

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

Please note, there are some embedded links within the transcript to articles from *Folklore*, which you may be interested in reading. If your institution subscribes to *Folklore*, you may have online access.

Part 2

Terry Pratchett: You have folklore and folksong and old crafts and all these things and they tend to come together and I'm glad to see that these days people are becoming more interested in them again, because in the 1960's there was a general folk revival and that probably was why my interest in folklore kind of sprang out of that.

Jacqueline Simpson: Yes and what made you want to write *Folklore of Discworld*¹, or provoke me into assisting on *Folklore of Discworld*²?

TP: Prod you into doing it! I once spoke to the [Folklore Society](#).

JS: I was secretary of the Folklore Society at that stage and I was responsible for inviting Terry to come and give us this lecture and because I was secretary I was sitting at the table beside him while he was giving the talks and I can assure you that in the massed ranks of faces stretching to the back of the room and beyond, and people peering round the door, there was only one that did not laugh, relax and be happy.

TP: I started off by saying "I am a writer so I think about folklore as a carpenter thinks about trees". It is quite a sensible thing to say. I'm interested in [the history of London](#) which is absolutely superb because it's impossible to believe things that happen in the biggest, richest city in the world, in Georgian England all the way up to the death of Victoria. That kind of interest is also a kind of folklore because many of the things that happened then get an aura of folklore about them, and it turns out that it isn't folklore. Have you heard the song *Knees up Mother Brown*³? Right, did you know that *Knees up Mother Brown* was actually originally based on the terrible murder of Mrs. Josephine Baxter in Bow in 1870, and she was not only killed but dismembered by her husband? Rather similar, have you heard of Sweet Fanny Adams and what happened to Sweet Fanny Adams? Well she was chopped up, apparently by her boyfriend, was that the case?

JS: I believe so. And so small that it became possible to imagine that she had been turned into minced meat and put in a tin.

¹ *The Folklore of Discworld* by Terry Pratchett and Jacqueline Simpson, Doubleday, 2008.

² Ibid.

³ *Knees Up Mother Brown*, song, by Harris Weston and Bert Lee, 1938.

TP: Certainly that was the rumour among the guys on the Western Front, wasn't it? In fact what I just told you about *Knees up Mother Brown* is entirely an invention, but the point is, it's how I work. You would be prepared to believe that because we know how folklore works, this thing happens, it becomes a broadsheet ballad or [broadsheet ballad](#). And so it's an 'orrible murder, which everyone is absolutely interested in, it's got to be 'orrible' it mustn't be horrible, it's got to be an 'orrible murder to be really 'orrible hasn't it?

JS: Oh aye!

TP: Preferably in a back street somewhere. Personally I've always thought that Sweeney Todd was just a very bad barber! And so it's very easy as it were to make up folklore, I would hesitate to say that's because it's made up anyway.

JS: There's always an element of invention, I mean the invention runs along channels that have been determined by previous inventions.

TP: Oh yes, it goes round and round. I was reading about the folklore of Ireland and I'd got hooked on *Lord of the Rings*⁴, so you'd read anything that had runes in it or fairies or anything. I was coming across folklore which was really very interesting and possibly that might have been where the whole thing really began. You start off with the fantasy and then you find out that the fantasy may be not exactly as unreal as you thought and that becomes very exciting that there are people alive at that time who knew people who had known [Biddy Early](#), the Witch of County Clare, around which a folklore has gathered rather similar to that to Robin Hood, who I suspect was a real person but who wound around himself, because of the way folklore works, tales of other bandits at the same time. That really fascinated me.

Going through the book there's a type of folkloric creature called the Phouka, which can take many shapes. And there was one story that was passed on by a farm labourer who was, early evening, digging away at his potatoes, and he heard this sizzle and he saw coming across the uneven landscape, something like a carpet but made out of silver, and as it passed over the humps and hollows in the ground it took the shape of them. And when I read that a chill went down my spine because I thought, this sounds electrical, this sounds like something real. Fairies, that sounds like something Guinness, about three pints of Guinness I would have thought. But the sizzle as it travelled, I couldn't help thinking, 'that was something'. I'd loved to have known what it was.

JS: Phouka is such an interesting word in itself. It's cognate with Puk, it's cognate with Icelandic Pukki which is a small demonic goblin. It's a word which goes from one language to another, and the word itself is a shape changer.

TP: I believe the countryside creates folklore in the same way that the mists rise in the evening. I think it just happens. People get feelings. The chill you feel when you walk in this place and all these things, and because we want this. We don't want the world to be too inexplicable and we stand and salute Richard Dawkins as he goes past and would shake hands with Mr. Einstein, but we just like to think that's not the end of it. I rather suspect there are people that would give up belief in God rather than belief in luck.

⁴ *The Lord of the Rings*, by J. R. R. Tolkien. Part I first published by Allen and Unwin, 1954.

JS: The other day I was watching a repeat of one of the Sharpe plays on television, and his friend, the Irish Sergeant, what's his name? I've forgotten. Anyway, the Irishman when asked whether he believes in ghosts replies, "I believe in God the Father, the Son, and the Sidh riding on the wind".

TP: That's right I remember that. The lovely thing about that series and getting things right was John Tams, who played Hagman, who always had the songs of the time and got them exactly right. So if this song had been first written down as being heard in such and such, he made certain that if that Sharpe episode as it were on the calendar that they were working from hadn't happened by then, he wouldn't sing it at that point, he couldn't actually sing it until it had become common currency.

JS: I wonder who did the advice on this. Was it the actor himself who knew all this?

TP: I think John Tams is pretty good about that anyway. There's lots of people like your good self who fill books with the information about this sort of thing.

JS: Yes, though not on the music side.

TP: Oh joy that you have an opposite number!

JS: One of the things I like about folklore in Discworld, is that it's not only rural, ok it's all over Lancre, it's all over the Chalk, but you also have urban folklore in Ankh-Morpork itself. You have children's games, you have beliefs that have sort of worn down and got distorted but are still there.

TP: The rhyme that I made up for *Wintersmith*⁵, I can't remember if that ever had a real...

JS: The thing about the 'Iron enough to make a nail'?

TP: 'Iron enough to make a nail', was it 'phosphor enough to make a match'?

JS: You asked me about that at the time and I've never found a source for it, but like you I'm convinced that it was real or at any rate something very like it was real. I think I remember it being in a sort of science for kids book back in the '30's.

TP: I know I invented the last two lines 'Hands enough to hold a child'.

JS: Oh yes, that wouldn't have been, no, that's you, definitely you.

TP: Ah, and what was the other one, 'Time enough for love', or was it 'Heart enough for love'?

JS: 'Heart enough for love,' I think.

TP: And that's why the Wintersmith couldn't quite make a man because he didn't understand the last two lines.

JS: When I was saying about the folklore in Ankh-Morpork, I was thinking of things like when Vimes goes back to Cockbill Street, is it, where he was brought up, and sees the kids playing hopscotch?

TP: Oh yes, in the school yard, if you were unlucky it was your name as well! But in the running gutters of Ankh-Morpork they play pooh sticks.

⁵ *Wintersmith*, by Terry Pratchett. First edition published by Doubleday Childrens, 2006.

JS: Yes, I loved that! That was one of the occasions when I disgracefully laughed for ten minutes in a public place. I like that.

TP: I make things up, but probably in the German forests in the early Iron Age, there were people coming up with Votan. Thinking about the wind and the sky and the thunder, and I think that's how the Gods were built. Uninformed people like me could make a rhyme or add enough truth to something that might be a lie so that it becomes... so you can whistle it for example, so that it sticks in the memory and then you tell it to the kids. I'm not boasting about this, I just think that's how it happened, people told stories, people wanted answers. To keep the kids quiet you told them "that's the goblin that looks after the goats" or whatever.

JS: One of the things that is fascinating me at the moment, and which actually is the theme of my talk at the convention, is the nature of elves which we can extend to fairies in general. Are they nasty or nice? They are so ambiguous, and it is a problem I think, why through all the long, long centuries of Christianity did people go on believing in ambiguous creatures like the Phouka, or the Elves who are neither entirely good, nor entirely bad, and I think it's because we are not at ease with the absolute black and white divisions which official Christianity imposes on experience. We experience good and bad luck in an arbitrary kind of way, suffering and happiness arise in ways that seem to have no meaning, and it's easier and more agreeable in a way to think of ambiguous forces rather than to try to say always that it's God's work or it's the Devil's work. I mean, to take a very dramatic instance, changelings.

TP: Ah, we are talking Susan Schoon [Eberly] aren't we?

JS: Yes. Supposing you give birth to a malformed baby, or your otherwise healthy little boy when he is about 18 month old suddenly develops some mysterious illness that nobody can diagnose and dies, you go and ask the priest what it was all about and you will be told either that God is punishing you for your sins, or that God has sent you this trial to test your virtue, or that it was the Devil doing it, and all that is very difficult to accept I should think. God knows I have never been in this position and I am myself a religious person, but still I do think that the religious reactions to extreme calamity, because they're so black and white, are very harsh and hard to accept.

TP: Can I say, you're still a religious person, despite my best attempts?

JS: Absolutely! Well you're getting somewhere. Possibly, or not! But if you think that elves or fairies have stolen your baby and left this little monstrosity instead, in a way that is putting less guilt on you.

TP: Indeed, it's going the other way, in a curious way. This is where the writer steps in. You are the person that the fairies chose to haunt, or destroy, or annoy, or to steal from. I think probably also somewhere in there a kind of pride flashes a tiny fin.

JS: [Ah, "my baby was so lovely that the fairies stole him". And maybe, "he's having a happy life in fairy land". Maybe.](#)

TP: I came across a lot of this in a book called *A Strange and Secret Peoples*⁶, I'm sorry that I cannot remember the author. She had a little hint about this and then I talked to Jacqueline and she then put me on to what Susan [Schoon Eberly] had written and it was quite terrifying. I'm sure you will correct me at the finer detail, but she had more or less mapped goblins and fairies and the look of them against folklore in various parts of England.

JS: And even more significantly she'd mapped them against the symptoms of actual...

TP: Yes, yes, I was about to say so. (JS: Sorry!)! We are like this all the time, don't worry. And the point is, let us say, "Does your child eat all the time but never thrive?" and "Does your child look like a little wizened old man?" "Is your child beautiful but completely and utterly stupid?" and so on.

JS: "Has your child got legs that don't divide but are stuck together like that, like a mermaid's tail?"

TP: Now there are people around today living reasonably happy and healthy lives like that. Thank goodness for the age of reason. And one of the things that horrified me was, I believe it's somewhere in the Midlands, I don't know whether it's happened a lot, but there was certainly a legend that if your child was clearly a fairy changeling, you took it to this place where there was the gravestone of a holy man who had been much thought of. And on that gravestone you put a lot of straw, you put the baby on the straw and you put candles round the edge of the gravestone, on a windless night obviously, and in the morning your baby will come back. But of course I have never known a night that's completely windless. In the morning, oh dear, the changeling has died but your wonderful child has not come back. Still half the job is done. I may have shall we say, not exaggerated, but dramatised this, but I'm about right aren't I?

JS: I don't know about it being done in the English Midlands, but what you have just described is virtually identical with something that was done in France in the thirteenth century and is recorded by a Dominican priest who visited the district and was absolutely shocked and horrified at what was going on. The grave in question was the grave of a holy man as you say, who may or may not have actually been a dog - the book is called *The Holy Greyhound*⁷ - anyway, the local women when they had a baby they knew was a changeling would take him as you say. They'd put him on the grave, or near the grave under a tree with piles of straw and candles burning and then they would retire to a safe distance and they must not interfere all night whatever happened. And of course there'd be a good chance the straw would catch fire; there would be a good chance that wolves would come out of the wood. If by any chance in the morning the baby was still alive, the next stage of the proceedings was to take him to a certain very cold and very swift-flowing river and dip him nine times. The priest in question was of course absolutely horrified and he reports that he had the grove of trees cut down, the tomb of the alleged sacred man, who may or may not have been a dog, dug up, and imposed severe penance on any women who ever did this again. So yes, what you say is not exaggerated. As I say, I don't know of it happening in England.

TP: And that's the downside, that's what happens when you put folklore in the driving seat.

⁶ *Strange and Secret Peoples: Fairies and Victorian Consciousness*, by Carole G. Silver. Oxford University Press, USA, 1999.

⁷ *The Holy Greyhound: Guinefort, Healer of Children since the Thirteenth Century*, by Jean-Claude Schmitt, first published in English by Cambridge University Press, 1983.