

Sir Terry Pratchett in conversation with Dr. Jacqueline Simpson

Recorded on 26th August 2010 at the Hilton Birmingham Metropole as part of the Discworld Convention by Katie Brown and Julie Sutton

Part 1

Terry Pratchett: When did you first encounter folklore?

Jacqueline Simpson: Well I encountered it without actually knowing what it was, giving it any name or anything, when I was a child I suppose, from about five years old onwards in various different forms. My Mother introduced me to Grimm's *Fairytales*¹, which I loved, and a little bit later to Hans Andersen's, most of which I hated. And on the other hand the gardener would say things like "ah you know, if you cut a worm in half it can join itself together again and you can see some of them with a kind of thick bit round the middle which shows that's what happened to them". And, what else? Well, for instance, there was the question of treacle mines. Now you know about treacle mines too don't you Terry?

TP: My Father, every time he used to drive past Bisham, which is near Marlow on the Thames, he pointed out treacle mines to me.

JS: How old were you?

TP: That must have been when we were going down to Lyme Regis so I reckon seven perhaps. Like all good folklore it's tantalisingly reasonable; one can imagine treacle mines, I mean you know, the pit head and all the rest of it, and the guy getting sticky money and their wives have to scrub them down in the evening. It's so easy to go from that point, if you have an imagination you want it to be true. That was perhaps the first bit of folklore that I heard, but the piece of folklore that I encountered knowing that it was folklore was the Wimblesstone on the Mendips, which was at the end of the lane where my wife and I moved not very long after our marriage. I walked up to it and round it and was fascinated by it because there were legends about it, all kinds of legends. But I think if it's full moon on midsummer's eve, the stone will canter around the field and if you look into the hole it otherwise occupied, while it was doing so, and saw the glint of treasure you would have to try and run away with it very fast otherwise it would fall on top of you. By then I was old enough to think 'where's the evidence?' But, as I said when I introduce this in the book that we both co-wrote² about the folklore of the Discworld series, I never dared go up there on full moons at midsummer, not because I was scared, well I was scared, I was scared that it wouldn't do it. While I didn't prove that it couldn't, it might have done and as I said, there has to be room somewhere in the world for a stone to dance.

JS: Absolutely, oh how I agree. And I love these stories that are tied in with the landscape. I think of all the various many forms of folklore, the local landscape legend is my favourite. And actually it was

¹ *Grimm's Fairytales*, by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, first published 1812

² *The Folklore of Discworld* by Terry Pratchett and Jacqueline Simpson, Doubleday 2008

something local which got me interested in English folklore. I had been interested in Icelandic folklore for some years, but one day some workmen were painting my kitchen and they started talking about Chanctobury Ring, which is a group of trees on a hilltop about, say, five miles from where I live. And they said, “you know, if you run round Chanctobury Ring seven times at midnight the devil will come out and give you a bowl of soup.” And the other one said, “No, no George, you’ve got it wrong, you’ve got to do it on Halloween at sunset and it’s thirteen times not seven, and it’s not soup he gives you it’s milk”. And there was a sudden kind of flash in my mind because I remembered two things from my childhood, going back to childhood again; one was that my Dad had said to me “if you run seven times round Chanctobury Ring without stopping” - oh and I may say that is quite a job, someone in good health, a young energetic bloke could do it but I certainly couldn’t have done it at any age, seven times round that without stopping, anyway - “if you go seven times round without stopping” according to my Father, wait a moment, what did he say? He said, “the devil will come out and chase you”. And he also said that if you counted all the trees in that clump you would never get the same number twice, and it would hardly ever be the right number and if it was the right number the ghost of Julius Caesar and all of his armies would come marching across the hills to you, because that is where Julius Caesar landed when he invaded England, which it is not!

TP: *So fasten your bonnet right under your chin...*

JS: No wait a moment.

Huffity puffity ringstone round,

If you lose your cap there...

TP: No I think we start at a different key

Huffity puffity ringstone round...

JS: Oh, I don’t have a tune to it

TP: *If you lose your hat it will never be found*

So tie up your bonnet right under your chin

Fasten your cloak with a brand new pin

Ask me a riddle and we’ll begin

Huffity puffity huff.

Now was that made up? It was, wasn’t it?

JS: Yes it was

TP: But it sounds as if it should be right!

JS: And I notice that it is developing variations, which is of course the mark of true folklore, because my version, which doesn’t have a tune, it is just said, is:

Huffity puffity ringstone round

If you lose your cap there it will never be found

So button your coat right up to the chin

And fasten your scarf with a bright new pin

And if we are ready then we can begin

Huffity puffity puff.

TP: There should be the Folklore Exploration Society so people would go up to these places with a soup detector, obviously, because you don't know what the devil is going to turn up with, but the point is, no one is ever going to do that because the last thing you've got to do with folklore, is prove it.

JS: Yes, yes indeed.

TP: I mean why count a ring of stones by putting a loaf on them? That's Badbury Rings isn't it?

JS: Yes, and also Kit's Coty in Kent.

TP: Right. That's a sheer waste of bread. By the time you've got half way down, birds will be pecking at it.

JS: Besides, the devil is following round behind you taking a loaf off here and there just to muddle things.

TP: OK, well all you have to do, is [have] some mathematician with a stopwatch, just checking, you know, marking the bread.

JS: A story is much better than knowledge, I mean I don't want to know how many stones there are.

TP: Yes it's as good and it's as fun.

The reason I really got interested, because, moving into the West Country of course, there seems to be more stuff there. As someone said, the further you go West, the more numinous the landscape becomes, and I remember the *Sunday Times* once corrected my word 'numinous' to 'luminous', now what can you say?

JS: Oh, the ignorance of the modern world!

TP: Obviously the man either didn't know what it meant or thought I didn't! So I started reading up about stuff and going to various sites, just for the sheer fun of it because I'm a fantasy writer anyway so it's almost part of the job. One time we were coming back from a signing tour, and we went past Flicht, Dunmow.

JS: I was just going to say I think the Dunmow Flicht is lurking on the horizon.

TP: Our car went past Dunmow and I saw the sign and I said ‘Oh yes, Dunmow Fitch’. And the other occupants of the car were putative adults at least as old as me, and they’d never heard of it. And I thought, thank goodness there is something like the Folklore Society that can actually write these down somewhere. It’s part of growing old - you think of all the things that you know, which you know everybody knows, but then periodically you find out that practically nobody knows them.

JS: And that was one of the things, that and fans writing to ask you what on earth had made you think of having three witches ?

TP: Yes. “Where did you get the idea from?”

JS: Argh! Yes. It’s agonising isn’t it, especially for one who’s been an English teacher like me, hammering Macbeth into the heads of infants. “Where did you get the idea of having three witches?” So anyway, then you got in touch with me did you not?

TP: Well it wasn’t quite like that. I was [writing] a book and I wanted to use magpies because I knew about magpie rhymes.

JS: Oh yes that’s going back a bit earlier than where I was. Yes, where we first met was magpies.

TP: And I embarrass this nice lady with this little anecdote, because I am a writer and therefore if it isn’t quite good enough you actually just adjust the facts a little. I wanted to be certain that people knew a magpie rhyme, and so on that particular signing tour while I was signing to people I said “tell me the magpie rhyme that you learned when you were a child”. And most often the one that they gave me had the lyrics from Magpie the children’s programme³, in the 70’s was it? Not that long ago. And I knew that there was a lot more magpie rhymes out there somewhere and I think Opies had quite a lot. It was a sort of shame that people still had the magpie and all the rest of it but they had, as it were, a slightly anodyne television version, which did incorporate quite a lot of other versions but it kept the devil out of it and Frenchmen and some of the more interesting bits. And death also.

JS: Definitely no death in a television thing for children. How dare you tell children that people die?

TP: Yes but most of the stuff, and I suspect it’s for you as much for me, was white knowledge, the stuff that you learn without ever knowing about it. Of course you put two coins on the eyelids of the dead. It just astonishes me that this startles people or they wonder about it. Even into the present day where I live, when a shepherd’s died, other shepherds will make certain, even if they are going to be cremated, there is a little bit of raw wool in the coffin.

JS: Was that done for your friend lately?

TP: I believe it was. I did not take it upon myself but there were two shepherds there. Certainly it was known by the shepherds as the custom.

JS: Yes and I picked up my shepherds law from Barclay Wills, *The Shepherd of the Downs*⁴, and he mentions this wool in the coffin thing which you have not in fact actually explained. The point is that shepherds, because of the nature of their work, are going to miss going to church very often because

³ Magpie, television programme, broadcast on ITV in the 1960s and the 1970s

⁴ *The Shepherd of the Downs*, by Barclay Wills, first edition published 1979 by Worthing Museum

they simply cannot leave the sheep alone. So of course the great problem is when they appear before the throne of God on judgement day, “Hey, where were you on Sundays?” And they will produce this little tuft of wool and say “I am a shepherd.” And your phrase about a good shepherd?

TP: We know about good shepherds here. And it’s beautiful, whatever religious persuasion you have. What I’ve always liked about it is there’s a concept of loyalty in all this, and people often misunderstand what loyalty means. Throughout history the concept of loyalty has meant ‘I will be loyal to you o king, o chief, o master, if you remain the sort of person, for the sort of person that I am, to be loyal to’. Loyalty is both ways. Yes we have duties to you, and yes you have duties to us. And they were applying that to the Almighty and I thought that was rather good and rather practical as you would expect of shepherds.

JS: Do you realise that in all this we have lost track of the magpies?

TP: Right. I know but then you interrupted me back then, and I was getting ready to say...between the two of us we’ll go on talking forever!

JS: Mea Culpa! So there you were in the queue asking...

TP: So I was in the queue and most of the people in the queue were giggling and I was getting TV magpie rhyme after another, and then I looked up and there was this statuesque lady, clearly, somewhat fierce so it seemed to me...

JS: No!

TP: ...with an accent that appeared to be going all round Europe. And I said to her...

JS: Ach, donner wetter!

TP: And I said to her “Madam, (JS: you didn’t!) do you know of any magpie rhymes?” I am not going to attempt the accent, it would probably be around Oslo around then, but in a very almost Germanic voice it seemed to me she said, “I think about 27”.

JS: This story has grown!

TP: Of course it has, it’s folklore!

JS: Yes. Oh dear. And then the next stage was you see he started talking to me about magpies and there was all this queue of people behind waiting to get their books signed, so I told him as much magpie stuff as I could think of on the spur of the moment and said, “I know I have more at home, I will go and take some photocopies and I will send them to you care of your publisher,” said I, being very tactful, as authors do not like to give out their addresses. Whereupon you gave me, not exactly an address, but at least a PO Box number.

TP: Well, those were the days.

JS: It was great fun. And to think I might...I hadn’t known that you were going to be coming to Worthing for a book signing at all. It was a friend who rang me up about a week or so ahead and said could I please, please take a book of hers to be signed. And you know, if I had been busy that

afternoon? I was so naive, I didn't realise what the queue was going to be like. Book signing was due to start at five o'clock and I thought if I get there by half past four that should be ok.

TP: But it's, from the point of view of an author, it's always nice when you find a) someone who's an expert and b) someone who's simpatico at the same time. I found a lady in Winchester who is a specialist in folksong, and I was there for other purpose, but everyone was getting fed up with us singing folksongs at the dining table. But it's great, because for a fantasy writer, someone like that, that gets half an hour of my time any day of the week.

JS: You had a nice folk song about larks singing melodious, didn't you?

TP: *Tis pleasant and delightful on a fine summer's morn,*

To see the fields and the meadows all covered in corn,

And the small birds are singing,

Love songs on each spray,

And the larks, they sang melodious at the dawning of the day.

And the larks, they sang melodious,

And the larks, they sang melodious,

And the larks, they sang melodious at the dawning of the day.

That's only the beginning of course, because of the conventions of folksongs, usually. I think a couple of verses later it's about a young girl going to Maidenhead and losing her Aylesbury! But I just loved the tune.

JS: Where did you learn it?

TP: I just heard someone who liked singing folksongs singing it. It had the same effect on my mind as the word 'vespers' has, that kind of feeling of quietness and also the sheer joy of the countryside.

JS: Yes, it's absolutely lovely; I must say it's a beautiful song. At any rate, it's a beautiful verse, whatever happens later to the young lady!