Fiction Excerpt 2: From The Adventures of Don Quixote

(retold with excerpts from the novel by Miguel de Cervantes)

Once upon a time, in a village in La Mancha, there lived a lean, thin-faced old gentleman whose favorite pastime was to read books about knights in armor. He loved to read about their daring exploits, strange adventures, bold rescues of damsels in distress, and intense devotion to their ladies. In fact, he became so caught up in the subject of chivalry that he neglected every other interest and even sold many acres of good farmland so that he might buy all the books he could get on the subject. He would lie awake at night, absorbed in every detail of these fantastic adventures. He would often engage in arguments with the village priest or the barber over who was the greatest knight of all time. Was it Amadis of Gaul or Palmerin of England? Or was it perhaps the Knight of the Sun?

As time went on, the old gentleman crammed his head so full of these stories and lost so much sleep from reading through the night that he lost his wits completely.

He began to believe that all the fantastic and romantic tales he read about enchantments, challenges, battles, wounds, and wooings were true histories. At last he fell into the strangest fancy that any madman has ever had: he resolved to become himself a knight errant, to travel through the world with horse and armor in search of adventures.

First he got out some rust-eaten armor that had belonged to his ancestors, then cleaned and repaired it as best he could. Although the head-piece of the helmet was intact, unfortunately, the visor that would have protected the face was gone. Not to be discouraged by this deficiency, however, he fashioned another out of some pieces of stiff paper and strips of iron. In his eyes it was without a doubt the most splendid helmet ever fashioned.

Next he considered what glorious, high-sounding name he might give his horse, who was to bear him on his quest. For though his horse was but a tired hack, practically skin and bones, to him it appeared as magnificent as Bucephalus, the horse of Alexander the Great.

After four days of inventing and rejecting various names, he at last settled on Rocinante (/row*see*non*tay/), which he thought sounded suitably grand. He then set about to choose a suitable name for himself. After eight days of hard consideration, he decided that he would be known as Don Quixote (/don/key*hoe*ray/). Following the example of many knights he admired, he decided to proclaim his native land as well, and so he called himself Don Quixote de la Mancha.
Now he needed to find a lady whom he might adore and serve, for a knight without a lady is like a body without a soul. It happened that in a neighboring village there lived a nice-looking farm girl whom he had once admired from a distance. He decided that she would be the lady of his fancy and that she should be known as Dulcinea del Toboso (/dull*si*nay*ah/del/toe*bow*so/), a name that to his ears sounded musical and anything but ordinary.

Now, with all these preparations made, Don Quixote was eager to sally forth: a whole world awaited, full of injustices to be made right and great deeds to be performed. So, clad in his rusty armor, with his improvised helmet tied to his head, Don Quixote mounted Rocinante and started out through the back of the stable yard.

But then he had a terrible thought: he had never yet been dubbed a knight! He took comfort, however, in his memory of the many books of chivalry he had read and determined that, like many of the heroes in those books, which he took for truth, he would simply have himself knighted by the first person that came along. So he rode on under a hot July sun, blissfully happy in his thoughts of how, in years to come, others would read of the brave exploits of Don Quixote de la Mancha and his faithful steed, Rocinante.

Now, almost the whole day had passed and still Don Quixote had encountered no wrong to set right nor any adventure to test his valor. Neither had he eaten or attended to any other bodily needs. His discouragement vanished, however, when, just at nightfall, he came upon a simple country inn with a stable beside it.

Everything that Don Quixote saw, or thought he saw, came out of the fantastic books he had read; so, when he neared the inn, he saw not a plain inn but a gleaming castle, with turrets thrusting to the sky and, of course, a drawbridge and a moat and all the other things that go with such castles. He reined in Rocinante and awaited the blast of a trumpet to signal his arrival, for that is what always happened in the books he read.

Just as he was getting impatient, a swineherd came along with a bunch of grunting hogs, which he called together by blowing upon his horn. With great satisfaction, Don Quixote took this to be the signal he awaited and rode forth.

The innkeeper, in Don Quixote’s eyes, was certainly the keeper of the castle. Don Quixote dismounted from Rocinante and told the innkeeper to take special care of his steed, which was surely the finest horse in the world. The innkeeper looked doubtfully at the bony hack but decided to humor this person so strangely dressed in a bizarre assortment of ill-fitting armor.
As Don Quixote had not eaten all day, he requested some food. Unfortunately, he had tied on his helmet and could not undo the knots—and, as he refused to allow the helmet to be cut off, he wore it the rest of the night. The innkeeper had to hollow out a reed in order for Don Quixote to drink his wine. As for the food, which a country lass was kind enough to put into Don Quixote’s mouth, it was an unappetizing meal of badly cooked fish and moldy bread. But Don Quixote remained firm in his belief that this was a brilliant castle and the food a gourmet feast.

When the meal was over, Don Quixote dropped to his knees before the surprised innkeeper. “Never,” he said, “shall I rise from here until you have consented to grant me the favor I ask, which will bring you great praise and benefit all mankind. I ask that you dub me a knight.” The innkeeper obliged the Don by whacking him on the shoulder with a sword, all the while mumbling some words from an account book in which he kept records of costs and charges for hay, grain, and the like.

The next day, Don Quixote, joyous in having been quite officially made a knight, set forth. His destination was his own village for, following the innkeeper’s advice, he planned to return home for some money and clean clothes (details which had been overlooked in all the books about knights and their adventures). And he planned to find a good man who could serve as his squire.

After he had gone but a little way, Don Quixote heard the groans of someone in distress. “Without a doubt,” he exclaimed, “those are the cries of some unfortunate person in need of my assistance.” He turned Rocinante into the woods where the cries were coming from. There he saw a boy, tied to a tree, his bare back being whipped by an angry farmer.

Don Quixote cried out, “It does no praise to you to strike someone who cannot defend himself. Now, you knave, take up your lance and prepare to defend yourself.”

When the farmer saw before him this armed figure with a lance pointed at him, he feared for his life. He explained to Don Quixote that the boy he was whipping was his servant who watched over his sheep and that the lad deserved to be punished because almost every day a sheep was missing from the flock. “And,” said the farmer, “the boy here dares to claim that I punish him only because I am a miser and will not pay his wages. But I swear that he lies.”

“You are the liar, you dog,” shouted Don Quixote. “Now untie him or I will destroy you here and now!”

The farmer untied the boy. Don Quixote asked the boy how much his master owed him, and the boy said for seven months’ work.
“But,” said the farmer, “I don’t have any money here. Let’s go home, Andres, and I’ll pay you there.”

“With you?” cried the boy. “Never! I know how you’ll pay me—with a terrible whipping.”

“He would not dare to,” said Don Quixote. “It is enough that I, Don Quixote de la Mancha, who bring justice where there is injustice, command him to pay you, and he will obey.” That, of course, is how things always worked out in the books Don Quixote read. So Don Quixote commanded the farmer to pay, and the farmer swore he would. As soon as Don Quixote rode out of sight, the farmer turned to the boy and said, “Because I’m so fond of you I want to pay you even more than I owe”—and then proceeded to thrash the boy more severely than ever.

In the distance, Don Quixote was pleased with his first noble deed. “Ah, Dulcinea del Toboso,” he said aloud, “your devoted servant, knighted only yesterday, has this day already put right the greatest wrong and stopped the greatest cruelty ever known.” And he proceeded back to his village.

Upon returning, Don Quixote set about with all his powers of persuasion to persuade a laborer of the village, whose name was Sancho Panza (/sahn*cho/ pahn*za/), to accompany him as his squire. At last, with the promise that Don Quixote would someday make him governor of his very own island, the country bumpkin agreed to leave his wife and children and follow the knight. The tall, lean knight sat upon bony Rocinante, while the plump Sancho Panza climbed astride his ass named Dapple, a leather wine bottle and well-stocked saddlebags at his side. And so this unlikely pair set off in search of adventures.

As they crossed the plain of Montiel, they spied dozens of windmills. “Fortune has smiled on us,” said Don Quixote to his squire. “Yonder stand more than thirty terrible giants. I will fight them and kill them all, and we shall make ourselves rich with the spoils.”

“What giants?” asked Sancho Panza.

“Those giants there, with the long arms,” said the knight.

“Be careful, sir,” said the squire. “Those are not giants, but windmills, and what seem to be their arms are the sails which turn the millstone.”

“If you are afraid of them, then go say your prayers,” said Don Quixote. “But I shall engage them in battle.” Immediately, he spurred his horse forward, and, paying no
attention to Sancho Panza’s shouted warnings, he cried, “Do not run, you cowards, for a lone knight assails you!” Just then a slight wind caused the windmills to begin turning. “I fear you not, though you have more arms than the giant Briareus,” cried the knight. “I ride forth in the name of fair Dulcinea!” Covering himself with his shield and thrusting forth his lance, he spurred Rocinante toward the nearest windmill. His lance pierced one of the whirling sails, which immediately wrenched it with such force that the horse was dragged along and the knight sent rolling across the ground. He lay without moving as Sancho Panza trotted to his side.

“Oh dear,” said Sancho, “didn’t I warn your worship to watch what you were doing when attacking those windmills?”

“I believe,” replied the knight, “that some evil enchanter turned those giants into windmills to rob me of a glorious victory. But I shall prevail over him in the end.”

“As God wills,” said Sancho, helping the knight to his feet. They climbed upon Rocinante and Dapple once more and continued on their way.

Just as Don Quixote desired, he and Sancho Panza encountered many dangerous and unusual adventures in the days that followed; for so often did the knight mistake shepherds, holy men, and peasant girls for miscreant knights, evil enchanters, and ladies in distress, that he was continually involved in ridiculous quarrels and brawls. No matter how frantically Sancho urged him to see things as they really were, Don Quixote paid no attention to him. But although these absurd encounters were matters of great seriousness to the knight, many who witnessed them were delighted and amused. Gradually, his exploits became known all over the countryside, and there were few who had not heard of that flower of chivalry, Don Quixote de la Mancha.