

## Sir Terry Pratchett in conversation with Dr. Jacqueline Simpson

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### Part 3

Terry Pratchett: Almost running parallel with folklore for me is an interest not only in just the history of London but in the history of the development of the countryside, particularly over the last five centuries for example. And I've found many kind of interesting things there. I'm fascinated by the way folklore was entwined with truth in people's lives. Whatever happens, urban myth for example is folklore, it is simply folklore. It's not different from folklore.

Jacqueline Simpson: No. And the amazement of the older generation of folklorists, indeed the fury of the older generation of folklorists, when young Americans and a few young folklorists also in England started saying "we're going to discuss, collect and analyze stories like the 'Kentucky Fried Chicken' and 'The Hook'".

TP: Oh, the hook on the bumper?

JS: Do you know 'Kentucky fried chicken'?

TP: I don't know 'Kentucky fried chicken' and possibly shouldn't at this point. Do you know about the couple in the mini car?

JS: Bumpety bumpety on the roof?

TP: No, no, no that was another one. That was a fact, shall we say they were in flagrante delicto.

JS: Yes they were flagrant dans le lit, yes!

TP: Indeed, in such a position, I'm trying to put this delicately for those of a delicate disposition.

JS: I am not of a delicate disposition as you know damn well by now!

TP: I know that's why I was artificially being...

JS: Of course we have these young ladies - [gesturing towards Julie Sutton and Katie Brown who are recording the interview].

TP: Young, young ladies, damsels probably. I don't know what the difference is really, whether they make some kind of noise as they walk. But anyway, the positions they had adopted was such that

the woman was perfectly ok, the man had had a heart attack and they had to sort of saw things to get him out and apparently she said, according to the story, "my husband's really not going to like this" and the medic said "I'm sorry to tell you this madam, your husband's dead". "No, that man isn't my husband and it's my husband's car". And I wondered did it really happen and then it was so good, as it were, that everyone told it everywhere. Because once I've been told by a doctor, and twice I've read in something by a doctor, the story of the doctor called in in a little country practice because of a death in a cottage. And he goes up and there's the old man lying there and the doctor has to examine him for the death certificate and comes back down and says to the wife, "I have to tell you, your husband's a woman". And the wife, a bit embarrassed, said, "we never bothered about that sort of thing". It appears to me that this is one that's probably part of doctor folklore.

JS: Yes that is one that has never come my way. No, what you've just said was new to me.

TP: They come and go, it's like bubbles that float and then pop.

JS: I'm now going to tell 'Kentucky fried chicken' because I know these two young things don't know it by the look on their face[s]; you surely know it and I will tell it as it was first told to me. This was in the times when I was a school teacher, and one day I noticed that a group of sixth-form girls were having a very kind of huddled up conversation as I was coming in and we got talking and I asked them what was so interesting and exciting and one of them said to me, "well you know something absolutely dreadful happened to the sister of my boyfriend who was out with her boyfriend and they'd gone to the Odeon cinema in Worthing and they had bought some Kentucky fried chicken at the shop in Broadwater Street West on their way down there and because you're not allowed to eat in the cinema they waited 'til the lights went down and then they unwrapped their portions of Kentucky Fried Chicken and they started eating. The film hadn't been going on very long when the girl suddenly said, "oh God, I must get to the loo". At which stage I noticed that one of the other girls in the class was kind of leaping up and down and wanting to join in and I was signalling, let the story run its way. So the poor young girl rushes to the loo and her boyfriend hangs around for a while and waits and she doesn't come back and then he gets worried so off he goes and he calls an usherette and says "look, my friend went in and she hasn't come out". When she is found there, rolling about in agony, an ambulance is called and she is taken to A&E in Worthing hospital and a stomach pump is applied and the boyfriend is waiting and eventually a medic comes out and says, "I have to ask you, what had you recently been eating?" And he said, "well we did have some Kentucky fried chicken" and the medic says "well we stomach pumped her and we brought up some bones, and I have to tell you, that was no chicken, that was a rat".

TP: Ah, I had heard a similar one.

JS: Wait, because we now come to the kind of payoff. At that point the other girl who had been leaping up and down trying to interrupt...

TP: Just like me. Just like me, yes indeed.

JS: ...said "but, but, but, but, but this cannot have happened in the Odeon in Worthing last weekend, because exactly the same thing happened in Brighton ten days ago and I heard of it from my Cousin's Brother and it was exactly like that". And at this point I, who had all this time managed to keep a straight face said, "well actually this story's been going round and round and round".

TP: The nice thing about these things is the specifics: “It happened in such and such a thing down the road”. And the things that aren’t specific: “A friend of my husband’s brother’s cousin was told at a wedding”, so that in the dock of reality testing you cannot bring someone who’s gonna then swear.

JS: And these two girls, “but it must have happened because it was her or him who told me and she or he wouldn’t tell a lie”. And so I said “look, a little test of folklore mechanics: ring up the person who it was supposed to have happened to, can you track them down?” “Oh yes, I’ll ask my brother, he has her phone number” etcetera. “Ring her up and get her to confirm that it happened to her sister” or whatever. And sure enough of course they both did this and they both within a few days said “yes I contacted”, and they said “no, no, it wasn’t my sister it happened to; it was my sister who told me, it happened to a friend of hers”. And it always moves the horizon forever and forever as we move.

TP: [The truth of course is undeniable, but it just moves backwards so we can’t quite track it down.](#)

I just wondered if I could say to a room full of people at this here convention, that *Knees up Mother Brown*<sup>1</sup> was actually celebrated for this ‘orrible murder. Because Sweet Fanny Adams is certainly true, she certainly existed, I don’t know about mince, but lots of her wasn’t found as I understand. In those days this was interesting stuff. People vaguely know this sort of thing and so the desire to believe that there is some kind of a narrative, that’s right, a narrative to the universe would say, “yeah, yeah that would be right, that’s what people would do, they would turn this ‘orrible thing into a song”.

JS: But how does the ‘orrible murder link up with the words of *Knees up Mother Brown* of which I must confess I do not know more than the first line?

TP: *Knees up Mother Brown, Knees up Mother Brown,*

*Under the table you must go,*

*Ee-eye ee-eye ee-eye-o*

*If I catch you bendin’,*

*I’ll saw your legs right off,*

*Knees up knees up, don’t get the breeze up,*

*Knees up Mother Brown.*

Cor, give me me jellied eels and pint of winkles me lovely! (JS: Cor) My family came from Barking

JS: Barking Mad!

TP: I’m just pure barking!

JS: Carry me out and bury me decent.

TP: Decent? Oh of course.

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<sup>1</sup> *Knees Up Mother Brown*, song, by Harris Weston and Bert Lee, 1938.

JS: Before your time, Old Mother Riley.

TP: That's right, yes.

JS: Yes, in the '50's, '40's even.

TP: '40's I believe.

JS: You weren't even born.

TP: Let me think.

*Old Mother Riley and her cow...*

It was still around, we've discussed this before, we talk about generations but there is always a kind of a skid, so you grow up sharing your parents' nostalgia almost. I couldn't possibly have ever heard Garrison Theatre, but "Can I do you now Sir?" I recognise those as jokes and things that got said. I have to explain to these young ladies this was on the wireless, and on the wireless on one occasion was Peter Brough and Archie Andrews, that was a ventriloquist act. And it went on for years and years. Now I think the human race is, in a very gleeful, wonderful, enjoyable way, totally mad. So for years, people listened to the ventriloquist's act on the wireless, and do you know what, they never saw his lips move!

JS: But the difference between the two voices!

TP: Gottle o geer, gottle o geer.

*Oh what a wonderful thing to be...*

JS: *A healthy grown up, busy busy bee...*

TP: *Filling up the sunlight hours,*

*Stealing all the pollen from the...*

We are talking different verses.

JS: Yes.

TP: But the point is, our generation, my generation is slightly younger than ours, as we've discussed, has a greater sense of history I think than the generation behind, because we've lived it, because we've spoken to it. My granddad was in the Dardanelles. He was one of seven brothers that went to the First World War. They all came back alive (JS: That's amazing). My great- great-grandfather had a letter from the King, thanking him for this.

And then my father was in the Second World War and my mother went through the Blitz and my uncle was an evacuee. All these things are real to me; they are not really historical. And I remember the absolute astonishment, when I realised that my father could have shaken hands with Wyatt Earp, which is quite unbelievable but that's because we don't realise that history is actually really very close. In fact, I wrote it in a school book and I'm writing my autobiography at the moment and I use that as a title, I copied it down as I'd done in the old school book, it just says, "My Father could

of shook hands with Wyatt Earp". Because Wyatt Earp lived I believe to see himself portrayed on the early cinema. And Tom Mix, the silent actor who played cowboys, wept at his funeral. He arrived in an aeroplane. I mean, he was a twentieth century guy, but we think of him as a historical person.

And that brings us I think back to our subject. I lived a mile... again I'm talking about how history kind of clamps together; I realise that my boyhood was very very similar to the boyhood of my father and my grandfather. Slightly better conditions. I suppose the wireless was around when my Granddad was a boy, certainly with my Dad, but in my case, born into a fairly ramshackled cottage that had no running water, water was a tap, no proper toilets, no gas, no electricity, and my father and my grandfather would have said pretty much the same thing, with minor things. But my mother had been educated. She didn't go to Grammar School because even bright girls of her class would never get to Grammar School, it just couldn't possibly happen. My London grandfather was one of those people that would make certain that the working class always stays the working class. But she told me about the Greek Myths on the way to school. And so I was the first kid ever probably to have a tortoise called Phidippides, who I'm sure you will know apparently ran the first marathon. And I remember arguing with my mother because I'd gone to see my London Granny and I was bemused at all the buses, because we didn't see them in Beaconsfield and Bucks, and she said "you can tell where the buses are going to because it is on the front". And I remember arguing with my Mum, because she told me about Marathon and I understood about that, and the Greeks and everything, and I said "but Mum, he ran from Marathon to Athens, so he must have run an Athens, because it's like the buses. If Phidippides had been driving a bus, it would have had Athens on the front". She was quite impressed by that. She had had an Irish grandfather who she recalled with great fondness, and I am certain she told me a lot of his folktales. She certainly told me one that she said he'd told her, which I used in one of my books because it's very very good and of course it happens in a place that it's inconvenient to go to see and check, and so of course why bother to try and check when you can put it in a book? What I'm really saying is, you talk to your kids, that's the key thing. Not always but I think folklore is odd and you don't know exactly where you've got it from at all. It's come down. I know some folklore because I've read about it, but that's because it's a scholarly thing, but often...

JS: Because you just started reading. You just devoured didn't you?

TP: Or you heard your parents talking or something.

JS: My childhood was rather different from that point of view. My father was a kind of spontaneous communicator of minor folklore, the marching of Julius Caesar over the Downs, the treacle mine and so on, but it was always with a twinkle in the eye, there was never any question of believing it, it was a jolly good joke. I mean if he had lived near the Wimblestone the way he would have told this business about the stone getting up at midnight and dashing about, he'd have said something like "when it hears the church clock at midnight it gets up", and you'd believe this for a while then you would see the twinkle in his eye and say "what do you mean", and he'd say "well when did a stone ever hear a clock?"

TP: Ah that's an academic thing isn't it?

JS: No, no, no, no, it's a 'catch the kids' thing. It's a joke thing.

TP: But you saying that reminded me, where I used to live on the Mendips, there was a nice old gentleman who I would like to emulate, called Mr Tovey who lived down in the valley and he used to grow his fruit trees, and he had early retired and his wife was a writer. He was always ready for a chat and he was a decent old boy, and I took my daughter Rhianna for a walk and she was quite young and she'd been reading fairy stories and things and she was a bit frightened of the forestry commission plantation which was a very dank place. She said, "I don't want to go in there, 'cos there might be wolves". And we were wandering along and we said hello to Mr Tovey, who was always working on his apple trees, and I said, "there aren't any wolves left are there Mr Tovey?" And he said "No, no, I killed 'em all. I killed 'em all, there was a dragon as well but I killed it. I remember it burning, it just burned across the sky and it crashed over on top of Black Down".

OK, but my daughter lived in modern times, more or less, and also by that time had, I cannot imagine why, picked up a certain amount of cynicism about what she had been told by grownups. But I just wonder if that's how so much of it began, someone saying, "well, I did that, he was about 15 foot high, no about 16 foot now I come to remember, hang on a minute no, probably about 20 foot. Anyway I pulled his head off but unfortunately I lost it in a bog".

JS: Did you pass on a lot of stuff to Rhianna?

TP: Possibly it marked the end of folklore. This is kind of an aside really. I can't remember whether we had to read to her for a very long time at all, she read incredibly fast and had library tickets at the age of two. Admittedly it was small things.

JS: Dad's daughter all over.

TP: Lyn was the genius in this one. She would talk to her and she spent a lot of time with her and all this was the perfect thing. She would listen to the favourite book over and over again until she could actually read the favourite book because she could remember the favourite book as she read it, and then she actually starts reading the favourite book a little while later and so it goes on and you pick up the other books. Once the torch is set to this tinder, actually no, the tinder is set to this torch I think, could be one or the other, then the child will be ablaze and you don't have to worry about their education because one way or another they will make their way in life. Or, be hanged.