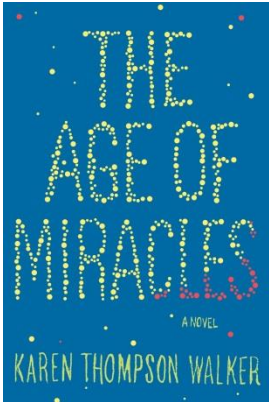


The Age of Miracles



By Karen Thompson Walker

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ABOUT THE BOOK

“It still amazes me how little we really knew. . . . Maybe everything that happened to me and my family had nothing at all to do with the slowing. It’s possible, I guess. But I doubt it. I doubt it very much.”

On a seemingly ordinary Saturday in a California suburb, Julia and her family awake to discover, along with the rest of the world, that the rotation of the earth has suddenly begun to slow. The days and nights grow longer and longer, gravity is affected, the environment is thrown into disarray. Yet as she struggles to navigate an ever-shifting landscape, Julia is also coping with the normal disasters of everyday life—the fissures in her parents’ marriage, the loss of old friends, the hopeful anguish of first love, the bizarre behavior of her grandfather who, convinced of a government conspiracy, spends his days obsessively cataloging his possessions. As Julia adjusts to the new normal, the slowing inexorably continues.

READER’S GUIDE

Questions to consider after reading The Age of Miracles.

1. As readers, why do you think we’re drawn to stories about the end of the world? What special pleasures do these kinds of narratives offer? And how do you think this element works in *The Age of Miracles*?
2. Julia is an only child. How does this fact affect who she is and how she sees the world? How would her experience of the slowing be different if she had a sibling? How would her experience of middle school be different?
3. How much do you think the slowing alters Julia’s experience of adolescence? If the slowing had never happened, in what ways would her childhood have been different? In what ways would it have been the same?
4. Julia’s parents’ marriage becomes increasingly strained over the course of the book. Why do you think they stay together? Do you think it’s the right choice? How much do you think Julia’s mother does or does not know about Sylvia?
5. Julia’s father tells several crucial lies. Discuss these lies and consider which ones, if any, are justified and which ones are not. Is lying ever the right thing to do? If so, when?

6. How would the book change if it were narrated by Julia’s mother? What if it were narrated by Julia’s father? Or her grandfather?
7. Why do you think Julia is so drawn to Seth? Why do you think he is drawn to her?
8. Did you identify more with the clock-timers or with the real-timers? Which would you be and why?
9. The slowing affects the whole planet, but the book is set in southern California. How does the setting affect the book? How important is it that the story takes place in California?
10. How do you feel about the way the book ends? What do you think lies ahead for Julia, for her parents and for the world?
11. The slowing throws the natural world into disarray. Plants and animals die and there are changes in the weather. Did this book make you think about the threats that face our own natural world? Do you think the book has something to say about climate change?
12. If you woke up tomorrow to the news that the rotation of the earth had significantly slowed, how do you think you would respond? What is the first thing you would do?

AUTHOR Q&A

taken from theageofmiraclesbook.com



A Conversation with Karen Thompson Walker and her editor, Kate Medina

KATE MEDINA: The “slowing” you envision threatens the entire world. What made you decide to focus on Julia? What is it about Julia, do you think, that makes her such a wonderful narrator, such a keen observer of the world around her?

KAREN THOMPSON WALKER: Julia is naturally quiet. She listens more than she speaks. She watches more than she acts. These qualities make her a natural narrator. She reports whatever she remembers noticing—about the slowing, about her parents, about other people—and she notices quite a lot.

I think the fact that Julia is an only child is also part of why she’s so observant. I’m an only child myself, so I know the territory well. Julia spends more time alone than her friends who have siblings do. As a result, she places a very high value on her friendships. She is devastated when they begin to change, to disintegrate, and then elated when she starts to form a bond

with Seth Moreno, who is as quiet as she is. Julia is also unusually attuned to the subtle tensions in her parents’ marriage, which increase as the slowing unfolds.

KM: The details of how such a “slowing” would affect us, and our environment—changes in gravity and tides, increased insomnia and impulsiveness—are quite realistically rendered. How did you do your research to get these details right?

KTW: I did do some research at the outset, but I came across many of my favorite details accidentally, just through the daily reading of newspapers. Whenever I read a story that contained a potentially relevant detail, I would knit it into the fabric of the book. This included studies on sleep disorders, stories about new technologies for growing plants in greenhouses, and even articles about the various ways people and governments reacted to the financial crisis.

The most intense research I did was on the physics. No one knows exactly what would happen if the rotation of the earth slowed the way it does in my book, so I had some freedom, but some consequences are more likely than others. After I had finished the book, I had an astrophysicist read it for scientific accuracy, which was an extremely nerve wracking experience. I was relieved by how many of my details he found plausible, but made some adjustments based on what he said.

In general, I wanted my book to seem as real as possible. I recently read a Guardian interview with the Portuguese writer José Saramago, who said that his books were about “the possibility of the impossible.” He explained that even if the premise of a book seems “impossible”, it was important to him that the development of that premise be logical and rational. That’s exactly the way I wanted *The Age of Miracles* to function.

KM: You call middle school “the age of miracles.” What do you think is special about this time of life?

KTW: I knew from the very beginning that Julia would be of middle school age. For some reason, her voice—that of a woman looking back on a specific moment in her adolescence—came into my head as soon as I had the idea of the slowing. It was the only way I could imagine writing the book.

I also think that looking back at our adolescence is something we all do—it’s one of the most extraordinary periods of human life. Middle school is an era when just the simple passage of time results in dramatic consequences, when we grow and change at seemingly impossible speeds. It seemed natural to tell the story of the slowing, which is partly about time, in the context of this distinct perspective. It’s also a way of concentrating on the fine grain details of everyday life, which was very important to me. I was interested in exploring the ways in which life carries on, even in the face of profound uncertainty.

KM: Some early readers have likened the slowing to the threat of climate change. Were you thinking about climate change during the writing of the book? If not, were you surprised by this reaction? What do you think the connection is, if any, between the two?

KTW: I didn’t specifically intend for the book to remind readers of climate change, but I’m not surprised that it does. One of the big challenges of writing this book was to figure out how people would react to a catastrophe like the slowing, which is almost too large to comprehend and which unfolds at a relatively slow rate. I was always trying to learn from parallel situations in our real world, and climate change was definitely one of those.

As I wrote this book, I also began to realize that one of the hidden pleasures of these kinds of stories is the way they can remind us of the preciousness and fragility of ordinary life on planet earth. In my book, the natural world is the thing that’s most immediately under threat, so I can see why readers would be reminded of the forces that threaten our world, today.

KM: There are so many different ways people respond to the threat of disaster in this book—denial, fatalism, conspiracy theories, etc. The “real timers”—the people who continue to live by the rising and setting of the sun — are one of the most fascinating aspects of the book. How did you conceive of them?

KTW: Every community has its dissidents. Even though the specific conflict between real time and clock time is invented, it felt like a classic divide between the natural and the man-made, and also between the herd and the individual. I liked the idea that real time would attract people from the extremes of both the left and the right, from liberal environmentalists to conservative religious groups. And it was fun to explore my characters in relation to these two different versions of time.

KM: Like Julia, you grew up in southern California. How do you think growing up in a place where natural disasters are always looming affected the concept, or the writing of *The Age of Miracles*?

KTW: I grew up in San Diego on a cul de sac of tract houses much like the one where *The Age of Miracles* takes place. In most ways, California was a very pleasant place to grow up. But it could also be a little scary. I remember the way the sky would sometimes fill with smoke during fire season, the way the smoke hung in the air for days at a time, burning our throats and turning everything slightly orange. I remember the way the windows rattled at the start of every earthquake, and the way the chandelier above our dinner table would swing back and forth until the shaking stopped. I sometimes couldn't sleep at night, worried that an earthquake or a fire would strike at night. But when I think of those years now, I realize that my novel grew partly out of my lifelong habit of imagining disaster.

If I've given the impression that I was constantly afraid as a child, that's not right. In fact, one of the things I remember most vividly about living in California is the way we mostly ignored the possibility of danger. We always knew that the "big one"—the giant earthquake that scientists believe will one day hit the region—could strike at any time, but mostly, we lived as if it never would. Life often felt idyllic: we played soccer, we went swimming, we went walking on the beach. A little bit of denial is part of what it means to live in California. Then again, maybe that's also just part of being alive. I really wanted to capture that feeling in *The Age of Miracles*.

KM: You wrote this book while working as an editor. Was there ever a conflict between what the writer in you and what the editor in you wanted to do with the story? Do you think your experience as an editor affected the way you write?

KTW: Working as an editor definitely made me a better writer. Over the years, the two processes, writing and editing, came to feel very closely connected. Editing is a big part of my writing process. I'm not someone who pours out five pages in a sitting. Instead, I edit every sentence as I go, rearranging the words again and again, like an editor. Being an editor is like being a professional reader, and I really feel that the better I became at reading, the better I became at writing. Editing professionally meant that I was striving to answer the same questions at my day job that I was as a writer: what makes a sentence work? What makes a story work? Who is this character? Whenever I revised a chapter of *The Age of Miracles*, I tried to pretend I was editing one of my authors' books. Working as an editor also taught me never to take the reader's attention for granted. As an editor, I was often swamped with manuscripts. The ones that really stood out were the ones that kept me turning pages, the ones I literally could not stop reading.