



Being Human

Article Author:

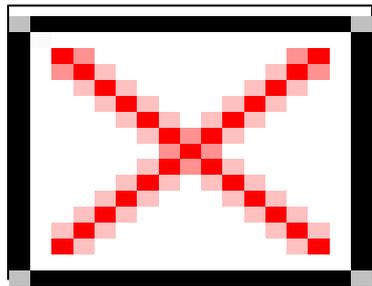
[Kevin Crossley-Holland](#) [1]

[239](#) [2]

Byline:

Kevin Crossley-Holland explains how folk-tales make us human

*Folk-tales are necessary to our understanding says **Kevin Crossley-Holland**.*



Puck was right. Right when he tells Dan and Una at the beginning of **Puck of Pook's Hill** that 'there's no good beating about the bush: it's true. The People of the Hills have all left. I saw them come into Old England and I saw them go. Giants, trolls, kelpies, brownies, goblins, imps; wood, tree, mound, and water-spirits; heath-people, pishogues, leprechauns, night-riders, pixies, nixies, gnomes, and the rest - gone. All gone!'

But if it's true that our lifelong and largely unquestioning belief in these creatures has gone, it's certainly alive and flourishing amongst children, and a crucial part, a magical part, of their imaginative worlds.

When my father sat by my sister's and my bunk bed, cradling his Welsh harp, and said-and-sang fairy tales to us, our nursery became a crossing-place. Can you remember what this was like, and how it felt? I think Edith Nesbit was right. 'You cannot hope to understand children by imagination, by love itself,' she said. 'There is only one way: to remember what you thought and felt and liked and hated when you yourself were a child.'

One important way of doing this is through listening to or reading folktales. . . Here's a morsel about seeing, imagining, dreaming maybe, the suspension of disbelief. . .

In the last of the light, the unruly long grasses at the bottom of the garden swayed and shimmered and, beyond them, the power station belched black smoke.

Out of the grass, stepped a young doe. She picked her way across the little garden and sampled the purple lupins. Then she nuzzled an apple tree sapling. But all the while she was watchful and fretful. And after no more than a minute, she stepped back into the shelter of the long grass.

It began to grow dark and still the girl watched. She pressed her nose to the kitchen window.

Then a shawl of clouds covered the smudge-moon, and she could no longer see the doe.

As soon as the girl woke up, she remembered the doe, and how lovely and dainty she was.

A doe, she thought. In this waste land! How likely is that? I keep dreaming such impossible things.

On the kitchen table stood a vase with seven purple lupins in it.

'They'd been knocked flat,' her mother told her, shaking her head and frowning. 'Their stems were broken. So I thought it was best to enjoy them.'

On several counts, this little narrative illustrates why folk tales speak so directly and deeply to children (and to many adults too).

The narrative is straightforward. It's true that the storyteller allows the girl to reflect that she keeps 'dreaming impossible things', but otherwise the action is direct. It's forthright.

Secondly, the tale's clothing - it's so simple. But that doesn't mean it lacks colour or movement. In this respect, it's of a piece with the centuries of family and communal retelling by everyday folk, for the most part illiterate, who used everyday sturdy language that spoke to everyone.

And then, what about the doe? Is she real or imaginary? Or both? Is she a metaphor? Whatever she is, the storyteller resists wrapping things up too neatly, and leaves it to you and me to decide for ourselves.

*

During the nineteenth century, aware that the Industrial Revolution was leading to the decline of rural communities throughout Europe as people made their way to towns and cities in search of better paid jobs, social historians and the first folklorists began to travel from village to village, and to write down the tales they heard. The historian and folklorist Joseph Jacobs estimated that in the British Isles alone, no fewer than ten thousand, yes ten thousand, different tales had been collected before the end of the century.

Heaven knows how many folk-tales have now been written down, worldwide. And taken together, they comprise the most wonderful source and inheritance - *a huge fund of vivid, short tales that human beings have told each other to illustrate what being human means.*

It's easier, maybe, to say what folk-tales are not than what they are. They don't concern themselves much with religious belief - that's the business of myths. When saints or devils do make an appearance, it's often to explain how some place got its name, or to describe how some idiot came to a bad end, as did Wullie who sold his soul to the devil for a few coins, and was found soon after lying on his bed 'like a piece of scorched bread. His family buried him, but a child could have carried the coffin. There was nothing there but some black ashes.'

Likewise, folk-tales are never "true stories" in any strict historical sense, but always include an element of imagination. Those that are based on some historical event or figure, such as Robin Hood or Dick Whittington, are what we call legends.

Otherwise, pretty much anything goes! Belief in ghosts and in witches, stories about fabulous beasts of all kinds, fables and animal tales, stories of giants and strong men, and wonder tales (Tom Thumb, for instance, and The King of the Cats): they're all grist to the mill.

As you'd expect, the length of these tales may be anything from snippets to quite meaty narratives; the manner of telling ranges from plainspeaking to the highly colloquial, and the tone from hilarious to tragic.

What a pity it is that anthologists and publishers trot out old favourites time and time again when there's such a hoard waiting to be uncovered. Isn't there a good folk tale somewhere about how foolish it is blindly to follow one's leader, and market trends?

One caveat: a fair few tales are not in the least PC, and are racially bigoted, while a handful are downright cruel. For that, after all, is how humans are. And another caveat: there's often a decided (and lamentable) want of feminism in the original versions of folk-tales, reflecting the society and time when they were first written down.

But. . . but. . . overall, folk-tales are our shared secular inheritance. To begin with, we could use them better to understand and enjoy the mix of 'your Roman-Saxon-Danish-Norman English,' as Kipling called them, and the Celts surrounding them, but also the many more recent immigrants to our islands. Each time I immerse myself in folk-tales, I come away thinking how various we humans are, but essentially how alike we are, not least in our deep, confirming need for story.

Kevin Crossley-Holland's collection **Between Worlds: Folktales of Britain & Ireland** is now available from Walker Books in paperback, 978-1406383096, £8.99.

Page Number:

2

Source URL (retrieved on Jan '20): <http://edbtjyw.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/239/childrens-books/articles/being-human>

Links:

[1] <http://edbtjyw.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/kevin-crossley-holland>

[2] <http://edbtjyw.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/239>