

Jules Watson interview on mythology with Bantam's Spectra Pulse magazine

What first turned you on to Celtic mythology?

As a child I read books such as *The Dark is Rising* series by Susan Cooper, Alan Garner's Welsh books, and Lloyd Alexander's *Taran* series — these were all steeped in Celtic folklore and mythology. Even though I grew up in Australia, when I read these books everything in them felt deeply right and familiar. As I devoured book after book, I was being transported back to a world I somehow knew, but from which I felt I had been separated. I yearned for it, as something I had lost and grieved for, and needed to recapture.

It didn't make sense, surrounded by the baking heat, flies and beaches of my home, and yet it was an instinct deep in my soul. I longed for the adventures of magic and mystery, the fight of good against evil, and even the landscapes of snow and mountains, misty green hills and lakes. However, looking back, what really drew me was the mixture of dark and light that so characterizes Celtic myth. Soaring moments of great nobility, sacrifice and courage are always cut through by great tragedy (a speciality of the Celts) and the dark side of life: betrayal, grief and death. I still find these extremes of human emotion stirring, thrilling and strangely satisfying. I loved being deeply moved like that, and it's something I aim for today as a writer — other elements in a book matter less to me, as long as I am being transported with the characters along those arcs of joy and swoops of sorrow. Although Tolkien used elements of myth that were not purely Celtic, as a whole *The Lord of the Rings* entrances people for the same reason: we love to feel involved in these enormous, world-changing events, to plunge into the depths of pain while witnessing courage and acts of love and sacrifice. It's addictive!

There is also a strong element of fate in Celtic stories, which gives rise to prophecies, and characters being drawn into unavoidable destinies. I had an unhappy childhood, and so the idea that perhaps I could secretly be bound by a mysterious fate that would one day come and sweep me away was comforting. It suggested that this reality I saw about me might be hiding another world: a place of magical beings, and brave deeds, and things that really mattered. It might mean that there was some grand plan after all, and one day I would discover that *I* mattered, that there was a great and mysterious fate underlying it all, in which I could play a part. J. K. Rowling also used this idea to great effect in *Harry Potter*.

***The Swan Maiden*, the first book in your new series, is about Deirdre, the “Irish Helen of Troy.” Why did you choose to write about this particular heroine?**

The story of Deirdre has always been my favourite myth. This is *the* original story of star-crossed lovers separated by a cruel world, a theme of which humans are so enamoured it has echoed down the ages in the tales of Romeo and Juliet, Helen and Paris of Troy, Tristan and Isolde, and Guinevere and Lancelot. We are transfixed by the idea that a love could be so strong that a couple would defy all the rules of family and society to pursue it; that they would give up belonging, safety and status, revelling only in each

other, unable to be separated even by death. It's that defiance against those who would seek to destroy us that sits at the heart of so many great stories.

As far as tragedies go, this is also the “big one”. It has all the elements that make up the most riveting adventures — escapes and chases, battles and near-misses, and terrible twists of fate and destiny. But more than that, it encapsulates the most rousing of human emotions: the wonder of an unbreakable love, the sorrow of betrayal and death, the yearning for great acts of courage and sacrifice. People first made up stories as oral tales to be recited around a fire on a stormy night, and the best have the “ooh” and “aah” factor as the audience is thrilled and dismayed in turn — Deirdre is a great *ooh* and *aah* tale.

The other, more writerly reason I *had* to write this book was that these Irish myths set in the pagan Iron Age were only written down much later when society in Ireland and Great Britain had changed. Christianity had brought a new world-view, and the only literate people were monks. So these great Celtic heroines were suddenly being portrayed by male monks, and they seem to suffer for it. Female characters such as Deirdre and Queen Maeve (the subject of my next book) are portrayed as manipulative seductresses. In fact, all the destruction and death among the warriors in the famous Irish epic *The Tain* is pretty much blamed on these two women: Deirdre and Maeve. In a foretale to *The Tain*, Deirdre tricks and seduces a hapless Naisi, the hero, into rescuing her, and so sets off the chain of events that leads to the war between the kingdoms of Ulster and Connacht.

This, I admit, always frustrated me, and I was intrigued by the idea of “resurrecting” the maligned Deirdre and Maeve and imagining what they really might have been like. In effect, I turn them from the she-devils of the monkish tales back into true heroines. Deirdre, in my book, is a free-thinking, strong, rather wild soul who is driven by the need to break from the shackles of the male society around her, and be independent and rule her own life. To me, this makes her a very modern heroine with whom the women of today can identify, even though the story may be two thousand years old.

Are your other books outgrowths of mythology? If so, why did those stories captivate you?

My previous series of novels, the Dalriada Trilogy, were not based directly on myths. I started with the history of the Roman invasions of Scotland and created a Celtic hero and heroine to fight them. However, mythology is wound all through those books, because from what we can tell, Celtic religion and spirituality was wound all through daily life. My heroine is a priestess, and I used a motif from Welsh mythology to frame her — the concept of Rhiannon, a mother goddess figure who protects the people and ensures the fertility of the land. In the Welsh myths she rides a white horse, and the connection between horse and goddess also occurs in the lore around the famous goddess Epona. That is where I got my idea for calling the first book *The White Mare*, and why my heroine Rhiann rides a pale horse. It also lies behind the concept that her role as a royal priestess was to embody “the Great Goddess”, and she bestows the honour of kingship on worthy men through either giving birth to them or marrying them, ritually or physically. The gods my characters worship, the fire festivals they celebrate, such as Beltaine, the idea of the triple goddesses of maiden, mother, and crone, the worship of the moon, and many other minor aspects in the books are all drawn from Celtic myth.

The role mythology plays in culture has been dissected by psychologists and anthropologists for years. What purpose do YOU think mythology serves?

To me myths are not fanciful tales — they encapsulate nothing less than the very essence of what it means to be human.

In previous eras they filled the role now taken up by the media of Western society — movies, TV shows, books, soap operas, blogs, newspaper features, discussion, and commentary. They ask the same things: Who are we? Why is the world like this? What does it all mean? From the day we developed the conscious ability to think, humans have always wondered these things. Once we had satisfied our physical needs — gathering food, making shelter — we started looking up at the stars around the campfire and wondering what they were. Where did that lightning come from? Why do things die? How do plants grow in the earth and animals inside their mothers? The first myths sought to explain all that, giving rise to the gods, and a host of other magical beings such as nature spirits. The rote answer is that we created these myths, then, to give us some measure of control over an uncontrollable world: “If I make this sacrifice to propitiate this god, then he will give me a good harvest.”

However, what gets interesting are the myths about “the hero’s journey” — not just stories of the gods and how the world was made, but the adventures of heroic humans within that world. Simply, myths are brilliant at showing us core human truths — they crystallize them and hold them up so we can see them more clearly. Remember that myths grew out of the experiences of a whole people over a long time, and that is why they still resonate today — they are the stories created by a group, not by one person, and so they embody *all* our experiences and dreams. Long before they were written down they were oral and over time would have been changed, adapted, and enriched, and this process distilled human experience down into more emotive, black-and-white ideas with which we can easily identify.

The mundane realities of life can muddy basic human truths, but myths strip away all that by exaggerating the good and the bad. By capturing our emotions with these extremes and making us *feel*, we are moved to reflect on our own lives and behaviour. Myths give people a “hyper-real” example of someone’s life where everything is written large — the joys, tragedies, challenges, and triumphs. It is easier to see, then, what love could be; the depths of courage and strength we can summon if we need to; the importance of doing good unto others; the consequences if you don’t.

Myths do two things: they can inspire a community towards more noble behaviour — *you, too, can be this brave, wise, loving, and strong*. And they can act as warnings about what not to do. In the Deirdre story, an aging king traps a young girl into marriage and separates her from her true love. This tale acts as a warning against greed, possessiveness, and jealousy, and we know from other myths that the Celts abhorred such traits, especially in rulers. The Deirdre myth can be seen as a warning about what *not* to do if you are in a position of power, and this same motif occurs in other myths, including that of Tristan and Isolde, and the tales of Guinevere, Arthur and Lancelot. We can imagine the bard singing them around the hall fire, and embedded in the stories are examples to all the people, from king to servants, about what is desirable behaviour and what should be avoided. In that sense, myths have always been templates about how to live in a society among others.

But they are also about the individual concerns of the listeners, for the Celtic myths are full of inspiring behaviour. Since it was a warrior society, many of these revolve around traits one would like to see in one's fighting men — courage, loyalty, and brotherhood. Love seems to be important. Women and men are shown displaying great bravery, fidelity, forbearance and loyalty, as well as faithlessness, cruelty and selfishness. Myths show us what we *could* be, what we can reach for and aspire to. This idea of a “shining light” of noble behaviour that we can follow is evident in the Harry Potter books and The Lord of the Rings.

And the success of these newer “myths” shows why such tales are still relevant today. Romantic comedy movies, with their storylines of a plucky woman winning then losing a man, fighting against the world in some “quest” to gain him back, then triumphing in the end, are nothing less than myths that encapsulate our desire for love and belonging. The Lord of the Rings movies were enormously successful not because of the special effects, but because the characters were living out human truths in a hyper-real, mythical way. Tolkien's epic is about love, loyalty and bravery, at its heart — not orcs! George Lucas has been open about basing the Star Wars movies around mythical concepts, and those movies have the classic Celtic elements: the fated birth, the “chosen one”, the prophecy, magic, and triumph over evil.

The best myths chime a chord in us because we recognise ourselves in them — we could almost be living that life; we feel connected to the characters. They could almost *be us*, because they are dealing with the same longings. I have always written my historical novels from the belief that people's concerns have not changed that much from Stone Age days, even if the outer wrapping does. No matter how much we acquire and build, and complicate our lives, we still want to be connected to other humans and find belonging and love. We still want to make sure those we love are protected from pain and death. The people around the campfire in the Stone Age wanted the same things, as did the ancient Greeks, the Aztecs, the Egyptians, the Native Americans and the Inuit, yesterday and today, and all the people alive now. That is why when I first read the Greek myths, the ancient people in them were recognisable to me because they were worried about the same things as all modern people are. People don't change that much through time and space: that's what makes us all one, really.

Are fresh interpretations of myths important? Why?

I think they are, so they can reach new audiences. Not many modern teenagers would pick up a volume of ancient Greek myths, or even the Celtic myths in their original form, but they will watch The Lord of the Rings, and Star Wars, and read Harry Potter and other novels that circle the same concepts. And let's not forget that all myths, by virtue of the fact they were orally transmitted, are “interpretations” and always have been. There might never have been a definitive version of any myth: over time they would have been adapted to suit their audience and a changing society, as different attributes became more or less important. In Irish myth, since our earliest physical copies of these tales are from the 10th, 11th and 12th centuries AD, there is great debate on when they were set, and if they are any true reflection of pre-Christian society. Do they hold some memory of the Celtic Iron Age? Or do they merely reflect the early medieval time in which they were written down? Could the Christian monks faithfully reproduce a picture of the pagan Celts, which they would have viewed perhaps with confusion, derision and suspicion? The stories were originally oral, and were therefore vulnerable to the winds of change in

politics, ideas and indeed population that blew over Ireland in the first millennium AD. They would surely have been changed by this overlay of a new belief system.

All myths are therefore only interpretations — they were interpreted by the bards, by the people who passed them on at firesides, by the new rulers as they came into power, and by the monks with their conflicting beliefs.

So as an author using these tales as a springboard, I see myself as part of a long chain of interpreters. Of course, in my case, I am making it clear this *is* one person's "re-imagination", not the myth of a whole people. And it is a re-imagination, creating novels *based* on those tales, not a retelling of the tales. I make this distinction because the original tales are too beautiful, precious, and valuable to Ireland and the world to attempt some sort of direct retelling. I have too much respect for them in their original form to do that — as much as we don't know what history they capture, now we have them, they are to be preserved at all costs. I am inspired by them, and I have tried to capture how reading those myths made me *feel*, then spinning that into a story to hopefully help others feel the same thing.

How does one go about reinterpreting/reusing a myth that is both well-known and the basis for other texts?

The original text of the Deirdre myth is very short and lacks detail. It was therefore easy to take the basic facts of the story and use my own imagination to draw this out into a novel. My aim was to resurrect Deirdre from the clutches of the medieval male writers, taking this apparently selfish minx and, like painting a picture, put flesh on her bones. What if the tales preserve a nugget of memory about a real woman? Such ideas send shivers down author's backs!

So I imagined a strong, complex woman struggling in a man's world of jealousy and greed, trying to free herself and chase her own dreams. I always felt there must be so much more to her, and that she must have been an extraordinary woman to inspire both the fascination and contempt that infuses the ancient texts about her. I also think that as long as an author makes it clear her novel is based on a myth, then she can take off on all sorts of flights of fancy. The original story is preserved in old manuscripts. Very few people would even read the translation from the Irish. But take that myth and make it a nail-biting, thrilling, romantic ride of a novel, and instantly it can reach more people. Readers can live the story more easily, because it is written in a modern way, and they are inside the characters' heads. This is why I love novels that are either based on myths or real historical events. Some people will read the original prose tale, but others want an author to interpret that for them and "live" that story through the characters' eyes and voices. That can inspire people to then go and read the original myths, or seek out the real history. I think that's an amazing advantage of good novels. It's not very highbrow, but it works! The important thing is that readers know the difference as much as possible, for of course in writing it, the author is changing the story as well.

What are some of your favorite retellings or interpretations of classic myths?

My all-time favourite is Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*, about King Arthur. That one book inspired me to be a writer. I've also loved all Morgan Llwyn's Celtic novels, especially Red Branch, about the Irish epic *The Tain*, and Mary Stewart's different spin on the Arthurian tales.

What is your favorite myth of all time? Why?

I cannot escape saying the myth of Deirdre, because of all the Celtic myths, I always thought it the most beautiful, stirring and tragic. I actually cannot believe that there has been no other recent adult novel that puts Deirdre at the heart of the story — to be able to do that myself is an absolute dream come true. (My other reasons for liking story were covered above)

We hear you have a background in archaeology! Has that influenced your writing in any way?

My archaeology training means that all my historical novels — despite expanding out into the mysterious realms of Celtic vision and prophecy, gods and *sidhe* — remain grounded in historical fact as much as possible. I deal with the Celtic Iron Age when there was no writing, so I rarely have to stick to known facts about peoples and events, such as those writing about ancient Rome, or later times such as Tudor and medieval. This gives me a wonderful freedom to just soar off on the wings of imagination.

However, that dreamer in me is frequently interrupted by a little scientific voice at the back muttering, “Now, get that right!” I am physically unable to let through some detail of dress, food, lifestyle or climate that would be impossible at my time or in my place, just to make the story better. I spend too much time tracing back tiny details and making *sure* they could get that plant at that time, or would have that type of wood, metal, stone, or implement. I might not always get it right, but I follow this thought process: if it’s possible they could have got this through trade or contact; if other people in similar places at slightly different times, or at this time in other places were using this thing; if there’s nothing in archaeology or history that directly contradicts this; then I put it in. If something is directly contradicted by the facts, I never would.

Fortunately, from an author’s point of view, archaeology is so incomplete and history so fragmented at this time that most things could be theoretically possible. For example, I had fun finding a poison to use in my last book, *The Boar Stone*. I finally decided on a plant that at this early time was not native, and therefore only grew in continental Europe. (Native versus non-native plants and animals are a common issue for me, dealing with an island that saw waves of invaders.) However, the poisoner was a Pictish king living on the Scottish coast, facing Europe where the plant *was* grown, *and* it was definitely in use a few hundred years later, *and* he would have had sea-trade contacts, so I felt safe putting it in. No expert in ancient poisonous plants has since contacted me to complain!

Tell us a bit about the next book. What else can readers look forward to on the horizon?

In the next book, *The Raven Queen*, I turn my attention to the other famous woman of Irish myth — Queen Maeve of Connacht. Like Deirdre, she was maligned by the early texts and turned into a ruthless, sexually voracious she-demon. Resurrecting her will be great fun, for unlike Deirdre, she has a significant amount of secular power, being a ruler in her own right, and she actually affects the politics of the Irish kingdoms. She is no innocent maiden but a full-blooded woman who is a warrior, mother and queen. The timeline of *The Raven Queen* runs almost in parallel with *The Swan Maiden*, for as

Deirdre is having her adventures in the first book, Maeve is having hers offstage. We only find out what she's been doing in the second book.

The novels are both about these intriguing, strong women trying to survive in a male world, but the stories are also linked more directly. The betrayal of Deirdre and her lover Naisi by King Conor in *The Swan Maiden* triggers off the events in the last third of *The Raven Queen*, where Maeve leads her army from Connacht to attack Conor's kingdom of Ulster. This war forms the core of the famous epic *The Tain*, so I am really writing about two women who were vital to the unfolding of that great story. Other authors including Morgan Llwyn and George Green have based their novels directly on *The Tain*, and I therefore wanted to cover different ground. Writing two epic romances about two fascinating, unknown women seemed a perfect way to steep myself in my beloved Celtic myths.