

On Mouse Worlds as a Hearthome

I have a fond connection to what TvTropes terms the “Mouse World”. This is a setting trope, but not a specific setting. It means that the setting is the ‘normal’ world the audience is expected to be familiar with, but the characters are small, thus re-contextualizing every day objects. A bookshelf becomes a massive tower, a spool of thread is now a rope, a needle can be used as a sword. The characters need not be mice, and the setting can be any setting- urban or rural, realistic or fantastical. The point is the shift in scale.

I have a long history with these kinds of settings. I recall, as a very young child, laying on my back with my head near the door, marveling at how the forced perspective made me feel tiny and the door gigantic. Honey, I Shrunk the Kids and its sequels were constantly being rerun on TV. I only ever saw bits and snippets of the show The Littles when scrolling through channels, but George Shrinks was regular viewing for me after school. I remember being frustrated and disappointed when things didn’t work for me the way they did on the show- bent paperclips not acting like grappling hooks. The Underland Chronicles, one of my favorite book series that I still reread as an adult, is not a Mouse World setting. But for the first book, I mistakenly believed it was. I thought the human characters were shrinking, as they did in Arthur and the Invisibles. The Tale of Despereaux, a literal mouse world, was also important to my early interest in knight and chivalry tropes. Sometimes the setting even surprised me. I picked up The Dark Ground at an airport to have something to read on the plane. The back-of-the-book blurb made me believe it would be a fantasy set in a magical other-world, but instead, the character was shrunk. More recently, I’ve played the cooperative video game It Takes Two with my partner. For various and unsurprising reasons, the garden level where I could transform into plants and ride spiders was my favorite. But the whole game is level after level of fantastical, bright, and fun mini-worlds.

By far the biggest contributor to the importance of these settings to me was the connection to fairies. I read the Spiderwick Chronicles for the first time starting in 2003. The way fae are depicted in that series was fundamental to my internalization of mythical creatures from then on. The series has undoubtedly and profoundly influenced my own faun kintype. After reading those books, I started leaving milk out for the household brownie. And, much as is depicted in the series, I tried to construct or provide miniature furniture and tools, such as a chair or duster. The books only indirectly referenced dryads and naiads, so I imagined my own versions- tiny spirits of individual blades of grass, with whom I would play in the backyard. When a local museum had a display of miniatures- elaborate dollhouses and castles- I went just to imagine tiny fairies living inside. My fairy drive led me to play games like Disney's Pixie Hollow (now defunct). I was drawn to the aesthetic of films like Epic and Strange Magic, though I don't believe I ever fully watched them.

So, I like mouse worlds. It's certainly an appealing trope to me, and one that will always pique my interest when used in fiction. But does that make it a hearthome? My other hearthome is grasslands and meadows. I feel like I belong in such biomes, both as a faun, and as a shepherd dog. The feeling of euphoria at seeing open prairie is so powerful, it was set off then seeing a wide patch of sea-grass in an ocean documentary. Do I feel like I belong in mouse worlds, or do I simply enjoy them? There is nothing lesser about having a favorite or a preference, without having to label it as a part of my identity. It could even be a coincidence. My faun-shape is human-sized, but I still identify as on the elfae spectrum. Most fictional fairies are tiny, so most fae representation in media comes with a built-in mouse world. And the other half of examples of this setting seem to be stories about mouse knights. As an example, the Toy Story series doesn't jump at me with the same appeal, despite technically fitting the bill. Maybe it's not the trope itself that resonates with me, but the fact that, like french fries as a side dish, it tends to come with other things I love.

And, however I feel about it, can it be called a hearthome, when it isn't any particular place?

Technically, 'grasslands' covers a number of different biomes, from savanna to steppe. But at least the idea of a grassland is a real location, with an ecological meaning and consistent patterns. A mouse world, by definition, can be basically any setting. It can be an apartment in the middle of the city, a suburban backyard, a distant magical land. I would argue some connection to humans is necessary, for the trope to meaningfully contrast. Even in a fantasy setting like Pixie Hollow, there was travel to and from the human world. But besides the re-contextualization of the world, there's no consistency to place or features. If I were to call mouse worlds a hearthome, what would that mean, and what would I be saying?

At the time of writing, I don't know the answers. I'm not sure it's an appropriate label. I don't know if my feelings about this trope are strong enough to warrant a specific name besides enjoyment. I might take some time looking into others' experiences of hearthomes, just to compare and contrast. I hope to also reflect on what, exactly, about this trope calls to me, and whether the importance is already served by another identity label. And fundamentally, I need to question whether I want to do anything about my feelings, and whether I would gain any insight, self-understanding, or benefit from labeling them in the first place. For now, it seems fitting to start small.