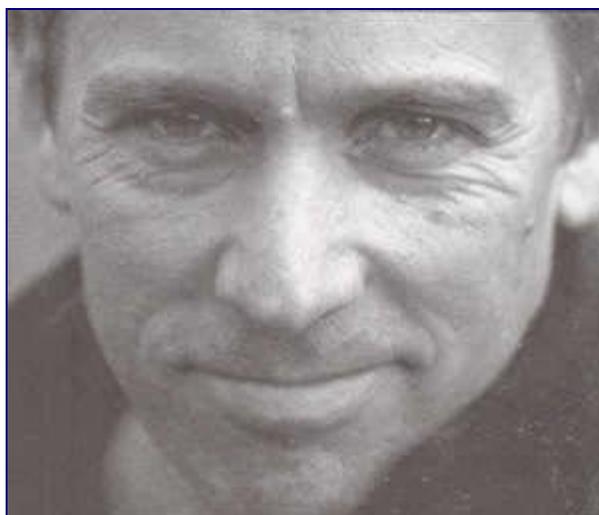


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A READER'S JOURNAL

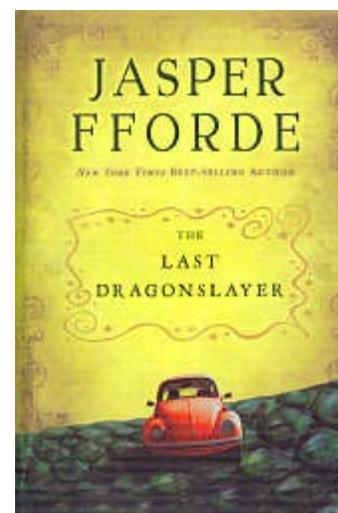
The Last Dragonslayer
A Novel

by

Jasper Fforde

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Book Review by Bobby Matherne
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"Quark!" is how we meet Jennifer Strange's strange pet, the

Quarkbeast. He doesn't talk much, just an occasional "Quark!" inserted in key points in the script, in between which he devours a tin or two of sardines. He — I think it's a he, not that anyone would dare get close enough for a short arm inspection — eats the tins, not the sardines, and any other metal object which dares to get close to him. He would make an afternoon snack of R2D2, for example, or have a full meal of a VW Bug, which strangely is our heroine Jennifer's auto, shredding it with his mouth with several rows of sharp teeth which rotate as he eats metallic things. But who is this Jennifer Strange? Here is the teaser page placed before Page 1 to answer that question.

Once I was famous. My face was seen on T-shirts, badges, commemorative mugs, and posters. I made front-page news, appeared on TV, and was even a special guest on *The Yogi Baird Daytime TV Show*. *The Daily Clam* called me "the year's most influential teenager," and I was the Mollusc on Sunday's *Woman of the Year*. Two people tried to kill me, I was threatened with jail, had fifty-eight offers of marriage, and was outlawed by King Snodd IV. All that and more besides, and in less than a week. My name is Jennifer Strange.

When we meet her in action, the fifteen-year-old teenager is at the wheel of the VW Beetle shown on the cover of the book and she is driving between two of the Ununited Kingdoms, apparently in a Britain some time in the future or in a parallel universe which is replete with magic and sorcerers who can do such feats, for a price, as replace all the rusted and leaky pipes in a large building with brand-new ones in under an hour, without tearing up walls and such, all of whom work for the company she heads, Kazam.

[page 1] We hadn't been able to afford a company car for years, so the three sorcerers, the beast, and I were packed into my rust-and-orange-but-mostly-rust Volkswagen for the short journey from Hereford to Dinmore.

Suddenly the Quarkbeast made his presence known in the crowded VW Bug.

[page 5] "Quark," said the Quarkbeast.

"Did we really have to bring the beast," Full Price asked me.

"It jumped in the car when I opened the door."

The Quarkbeast yawned, revealing several rows of razor-sharp fangs. Despite his placid nature, the beast's ferocious appearance almost guaranteed that no one ever completely shrugged off the possibility that he might try to take a chunk out of them when they weren't looking. If the Quarkbeast was aware of this, it didn't show. Indeed, he might have been so unaware that he wondered why people always ran away

screaming.

We follow with interest Jennifer's adventures as the orphan who heads up Kazam. Why does she run the large magic corporation? Because the Great Zambini went missing, because she had been there since age 12 and knew the Magical Art business, and because, as she so adroitly put it, "No one else wanted to." Suddenly the Last Dragonslayer is predicted to slay the last Dragon, Maltcassion, and Jennifer discovers to her chagrin that she has been chosen, pre-ordained it seems, to do the job. Just in time, her replacement, a new foundling, called Tiger, has been sent to learn Kazam's business, a process which occurs every four years.

You've already heard about Full Price, whose twin brother, the skinny one, is called Half Price, and now you're ready to learn about the Transient Moose, Hector, another droll character conjured out of the ethers by Fforde. Jennifer enlightens Tiger.

[page 35] "That's the Transient Moose," I said, looking through the mail, "an illusion that was left as a practical joke long before I got here. He moves randomly around the building, appearing now and then, here and there. We're hoping he'll wear out soon."

When Hector was blocking someone's way, Jennifer suggested, "Just walk through him, and if you're ever wanted to know how a moose works, stop halfway and have a good look around." (Page 66)

Tiger wants to know about what a sorcerer can do who is at the Spellmanager level of skill. Jennifer answers her probie this way:

[page 48] I took a sip of hot chocolate. "Levitation of light objects, stopping clocks, unblocking drains, and simple washing and drying can all be handled pretty well at the Spellmanager level. There's no one below this status at Kazam except you, me, Unstable Mabel, the Quarkbeast, and Hector."

Suddenly Kazam is hit by a *Magicylsm* and Jennifer Strange immediately takes action to minimize the damage.

[page 55] The lights flickered in the corridor, and my bedroom door, which I had closed behind me, slowly swung open. I felt the building shimmer and the tingling sensation grow stronger, and then, one by one, the light bulbs fell from their fittings, bounced on the carpet, and rolled to the far end of the corridor. Beneath my feet, I could feel the floorboards start to bend, and several toads dropped from nowhere.

I needed no further warnings. Zambini had briefed me about a *Magicylsm*. I ran to the alarm next to the elevator, broke the glass, and pressed the large red button.

The klaxon sounded in the building, warning all those within to use whatever countermeasures they could. Almost immediately the misters filled the entire hotel with a fine dampness, which felt like stepping inside a cloud. Water is an ideal moderator and is about the only thing that can naturally quench a spell that is about to go critical. A few seconds later there was a tremendous detonation from somewhere upstairs. The tingling and vibrations abruptly stopped, and I turned to see a cloud of plaster and dust descend the stairwell. I switched off the alarm and ran up the stairs — elevators, even enchanted ones, should never be used in an emergency. I found Wizard Moobin lying in a heap on the fifth-floor landing.

As I read this I was reminded of our riding out Hurricane Katrina in a luxury apartment built on the third floor of an industrial warehouse next to the Mississippi River. The building shook, water was spraying in through holes left after the light panels in the corrugated metal wall had been blown out, and the mist was spraying over all the machine tools on the floor of the warehouse. The resemblance was to get spookier after I read what happened to Moobin.

[page 55, 56, italics added] "Moobin!" I exclaimed as the dust began to settle. "What on earth happened to you?"

He didn't answer. Instead, he clambered unsteadily to his feet and returned to his room, the door of which had been blown clean off its hinges and was now embedded in the opposite wall. I stared through the doorway at the devastation. A wizard's room is also a laboratory, as all sorcerers are inveterate tinkerers by nature and may spend entire lifetimes in pursuit of a specific spell to do a specific job. Even something as inconsequential as the charm for finding a lost hammer had taken Grendell of Cleethorpes a lifetime to weave in the twelfth century. A destroyed workshop often indicated several decades of important work lost in one short blast of uncontrolled wizardry. Magic can be strong stuff and bite the unwary.

During Katrina, our 2005 *Magicylism* in New Orleans, at the height of its winds, an office's door was blown, with its hinges and door frame still attached, across hallway and embedded in the opposite wall. If I had only imagined this happening, I would have written "blown clean off its hinges" but sometimes reality is stranger than fiction, and this door took its frame and hinges with it as it was embedded into the wall. What led to this event was the window on the outside wall of the office had been blown out and the full force of Katrina's 105 mph wind ripped out the door still hinged to its frame and sent the whole thing flying across the short hall. Luckily no one was walking past at the time.

As for the finding-a-lost-hammer charm being lost, one could say that after a *Magicylism*, even a charm could lose its charm. But this book, through all its *Magicylismic* adventures, Fforde never lets it lose its charm. For example, when Jennifer as the Last Dragonslayer is commanded by the King to visit his castle, she can't believe it.

[page 173] "The castle? Me? You're joking!"

The footman looked at me coldly. "The king doesn't make jokes, Miss Strange. On the rare occasion that he does, he circulates a memo beforehand to avoid any misunderstandings.

So if you are like King Snodd and don't like jokes or make jokes, this book will lose its charm for you quickly, and you would best not begin reading it in the first place. Why? Because the lines of this next passage will leave you as cold as the king's footman above. Gordon van Gordon is explaining the effects of Jennifer's newfound notoriety:

[page 186] "Out of your mail, ninety-seven percent want you to kill the dragon and three percent want you to leave it alone. Fifty-eight people have written in with offers of marriage, and two have claimed that they are the real Dragonslayer. One little old lady in Chepstow wants you to use your sword to dispose of a particularly invasive thorn tree, and another in Cirencester wants you to appear at a fund raiser for the Troll War Orphans Appeal. And finally the Wessex Rolls-Royce club wants you to bring the Slayermobile to a car show next month."

Jennifer has gone from an unknown orphan driving a VW Bug to a great celebrity driving a Rolls-Royce-based, Dragon-slayer armored car. When she finally gets to know Maltcassion, she asks the Dragon what he thinks about the people waiting for him to die so they can take over his great landed estate called Dragonlands. His answer is that he has already perceived her coming to kill him via some time waves from the future(1).

[page 229] Maltcassion stared at me and blinked the lids above his jewellike eyes. "It bothered me once. I am old now and have been waiting for you for a number of years. But there is another place we can see. Not radio waves or gamma waves but another realm entirely — the cloudy subether of potential outcome."

"The future?"

"Ah, yes!" said Maltcassion, raising a claw in the air. "The future. The undiscovered country. We all journey there sooner or later. Don't let anyone tell you the future is already written. The best any prophet can do is give you the *most likely* version of future events. It is up to us to accept the future for what it is, or change it.

Millions of people are expecting the Dragon to be killed at noon on Sunday by Jennifer and she tells Maltcassion that she simply won't come. This leads him to explain the nature of mass events to her.

[page 231] "Premonitions come true because people want them to. The observer will always change the outcome of an event; the millions of observers we have now will almost guarantee it. You and I are just small players in something bigger than either of us. Leave now. I will see you on Sunday."

What Maltcassion says is similar to what Seth said in the Jane Roberts book, [The Individual and the Nature of Mass Events](#). She explained that the steering currents of hurricanes, like Hurricane Katrina or Hurricane Sandy, are the collective psyches of the people in a given area who need a destabilizing force to pass through their area to clear the way for improvement. Maltcassion knew that his time had come and that Hurricane Jennifer was heading his way on Sunday, inexorably steered towards him by the psyches of millions of people.

While the charm for finding lost hammers may have been lost, the charm of Jasper Fforde's writing is as strong as ever, weaving the warp and woof of Dragons and Magic into a crazy quilt of insight and fun for all his readers. That being so, the only thing left to say is Quark!

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----- *Footnotes* -----

Footnote 1.

You can read about "time waves from the future" here: <http://www.doyletics.com/mrules.shtml#mrn36>
These actually are perceived by ordinary humans, who ordinarily slough them off completely as if nothing had happened, up until now.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 1.](#)

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If you enjoyed *The Last Dragonslayer*, especially the character of Jennifer Strange as she shared her adventures, you might wish to read about the equally strange and fun adventures of Jasper Fforde's character, Thursday Next. Click below to View 3 Books in the *Dragonslayer* Series and 6 Books in the *Thursday Next* Series:

