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Opening Extract from...

THESE OUR MONSTERS

Written by **Various Authors**

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Introduction

James Kidd

'We will write our answers on paper, and when we return we shall compile the pages into a book.' *Fiona Mozley*

THE BOOK IN YOUR HAND one might imagine as the chronicle of a quest. Eight contemporary novelists – writers of a 21st-century Round Table, perhaps – picked one of eight points around England, each one preserved by English Heritage. As well as absorbing the atmosphere of their chosen site each was charged with recovering the history and folklore that over the centuries have enveloped that location.

The eight stories in this book are the records of those expeditions, which extend from Berwick Castle on the Anglo-Scottish border to Tintagel Castle on the south-west tip of England, from the 12th century to a more or less recognisable present day.

Some of the myths, legends and fairytales explored by the writers already enjoy rich artistic traditions: 600 years before Fiona Mozley resurrected Sir Gawain's encounter with Dame Ragnelle somewhere in the vicinity of Carlisle, Chaucer's Wife of Bath related it to her fellow pilgrims on the road to Canterbury. The arrival of Tristan and Iseult in Tintagel has inspired works by Thomas Malory in the 15th century and film director François

Truffaut in the 20th, the Victorian poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and the French composer Olivier Messiaen, the Bollywood director Subhash Ghai and (now) Adam Thorpe. While in Whitby, Bram Stoker channelled his adventures into his seminal novel *Dracula* (1897), as Graeme Macrae Burnet's story reminds us, little suspecting how contagious vampirism would prove. The Count's heirs, including that in Macrae Burnet's story, continue, numerous and infamous: the German horror *Nosferatu* (1922); Bela Lugosi's embodiment in the 1931 film; *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; Elizabeth Kostova's novel *The Historian* (2005). Others (*Dracula 3D* and *Dracula: Dead and Loving It* spring to mind) would probably have Stoker turning in his grave.

Others in this collection are of more elusive provenance, such as the dancing hare goddess of Salisbury Plain, where Stonehenge stands, who persistently evades the rapt attention of Paul Kingsnorth's narrator in 'Goibert of the Moon'. Similarly the evil 'Redcaps' of Sarah Moss's story, which might be defined as familiars haunting Berwick Castle, among other places on the English–Scottish border, but which were unfamiliar to me.

Together they provide a vivid mosaic of England's pasts and presents. Many of the stories explicitly layer history upon history, folklore upon folklore, rather as the Whitby cliffs formed of millennia's worth of ammonites and alum in Macrae Burnet's story, or the 12th-century origins of Tristan and Iseult refracted through the cut-glass voices of Thorpe's early 20th-century teenagers ('What a lark', Louisa cries) who themselves refract the star-crossed lovers through the stained-glass 19th-century medievalism of Tennyson, the Pre-Raphaelites and William Morris.

The moods of the eight stories are similarly eclectic, by turns comic or uncanny, absurd or scholarly, angry or fanciful, unsettling or poignant. Horror rubs shoulders with tender, if tragic, family portraits. Romances cosy up to accounts of psychological breakdown. An almost Blytonesque celebration of youthful friendship dances around studies of isolation and loneliness.

Navigating this diversity presents the reader with a quest of their own. But what might their goal be? As Mozley's story 'The

Loathly Lady' reminds us, quests, no matter how dizzying in scale and scope, are often launched by a single question. That in her own Arthurian update is the perpetually challenging: 'what do women want?' Just in case the task wasn't difficult enough, failure to answer this question satisfactorily results in literal loss of face (or head). Fortunately for Arthur and his sidekick Gawain, there *is* an answer, although it comes with a price, for the handsome Gawain at least: he must marry Dame Ragnelle, undisputed winner of the 15th century's 'most repulsive creature in the known world' competition.

This is not merely the punchline of Mozley's shaggy dog myth; it makes a trial of Gawain's new-found knowledge. Was Dame Ragnelle's secret merely the means to avoid losing one's head? Or did Gawain actually learn something?

What Mozley wittily demonstrates is that the answer, true enlightenment, is inextricable from the quest itself. Wisdom cannot simply be imparted in a few words, but requires effort, by turns physical, intellectual and emotional. Gawain progresses from a state of bafflement and panic about women's desires towards genuine empathy with a perspective that his own chivalric code habitually objectifies, after its own sexist fashion, as alien, comical and, Mozley suggests, *mythical*: 'It is an impossible task; an absurd question without an answer,' that chivalric code initially considers. 'It is a nothing, a nowhere, a never.'

Gawain's journey from this state of bewilderment towards practical, everyday knowledge is mirrored by the reader as they translate the seemingly remote courtly preoccupations into our own time, with its adherence to wealth, privilege and patriarchy. Mozley encourages the recognition of the similarity in the playful opening, which juxtaposes the original 15th-century poem 'The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle' with an aside in something like Mozley's own cheeky, sceptical voice: '*Lythe and listenythe the lif of a lord riche* (was there ever another kind?)'.

But to return to the question of the reader's quest, and the question that might spark it: perhaps it is to find what holds these stories together, what they all have in common? But is it

even possible to piece together such different times, places and folklore into some kind of wholeness? Bold as such a challenge might be, the pursuit of unity is the very stuff of folklore, at least according to JRR Tolkien, who, in his 1931 poem 'Mythopoeia' defined myth-making humanity as:

> *the refracted light*
> *through whom is splintered from a single White*
> *to many hues, and endlessly combined*
> *in living shapes that move from mind to mind.*

For Tolkien, mythic works provide glimpses of a distant perfection: to 'renew/from mirrored truth the likeness of the True'. Something similar has befallen folklore as a whole, which has itself broken into three 'mirrors' or forms of human truth: myth, legend, fairytale.

Myths, it is generally agreed, possess a spiritual, or even religious character, and narrate foundational stories in which the mortal world is determined by fate, personified by divine powers. The act of creation can be a nation or a flower, an echo or an entire universe, but it leaves few in any doubt about a supernatural or fictional element. To quote the 17th-century polymath Sir Thomas Browne, they 'containeth impossibilities, and things inconsistent with truth', that is, the hard truth of science.

Legends, by and large, have a surer footing in reality, or at least were once believed to be the real histories of real people, within, or nearly within, human memory – King Arthur, for instance. But as Mozley's Arthur remembers, the act of telling, re-telling and re-re-telling a particular legend over time casts it into a liminal space where fact and fiction merge, rather like the puns on *world*, *woods* and *would* do in Mozley's writing: 'Arthur is everything and nothing, has everything, has no one, wants (for) nothing, desires a world. He is boy-king, man-boy, woods-man. He is king of these woods; he is a king who would.'

Fairytales, by contrast, are not concerned with gods and the origins of worlds, or with an at-least possible human history. They

have no qualms intruding fantastic beasts and magical beings on everyday reality. This is one reason, perhaps, why they have a reputation as stories intended for children – unfairly, according to Tolkien, as Théoden, King of the Rohan in *The Lord of the Rings*, puts it: 'Songs we have that tell of these things, but we are forgetting them, teaching them only to children, as a careless custom. And now the songs have come down among us out of strange places, and walk visible under the Sun.'

For Tolkien's contemporary the philosopher Walter Benjamin fairytales were nothing less than humanity's true foundational stories: 'The first true storyteller is, and will continue to be, the teller of fairy tales.' The reason, he continued, was because they liberated humanity from 'the nightmare which the myth had placed upon its chest'. Avoiding the 12 volumes that would be required to unpack Benjamin's ideas on the subject, suffice it to say fairytales encourage human agency in the face of mythical fate: 'The wisest thing – so the fairy tale taught mankind in olden times, and teaches children to this day – is to meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning and with high spirits.'

But whatever the differences between myth, legend and fairy-tale, they share an intimate relationship with the broadly fictional or unreal, which is one answer to the question of what they hold in common. Another is perhaps consequent upon it. For if this slipperiness makes folklore's three major forms tricky to pin down, it does suggest a shared quality that allows them to glide so fluidly through history. If they are not bound by fact, they are not bound by time, either. 'Time slipped and slid around him, unanchored by any fact that could be verified. Perhaps it did not matter.' This is the journalist, critic and poet Ann Wroe writing about myth's greatest crooner, Orpheus. As if to prove her point, she immediately quotes Jean Cocteau's 1950 film, *Orphée*: 'Where does our story take place, and when? … It's the privilege of legends to be ageless. *Comme il vous plaira*. As you please.'

Folklore's easy indifference to time's usual boundaries – 'As you please' – is celebrated by William Morris in the prologue of *The Earthly Paradise*:

So let me sing of names remembered,
Because they, living not, can ne'er be dead,
Or long time take their memory quite away
From us poor singers of an empty day.

'Because they, living not, can ne'er be dead': it's not difficult to make the leap from Mozley's perpetually conditional Arthur (the 'king who would') across Morris's 'names remembered' towards Count Dracula, who haunts Graeme Macrae Burnet's ominous account of Bram Stoker's visit to Whitby in 1890 – about two decades after Morris began his epic verse adaptation of Greek and Scandinavian myths.

Dracula could be Morris's vision of folklore made flesh (albeit strangely pale): three of the Count's more celebrated powers are his ability to transcend time, defy gravity and change form (from a wolf to a mist to a bat). And while not invulnerable (daylight *can* wreak its revenge), he can regenerate himself by spreading his disease and – in some of the more outlandish adaptations by being resurrected.

In Macrae Burnet's allegory of folklore creation and transmission, Dracula is even more insubstantially fictional: he appears unformed as the spark of an idea, inspiration-in-progress, the glint-in-the-writer's-eye. The 'vampire who would'. His presence isn't seen so much as insinuated through prophetic hints, innuendos and subliminal shivers: 'I felt the blood coagulate in my veins'; 'He has quite turned day into night'; 'and yet when I gaze into the glass I see only myself'.

This pliable draft of the Count's own pliable character is reflected by that of Bram Stoker himself, who arrives in Whitby exhausted, paranoid and 'on the cusp of losing my reason.' This is personified by the 'shadow' that pursues his nocturnal walks through the town. The prime candidate for this 'Horror' is Stoker's Henry Irving: 'I fear that Mr Irving has drained all his reserves of energy and there is nothing left for his wife. In the evening he comes alive a little.' Others include Stoker's own unsteady mental health and his confused, repressed sexuality.

What is really possessing Bram Stoker is vampiric folklore itself: the tales of the Irish Dearg-due told by his mother, Charlotte, the leaches applied by doctor Uncle William and his boss at Dublin's *Evening Mail*, Sheridan le Fanu, author of the famous vampire story *Carmilla*. These are just a few of the forms of folklore that drift from one generation to the next, enticing willing victims (or readers) who, if they fell under its spell, might pass it on, to misquote Tolkien, 'in *undead shapes* that move from mind to mind'.

The tricky question of Stoker's originality, not to mention his sanity, is neatly summarised by the line: 'Whether this Horror is real or merely the handiwork of my imagination I cannot say.' What Macrae Burnet is also emphasising is how Dracula's lifeblood is really stories, transfused from one mind to another. What American shock-master Chuck Palahniuk writes about in his novel *Choke* (2001): 'The unreal is more powerful than the real, because nothing is as perfect as you can imagine it, because it's only intangible ideas, concepts, beliefs, fantasies that last. Stone crumbles, wood rots. People, well, they die. But things as fragile as a thought, a dream, a legend, they can go on and on.'

What Mozley and Macrae Burnet propose is that folklore's forms endure, paradoxically, through flux and persist through transformation. Dracula might be Bela Lugosi, Christopher Lee, Gary Oldman and, well, Leslie Nielsen, but he is always Dracula. 'Time slipped and slid around him, unanchored by any fact that could be verified.'

What might all this entail for that vastest of concepts: truth? What happens when folklore, with its 'impossibilities, and things inconsistent with truth', sits beside fact – and its science, history? It is perhaps a particularly vexed question for our own multivalent, cut-and-paste, post (post (post?)) modernist age of remixing, fake news and virtual reality.

There are certainly many examples of history's material facts in all eight of the stories, not least in the buildings, monuments and sites themselves that provide such atmospheric backdrops: 'The eastern gable of the ancient Abbey, devoid of any protec-

tion from the elements, thrust above the horizon like the craggy eminences of the Carpathians' ('The Dark Thread'). The stone circle in Sarah Hall's 'The Hand Under the Stone', each stone with 'bumps, smooth bits, scrapes and chips; each has mountain-copied shapes, like the Castlerigg stones, flat-topped, saddle-backed, peaky; each is booming over or is still upright, has beardy moss or sparkle crystals inside'.

Instead of being monolithic still lives, these testaments to historical endurance are fragile and mutable, and bear the marks of time's passing: Whitby's roofless abbey; the pockmarks in Hall's stones; or the ruins of Tintagel which Thorpe describes as 'like any other ruins: heaps of stone blocks loosely cemented together by a sort of ancient, crumbling mortar into precarious walls, chunks bitten out of them like traces of hungry rats in cheese'.

Of course, what time takes away, modernity also restores and rebuilds. In 'Breakynecky', Moss describes the worn stone steps leading to Berwick Castle, which once 'used to stand implacable against the sky, turreted like the stained-glass Jerusalem in the church windows'. Its current crumbling state is now emphasised by a later bridge, a 'miracle of Victorian engineering', and the even more recent construction work by 'yellow-jacketed men' and their 'yolk-yellow machine hammers'. The perilous climb to Tintagel has been eased, in places, by a 'new, cemented footpath' served by a 'hand-rail that saved any foolhardy visitors from slipping over'.

This ebb and flow is nonetheless grounded in material reality, in the verifiable facts that anchor history. And if historians are a nation's official biographers, then the storytellers of myth, legend and fairytale are their weird, wild and rakishly enticing older siblings, free to channel the 'vivid flashes' of ancient violence that assault Louisa's imagination in Thorpe's 'Capture' or to hear the whispers of Hall's stone circle.

As Graeme Macrae Burnet shows us, folklore can transform even history's most solid and prosaic artefact into gateways to other worlds and dimensions. Whitby, the unlikely and 'tranquil'

town where Bram Stoker discovers his vampiric anti-hero, becomes 'no less than a portal: a gateway to these islands for those shape-shifting blood-suckers designated around the globe as Strigoi, Estries, Jiangshi or Vampyres'.

These different ways to account for Truth are explored by Alison MacLeod in her story 'Great Pucklands', whose opening fuses the language of fairytale with cutting-edge science: 'At the tangled edge, where bright meadow meets dark wood, hunchbacked fairies stitch the fabric of life … Bent over their work, they cut, splice and sew with algorithmic speed. Chromosomes split, fray and are re-stitched.'

MacLeod's story is itself a crazy paving tangle of stories, each with its own very different claims on truth. Charles Darwin's developing theory of evolution, which can be summarised by the recognition that 'We are all netted together', sits fondly beside the vivid, fairytale imagination of his nine-year-old daughter Annie, who daydreams that 'hunchbacked fairies stitch the fabric of life'. These ideas can be weighed beside the Christian beliefs of Darwin's wife, Emma, before being set against the poignant biography of the family as a whole.

The resulting hotchpotch map of the many ways in which humans account for their inheritances and heritage is present in Annie Darwin's 'Equations of Ancestry', drawn in imitation of her father's 'lines of inheritance'. So, a brief encounter with 'old carpenter' Alfred Greenleaf, who has 'what looked like a tree-burr growing from his cheek', inspires this equation: 'Conifers – woody flowering plants – Oak Trees – Alfred Greenleaf.'

Annie's hope that fairy wings beat among the bees in Great Pucklands meadow, besides her home at Down House, prompts this observation: '"Larva – Pupa – Slug – Winged Insect – Winged Fairy – Hominin – Human." Fairies and people shared a line of inheritance. Her Equation proved it.'

MacLeod's smart joke is that the amused jolt most readers feel on reaching 'Winged Fairy' would be mild when compared to the utter disbelief that Darwin's *Origin of the Species* would have engendered in 1850, when MacLeod's story is set.

What is more outlandish: the idea that bees have fairy 'bodies sticky with pollen' or the notion that 'The bat's wing … was related to the porpoise's fin and the horse's leg, and all three were related to the human hand'? A full 70 years later, Arthur Conan Doyle was happy to believe the photographs of the so-called Cottingley Fairies, while Darwin's theories are still disputed by many as fiction, much as his wife did at the time: 'Her [Annie's] mother had explained to her that God made all the animals on the Sixth Day of Creation.'

The search for Truth now presents an obstacle. One interpretation of MacLeod's nicely ambiguous conclusion is that fairy-tales offer a fantasy evasion of, if not an escape from, the difficult human truths Darwin was investigating – the ones that lead him to write secretly, 'Old Testament God, vengeful tyrant. Not First Cause', and that prompted 'palpitations and cold, sweaty skin' and possibly undermined his marriage.

This presents a turning point in the reader's quest. In one direction, folklore offers humanity a glimpse of perfection. In the other, it beats a retreat from the contemporary, the modern. In one direction: 'Revolution or Evolution.' In the other: 'Re-evolution.' One might turn again to Tolkien's 'Mythopoeia', whose most conservative declaration takes an explicit swipe at Darwin:

I will not walk with your progressive apes,
erect and sapient. Before them gapes
the dark abyss to which their progress tends –
if by God's mercy progress ever ends,
and does not ceaselessly revolve the same
unfruitful course with changing of a name.

Anyone looking for evidence of Tolkien as a conservative, fuddy-duddy luddite, hopelessly nostalgic for remote antiquity, need look no further. Having blessed the 'legend-makers with their rhyme/Of things nor found within record time,' he says:

It is not they that have forgot the Night,

or bid us flee to organised delight,
in lotus-isles of economic bliss
forswearing souls to gain a Circe-kiss
(and counterfeit at that, machine-produced,
bogus seduction of the twice-seduced).

One hears echoes of this voice in the narrator of Kingsnorth's 'Goibert of the Moon' as he gazes across Salisbury Plain: 'In my mind's eye I see the plain in the times before industry. The hills of yellow grass and green, rolling to a far horizon. The skies clear, the only sounds the birds, the sheep, the wind. Sometimes I curse my mind's eye for what it shows me. All of the unreachable things.'

Unreachable, that is, except through folklore's visions of the hare goddess dancing beneath the moon near Imber, on Salisbury Plain. Such access occurs through a cloud of unknowing, by forgetting the conscious and intellectual mind. Kingsnorth's narrator defines his childhood attraction to 'Anything primitive or superstitious, any pre-modern notion which cannot be double-blind tested' as 'anything dismissed by the educated as whimsy, stupidity, foolishness'.

Compare this again to Tolkien describing his own faith in folklore: a 'basic passion of mine *ab initio* was for myth (not allegory!) and for fairy-story, and above all for heroic legend on the brink of fairy-tale and history, of which there is far too little in the world (accessible to me) for my appetite'. As Tolkien argued in 1936, this passion and appetite were beyond intellectual understanding: 'The significance of a myth is not easily to be pinned on paper by analytical reasoning … For myth is alive at once and in all its parts, and dies before it can be dissected.'

This too resounds in the voice of Kingsnorth's speaker: 'The more educated a person is, the less they can really see. When the educated look at hares, if they ever do, they do not see the dance under the moon.' The 'educated' are not alone in the narrator's derision – he pours scorn on the mother reducing the hare to an infantile 'bunny', on chocolate rabbits at Easter and on modern

Pagans wandering the Downs waving 'their incense sticks and magic crystals'.

Beneath this pomposity is a deep emotional attachment to this particular folklore and its own attachment to this place. Kingsnorth dramatizes this through a later version of the myth, in which Albert Nash, the last blacksmith at Imber, has been forced to vacate the land his family inhabited for generations. On the eve of his departure, Albert sees a vision under the full moon, whose desolate beauty provides a form of release. There is only the narrator's word for any of this: 'I can prove nothing.' But this conviction itself proves how the dancing hare has become something like an article of faith: 'I believe that the hare appears to the grieving, to the worthy, to the lost in soul and body. I believe it comes when it is needed.'

The worthy, it hardly needs adding, just happen to include anyone excluded from society's 'educated' mainstream: 'The lost in soul and body,' which even includes those silly modern Pagans who 'are lost like everyone else', he says in a moment of fleeting charity. 'But why is it necessary to dress up like vampires?'

Again, one can find in Tolkien the same deep solace and even salvation that Kingsnorth's narrator finds in folklore. After the death of his wife, Tolkien wrote to his son Christopher to explain why he inscribed the name of his own mythical character Lurien on her grave. 'I shall never write any ordered biography … It is against my nature, which expresses itself about the things deepest felt in tales and myths.'

But what kind of consolation is being provided? Ageing, lonely and increasingly out of step with the world around him, Kingsnorth's narrator is happy to proclaim himself one of the lost. Yet does folklore achieve anything other than estrangement from modernity? 'There is a darkness about this world. It is wiser to live alone. Stay silent, walk with your head down. Speak only when spoken to. That way, many of life's arrows may miss you, if you are lucky.'

To be fair to Tolkien, 'Mythopoeia' is an expression of private feelings expressed in a private conversation: the poem wouldn't

be published until 1964. Its boldness and even defiance was inspired by a debate between Tolkien, fellow academic Hugo Dyson and fellow academic/fantasy-superstar-in-waiting CS Lewis. Despite his recent conversion to Christianity, Lewis was still struggling to understand, among other things, the meaning and purpose of the Crucifixion. Tolkien countered by noting Lewis had no such qualms over similar sacrificial stories in, say, Norse myth, which prompted Lewis to make a famous counter-counter: 'But myths are *lies*, even though lies breathed through silver.'

'Silver' is striking. It conveys the beauty Lewis admits to finding in folklore, while also hinting at its treacherous seductions: a nod perhaps towards Judas Iscariot, not inconceivable given the subject at hand?

The reader's quest presents another trial. For folklore's siren call runs through this present collection too. Moss captures its disorientating allure in those who yearn to hurl themselves from Berwick Castle: who 'long, privately, at the backs of their minds, for a little breakynecky. The general public who yearn, just occasionally, for the vertiginous, for gravity, who crave a slip, a flight, a final snap and smash, whose feet know the way to the edge.'

The superstitious villagers in Edward Carey's 'These Our Monsters' fear their own superstitions but cannot help but sneak a peek: 'Of a general we say no to magicals and satanicals both. True, it does come dark here longtimes and we sit in in the blackness with our little firelights and our weak candlesuns and then sometimes we do wonder about those other things but then in the mornings we always come straight again.'

The pregnant potential of Carey's 'True' is picked up by Hall in 'The Hand Under the Stone': 'Sometimes it's better to not know when something is true. People, including grown-ups, spend a lot of time pretending, to make life easier.' This is Monica, whose preference for writing her name backwards characterises her own folkloric estrangement from her reality. Only, what she believes as 'true' are the myths surrounding the nearby stone circles, which are not simply '*like* a person' (my italics) but actually *are* a group of women, who were punished by a 'wizard

who also believed in God' for having a party when they should have been in church. Monica can hear the stone-women whisper to her, something even her Aunty Ro, one of the 'circle-worshippers' who leave ritual offerings in the circle before Christmas, smirks at.

For Monica, an outsider like Paul Kingsnorth's narrator, this capacity to beggar orthodox belief is initially central to folklore's attraction: 'You think about the magical stories, men and women changed, because something in them was different, and they wouldn't follow rules, because they upset people.'

Hall's moving twist is to wonder whether Monica is sublimating her complicated feelings about her brother TJ, whose fragile mental health has cast him further and further to the margins of society. Her belief in the power of the stone circle expresses her increasingly futile hope that TJ can return as the brother she dimly remembers.

Like Macrae Burnet's Bram Stoker, Hall's story deftly mediates between the present and the past, the mind and the body, pretence and cold reality. Hall's crushing final note of almost literal disenchantment is present from the start of Moss's 'Breaky-necky', which is perhaps unique in demythologising any form of redemption or even consolation from her admittedly menacing choice of myth. Moss's 21st-century version of the Redcaps who terrorised anyone trespassing the Anglo-Scottish borders starts with a warning fit for a Redcap: 'If you are thinking of leaving, you should probably go soon.'

This, it's soon clear, is no evil sprite, but Mary, a grieving soul stranded far from her homeland: 'It's not my sea. Between the passing of trains, it can sound like home.' Together with her husband, Séan, she fled Ireland destroyed by famine ('There will not be many memorials, at home. Starvation is not heroic.') to find work building 'Mr Stephenson's' bridge across the Tweed.

Granted, there are intimations that the borders exert a special, almost otherworldly appeal for what Kingsnorth called 'the lost in soul and body', like Mary and Séan: 'We restless ones mass, sometimes, there at the hinge point, the portal where the sea

touches the river and the bridge strikes the land.' There are hints too of folkloric transgression of ancient sensitivities. Mary frets about 'disturbing, the ancient ones who were still there when the navvies came with their dynamite and picks'. To which Séan replies ominously: 'sure these are men of science, Mary, none of that', before marvelling at the trains that will make return journeys between Edinburgh and London in a single day.

But Mary now knows better. Experience has taught that the frightening folktales about the 'old man in the tell-tale red cap who lures travellers to his cellar in bad weather' are simply a cover-up for English xenophobia: 'They consecrate their homes with strangers' blood in this land.' Moss's blunt depiction of how an empire remembers its own dead, while exploiting the migrant workers, refugees and slaves who increase its profits, removes any varnish the Redcap fable might provide: 'The English made our men build roads, even when they could barely stand for hunger and it took hours to move a few rocks.' Mary's terse, bitter conclusion seems an act of folkloric atheism that transforms myth into allegory: 'Stones should not fly. Rock is not meant for the air.'

This might be the bleakest moment on the reader's quest, but it isn't over yet. What Moss's story does suggest is a complex and unstable relationship between history and folklore. In CS Lewis's *The Last Battle*, Jewel the unicorn gives a little Narnian history lesson to Jill: 'He said that the Sons and Daughters of Adam and Eve were brought out of their own strange world into Narnia only at times when Narnia was stirred and upset, but she mustn't think it was always like that.'

Lewis's implication, that myth is of most use during periods of national or global turmoil, is borne out by the story of Lewis's friend Tolkien. Born in South Africa at the end of the 19th century, Tolkien was shaped by family tragedy (the early deaths of both parents), constant relocations, religious schism (his Baptist mother's controversial conversion to Catholicism) and two global conflicts: the First World War, which he experienced first-hand at the Somme, and its sequel, which is more or less the period during which he produced both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

Take 1936, the year in which Tolkien delivered the British Academy's annual Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture. Entitled '*Beowulf*: The Monster and the Critics', this was his boldest public articulation of his faith in folklore. One can imagine Tolkien as a dashing knight, shinning down his ivory tower and riding single-handed to save a poem-in-distress (*Beowulf*) from a horde of nasty scholar-beasts, otherwise known as Tolkien's fellow Anglo-Saxon academics.

The specific cause of Sir Tolkien's dispute with the Anglo-Saxon scholars was their savaging of *Beowulf*'s subject matter. While even his most demonic foe (Tolkien respectfully names WP Ker) praised the 'dignity' and 'loftiness' of *Beowulf*'s prosody, his complaint was that it was squandered on such a trashy tale: 'The thing itself is cheap,' Ker concluded primly. Ker and his fellows believed that 'the heroic or tragic story on a strictly human plane is by nature superior'.

But this rather begs the question, superior to what? Enter Tolkien, defender of myth, legend and fairytale: 'Correct and sober taste may refuse to admit that there can be an interest for *us* – the proud *we* that includes all intelligent living people – in ogres and dragons; they perceive its puzzlement in face of the odd fact that it has derived great pleasure from a poem that is actually about these unfashionable creatures.'

The significance of Tolkien's *Beowulf* lecture owes something to its proximity to the completion of *The Hobbit*, which also climaxed with a battle between men (and, yes, Elves, a Wizard and a Hobbit) and a dragon. But 1936 was unusually volatile even by the standards of that most volatile decade: the Spanish Civil War, Hitler's annexation of the Rhineland and Italy's of Ethiopia, Stalin's Purges, Japan's increasing militarism, the anti-comintern pact with Germany and Italy, the Berlin Olympics, the death of George v and Edward viii's abdication crisis.

Such an apocalyptic context might pose a rather different question about folkloric escapism, which is: why not? Or as Dickens wrote, in a light-hearted, but serious admonition to the caricaturist George Cruikshank: 'In a utilitarian age, of all other

times, it is a matter of grave importance that fairy tales should be respected' (*Frauds on the Fairies*, 1853). Dickens's beef with his old friend concerned Cruikshank's injecting of Temperance propaganda into a series of fairytales, a form that above all others should be free of such worldly sermonising: 'The Vicar of Wakefield [in Oliver Goldsmith's novel] was wisest when he was tired of being always wise. The world is too much with us, early and late. Leave this precious old escape from it, alone.'

One can find a Tolkienesque parallel in the American hippies who flocked to *The Lord of the Rings* in the 1960s and found the 'pipeweed' of the Hobbits conducive to dropping out of mainstream society. But what made Tolkien's work such a cultural force as well as a commercial success was its simultaneous appeal to the politically engaged: the feminist, civil rights and anti-Vietnam movements which tuned into Tolkien's portrait of a small, pastoral, anti-capitalist rebellion defeating a vast, industrialised war machine. 'Frodo Lives!' and 'Gandalf for President!' became favourite slogans of the Counter-Culture, much to Tolkien's public disapproval: 'Many American fans enjoy the books in a way which I do not.'

Similar instability would be reproduced just in time for Peter Jackson's film adaptation of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, whose first screenings occurred only weeks after September 11th. Writing about this experience a decade later, Christopher Borelli of the *Chicago Tribune* recalled the 'queasy jolt of immediacy, a chill of recognition' delivered by Cate Blanchett's mournful recitation of the film's opening lines, 'The world is changed. I feel it in the water. I feel it in the earth. I smell it in the air.'

Similar, if dimly felt, earthquakes produce Carey's astonishing 'These Our Monsters'. Drawing on a 12th-century legend of two green children that appeared by the Wolfpits near Bury St Edmunds, Carey's story feels like a Hammer House of Comedy narrated by Gollum crossed with Alf Garnett.

One can read the story as a tart and timely satire on racism. 'Our skin, to make all right clear, is like any other,' Carey's narrator says, meaning pink, before proceeding chaotically on. 'A little

darker in the summer when the sun gets at it and whiter in winter like unto the bones, yes, when it is the winter and the old die before the warm comes back again. Yellowish on occasion due to a sickness, a little blueish if the cold is biting hard. But usual pink like the English we are.'

This reading of the two green children intersects deftly with another: their appearance exposes how the village's sense of community relies on its being hermetically sealed from the outside world: 'We are from here, Suffolk everyone. Been to Bury Saint Edmonds, many of us. Not to London. Not one among us. It is a big place sure. We cannot say what happens there. Not our business. We have no place in it. We do not care for it and seek it not.'

Carey's careful distribution of negatives throughout the story presents an abstract form of clarity ('We' and 'here' versus 'there' and 'not') that is simply impossible to maintain. Some of these doubts are already being voiced. Take the technological marvel that is the abbey in far-off Bury St Edmunds: 'Our first impossible strange thing. But man done it, bit by bit. Took a while. It looks impossible and yet, we have to think about this …'

This tremor is followed by the earthquake that is the two children – 'otherness' in supernaturally verdant forms. Suddenly, it isn't just Suffolk that is under assault, but the fabric of reality itself: 'GOBLINS ARE TRUE. LOOK, LOOK: WE HAVE GREEN! WE HAVE GOBLINS AT HOME. Goblins in August. Goblins on a Thursday. Some time between two and three are we having goblins.'

The wild mood grows wilder still as the villagers' certainties are eroded still further in the ensuing frenzy, culminating in questions whose terrifying irrationality resist any laughter: 'But are they children, we wonder? Do we kill children? We think, no, on the whole.'

The reader, hopefully, can maintain a cool-enough head to see that the impossible infant monsters are inventions made entirely of the villagers' own monstrous disbelief, which gallops from astonishment to fear to homicidal hatred. 'Though they are no longer in our village, still we think on them. And we do wonder over them. The wondering, you see, comes back thick and fast.'

This is not the first time that the fantastical visions of folklore have been generated by inner turmoil: see Macrae Burnet's Bram Stoker and Hall's Monica. How many of the myths, legends and fairytales here concern interior mysteries of mind and feeling that are manifested in external forms? This question is perhaps the final answer in the reader's quest, the search for what these eight stories share: the imagination.

In Tolkien's 1936 lecture it was the quality of imagination that he found in the much-maligned dragon in *Beowulf*. 'A dragon is no idle fancy. Whatever may be his origins, in fact or invention, the dragon in legend is a potent creation of men's imagination, richer in significance than his barrow of gold.' The dragon that confronts Beowulf at the end of his own epic quest is, Tolkien concludes, 'A thing made by the imagination for just such a purpose.'

Almost every writer in this book invents a similar 'thing made by the imagination' for their own purposes – the undead 'Horror' haunting Bram Stoker, the beautiful princess in Dame Ragnelle's clothing, the two green children breaking down the walls of a Suffolk village.

In Thorpe's 'Capture', these are the 'vivid flashes' that assault Louisa in the midst of a day whose unexceptional surfaces hide folkloric promise: 'clouds of cerulean blue billowing out like the myth of a Cornish summer.' Like Stoker, Hall's Monica or Kingsnorth's narrator, Louisa is unusually susceptible to the visions vouchsafed by legend: 'huge men covered in dark plates clanking and shouting, the occasional limb sliced through, blood jetting out onto the grass which sprouted on the broken walls as well as underfoot'.

These flashes are vivid enough to transform the otherwise stable reality surrounding Tintagel Castle into something ethereal, intangible, unreal: 'The rushing clouds had brought a giddiness that, completely to her surprise, seemed to be physically forcing her legs away from the vertical and towards some nebulous state that appeared attracted to the waves below.'

Although she is accused of being 'too thoroughly trapped in modern times', Louisa bears witness to ancient scenes that

terrify, disorientate and thrill. Suddenly, she believes a *'corner'* of all things 'was pursuing her on thin legs, even though she was going nowhere'. Folkloric imagination shakes time as well as space: turning a short afternoon into an entire 'lifetime'.

Here perhaps is the rejoinder to those opponents of Tolkien who would relegate folklore to a reactionary form. The sheer, unwavering persistence of myth, legend and fairytale across history offers insight not only into the past but the future too. Having predated us by many thousands of years, folklore will in all likelihood outlive us too, something Louisa senses in the apocalyptic vision of England itself crumbling into the sea: 'Louisa imagined the entire promontory as being swept free of people, followed by the rest of the island of Britain, and then terra firma in general.'

While the land may vanish, its heritage will live on, even if only through the stories passed on of its history, its people and its folklore: the young lovers whose feelings collapse centuries, the whispers heard around magical stone circles, the shadowy creatures of the night that tap at our windows, the ghostly children that symbolise a world, and even a universe, beyond our borders.

All of this, and more besides, has been dreamed up by the eight writers who visited just eight sites around England. Now that they have been recorded in this book, the stories can begin to live all over again.