

# MARINA WARNER

... talks about life as an independent scholar, and why fairy tales matter so much to us



Dame Marina Warner is Professor of English and Creative Writing at Birkbeck University of London. She was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2005.

**Compared to many other Fellows of the British Academy, you have a rather different career story. After graduating, you went straight into journalism – the *Daily Telegraph Magazine* and *Vogue*. Those must have been interesting times.** I know my career has been very irregular. Even when I was at school, I was always getting reports saying ‘erratic’!

I wanted to finance my own writing, and journalism in those days was definitely compatible with that. V.S. Naipaul, a features writer on the *Daily Telegraph Magazine* when I worked there, was one of several very distinguished authors who practised journalism in order to fund the writing and research of their books. This was a common pattern in the 1970s when I was first becoming a serious writer. But this use of journalism to support writing has changed. Somebody like George

Orwell is likely now to be a Professor of Creative Writing, or a Professor of Journalism, or even a Professor of Cultural or Media Studies, teaching in

a university in a very distinguished way; in his day, he eked out his living on Grub Street.

**You interviewed the film director Bernardo Bertolucci as well as figures like Glenda Jackson for *Vogue*, and Jean-Luc Godard for the *Observer*. You later interviewed Margaret Thatcher shortly after she had become Leader of the Opposition in 1975. Were those formative experiences?**

A fashion magazine like *Vogue* is a female world. There really were very few men working there (just some in the upper echelons running the money side), so it was very like the convent where I had gone to boarding school. I had changed from one entirely female environment to another, with rather comparable figures of authority: the Reverend Mother was quite a model for the Chief Editor of *Vogue*. (I don’t think Alexandra Shulman would think that now! But Beatrix Miller, known to us as ‘Miss Miller’, was definitely of the same ilk as a Reverend Mother.)

In the features that I wrote there was a common thread of interest in how women were represented. The avant-garde filmmakers of the time included strong female roles, which were important in the

1960s for shaping ideas about sex and relationships. Godard, particularly, didn't explore women's lives in an admirable, profound way, but women and their desires were foregrounded. So it was an arena where my interest in this aspect of experience could be pressed forward.

I was pleased that a woman had been elected leader of the Conservatives; I thought this was a great breakthrough. But I'm afraid Margaret Thatcher let me down in the very first moments of the interview, because she was patronising – it was almost 'There, there, little girl' – which was a huge mistake. I only had ten minutes with her, so I asked her a rapid series of questions. One of them was 'Do you believe in God?' She was very cross and protested furiously that of course she did, but she condescended to me while answering it, so she revealed herself in an interesting way.

In those decades, we were still looking for role models and for exemplary women. We could find them amongst the exceptions. In fact, in my pattern of writing, the subjects have moved from exceptional women to ordinary women. I started with the Empress of China,<sup>1</sup> and went on to the Virgin Mary.<sup>2</sup> Then I became interested in anonymous fairytale tellers – the figures of the old crone and Mother Goose – and in the vernacular, anonymous body of literature which was often created by women who could not read and write. This shift in my inquiries reflects the changes in feminism, as its interest was moving from examples of exceptional heroines to explore the structures that produced gender inequalities – and possibilities.

**You wrote that first book about the Empress Dowager of China whilst still at *Vogue*.**

I did a lot of research into what is called 'Treaty Port Literature', and I was very aware that I couldn't read Chinese. I wanted to study Chinese at university, but I was strongly advised not to try because I didn't already have any. After Oxford, I applied for scholarships to learn Chinese, but I was turned down. My career would have been entirely changed!

My interest in China was probably sparked by Rupert Bear. This is a good example of how popular literature puts one onto extraordinary paths. In Rupert Bear there is an emperor of China who flies around on a carpet, and I was fascinated by this figure when I was very young. And any time my sister or I ever showed any

interest in anything, my father, who was a bookseller, would bring us material of all kinds – books, journals, magazines – back from the shop. My question 'What is China?' produced a marvellous stash for me to look at, and it was immediately very seductive. Even the script is aesthetically satisfying, and the art is wonderful.

I particularly fell in love with Chinese civilisation, because it was so ancient and had shown such strong interest in poetry, philosophy, nature, seclusion and reflectiveness. As a teenager I was already very uneasy with Christian patterns of sacrifice, and I still am. In terms of cosmology, Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism are in general all rather more serene than Judaeo-Christianity.

**Do you think there are different opportunities and different pressures for an independent scholar?**

I have thought about this a lot.

My career would not have been possible inside the academic world – until the point when I was embraced by it. For one thing, I didn't really have a subject. At Oxford I read French and Italian. But I

**In those decades, we were still looking for role models and for exemplary women.**

wanted to decipher the world. I wanted to look at how things related to the stories we were being told. I had been brought up a Catholic and I had been brought up on stories. I knew they had made my imagination's picture of the world, as laid out by the Catholic religion that

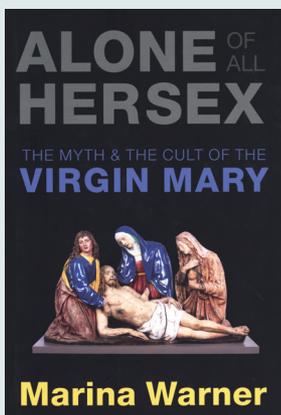
I belonged to. I wanted to understand that.

My work doesn't fall very easily into any category, and that is extremely difficult for the academic disciplines to accommodate. I wanted to investigate the texture of reality as I experienced it, and that seemed to me to need a cross-disciplinary approach. My questions couldn't fit into French language from 1800 to 1900, or Italian Renaissance studies. I sensed that such cultural expressions were rather more interconnected in a dynamic way, so I tried to investigate that.

The division between academic subjects and between periods can cause rigidity, a rigidity that doesn't always allow for fertile fission.

In my career, I've tried to write my non-fiction work in a creative way, and develop a rich, dramatic style. My models are Virginia Woolf and George Orwell, whose critical writings are still literature. That is what I have wanted to pursue.

My fiction writing is always seen separately from my non-fiction writing. People in this country



1. Marina Warner, *The Dragon Empress: The Life and Times of Tz'u-hsi, Empress Dowager of China, 1835–1980* (1972).
2. Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (1976; reissued by Oxford University Press, 2013).

think it's more of a dilettante thing that I do. It isn't dilettantism: it's dedicated in the same spirit to the pursuit of something I want to understand – or at least describe.

**As an independent scholar living off your writing, you had the pressure of having to produce books that sold.**

Yes. I had some very lean years, partly because in the 1980s I was married to a painter, so we didn't have a real professional salary between us.

I was increasingly being invited to lecture. This developed organically. I was really beginning to be entirely supported by invitations to America or to Europe. The very first large act of support came from the Getty Institute of Humanities in California. They telephoned me (this happened before the Internet) and invited me to join a year that was focusing on religious symbolism. They knew my work on the Virgin Mary. It was a wonderful year for me (1987–88), and my first entry into higher scholarly circles.

**In 2004, you became Professor in the Department of Literature, Film, and Theatre Studies at the University of Essex.**

I had been ill for a year, and though I had enough money for the year I was ill, afterwards I couldn't make up for the gap. My partner, Graeme Segal (we are now married), said to me, 'You just have to get a job, otherwise you are going to have to sell your house.'

I had lots of friends at the University of Essex, with Peter Hulme, who is a Caribbeanist. The Warner family's antecedents were in Trinidad for

many centuries, and he had helped me with the novel I wrote about that history – *Indigo* – which is a reckoning with my white planter background.<sup>3</sup>

**You were elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2005, just a year after you became a Professor at the University of Essex. Did that recognition by the British Academy of everything you had done up to that point, outside the normal university system, seem particularly valuable to you?**

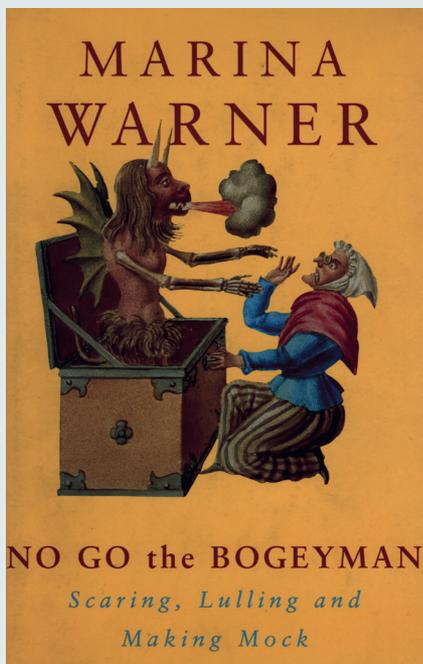
I was astonished, and I continue to be completely astonished when I see the extraordinarily complex and arduous process by which Fellows get elected. I must say, it made a huge difference to me. I have a bit of trouble with recognition, because it makes me feel like an impostor. I was very, very pleased, and I still am.

**How have your interests progressed? Has one project moved seamlessly into another?**

Yes. They are all interconnected, including the novels. They all arise from questions that the last piece of research has left dangling.

Fiction gives you permission not to make up your mind. You obviously don't want to be too didactic or too schematic. My novel *The Lost Father* was about my mother's childhood.<sup>4</sup> She was born in the year Mussolini came into power and married my father the year he fell, when she also left Italy. So her entire Italian life was lived under Fascism. If I had written a non-fiction book, I would have had to tackle the lives of little people like my mother's family who didn't do anything about it. In a novel, you can be much more sympathetic without necessarily endorsing. I tried to show what it was like to be a young woman in Fascist Italy and how you had to accommodate this way or that, how you survived. It's not exactly moral latitude, but fiction allows for powerful psychological sympathy.

I almost always used to write a novel after a non-fiction book, and in some cases it was a reply from the psychological or emotional view of the problem. I have written about racism, and still do. But in *Indigo* I tried to explore the legacy of white colonialism in the Caribbean, not sympathetically,



**One hundred years of the Rose Mary Crawshay Prize**

Marina Warner was awarded the Rose Mary Crawshay Prize in 2000 for her book *No Go the Bogeyman: Scaring, Lulling and Making Mock*. In 1888 Mrs Rose Mary Crawshay established 'The Byron, Shelley, Keats In Memoriam Yearly Prize Fund'. In 1914 the Charity Commissioners transferred the administration of the prize fund to the British Academy, and the Prize was first awarded by the Academy in 1916. The Rose Mary Crawshay Prize is awarded for a historical or critical work written by a woman on any English literature subject. Past recipients have included Jenny Uglow, Penelope Fitzgerald, Hermione Lee and Claire Tomalin.

3. Marina Warner, *Indigo* (1992).  
4. Marina Warner, *The Lost Father* (1987).

but at least tried to get insight into the necessary collusion of the inhabitants with their white masters, which is usually decried. Especially for women, it's difficult to act heroically in such situations.

**Can you give some other examples of where your scholarly work has thrown up ideas, which you have then worked through in your fiction?**

After I set aside exceptional figures from history who were women and structures of ideology employing female symbols, such as Liberty (I wrote about this in *Monuments and Maidens*),<sup>5</sup> I started to look at the lesser voices that had fashioned our world, to dig under the massive visible fabric to the more difficult-to-access undercurrents and how they carry ideology or opposing values. This research took me to fairy tales. In *From the Beast to the Blonde*,<sup>6</sup> I was trying to engage with the feminist critique of fairy tales that, through Disney above all, they are oppressive instruments designed to turn every girl into a milksop Cinderella. I was trying to argue for a countervailing tradition. Many very powerful and interesting writers like Italo Calvino and Walter Benjamin have also seen in this folk tradition something different, something more energetic, vital and liberating.

All during the time I was researching this material, I was writing fables and fairy tales myself. *Indigo* is structured as a fairy tale with a happy ending. It's a re-vision of the *Tempest*, but it ends with the marriage of Caliban and Miranda, which is a clear fairy tale ending, a defiant gesture of hope against hope.

*The Leto Bundle* is another series of interlocking fairy tales, but tragic, about a refugee.<sup>7</sup> A lot of my short stories also take up fairy tales. I do try to continue the dialogue, though it's not been much noticed by the critics. I'm quite proud of the one that rewrites 'Rapunzel' ('The Difference in the Dose'), because it's about adoption and older women who can't have children.<sup>8</sup> I like trying to engage at this level.

**Did your early upbringing in Cairo, where your father had a bookshop, contribute to your interest in the 'Arabian Nights'?**

Yes, possibly.

But when I was working on French and Italian fairy tales, I began to realise how indebted they were to the 'Arabian Nights' (this is an example of structural limits in university organisation: Oriental Studies and Modern Languages rarely meet or interact). Giambattista Basile, who in the 17th century

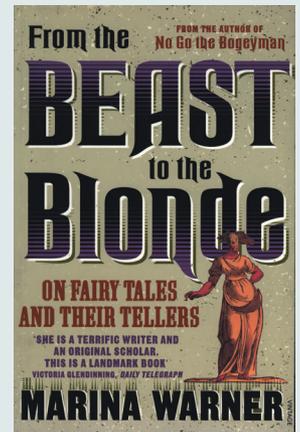
put together an early collection of fairy tales, known as *Il Pentamerone*, knew many oriental stories, probably because Naples is a port city trading across the Mediterranean. And there are also traces in Shakespeare, which he may have found in Boccaccio. The sea of stories was crisscrossed by merchants and pilgrims and many others who might have told one another stories. I felt this conversation hadn't been acknowledged.

As I was listening to the radio when the first Iraq war broke out, I realised that I knew the name 'Basra' from the 'Nights'. At this time of conflict, I thought I'd look at the alternative story – a story of entanglement, intercommunication, mutual curiosity and respect. As I wrote in the foreword to *Scheherazade's Children*, which is a collection of very good essays by other people,<sup>9</sup> at the very height of the most murderous Crusades or battles across the Mediterranean, ordinary men and women were looking at one another's clothes and saying, 'How did you make that velvet? How did you weave that silk?' There was something very different going on at a cultural level, and certainly in literary terms they were listening to each other. That inclination of the imagination to listen in to others because they are going to tell you something you don't know is a real resource for stability and for co-existence. It's important in terms of creating mutual respect and interests, and I feel it is under-noticed, neglected. I was fortunate that my book *Stranger Magic* struck a chord.<sup>10</sup> People recognised something in it that could help now, could do something.

In 2016, I've been the Humanitas Weidenfeld Visiting Professor in Comparative European Literature at Oxford, and one of the themes of the lectures I gave was that many of us are living in a half-comprehending world, where we're all needing to learn. People speak a bit of this and a bit of that, and we have to muddle along together and make ourselves understood. I've become very interested in unintelligibility. I am in that situation myself when I look at Arabic. I can't read a word of Arabic, although until I was six I spoke kitchen Arabic.

**For migrants and refugees displaced from their homes and cultures, how important are stories?**

This was a theme of these lectures I've been giving. I am trying to suggest that the imaginative world we



5. Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form* (1985).  
 6. Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On fairy tales and their tellers* (1994).  
 7. Marina Warner, *The Leto Bundle* (2001).  
 8. In Marina Warner, *Fly Away Home* (2015).  
 9. *Scheherazade's Children: Global Encounters with the Arabian Nights*, edited by Philip F. Kennedy and Marina Warner (NYU Press, 2013).  
 10. Marina Warner, *Stranger Magic: Charmed States and the Arabian Nights* (2011).

carry inside us – which can be made up not only of words, but also of music, song, possibly certain ritual gestures – can help a little to alleviate the conditions of dislocation, evacuation, of being emptied of your past. The charity Bibliothèques Sans Frontières has said the average time in a refugee camp is 17 years. So if you become a refugee as a child of four, that's your life, that's the setting for what you're going to know. It's really important that the world inside the head is full of something beyond the immediate deprivation – that song, poetry, stories exist there too.

I'm working on a refugees and storytelling project. The idea is to persuade an NGO that it's important to have storytelling or cultural spaces in a refugee camp or 'reception centre'. For  $x$  number of people, there should be something of the kind.

I'm working on a project to have storytelling or cultural spaces in a refugee camp.

It was winning the Holberg Prize last year that made me want to do this.<sup>11</sup> They asked whether I had any plans for using the prize money. I began thinking up this plan. I hope it's going to bear fruit. But it's very complicated and difficult.

There are linguistic difficulties, obviously. The camps do naturally divide up according to ethnic groups and languages. In Sicily, where we are holding a workshop this September, I encountered 14 different languages. We're trying to face the problem of how you foster cultural memory within a community without a common language. We're looking at gesture, performance, mime, puppetry – different methods of carrying a story that aren't textually linguistic. The emphasis is on the people telling their own stories. But we want them to have more furniture to put in their stories – we want them to have a house they can build of their memories with more elements.

Alice Oswald is participating: she is a wonderful poet, but she is also very committed to these questions, and does a lot of translation/re-telling of classical myth. Tamim Al-Barghouti is involved: he is a Palestinian-Egyptian who is reviving the Arabic tradition of recitation, but is also interested in the mnemonic aspects of sharing poetry – it can give you a sense of home, 'a country of words', where you inhabit a familiar, larger music than the immediate meaning of the language.

**You're also interested in how stories can act as 'thought experiments in times of turmoil'. What do you mean by that?**

I am interested in well-known stories that don't exist in one textual form. Jane Austen's *Persuasion* is *Persuasion*. You could retell it with zombies – as is

now the fashion – and it might recognisably still be *Persuasion*. But on the whole, it's a text, and the commas matter. 'Bluebeard' is a very different thing. It manifests itself in a form that becomes very popular, like Charles Perrault's famous version, or in a film, but it's totally mobile, totally labile. It only needs certain elements and it still remains 'Bluebeard'. That is the metamorphic quality of the received tale.

A neater way of thinking of it is the difference between a story and a tale. The French word for a short story, *nouvelle*, and 'novella' and 'novel' are all terms that imply newness, originality – in contrast to a tale, which comes down through tradition. Of course, novels are thought experiments too. But those proverbial tales already exist as a kit, and the way you reassemble that kit gives you the chance to think out a different way of doing it. 'Bluebeard' has been rewritten many times, including by many women. I have proposed that it's about death in childbirth – that it confronts that danger and that very well grounded fear that marriage may be the death of you.

These tales constitute an inexhaustible treasury. When Italo Calvino made his collection of Italian folk tales in 1956,<sup>12</sup> what he was really thrilled by was the extraordinary variety. There's a repertory of recognisable themes and figures – the poor woodcutter's daughter, the trickster lad – but there are so many ingenious variations. For example, Calvino particularly liked the version of 'Bluebeard' in which the girl tricks him and brings her two sisters back to life – it's a joyous act of rebellion. We have allowed the range of tales to be attenuated. And there is a huge amount that has slipped from general consciousness. There is the Scandinavian material – the sagas and the myths – and the rich corpus of Irish and Celtic legends, which are very little known.

There is also a whole class of tales that are even more evidently thought experiments. Those are the ones that are about resisting power, and they are the most interesting ancient literature in the world. The so-called fables of Aesop actually originate in India earlier, and then manifest themselves in different forms over the world, including Africa. In the *Kalila Wa Dimna*, the Arabic version, they are parables about statecraft and power. They are thought experiments about justice. In the 'Arabian Nights', the princes who are deeply criticised for their violence and tyranny do resemble certain people today very recognisably – Assad or Putin. Unfortunately, while the stories understand, the abuses continue.

**So do these tales provide us with some sort of compensation mechanism?**

11. The Holberg Prize – established by the Norwegian Parliament in 2003, and named after the Danish-Norwegian writer Ludvig Holberg – is awarded annually to a scholar who has made outstanding contributions to research in the arts and humanities, social science, law or theology. The Prize amounts to 4.5 million Norwegian kroner.

12. Italo Calvino, *Fiabe Italiane* (1956).



In May 2015, Dame Marina Warner FBA introduced a week of British Academy events that explored the literary 'Other Worlds' of fairy tales and folk tales. Her book *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tale* is reissued in paperback in Summer 2016.

There are several ways in which it is a literature of consolation. Somehow understanding something, recognising it, gives one a sense of fulfilment of some kind. Aristotle noticed that. It's bizarre how one goes to tragedy and feels a bit better afterwards. He said that it was to do with seeing the mighty fallen, but I don't think it's that. I think the sense of order that a great tragedy imposes on the mess of existence gives one a certain kind of hope that maybe something can be redressed – that is Seamus Heaney's word and I like it.

I don't believe that Auden was right that 'poetry makes nothing happen'. Certain things *have* changed, and one should uphold literature as an instrument of that change. The great changes in our lifetime have included women's rights to equality in education above all, and gay rights. These major social changes arrived through legal measures. But those legal measures depended on changes in values and attitudes, and they happened through thinking and writing. Jane Austen wrote 'Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story ... the pen has been in their hands'. But she recognised that, and

There is a whole class of tales that are about resisting power, and they are the most interesting ancient literature in the world.

she helped set the path that put the pen in women's hands. And other women writers, thinkers and artists did so much work to get women educated. Voltaire grasped that making up fables – his *contes philosophiques* – would communicate his ideas far more widely than his essays.

### Why do we seem so interested today in stories about vampires and zombies? Are they also symbols for understanding our world?

Vampires and zombies are formidable cultural symbols. When zombies first emerged in the Caribbean in the 18th and 19th centuries, they were figures of the slave, driven by the slave owner and deprived of all being, of all will and sentience – shuffling around, completely zombified. But then they re-emerged in the 1960s, in George A. Romero's films as active, cannibalistic, vengeful. In Romero's vision they had taken on a totally different dynamic – the urban proletariat enraged with their lot.

Zombies and vampires are now a powerful expression of the difficulties the young are experiencing. They feel themselves to be part of a vampiric system in which they have been zombified. There are real difficulties of housing and expenses for the young. Their only way out of it is to become more cannibalistic than the next person. The job market is absolutely cutthroat.

There is also the broader question of the role of fantasy. One of the reasons that fantasy has gained such a purchase on us – and has become so extraordinarily fertile through so many systems of representations – is the underexplored state of our changing consciousness in the digital age. We are now capable of realising phantasms beyond any previous generation.<sup>13</sup> There are 3D glasses where you can live in a complete virtual world: you feel you are experiencing a reality. Our sense perceptions are no longer our only tools for understanding phenomena. We are now able to conjure phenomena that simply aren't there. But it's very little understood what effect it will have on us and our children.

I'd like to make a final point. When one is trying to talk in a scholarly way about fantasy or fairy tales, it is very easy to forget the part enjoyment plays, the important cultural dimensions of entertainment, which can lead to pleasure, laughter, sympathy and poignancy. That is also an important part of the way we are – imaginative, thinking beings, but also capable of fellow-feeling and of moving outside our own immediate experience. ♥♥

13. At a British Academy event in May 2011, Marina Warner discussed her 2006 book *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media*, in conversation with Professor Hermione Lee FBA. See *British Academy Review*, 18 (Summer 2011), 41–44.