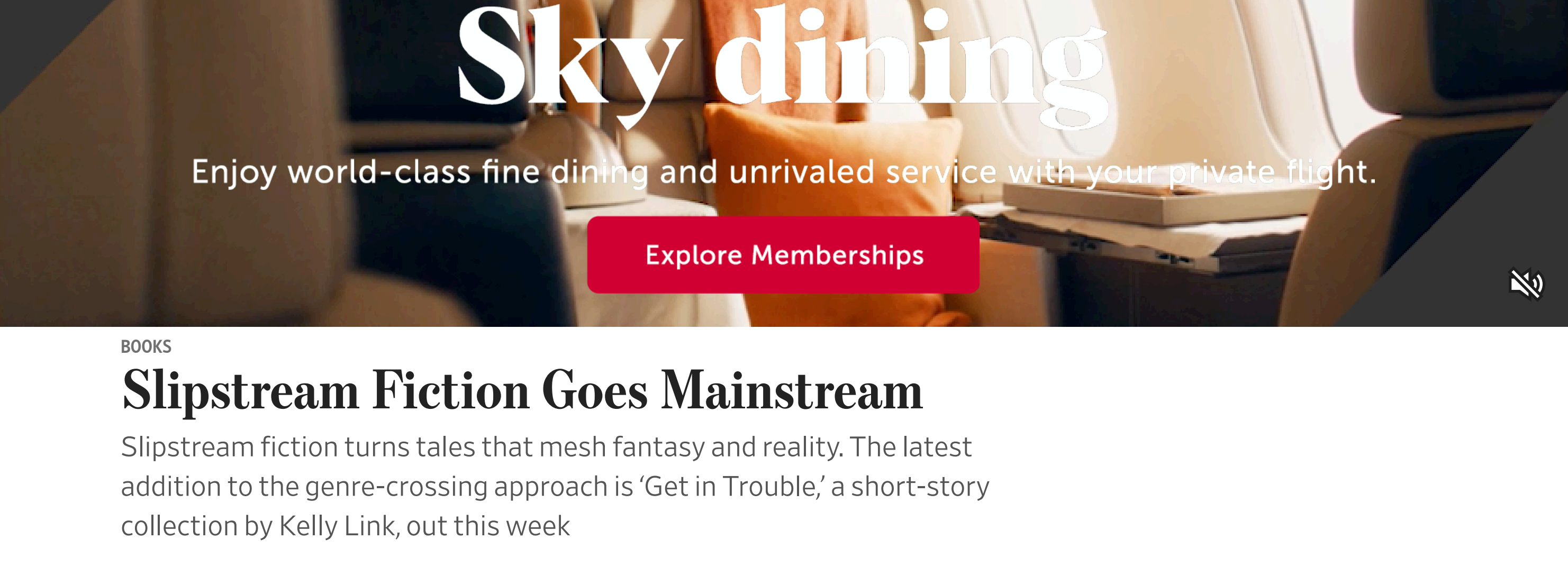




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Slipstream Fiction Goes Mainstream

Slipstream fiction turns tales that mesh fantasy and reality. The latest addition to the genre-crossing approach is 'Get in Trouble,' a short-story collection by Kelly Link, out this week

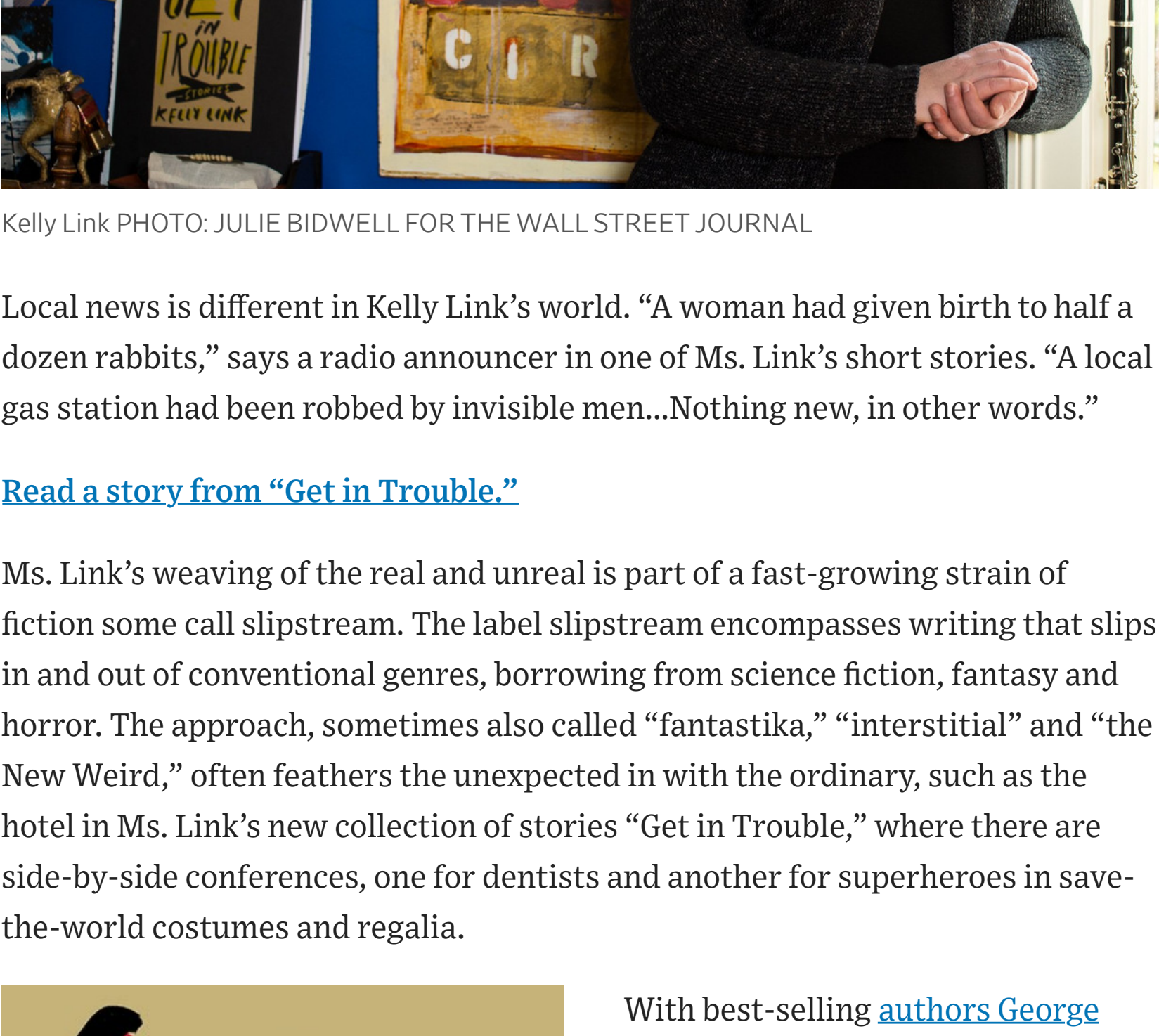
By Anna Russell and Jennifer Maloney

Updated Feb. 4, 2015 1:25 pm ET

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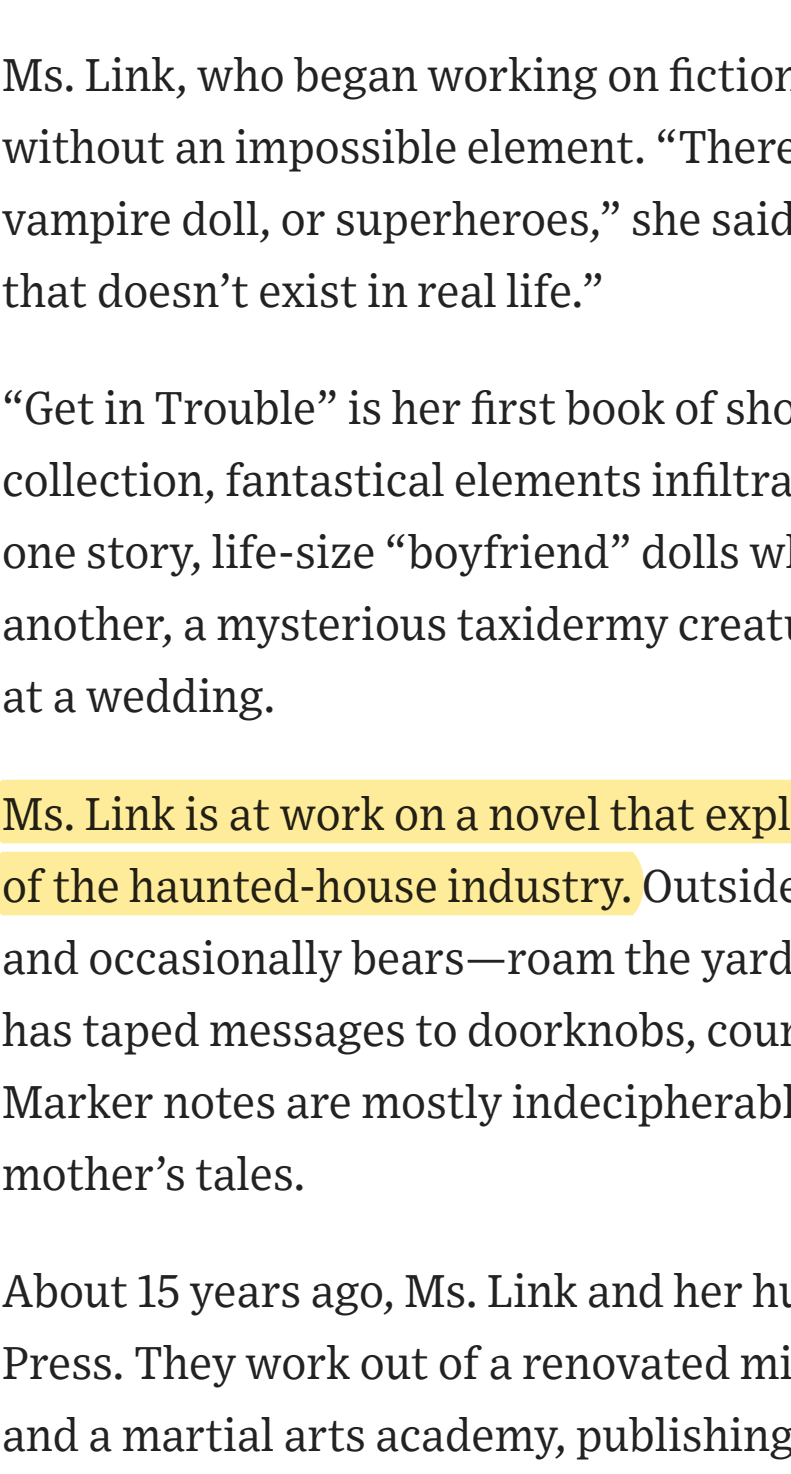
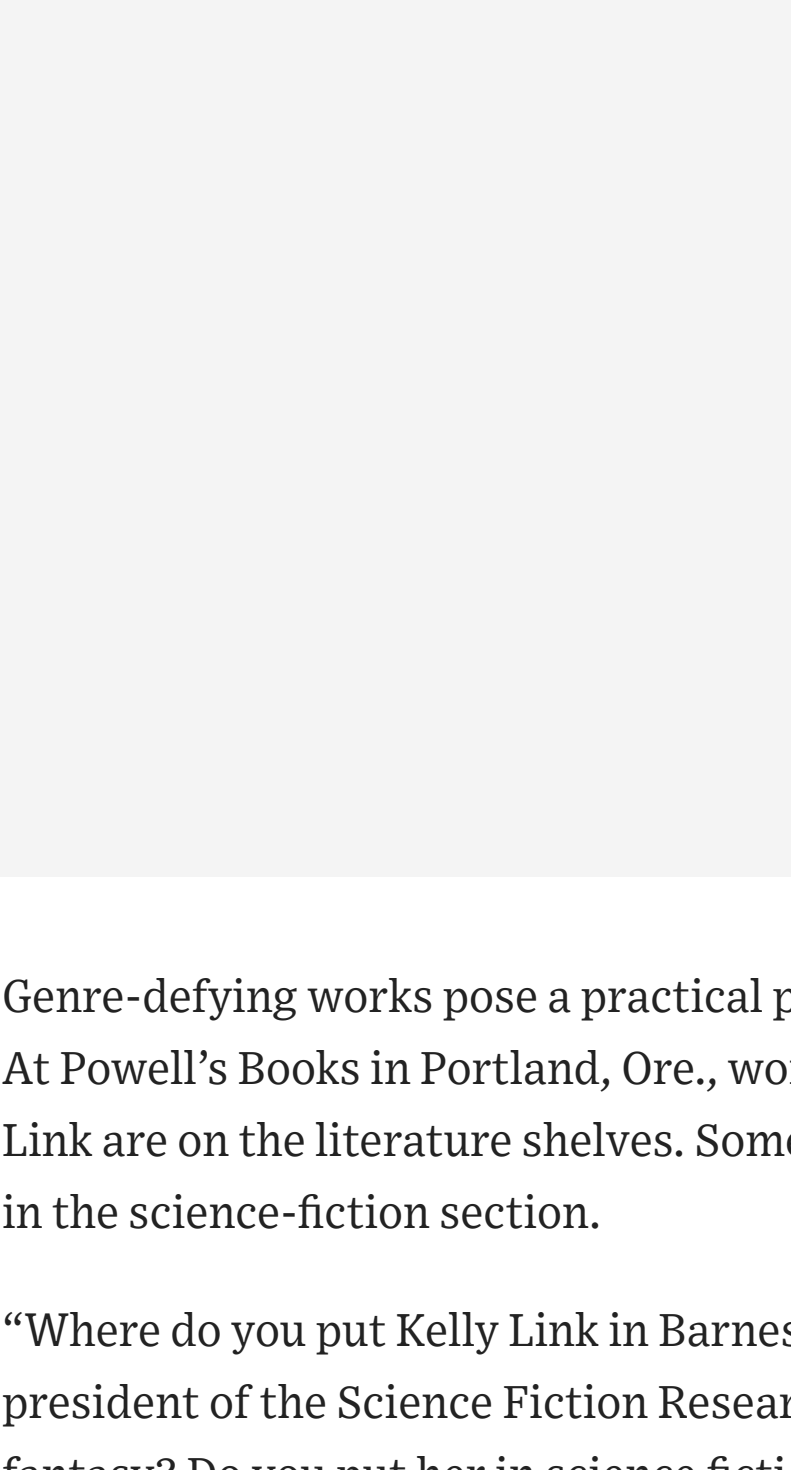
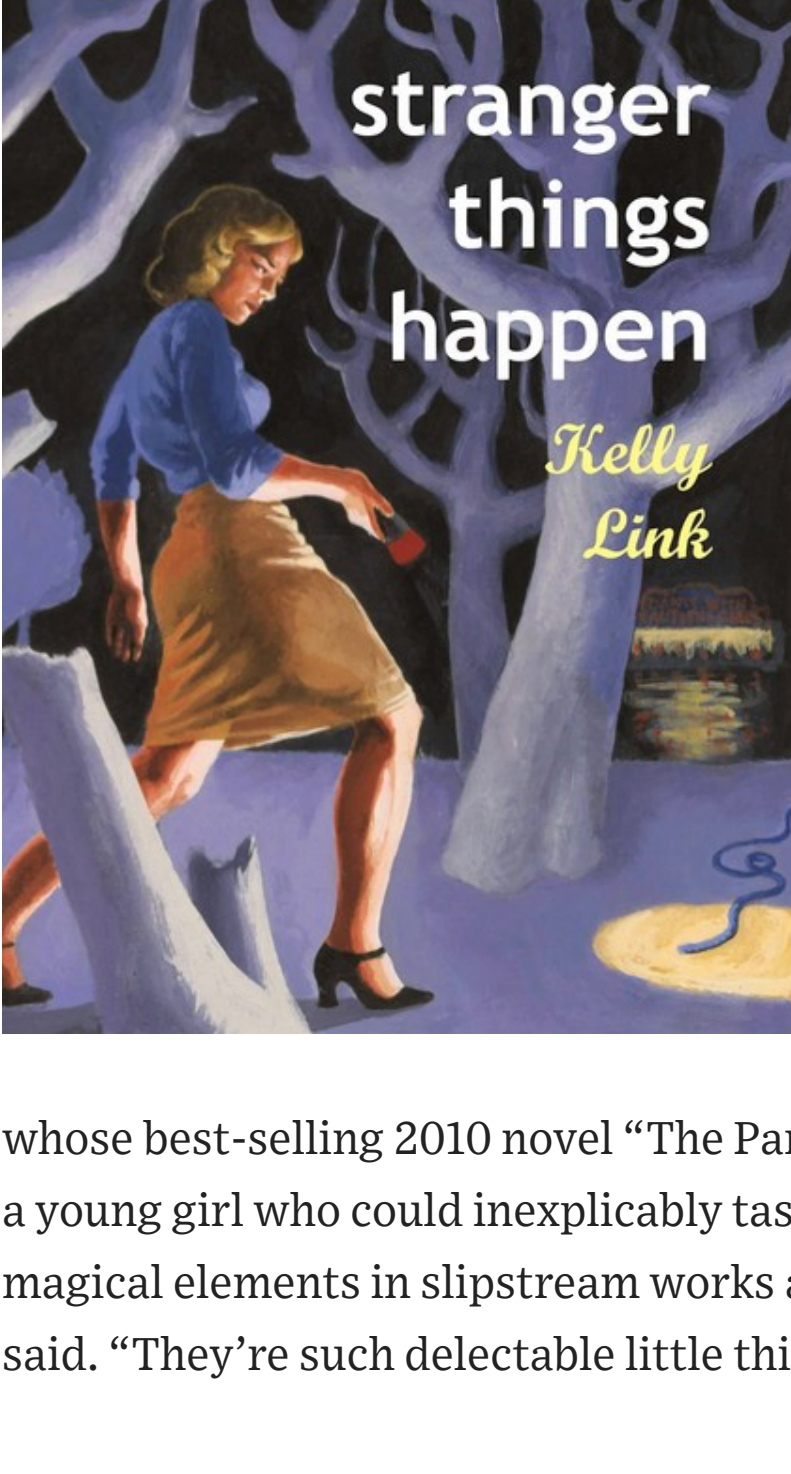
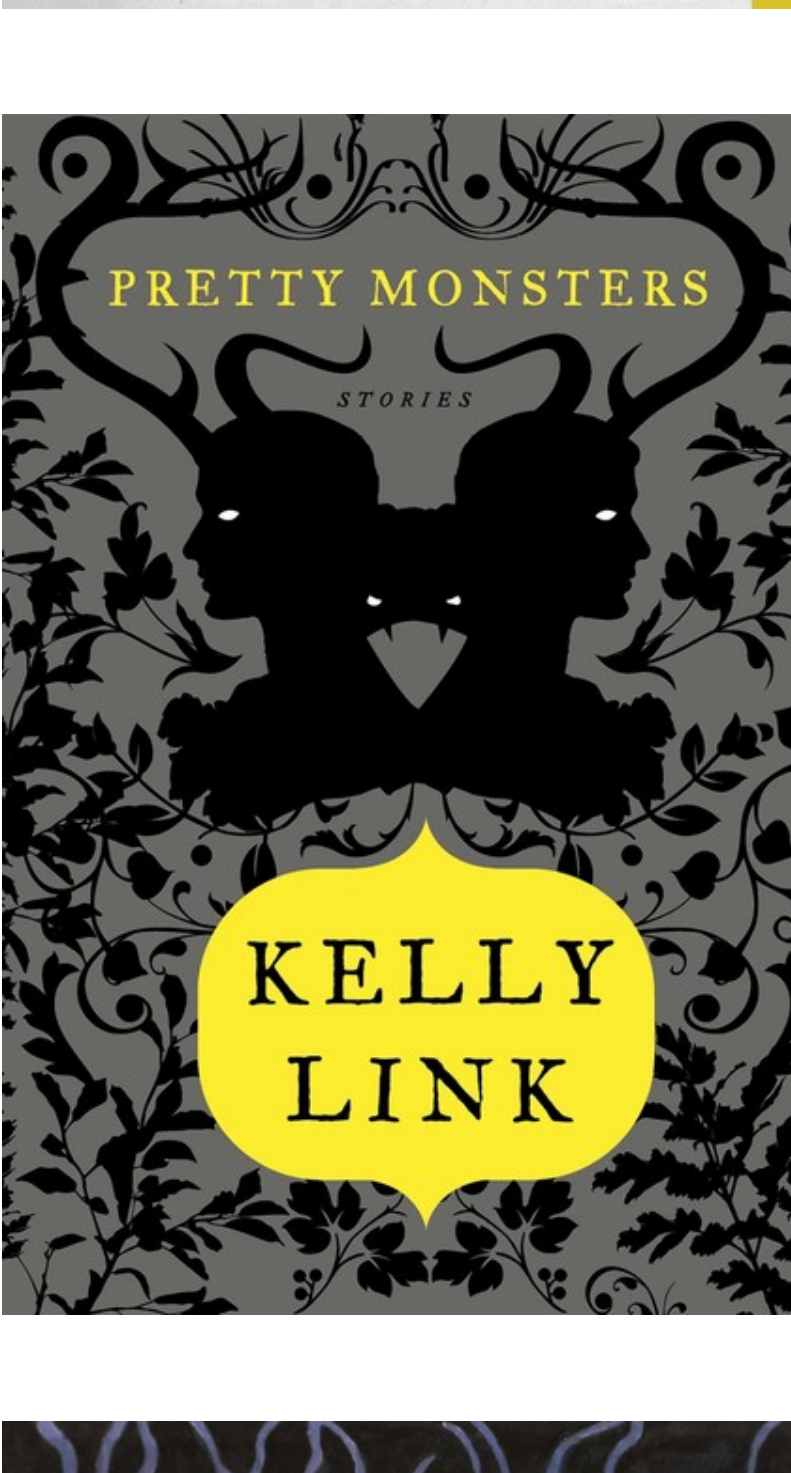
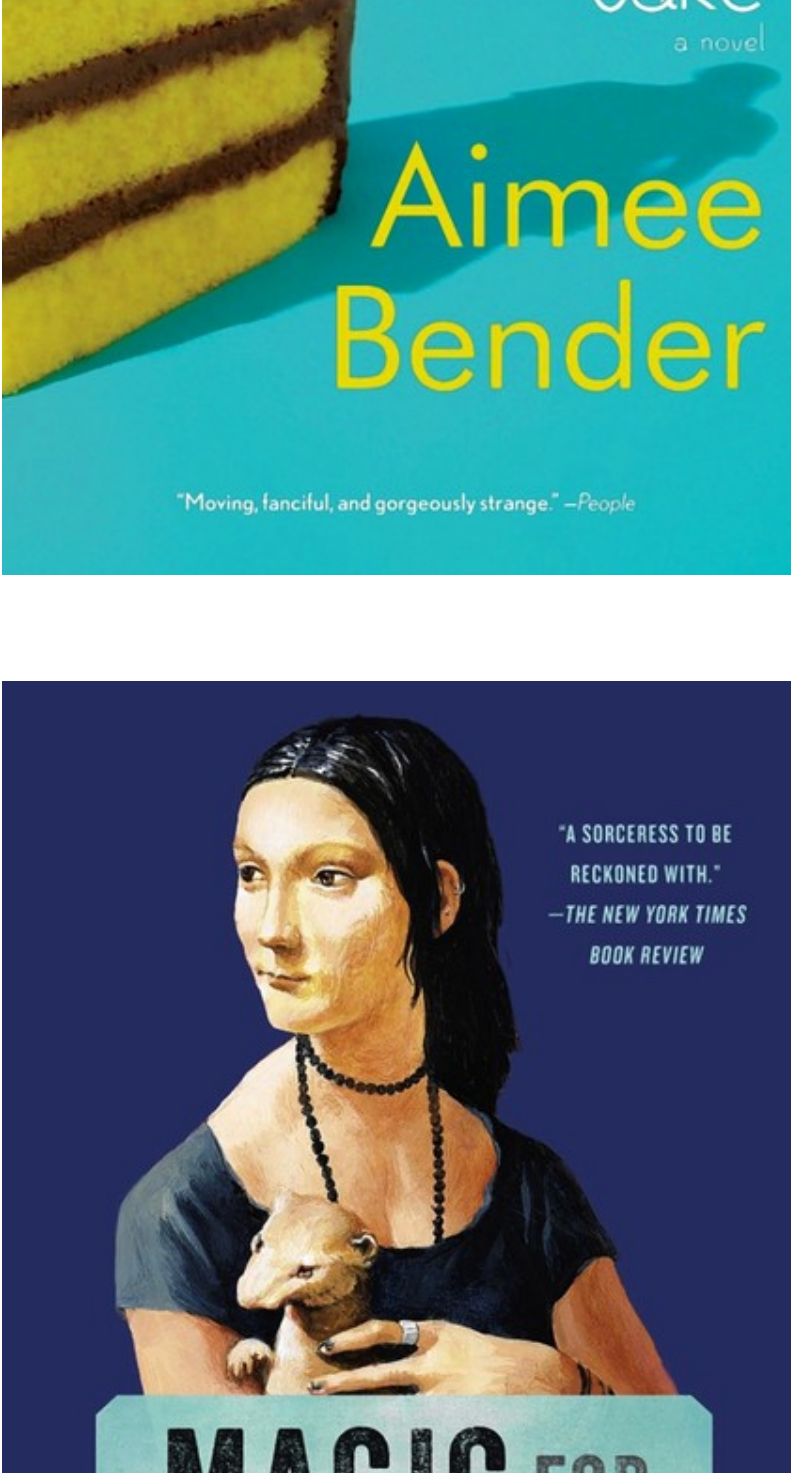
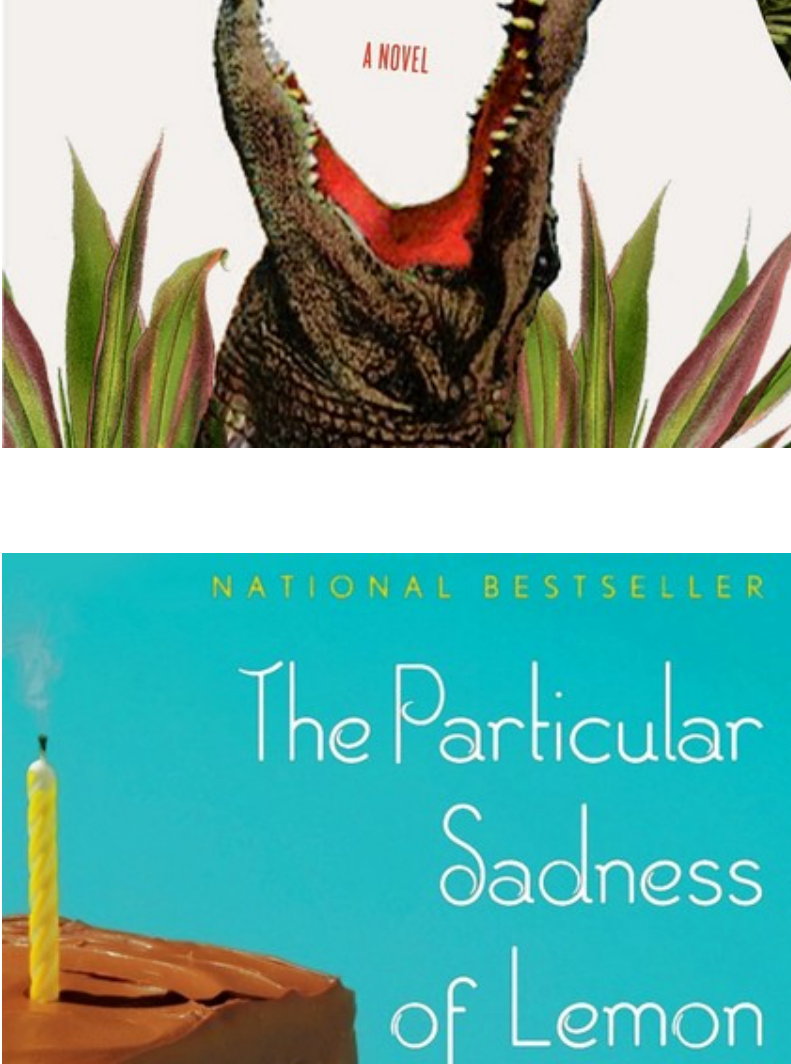
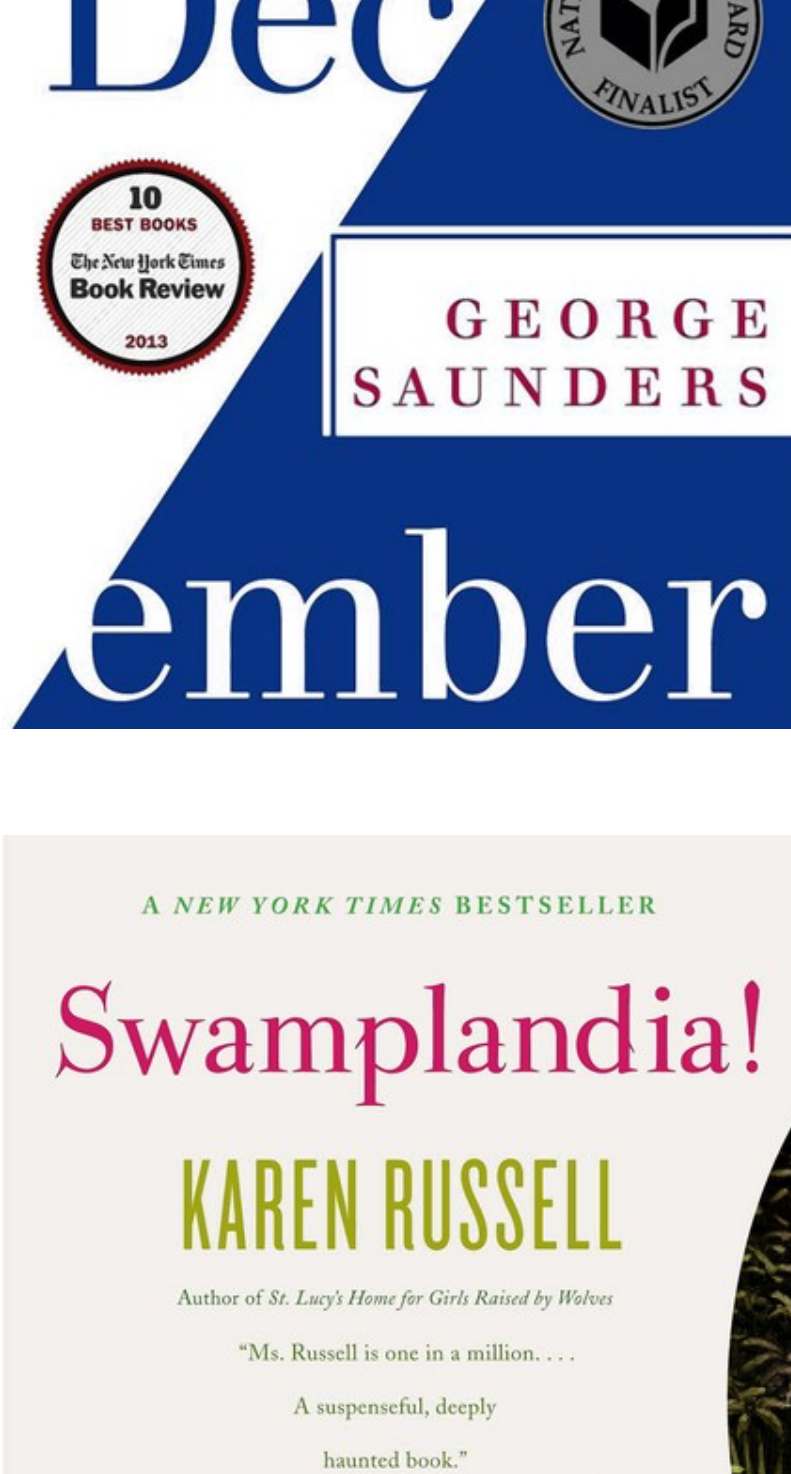


Kelly Link PHOTO: JULIE BIDWELL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Local news is different in Kelly Link's world. "A woman had given birth to half a dozen rabbits," says a radio announcer in one of Ms. Link's short stories. "A local gas station had been robbed by invisible men...Nothing new, in other words."

[Read a story from "Get in Trouble."](#)

Ms. Link's weaving of the real and unreal is part of a fast-growing strain of fiction some call slipstream. The label slipstream encompasses writing that slips in and out of conventional genres, borrowing from science fiction, fantasy and horror. The approach, sometimes also called "fantastika," "interstitial" and "the New Weird," often feathers the unexpected in with the ordinary, such as the hotel in Ms. Link's new collection of stories "Get in Trouble," where there are side-by-side conferences, one for dentists and another for superheroes in save-the-world costumes and regalia.



whose best-selling 2010 novel "The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake" followed a young girl who could inexplicably taste emotions in food, described the magical elements in slipstream works as delicious. "They're like bonbons," she said. "They're such delectable little things to pluck when you're reading."

With best-selling authors [George Saunders](#), [David Mitchell](#) and others meshing the bizarre and the mundane in their novels, slipstream is going mainstream. Mr. Mitchell's "The Bone Clocks," out last year, already has sold 150,000 copies. His 2004 novel, "Cloud Atlas," has sold about a million copies, including the movie-tie in edition.

For "Get in Trouble," which was released this week, Random House set a print run of 25,000. That's a big step up from the 2,000-copy first run for Ms. Link's debut collection 14 years ago. "There's a kind of delight in thinking that you understand the kind of story you're entering into, and then for things to rapidly become stranger and stranger," said the 45-year-old author, who lives in an old red farmhouse in Northampton, Mass. "It's like being led down a garden path into a really strange place—a door opens and you're somewhere you've never been before."

Genre-crossing work is striking a chord with readers because its cocktail of the familiar and unexpected mirrors today's unpredictable and chaotic world.

Readers—many primed for the imaginary by a diet of Dungeons & Dragons and Harry Potter—are identifying with the inexplicable events that unfold in slipstream tales.

"I think one reason this kind of fiction has become more popular is that the world doesn't make a lot of sense to a lot of people," said John Kessel, co-editor of a slipstream anthology, "Feeling Very Strange," which included one of Ms. Link's stories. "So fiction that suggests that the world is inexplicable, but that there is some feeling of connection nonetheless, speaks to people."

Author Elizabeth Hand said the swift changes of the past few decades—through technology and other forces—have disposed readers to this kind of work. Ms. Hand's short novel "Wyliding Hall," coming this summer from Open Road Integrated Media, is about a British band holed up in a country house where "something inexplicable" happens. "I think more and more people are looking to this sort of fiction as a way, perhaps, consciously or not, to navigate this world," Ms. Hand said. "And also, it's very entertaining."

Slipstream's broad appeal to fans of speculative genres as well as literary or experimental fiction can translate into best sellers. Mr. Saunders's "Tenth of December" rocketed to number two among New York Times hardcover-fiction best sellers in 2013, an almost unheard-of feat for a short-story collection. The book, which mixes a literary style with strange elements—women as lawn ornaments, for instance, or a fictional drug called Darkenflox—has sold nearly 300,000 copies. "It feels to me like people are more willing now to accept that you might have to abandon so-called realism to say something true about reality," Mr. Saunders said.

Other writers have succeeded in this no-man's-land between genres. All three novels in Jeff VanderMeer's "The Southern Reach" trilogy hit best-seller lists last year. The series recounts expeditions by a secret government agency into a mysterious wilderness called "Area X." Farrar, Straus and Giroux published the books—which together have sold more than 150,000 copies—in colorful editions. The publisher didn't use terms like "post-apocalyptic" or "science fiction" in advertisements and promotional materials for the books, as a genre imprint likely would have done. The goal was to expand the audience beyond genre fans, said the books' editor, Sean McDonald: "I wanted to reach all the readers."

Mr. VanderMeer, already well known among science-fiction aficionados, credited the trilogy's realistic setting with attracting more readers. "There are people who just will not read something about a fantastical city," he said. "They will read something set in some approximation of Florida...It's kind of the rate of strangeness that readers will allow."

Authors can be loath to pigeonhole themselves with the slipstream label, which is seldom seen on advertisements or store shelves (except perhaps in very hip bookshops). [Science-fiction writer Bruce Sterling](#), who introduced the term in a 1989 essay in the magazine "Science Fiction Eye," wrote that slipstream, "is a kind of writing which simply makes you feel very strange; the way that living in the late 20th century makes you feel, if you are a person of a certain sensibility."

"Feeling Very Strange," the anthology Mr. Kessel coedited, described slipstream as more a literary effect—such as sparking fear in readers—than a genre. The anthology, which was published in 2006, included stories by a range of authors such as Michael Chabon, Jonathan Lethem, Karen Joy Fowler and Aimee Bender. Ms. Bender,

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Genre-defying works pose a practical problem: Where do they belong in stores? At Powell's Books in Portland, Ore., works by Mr. Lethem, Mr. Mitchell and Ms. Link are on the literature shelves. Some of the authors' works also can be found in the science-fiction section.

"Where do you put Kelly Link in Barnes & Noble?" asked Pawel Frelík, former president of the Science Fiction Research Association. "Do you put her in fantasy? Do you put her in science fiction? Do you put her in literary fiction? You could put in her in all three and they would in some way be adequate."

Ms. Link, who began working on fiction in college, finds it hard to write a story without an impossible element. "There's a ghost, or a vampire, or a life-size vampire doll, or superheroes," she said. "I need to have something in the story that doesn't exist in real life."

"Get in Trouble" is her first book of short stories for a decade. In the collection, fantastical elements infiltrate reality—often to humorous effect. In one story, life-size "boyfriend" dolls whisper preprogrammed sweet nothings. In another, a mysterious taxidermy creature, called a "Bad Claw," menaces guests at a wedding.

Ms. Link is at work on a novel that explores the weird—and often funny—world of the haunted-house industry. Outside her Massachusetts home, black cats—and occasionally bears—roam the yard. Inside, her 5-year-old daughter, Ursula, has taped messages to doorknobs, counters and windowpanes. The girl's Magic Marker notes are mostly indecipherable, like a fairy language from one of her mother's tales.

About 15 years ago, Ms. Link and her husband, Gavin Grant, founded Small Beer Press. They work out of a renovated mill building that also hosts a circus school and a martial arts academy, publishing six to 10 works a year along with a 'zine, "Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet."

Over the years, they've introduced a number of slipstream authors to a wider audience. Small Beer has published Theodora Goss, M. Rickert and Jeffrey Ford, as well as early work by Karen Russell, who went on to write the Pulitzer-nominated novel "Swamplandia!" Small Beer also published Ms. Link's first short-story collection, "Stranger Things Happen."

One of the press's goals was to "take on projects which were possibly falling through the cracks because they didn't quite fit into traditional genre categories or just into fiction on the bookshelves," Ms. Link said.

In her own stories, she likes to push fantastical elements to their logical end: to consider, for instance, how a superhero might improve his career by networking. "When you tease out what that means in practical terms, then it gets really fun," she said. "That kind of strangeness that emanates from the weird or slipstream is something that I crave. It's a kind of pleasurable dislocation."

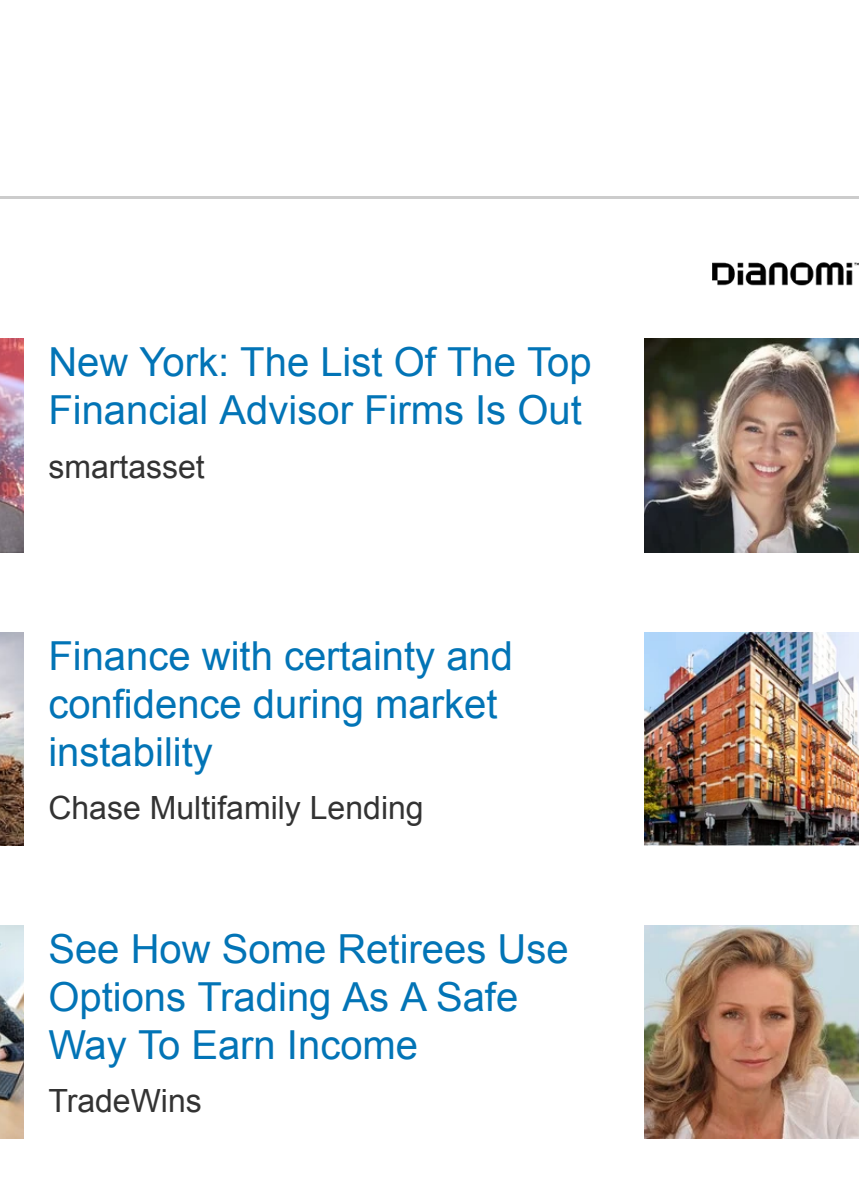
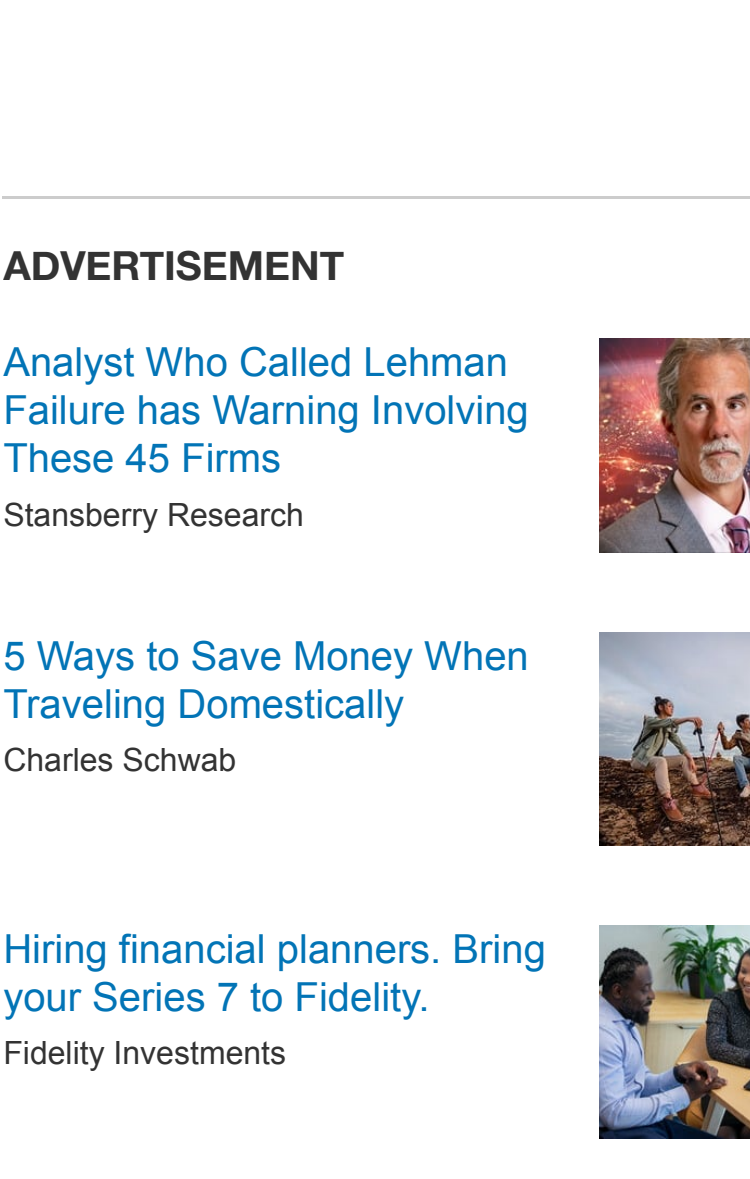
Some of her stories are also strongly autobiographical. "The Lesson" draws on giving birth to her daughter—who is named in part for science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin—at only 24 weeks. "Playfulness is half the coin, and the emotional life is the other side," she said. "You have to have both."

Some longtime fans of Ms. Link's work were surprised that she was able to reach a broader readership. "I thought she would be too weird for the ordinary audience," Mr. Kessel said. "But I guess the ordinary audience is weirder than it used to be."

Write to Jennifer Maloney at jennifer.maloney@wsj.com

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