, share and experience, as opposed to a content or conclusion-directed inquiry. The process itself is the path. As such, I am fascinated less by Frederick Lenz’s many lectures than by his *novels*. What other Dharma teacher do I know who dares to play in fiction?³ What does this fiction make possible? What does it open and enliven? Moreover, in line with the intent of the Lenz foundation in promoting American Buddhism, what does fiction offer us in this precarious and precious moment of Dharma dissemination in the West that more traditional systems of teaching may lack?

Rama & his Tales

Dr. Frederick P. Lenz accomplished in his mere 48 years seeming lifetimes of activity: deep commitment to meditation and resultant *siddhis*, engagement with extreme athleticism such as high altitude snowboarding, success in software engineering and widespread Dharma teaching in the United States. In his early years, he also earned a PhD in English Literature from SUNY-Stony Brook.⁴ I can’t help but wonder if this early love of literature opened his mind to “alternative” teaching potentials. While many of his talks have been compiled and published, Dr.

² Naropa University Website, accessed 6/18/20, <https://www.naropa.edu/academics/masters/divinity/lenz-scholarship.php>

³ The only other person who comes to mind is Dzongzar Khyentse Rinpoche, whose popular films *The Cup*, *Travelers and Magicians*, and *Hema Hema: Sing me a Song While I Wait*, surely deserve mention.

⁴ Rama- Dr. Frederick P Lenz, *Tantric Buddhism: Twenty-Seven Talks* (Beverly Hills: The Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism, 2003), 359.

Lenz also wrote two novels in the mid 1990's: *Surfing the Himalayas* and *Snowboarding to Nirvana*. He writes in the preface to *Snowboarding*, "I have taken the liberty of transforming these accounts—even though they are based on real-life occurrences—into a work of fiction. In transforming my actual experiences into fiction...I have, in some instances altered time periods, shortened trekking experiences, and made other chronological and content changes."⁵ What follows are fantastical accounts of high-performance athletic feats, encounters with Tibetan meditation masters, interdimensional snowboarding and even some sex scenes. Rama's audacity reflects in his writing. His story is also uniquely American. We encounter a young Lenz who cares nothing for enlightenment. As opposed to traditional tales where students search endlessly to find, yet alone be accepted by a teacher, Rama's stories describe a role reversal. While he cultivates devotion to snowboarding, realized teachers pursue him nudging him toward awakening.

What is missing from these tales are key components that traditional Buddhist lineages, along with scholars of religion, would consider necessary: references and sources to grant credence and validity, an elaboration of both lineage & ethics, and a logical tenet system that outline beliefs and practices. Lenz touches on these in his novels in ways that are surely fictionalized. I propose that it is precisely the breaking of these orthodoxies and embrace of the fantastical and mythic realms of practice that enliven Lenz's work with continued potentiality. While many streams of American Buddhism are involved in deep intellectual discussion on how to both preserve and adapt lineage, Rama dispenses with all such norms and dives instead into a mythic world of experience. In unbinding himself from tradition, he is also free to speak directly to his audience with themes often taboo for Buddhists, such as personal power and enjoyment.⁶ He points to the heart of what we, as Americans, have largely lost: magic, myth, and the power of great stories. I view Lenz's unorthodoxy as a way of making magic and opening potential for his students, and I examine several aspects of his work and writing that engage this creative potential. Instead of relating Lenz's non-academic work to the world of academia, I explore ways that fictionalizing experience opens avenues of communication and potential in scholarly representation. Finally, I

⁵ Rama-Dr. Frederick Lenz. *Snowboarding to Nirvana: A Spiritual Adventure*. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997), x.

⁶ See Frederick P. Lenz "Power," and "Personal Happiness," in *The Enlightenment Cycle* & "Modular Mysticism: Storing Power," and "Modular Mysticism: Dress for Power," in *Insights: Talks on the Nature of Existence*, (Beverly Hills: The Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for American Buddhism, 2003).

muse on how fiction and narrative can provide vital conduits for transmission of Buddhism in the United States.

Fantastical and Unorthodox

When I use the words fantasy and fiction I do so with utmost reverence. In reflecting on this material I am reminded of one of my favorite films, *Big Fish*, directed by Tim Burton. In the movie, Edward Bloom is a storyteller of epic proportions. His affinity for fantasy, however, drives away his son Will, who prefers a logical and factual account of history, and who views his father's stories as lies. Yet Edward Bloom cannot be stopped in his effervescent and exaggerated interactions with life. In the final scene, at Edward's funeral, we see that many of his fantastical friends were indeed existent—although somewhat more “normal” than he proclaimed them to be. This film speaks volumes. Will plays the role largely filled by a logocentric culture. He values “facts” and shuns artistry and myth. Edward, however, does not perceive his stories as fiction at all. His “true” perception may remain a mystery he does not divulge, but his diversity in seeing enriches his life and those around him.

If we expand this example to Dharma, it can be argued that concretized ways of seeing and perceiving are, at the deepest level, anathema to the awakening Buddhism promotes. Any idea when solidified and grasped becomes an obstacle, including Western culture's prized ideals around objective and factual experience. In the *Enlightenment Cycle*, Lenz writes, “Things are not necessarily logical. Logic is a way of looking at something. It's a flow chart...But everything is not logical. Things just are. And logic is a secondary source of referencing where we look at something and say, “oh, well this is this way because....” No, it's not. It is what it is. And we've decided that we want to apply rationale to it.”⁷ In some places Lenz yields to this rationale with incredible practicality, such as his talks on how to create balance and craft a meditation practice around a full work schedule. Yet in his novels, he moves into the realm of story and fiction as powerful tools for transmission.

In his books, Lenz tells his tale of moving to Nepal to engage in high-altitude, back country snowboarding. His tale begins with wild dreams of a Tibetan monk he would meet while snowboarding...who he then runs over the next day on his snowboard.⁸ This monk is Master

⁷ Frederick Lenz, *The Enlightenment Cycle*, (Mystic Buddha Publishing House, 2016), 38.

⁸ Frederick P. Lenz, *Surfing the Himalayas: A Spiritual Adventure*, (Boulder: Living Flow, 2020), 8.

Fwap Sam-Dup, a teacher who tells Rama that because of his past life karma, he would initiate and teach him in the Rae Chorze-Fwaz Order of Tantric Buddhist Enlightenment. Rama is more interested in snowboarding and declines Master Fwap's invitation to continue study, until his dreams send him a clear message.⁹ Following a dreamtime message from his future self, he takes up study with Master Fwap who eventually introduces him to the Oracle of Nepal. Adventure ensues: lots of high-stakes snowboarding, direct teachings and insight from the masters, several trysts with women from his past lives, opening "dimensions" in the enlightenment cave, and teachings from the *Handbook for Enlightenment*. Throughout much of the work, we encounter Lenz's ambivalence toward the project of awakening; "While I loved...Master Fwap...[he] wasn't like me. My world was competitive athletics, and [his] was enlightenment. It just seemed to me as if the twain would never meet between us."¹⁰ At one point he even returns to California, avoiding the meditative path for the streets of LA.¹¹ His return home, however, leaves him with a renewed desire to return to Nepal—this time to actualize the insights of his teacher and remember his past life awakening—not only to snowboard, but to "snowboard to nirvana."¹²

Through sustained efforts on the part of his teachers, and his own past propensities based on past-life meditation experience, Rama "solves the riddle of the missing dimensions,"¹³ and encounters wild realms of experience. Master Fwap and the Oracle take Rama to the Cave of Enlightenment; after engaging certain meditation practice merging himself with the blue sky, Rama finds himself on his snowboard in the air with both masters. "Without knowing how I could do it, I found that I was able to skyboard through the sky as proficiently as I could snowboard down a mountain in deep powder."¹⁴ He portrays his experience of enlightenment as an interdimensional extreme sport where he skyboards through various dimensions of light and consciousness to experience timelessness. The ultimate solving of the riddle grants certain *siddhis*, or special powers, such as teleportation. While this brief sketch certainly does not cover the span of both novels, including lengthy dialogues between Rama and his teachers and many

⁹ Lenz, *Surfing*, 21-25.

¹⁰ Lenz, *Snowboarding*, 123.

¹¹ Lenz, *Snowboarding*, 123.

¹² Lenz, *Snowboarding*, 135.

¹³ Lenz, *Snowboarding*, 183.

¹⁴ Lenz, *Snowboarding*, 193.

practices taken from the *Handbook of Enlightenment*, I chose to highlight both the fantastical and seemingly fictionalized elements.

While overt fantasy may be lacking in American Buddhist contexts, Indian and Tibetan lineages are steeped in metaphor, myth and tales of extraordinary powers. In the Mahayana sutra *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, Vimalakīrti casually conducts many feats to open the minds of the *arhats*, realizers of foundational Buddhist practices, into the greater view of the Mahayana. In one passage he asks Mañjuśrī, who has traveled to “innumerable hundreds of thousands of Buddha-fields,” where in those realms he found the finest thrones, and then proceeds to transport 320,000 thrones from that Buddha field, which were each “thirty-four hundred thousand leagues high.” The thrones “arranged themselves without crowding and the house seemed to enlarge itself accordingly.”¹⁵ The bodhisattvas present then enlarged themselves to fit the epic thrones, while those less capable of such feats were instructed by Vimalakīrti. In his introduction to this text, Robert Thurman describes the split between modern and traditional scholarly views on the sutra. The former “see the Scripture as a literary creation by an imaginative artist of the Mahayana tradition: an allegorical presentation....to dramatize the doctrines.” Traditional scholars, on the other hand, “do believe in the historicity of Vimalakīrti...as well as the “science-fictional” world view of interrelated universes or Buddha-fields.”¹⁶ Scholars from different cultures and orientations thus treat the allegory of Vimalakīrti quite differently.

Scholarship aside, popular cultures of both India and Tibet are also full of extraordinary stories. Tibetans revere Padmasambhava, affectionately called Guru Rinpoche, because of his fierce power in bringing Buddhism to Tibet—subduing local demons and performing miracles to tame the minds of wild Tibetans.¹⁷ Furthermore, Rama—Dr. Frederick Lenz—takes his name from the Indian Epic, the Ramayana. In this tale Hanuman takes an epic leap from India all the way to Lanka. During this one leap, flowering trees rise up to support him, Devas shower petal rain on him, he evades the mother of serpents, kills a demoness of the sea, and transforms back and form in size from a monkey hundreds of feet high to a mere few feet.¹⁸ Next to these stories,

¹⁵ *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti: A Mahayana Scripture*, trans. Robert A.F. Thurman. (Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 51.

¹⁶ Thurman, *The Holy Teaching*, 8.

¹⁷ Tulku Thondup, *Masters of Meditations and Miracles: Lives of the Great Buddhist Masters of India and Tibet*. (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), 83.

¹⁸ Ramesh Menon, *The Ramayana: A Modern Retelling of the Great Indian Epic*. (New York: North Point Press, 2001), 287-281.

Rama's tales seem right at home. His willingness to engage in the fantastic links to much older human traditions embracing mythic storytelling. His stories also call to attention the logocentric tendency to treat "fantasy" as false and not worthy of serious consideration.

Despite my wildly imaginative tendencies, I surely encountered scholarly objections while reading Lenz. For example, the names of his teachers and their order seem clearly fictionalized—and they are, yet to what degree Lenz gives no clue. As a practitioner, I have never met a teacher who did not factually acknowledge his lineage, *particularly* in a Tibetan tradition where lineage is so crucial. Lenz's use of terms like "soul" and "God" are, from a scholarly perspective, simply not Buddhist. Yet I remind myself, Lenz is not concerned with scholarship, he's concerned with sharing awakening with his students. He teaches and writes in the vernacular of new age spirituality; integrating Buddhism, both tantric and zen, yoga, and the teachings of Carlos Castaneda. He focuses equally on transcendent practices and on incredibly pragmatic and effective ways to live and thrive in life. From this perspective, his fiction serves as a valuable tool to step outside the concretization of institutionalized forms, including lineage, and speak directly in the language of his audience.

Rama's mentions of Castaneda¹⁹ also led me to remember the mystery surrounding the teachings of Don Juan. After the immense success of Castaneda's many books recounting his apprenticeship with the Yaqui shaman, "scholars and critics have debated whether Don Juan existed and whether the books were anthropology or fantasy, fact or fiction." Yet one journalist writes, "The most important question we can ask is not, 'Can Juan Matus be located in 1977 in Sonora, Mexico?' It is rather: "What does Don Juan tell us about ourselves, about the millions in this country and abroad, who have read his words...?' As an archetypal hero, Don Juan may reveal to us something about the contours of the collective unconscious and the longings of our time."²⁰ Correlate questions can be asked of Lenz's adventures in Nepal. How do his otherworldly skyboarding feats speak to modern readers?

On one hand, Lenz's writing and works speak directly to a changing audience. American culture is does not value asceticism the way it was during the Buddha's time. Culturally there is great cynicism toward organized religion, and academically we see this in declining admissions

¹⁹ Lenz, *Insights: Talks on the Nature of Existence*, ii & throughout the book.

²⁰ Peter Applebome, "Carlos Castaneda, Mystical and Mysterious Writer, Dies," in the *New York Times*, June 20, 1998. <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/06/20/arts/carlos-castaneda-mystical-and-mysterious-writer-dies.html>

in religious studies departments across the country. If the Dharma is going to take root here, it will have to speak to a very different culture. Lenz's style breaks molds that restrict our stories of American Buddhism—what it is and what it can be. He also harnesses the power of the miraculous. Much of Buddhism is landing in the West through the lens of neuroscience, mindfulness and stress relief—stripped down of culture and context, and I would add, magic. Yet those elements are arguably essential to the richness of human life. Lenz's willingness to break from the mold is aided by fiction; he does not explicitly reject traditions, but in fictionalizing them, he assumes the freedom to be flexible, magnetic, and original.

Scholastic Application: Methods of Inquiry & Stories that Matter

Instead of viewing Lenz's fiction through an academic lens, I explore scholars who apply the wisdom of fiction to academia. As Patricia Levy writes, "Historically, both academic research and public perception have been informed by the fiction-nonfiction dualism that inherently legitimized the notion of a discernible "truth" while implying fiction to be its polar opposite; however, it is now widely accepted in academia that there are "truths" to be found in fiction...the polarization of fiction and nonfiction is misleading, and qualitative social science research is moving beyond this false dichotomy."²¹ By stepping out of the presumption that there is a single concrete truth to be discovered, fiction opens us to an array of interpretations and perspectives. "Fiction can, ironically, expose that which "factual representation" conceals by its very implication."²² Discussing fiction in the academia, particularly in regards to Buddhism, also opens into discussions on the nature of reality and truth. Rob Burbea, a teacher in the Insight Meditation tradition, focuses on how the *fluidity* of our relationship to image and story opens us into experiences of emptiness, while the concretization of ideas and beliefs may ultimately hinder our practice.²³ Fiction, then, becomes a way to explore truth—to open out of the stagnant comfort zone of rigid beliefs, even Buddhist ones.

Many scholars working with indigenous methodologies have moved to include narrative and fictional writing in the presentation of research. Dalene Swanson writes, "Narrativity offers the possibility of flagrantly resisting formulation, and concerns itself with the human condition

²¹ Patricia Leavy, *Method Meets Art*, (New York: The Guilford Press, 2009), 47-8.

²² Leavy, *Method*, 43.

²³ Rob Burbea. Talks available online at <https://dharmafeed.org/teacher/210/>.

as lived and (re)imagined as its primary focus.”²⁴ If a purpose of scholarship is the actual enrichment of the human condition, then its results should be accessible and tangible. Leavy writes, “fiction may reach broader audiences and do so on deeper levels as compared with other forms of academic writing.”²⁵ In his essay, “In Defense of Fiction,” Stephen Banks advocates using fiction to share research, while stressing the need to delineate fictionalized experience with more objective findings. Leavy similarly stresses the importance of delineating work that is pulled from actual sources.²⁶ For example, an author should make clear to the audience whether they are quoting a research participant or fictionalizing their experience. In this way, academic research can maintain objective findings, while leaning into the potentials of fiction in disseminating work to a greater audience and unveiling its own truth.

Telling New Stories

Frederick Lenz has left a legacy for American Buddhism through his own teachings, the insights of his students, and his generous vision and activity through the work of his foundation. As I consider my own role in this vision, as a recipient of his and the Foundation’s generosity, I muse on the important role that fiction may play in the dissemination of Dharma in the West. The clearest message I take from reading Lenz’s two novels is that many Americans may need a new image and story of the Dharma. What are some common images we have now? One is the Buddha as a renunciate—leaving behind the world to sit beneath the Bodhi tree. This image appeals to some, the stoic sort who might easily abandon relationships. Yet many today don’t want a transcendent path of renunciation—they need a path where life, relationships, the body and emotion can be involved. We have another unfortunate story arising in American Buddhism, and that is the story of abusive Gurus. It continues to pain me that many friends who are not already deeply linked to a spiritual path have extreme aversion to entering traditional Dharma centers because of the plethora of abuse scandals—be they in Zen, Tibetan, or Indian Yogic traditions. Going forward, I acknowledge the deep power of story, not as mere entertainment, but as a psychic mandala so to speak—as a template of what is possible. And right now we need new stories.

²⁴ Dalene Swanson “Voices in the Silence,” in *Authentic Dissertation*, ed. Four Arrows (Don Trent Jacobs), (New York: Routledge, 2008), 88.

²⁵ Leavy, *Method*, 43.

²⁶ Leavy, *Method*, 50.

In this time of immense upheaval, Dharma fiction can focus on the *potentiality* inherent in emptiness and the joys and depths of compassion. The groundlessness of being is a source of terror and suffering for many, yet in Lenz's tale it is this very groundlessness that serves as the interdimensional ground for this "skyboarding" adventure. There are myriad ways to portray and perceive emptiness; Dharma fiction could offer tales which shift us toward the richness, magic, and joy of not grasping. Fiction can also lean into traditional Buddhist tenets such as ethical behavior and the deep heart of compassion. Ethics and compassion are often seen as "weak" in our society—or linked with dogmatic moral codes. We tend to be bombarded by entertainment that celebrates toxic masculinity, selfishness, and greed. Dharma fiction could tell stories where behaviors are rooted in our inherent dignity and good hearts; this behavior, far from being "boring" or "weak" can be fantastically rich.

What stories would *I* tell, were I to bulk up on my prose-writing abilities? I envision stories where nuance and complexity is accepted and celebrated, where the righteous need not vilify their opponents and concretize their righteousness, but rather use their good hearts to impact others through beautiful action and kind thoughts, and where humans are no longer perceived as the center of the universe, but exist in utter interdependence with this earth and the cosmos and dance that precarious existence with both equanimity and celebration.

In the language of Joanna Macy and her Work that Reconnects, there are three main story lines from which we operate: "Business as Usual," (logocentric, industrial, masculine, and progress/growth-oriented), "The Great Unraveling" (climate collapse, mass-scale destruction and pain), and "The Great Turning" (humans waking up to our true nature and dramatically altering our behavior for the better.) I believe stories—both fiction and narrative—can play an important role in this new vision for our world. The Great Turning needs great stories. Buddhism certainly has an immense history and wealth of insights on how to reduce human suffering, yet its message must be fresh and accessible to us now. Telling new stories with Buddhist roots can allow for this dissemination, while also maintaining the integrity and insight of traditional lineages. Tradition can be studied, preserved and practiced in one form, yet instead of dominating the field, it can coexist and indeed mutually support new Dharma stories. Through fiction, this process can be a transparent and honest expression of imagination, while adhering to the fundamental Mahayana tenet that all expression, all action, be for the ultimate benefit of all beings. May we tell rich, magical new stories of awakening!

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