

## Sir Terry Pratchett in conversation with Dr Jacqueline Simpson

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### Part 4

TP: We've been not scathing, I think, about folklore, so I would like to ask you, what are the uses of folklore?

JS: To reconnect us with our past. To provide material for a lot of fun. To stimulate the imagination.

TP: Could I add one?

JS: Yes.

TP: To remind the kids that things were otherwise.

JS: Very true.

TP: That the human race did not pop out of the ground with iPods™. That things were different. This is why I think a study of history is vital because as I always say, if you don't know where you've come from, you don't know where you are, and if you don't know where you are, you have no idea where you are going.

JS: I think that some themes that are found in folktales, perhaps more in the big fairy tales rather than the local stories, but still, some of these themes help us to understand ourselves, to understand our fears, to give courage and hope, don't you think?

TP: Yes, yes, but also to make life more fun, but not fun, satisfying.

JS: Yes, yes.

TP: I think actually one of the nice things about folklore is that it is in fact useless. It belongs to us, it doesn't cost anything, and it changes, it moves, it disappears.

JS: And I may say that it is a delight to be a folklorist and to work on folklore because you never need worry whether the thing is true and accurate or not. As soon as you can prove that somebody has said it and somebody else has listened and repeated it, it doesn't matter a tinker's cuss whether it ever happened or not. Did King Alfred burn the cakes? Who the hell cares, the story's what matters.

TP: Did Robert the Bruce see the spider?

JS: Precisely.

TP: But presumably, the sight of the spider or whatever he said he saw, or what someone wrote down that he saw, or someone else thought he saw, just possibly did inspire a few people to try, try, and try again. And I suspect there are people out there who don't know what I'm talking about.

Why was he called Robert the Bruce, why wasn't he Bruce the Robert?

JS: Oh, go! I don't know I'm not Scottish, whatever else I may be!

TP: I say this as a kind of afterthought. I see two young ladies in front of me; I'm not going to ask their ages. I'm going to ask you something, who was Abraham?

Katie Brown: A biblical figure?

TP: A biblical figure. Would you like to essay a little further guess?

KB: No!

TP: Effectively the founder of Judaism, do you think? Or how about Job?

Julie Sutton: I know about him, I've read about him. He was tested by God.

TP: Righty-ho.

JSu: He was very much a fan of God and then God tested him by taking away everything that he ever had, his sheep and his family, and then gave him boils, and everything, I'm obviously making most of this up!

TP: No, no, no, you are pretty well doing...your imagination is similar to the Almighty's.

JSu: And to try and test him, because the Devil said to God, "Job wouldn't really be your biggest fan if you weren't so good to him".

TP: I like 'biggest fan'. "Alright, I've enjoyed all your planets".

JSu: And I think in the end, actually Job gave up on God and said, "No, this is terrible".

TP: Uh, no, no, no, I don't even believe in God and I think I know that God actually thought, "well, you've come through it".

JSu: Oh, yes, he gave it all back!

TP: Well, yes, and then he became very honoured and all the rest of it.

JSu: So he never gave up hope, that was it.

TP: It wouldn't have been good PR the other way.

How about Methuselah?

According to the Bible, the oldest man, although there is another one I believe.

JSu: There is another one. The oldest one who never died was invited up to heaven without dying

TP: OK, the oldest one who ended up dying was Methuselah.

JS: That was really very impressive on Old Testament. Let's try Greek Mythology. What's a Hydra?

KB: Snakes out of the head, is that not the hydra? Is the hydra a sort of three-headed, big beast, snake?

TP: It's a multi headed snake. It's probably bits of Medusa as it were. But that wasn't too bad.

JS: No it wasn't, was it?

TP: I think my generation was probably the last that would routinely expect people to know names like Abraham. You would know about Noah.

JSu: Also very old.

TP: And he danced for God. And he had an animal act which always gets you remembered.

JS: Yes. It's a pity that Abraham is fading because Abraham is important because he is the figure that Jews, Muslims and Christians all revere as being right at the beginning of their religious history.

TP: I said that because for the likes of us, you think in terms of what everybody knows. And as I've said, it's often a shock to find out that hardly anybody knows what everybody knows, and it's possibly as a result of this that the twentieth century is generating so much urban myth, because we've lost the goblins and the fairies, but the axe murderers, and the people that bang other people's heads on the roofs of cars, and the ladies that get stuck rather embarrassingly, all come together because we miss that numinosity. Can you have numinosity? I suspect you can.

JS: If we didn't have it five minutes ago, we've got it now.

TP: We want that bit. We want to know that certainty has frayed edges because we personally know that we are full of frayed edges and we'd quite like the world to be exactly like ourselves. You know what? After two brandies, that came close to wisdom!

JS: *And still he spoke, and still the wonder grew,*

*That one small head could carry all he knew.*

TP: Every kid I know has heard the chimes of midnight I would imagine.

JS: I would imagine so yes. Frequently. But will they know where the phrase comes from?

TP: That's Shakespeare. It was in the mouth of Falstaff.

JS: It's two elderly men sitting drinking and remembering the days of their youth.

TP: And indeed, Shakespeare was largely an inventor of fairies, as well as a creator of folklore in his own right I think.

*What a piece of work is [a] man, how noble in reason,  
[how] infinite in faculties, in form and moving, how express and admirable,  
in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god!  
The beauty of the world. The paragon of animals.<sup>1</sup>*

I can't remember any Shakespeare but I can remember Shakespeare if I sing it

JS: That's Hamlet in case you are wondering

KB: Cheerful Hamlet, almost with the tune.

TP: Yes because, but later on you go:

*I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth.  
This goodly frame, the earth seems to me a sterile promontory [...]  
This great o'er hanging firmament, the air, look you.  
While it appears no other thing to me but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours.*

It always gets West Indian at the end. And actually that was sung in *Hair*, the musical, which is as far back in time as Shakespeare now to a young person, and actually I thought, "this is great, this is how poetry should be apprehended, as song".

JS: I had absolutely no idea of course that the Shakespeare passage had ever been set to music. This is news to me, I had no idea.

TP: It was. But to time shift, to read *Punch*, which was a knowing magazine (rather like the *Private Eye* of its time, for the young maidens here) you would read about the things they took for granted, the things they knew and didn't know. Again, like folklore it told you that things had once been otherwise and that's a very important thing to know. And in fact I use that in *Nation*<sup>2</sup>, "in the time when things were otherwise". That's a mysterious place where everything happened and all folklore has something like, "in the days when the moon hadn't been born" and all that.

JS: Yes. There used to be stupid girls that I taught, who sometimes would say...

TP: Not clever young girls like these young ladies who can tell us about the ancients of the Bible?

JS: Oh yes, totally unlike these young ladies, and they would say, "what's the point of reading novels?" And indeed you sometimes get adults who say that, and I'd say, "because reading fiction is the only way you can get out of your own skin. When you read fiction you're no longer a seventeen year old girl in Worthing, middle class, you can be Oliver Twist, a slum orphan. You can go on adventures. You can do anything. Do you want to be forever just you?"

TP: I think it's true to say that fantasy and science fiction to some extent, how can I put it? [Tolkien](#) is now practically folklore. In a sense that just about everyone that reads books has read [Tolkien](#). It has the same kind of effect. Fantasy imbues our society in some ways. I believe that fantasy and science fiction is now actually being subsumed into what you might call the greater literature because so many people have grown up reading it, it's just the kind of thing you write books about. I get so

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. Act 2, scene 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Nation*, by Terry Pratchett. Published by Doubleday Childrens, 2008.

many letters from Mothers that say, “My son would never ever read a book and then he read the Discworld Series and now he’s Professor of Comparative Theology at Oxford University”. Because it takes you out of yourself, it’s like going to University. You’re no longer there with Mum and Dad and the neighbours and your Granny and Granddad, you’re with different people. It may be Bilbo Baggins and it may be Gandalf, but it’s actually increasing the number of people who are telling you who you are.

JS: Yes.

TP: By God this is double brandy stuff you know!