On how creative work helps make sense of the everyday

Writer Gennarose Nethercott discusses processing life with the help of metaphor, writing within a tradition, and the ongoing value of folk tales.

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Do you consider yourself a writer first or a folklorist first?

A writer first, but all of my writing is filtered through the lens of my experience as a folklorist. I enjoy playing off folkloric motifs and traditions. I've been able to start thinking of myself more officially as a folklorist since February when I started working as one of the head researchers and associate producers for the podcast *Lore*. It's strange. I went to school in part for folklore studies, so I have a degree in that. But only when I started working for *Lore* did I say to myself, "Now I'm actually a folklorist." That validated the identity that I'd held for a long time.

Would you have called yourself a writer before you made money writing?

Definitely. But when I was growing up, I really did not want to be a writer. My father is a writer and I thought, "Well, that looks existentially devastating. So I think I'll skip that life course." But it was always what I loved to do. Then when I got to college, I found that I was only happy if I was writing. So at that point I was like, "Yes, I'm a writer."

Your Twitter bio also says that you are a ruffian, which I didn't really know what that meant, so I Googled it. So may I ask, would you say you're a violent person or have a particular penchant for crime?

I'm not violent at *all*. [*laughs*] I associate ruffianism more with mischief and goblin escapades. Yesterday, for example, I was at a thrift store and found this heavy brass bell. Instead of a handle, there was a brass goblin crouching on top. I brought it up to the counter to buy it. I asked, "Can I ring this bell?" And they said, "We would prefer that you wait to ring the bell until you leave our store." So I bought this terrible cursed bell and left the store. So today at exactly 1:54, which is right when the new moon was cresting, I rang the goblin bell. So part of this interview is me just sitting here, waiting for the goblins to show up, which could happen at any moment. My ruffian energy leans more in that direction—rather than violent criminal activity.

More like spiritual crime.

Wayward high jinks.

Is that a theme that you're interested in your folklore research and stories? Are you drawn to characters who like mischief, and do you think that's a key part of your writing?

My favorite characters are often anti-heroes. I'm mostly interested in stories that have moralistic tension. There's an essay by Theodora Goss about how monsterdom is defined by contradiction. A vampire is frightening because it is both living and dead. A werewolf is frightening because it is both animal and human. It's not the thing itself that is frightening to us. It's the contradiction between two opposing entities forced into one body, and monsters take that to the extreme. But I do think that any story or any character who makes use of this chafing, conflicting sensation is to me more exciting.

I like characters who have a bite to them, but also have a softness like Isaac, one of my main characters in *Thistlefoot*. He's my indulgent example of that, in that he's irresponsible and careless with other people's feelings, needs, and sometimes safety…but he's also very soft and loving in certain ways. I like to see those dualities at play with each other. I have a hard time with someone who is all bad or all good. I think it's because those people don't exist. Any characters that are realistic are going to have a little bit of both.

Baba Yaga in your book also seems like one of these characters. She's the mythical supernatural old woman who steals, cooks, and eats babies. What is it that drew you to her story? Did you have an idea for the novel before you read about Baba Yaga, or did it stem from her?

It all originated with Baba Yaga. I was also thinking about my own family's history and legacy. The story of what happens in Gedenkrovka—which is this Russian shtetl in *Thistlefoot* where Baba Yaga lives—is based on a real shtetl called Rotmistrivka, which was where my family came from, and faced a pogrom in 1919. But I knew I wanted to work with Baba Yaga in some capacity because I think she is exactly that combination of contradictions: maybe she'll eat your babies, or maybe she'll give you a magic candle to solve your life. That duality and conflict is fun. And I loved her house on chicken legs.

I conceptualized the novel while I myself was on the road touring with my first book, *The Lumberjack's Dove*. The Baba Yaga folktale lends itself really well to stories of itinerancy and the traveling bard archetype, because this is a house that is fully a *home*, but doesn't have to sit still and pin you down. For me, basically living out of the trunk of my Honda Fit, this was such an appealing fantasy. There are two main characters in *Thistlefoot*: Isaac who longs for movement, and Bellatine who longs for home, and both of those elements were in me at the time.

How did you know what to preserve of the original folklore, and what to make your own?

It wasn't a matter of knowing what to change and what not to, but rather, allowing my book to be just one more link in a long chain of Baba Yaga stories that came before. I was working with these folktales that have already been told thousands of times, and the reason that they endure as long as they do is because they have an incredible malleability. Folktales have to be able to adapt. These stories have already been changed endlessly, into endless variations—so it actually felt incredibly natural to create a *new* variation. An extension of the process that had already been happening for hundreds and hundreds of years.

Ultimately, in deciding what to drop and what to keep, it came down to what I liked. I kept the parts that I enjoyed most, and that I felt fit the metaphors within the story that I wanted to tell. I replaced the rest.

Do you think that folktales are metaphors?

One hundred percent. Absolutely. The reason I love folklore so much is because folktales are direct mirrors for the cultures that tell them.

I'm specifically attracted to how a folktale can be a metaphor for something that's too frightening for a community to discuss directly. Something taboo or confusing. Rather than discuss a horrific or inappropriate topic head on, people will come up with these fantastical parallels to discuss and process the issues, without discussing and processing them literally. For example, Scottish and Celtic folklore have changeling stories, where your baby is stolen and taken to fairyland, and replaced with a fairy baby. And it looks exactly like your baby, but there's something a little off about it. If you look through old folk tales, the descriptions of changeling children almost exactly mirror descriptions of different congenital disorders. So essentially it was a

way for parents with a child who was ill or with a child who was born with a disability, to say, "No, that's not my baby. My baby is perfectly healthy and is somewhere else." It can be a very insidious thing. There have even been court cases around people committing murder and claiming it was because this person was a changeling. But on a softer level, that particular belief was a way for people to just handle the hardships of parenthood, where rather than having a sick child that might pass away, instead you can say, "No, this dying baby is not my child. My child is safe and healthy somewhere else."

That's just one of millions of examples of what seems on the surface like a fantasy story, but when you actually start to examine it more critically, you can see what it's actually saying about the culture that is telling it. And it's actually revealing secrets that people don't want us to know. I think that's the best part. These stories are exciting and fun and fantasy based, and they have whimsical elements to them, but you have the whimsy pressed up against the ugliness and the secrets.

So what is the secret or lesson from Baba Yaga's story?

I think Baba Yaga stories, in part, were told to vilify an other—to vilify older women who had medicinal power in a time when the Christian Church wanted full control. I also think that her stories are an early form of stranger danger. Like with *Hansel and Gretel*, it's simpler and more convincing to tell a child that if a strange woman offers you food, it's because she wants to eat you, than it is to explain the myriad of realities that might befall them. So Baba Yaga has so many uses, which is why, in *Thistlefoot*, I was able to use her for a completely different metaphor. But if you want to know what *that* one is, you'll just have to read the book.

What draws you to metaphor? What do you think gives metaphor power?

It's simply the way I process the world. I'm often too close to my own life to process it directly. A metaphor allows me to take a step back and see my experiences through the lens of some other story or some other descriptor. It gives me the necessary distance to actually process and understand my feelings.

These days, it's nice to read about folktales and stories that have persisted for centuries. But do you read current events? Do you stay up with the news? Or just retreat into folktales?

I wish I just retreated into folktales, what a life. But alas, I'm on Twitter. I really wish I didn't, but I do embarrassingly get most of my current events through Twitter—true for a lot of us these days. But either way I do think that being a folklorist helps me process things. Because I have a language designed to filter painful real-world experiences into stories. So much folklore came out of pandemics, for example—like vampire folklore, which came from tuberculosis, when no one knew what that was. There was this wasting disease where you were spitting blood out of your mouth and growing pale and ending up in the grave. The lore helps make sense of things —even if it doesn't make it better.

What will be the folktale that comes out of this era?

You know, I taught a class two winters ago called myth-making in quarantine. It was specifically about translating the experience of life during COVID and lockdown through the lens of folklore. For example, stay-at-home was compared to haunted houses—where we were all like ghosts haunting our own homes. We really understood what it felt like to be haunting a space.

One day, I had my students create monsters based on our experiences with this pandemic: Think of any social rule relating to COVID. It didn't have to be a literal law, but some kind of rule—like hand washing, or six feet of distance. Then, I had them invent a monster to enforce that rule. So, if you tend not to wash your hands…the next time you turn on your faucet, something slithers out of it and crawls under your skin. Or with the six-foot distance thing, say, if you violate that, there's an entity in that space that can then harm you. Basically, taking the reality we're living with and just turning the volume knob up.

When we lack information—or a sense of control—that's when folklore can develop. I think we already see it at

play, but people might not recognize it as folklore because it feels modern.

**I'd like to talk a little about the craft influences that went into this. I know you're a poet, and possibly a puppeteer and/or playwright. How do you incorporate poetry when writing fiction? Or does it feel very different? **

My poetry background gave me a real attention to linguistic detail. I am not one of those fiction writers who can sit down and slam out 3000 words. I think I did that maybe twice, right before a big deadline. In general, 600 words in one sitting is a slog for me because I am selecting every individual word one by one, incredibly methodically. And with a novel, there's a frustration because you can't edit as tightly as you would edit a poem. Someone said a poem is like a Jenga tower where, when it's done, if you pull a single word out the entire poem collapses. You can't really achieve that with a novel. But I still try to write as precisely as I can.

If you were told you can never write again, what would you do instead as a creative outlet?

I got really into decorating Ukrainian eggs over the winter. I use a batik wax process. You take an eggshell and draw on it with beeswax inserted into a metal funnel, that you hold in a candle and then dip in dye, then draw on another layer of beeswax, then dye it again, and so on. Everything smells like beeswax and smoke. Finally, you hold it over the candle at the end and wipe all the beeswax off and it reveals this beautiful jewel of a pattern. So, I'd do things like that. I would build things. And probably learn the fiddle.

Gennarose Nethercott Recommends:

Magic for Beginners by Kelly Link

Over the Garden Wall

A slice of chocolate babka grilled in butter

Young Man in America by Anais Mitchell

Tender by Sofia Samatar

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Vocation
writer, folklorist, poet