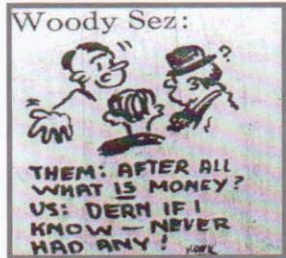
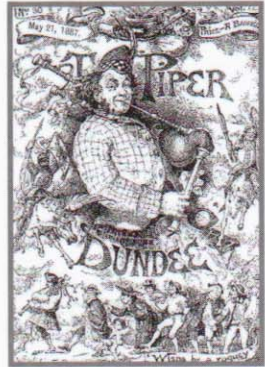


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## 2.2 Language and Fiction in the Creation of Reality in *The Invisibles*

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Running from 1994-2000, *The Invisibles* comic book series employed the tropes of fantasy to pose real questions about the nature of the world we live in. Through the adventures of an anarchist terrorist squad fighting to save the world from an oppressive status quo, author Grant Morrison dissected the methods and images used to create our “consensus reality.” One of the more intriguing themes repeated throughout the series is the idea of language as the foundation of reality. This manifests itself in words used as magic -- not as incantations, but as the magic itself-- and elaborate fictions being worn like suits by both sides in the conflict. This paper will examine the role of language in the creation of reality in *The Invisibles*, and look at whether Morrison’s concepts hold up in what the casual reader could accept as “the real world.”

### “Truth Speaks Best”

From the very beginning, Morrison sets up a tension between language and reality. Our hero Dane McGowan makes his first appearance shouting the word “Fuck” as he hurls a Molotov cocktail into his school’s library (Morrison, 1996:8-10). As Patrick Neighly and Kereth Cowe-Spigai note in their book, *Anarchy for the Masses: A Disinformation Guide to the Invisibles*, Dane is essentially destroying one mindset in favor of another (2003:14), which is initially perceived as chaos supplanting order. Dane’s first word also wields a particular sort of power. Throughout the series, characters comment on Dane’s debased vocabulary, yet when Dane grows into his role as the Invisible Jack Frost, he also learns how to use the power of words to influence reality, finally mastering the Invisible language.

### Text Hexes

Text, the symbolic representation of language, plays a key role in triggering several events throughout *The Invisibles*, and indeed there are many images that would be difficult to understand without accepting text as a physical “thing” or entity. After Dane is captured and brought to Harmony House for indoctrination, his schoolmasters use cards labelled simply “yes” and “no” (Morrison, 1996:32) to condition young minds for limited binary

responses. Taking this a step further, the Outer Church which serves as the border between our universe and the “diseased” Universe B is often portrayed as word-shapes against empty space, with a sphere imprinted with “I/You” and assorted hopeless slogans floating throughout (Morrison, 1998:68-69). On the other side, once Dane escapes from Harmony House and meets up with Tom o’Bedlam, an Invisible living as a vagrant. Tom teaches him to see the “magic words in neon signs,” (Morrison, 1996:83), such as the hidden name of the god “Ixat” (“taxi” reflected through a rear-view mirror).



Fig. 12. King Mob being tortured with Key 17, *Entropy in the UK*, p.36, art by Phil Jimenez, 1996.

While ambient word-spells crop up several times throughout the series (notably, Dane’s “magic word” emerging from “Top of the Pops” in *Entropy in the UK*, p.126), the most persistent use occurs through graffiti, used by agents on both sides of the struggle. The most significant use of graffiti, however, is the appearance of the name “Barbelith” on city walls, which invariably marks a turning point for each character who sees it. Dane’s first

experience with magical reality occurs from simply seeing a word on the wall, when Tom o'Bedlam leads him to a disused Underground station and shows him the Barbelith graffiti. After this, Dane and Tom enter a London different from the city as it is normally perceived, with airships flying overhead and strange statues emerging from the streets (Morrison, 1996:66-68). Following on a theme of the Invisibles that "initiation never ends," this scene is repeated, as an older Dane stands on the other side of the marked wall, mirroring his earlier self in an eternally-present moment (Morrison, *Apocalipstick*, 2001:189-190). Much later, Mr. Six encounters the same piece of Barbelith graffiti and it allows him to solve the riddle of the Harlequinade (Morrison, 2002:182-183).

The most intriguing use of text as magic, though, is the introduction of the drug Key 17, which causes those under the influence to experience printed words as the things they represent. Sir Miles Delacourt tortures the Invisibles' leader, King Mob, by injecting him with Key 17 and showing him scraps of paper labelled "fingers" and a mirror with the words "diseased face," causing him to believe he's been disfigured (Morrison, *Entropy*, 2001:36; **Fig. 12**). The drug returns, presumably refined, as Key 23 in the final volume of the series, where it is used by the Invisibles to strip Detective Inspector Jack Flint of his doomed "cover persona" (Morrison, 2002:60), to defeat Sir Miles in the windmill (96), and to finally conquer Miles at the Moonchild's coronation (246-247). The drug's final appearance, as Key 64, allows King Mob to kill the King-of-All-Tears with a pop gun (280-281). King Mob's comment, "A bullet in the right place ... is no substitute for the real thing," both mirrors his earlier comment that such a bullet "can change the world" (119) and suggests that the concept of a thing is more significant than the physical object.

### "They Talk in Emotional Aggregates"

Oral language works its own magic through the course of *The Invisibles*. During her initiation to magic, the transvestite sorceress Lord Fanny pricks her tongue with a rose and "learns the secret language of shamans -- that language whose words do not describe things but **are** things" (Morrison, *Apocalipstick*, 2001:172), which might be seen as a verbal version of Key 17/23. Though used to various effects, it is possible that the extra-lingual encounters can all be evaluated through the lens of Ragged Robin's encounter with the Oracle. Finding herself stranded alone at Rennes-le-Chateau after a botched journey through time, Robin enters the church to find CIPHERMEN, the "other side's" drones, guarding the head of John the Baptist. When the CIPHERMEN start the head talking, Robin hears what is essentially nonsense, fragments of song lyrics and disconnected philosophical muttering -- but her enemies hear commands. She realizes quickly that this "secret of the Templars" is Glossolalia, a pre-conscious language that causes the listener to hear what

they want to hear. Robin rejects the Oracle, and returns to the present (Morrison, 1996:196-209).

Is the Oracle's unhelpful Glossolalia related to that form of communication taught by Barbelith? When Mason Lang tells King Mob of first contact with the mysterious entity, which he experienced as an alien abduction due to his own cultural expectations, he explains that the language is a system of "emotional aggregates," in which "one word, one sound, represents a whole complex of ideas and associations and feelings." Mason also says that it gave him a new understanding of the world (Morrison, 1998:15-16). While Barbelith is normally portrayed as something of a mystic benefactor, a midwife to the birth of true knowledge, it is important to consider this is the context of another *Invisibles* theme, that both sides are really the same. The ambiguity is enhanced by the fact that it is difficult to imagine how humans would experience a language of "emotional aggregates," and what form any knowledge gleaned from such a conversation would take. One possibility appears when Lord Fanny and Jack encounter the Harlequinade. When the Invisibles are asked what they can offer in return for the Hand of Glory, Jack and Fanny dance, and while they do so, Pierrot remarks that "they talk in emotional aggregates" (Morrison, 1999:72-74). Pierrot's comment is presented as a quotation, possibly mincing together Mason Lang and King Mob's earlier conversation. This would connect Fanny and Jack to Mason's abduction experience, which would in turn, suggest that a language of "emotional aggregates" is highly suggestive and vastly open to interpretation, much like the Oracle's Glossolalia.

### Fiction Suits

Life's resemblance to fiction, and the possibility that all of reality is a story, is a theme central to *The Invisibles*. But within the structure of the plot itself, the use of fiction as magic plays varied and recurring roles. King Mob uses false histories as a mental barrier against Sir Miles's psychic interrogation in *Entropy in the UK*, projecting alternate "memories" from lives inspired by spy thrillers, weird science fiction, boys' adventure, and post-apocalyptic drama (7-32). Ragged Robin weaves a fake childhood trauma as a trap for Quimper (Morrison, 2000:156). In such cases, the characters use invention inspired by popular novels and films as magic, but other characters use the story-within-a-story aspect of *The Invisibles* to live entirely as other people.

John-a-Dreams, the Invisible who vanished following a horrific discovery in Philadelphia, is set up as an intriguing mystery early in the series. By the end of the series, he has returned three times: once as Quimper, again as Division X's Jack Flint, and finally as himself, this time aligning himself against the Invisibles. One of John-a-Dreams's personas, Jack Flint, remarks just before his death that, "I've just remembered that this is just a suit for experiencing

"The Invisibles'" (Morrison, 2002:226; see also Fig. 13), which reflects a recurring theme that life and fiction are the same and clarifies John-a-Dream's methods in manipulating the "game."



Fig. 13. Detective Flint remembers his full history, *Invisible Kingdom*, p.135, art by Sean Phillips, 1999-2000.

### "Be Careful What You Write"

The episodes of time travel, and the various identities adopted by John-a-Dreams, Mr. Six, and others, rely upon the idea that life is a story that's already been written. But who is the author? There are at least six chronicles called *The Invisibles* within the Invisibles' universe -- a memoir by Sir Miles, a film by Mason Lang, another book by Ragged Robin (Fig. 14), a comic book by Grant Morrison (read by King Mob in *Counting to None*, p.16), an immersive video game created by King Mob, and Jack/Danc's story to Gaz at the end of the world. At least the last four of these reflect the story as presented in the comics. Morrison himself comments on the story-within-a-story nature of the series in an interview with the authors of *Anarchy for the Masses*, saying that all of these interpretations are valid, and that it was his aim to allow readers to "hijack the text" and form their own conclusions (252).

In a series such as *The Invisibles*, though, who is telling the story is, in the end, secondary to who is receiving it. Like Orwell, Morrison suggests that the way we see the world is limited by the words we have to describe things, taking a step back from the gradual but systematic oppression of language in 1984 to reveal that we have already been blinded to large segments of truth. During the Invisibles' mission to rescue Boy, they are trapped by an adversary who states that "reality is all about language," before dazzling the team with words composed of the 64-letter alphabet (Morrison, 1999:212-217). Only Jack, who has attained enlightenment, can cope with the world as it is. Even accounting for the fantasy of the Invisible alphabet, can we accept as true that we can only conceptualize that for which we have language? We can observe that we may not notice a particular plant, or image, or saying, until it is pointed out to us, and then it seems to be everywhere. What, then, would set the boundaries to what might be perceived, given the proper context? *The*

*Invisibles* includes numerous references to experiencing the world through a cultural lens, which may be the largest useful unit of shared expectations. *The Invisibles* will also, by necessity, be evaluated according to individual reader bias. It can be read as pure fantasy, as subversive philosophy, as post-modern posturing. One can take its ideas seriously, or not. But the world of *The Invisibles* is a world bound together by language, and it ends in language: Jack concludes the series by addressing the reader, telling us, "See! Now! Our sentence is up" (Morrison, 2002:286; Fig. 15). This of course refers to both the sentence as a linguistic unit, as well as a period of time one might serve imprisoned: Jack and his friends have presented their case, and have endeavoured to open the gates to our cells of conventional thought, using the magic of language as a key. We can question, accept or reject Morrison's fantastic cosmology, so long as we have the proper tools to do so.



Fig. 14. Did Robin write *The Invisibles*? *Kissing Mister Quimper*, p.155, art by Chris Weston, 1998-1999.

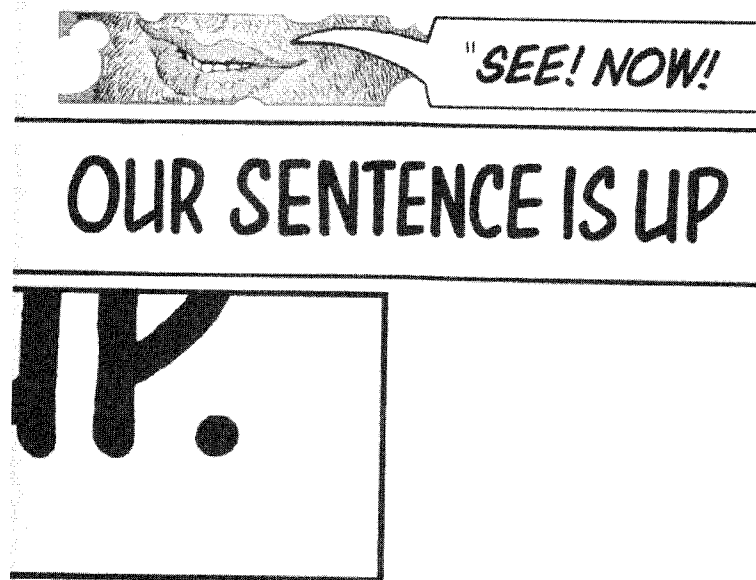


Fig. 15. The end, *Invisible Kingdom*, p.286, art by Frank Quitely, 1999-2000.

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Note: collected editions of *The Invisibles* were not published consecutively; the listed copyright dates are accurate.