

Arantza Sestayo's cover art for Marillier's forthcoming book in the Blackthorn & Grim series, *Den of Wolves* (Roc USA and Pan Macmillan Australia).



Interview with Juliet Marillier

Ceri Houlbrook



Juliet Marillier is a writer of historical fantasy with five Aurealis Awards and four Sir Julius Vogel Awards under her belt, amongst many others. Born in Dunedin, New Zealand – which she describes as the ‘most Scottish city outside Scotland itself’ – she currently lives in Western Australia with her small pack of rescue dogs.

With a focus on family and romance, her novels take place in historical settings, ranging from Ireland to Transylvania – but always with a touch of magic. Her work is heavily influenced by her status as a member of The Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, with an emphasis on nature, the power of storytelling, and growth through the undertaking of personal journeys. Drawing on the local folklore and mythologies of her historical settings, she effortlessly weaves elements of the fantastical into her worlds: medieval Ireland in her *Sevenwaters* series (1999-2012); the kingdom of the Picts in the *Bridei Chronicles* (2004-6); and eighth-century Norway and Orkney in the *Saga of the Light Isles* (2002-3), to name only some. The fates of her protagonists, often strong female characters finding themselves in difficult situations, become intertwined with denizens of the otherworld, from the Fair Folk of Ireland and the Scottish selkie to the Transylvanian vampire.

This interview focuses on Marillier’s love of Scottish history and folklore, particularly evident in her *Shadowfell* series. This trilogy – consisting of *Shadowfell* (2013), *Raven Flight* (2014), and *The Caller* (2015) – is set in a deliberately ahistorical, vividly re-imagined ancient Scotland ruled by the tyrannical King Keldec, who has banned the use of magic

in his kingdom. The story follows the plight of Neryn, a teenage girl with a unique magical ability allowing her to summon the Good Folk: scattered clans of otherworldly creatures as fractious, eclectic, and ambiguous as the fairies of Scottish folklore. With the help of human rebel fighters and the spiritual tutelage of the ancient 'Guardians of Alban', Neryn seeks to overthrow Keldec's oppressive rule.

What was the first story you wrote set in Scotland?

The first book set wholly in Scotland (or in what later became Scotland) was *The Dark Mirror*, first novel in the *Bridei Chronicles*. That three-book series is one of my more historically based stories and is set in the kingdom of the Picts. The series begins with Bridei (Bridei son of Maelchon, an historical figure from the sixth century) as a child, and follows his life through to St Columba's mission to the Picts, which took Columba to Bridei's court, situated where Inverness is now. Although there's an uncanny element in those books, they have a framework in history and required extensive research. The Picts provide fertile ground for a creative writer, as so much is unknown or debatable about their culture – for example, whether they had matrilineal succession for the kingship, and what their decorative symbols stood for. These grey areas of history allow the writer to use both informed guesswork and imagination. I tried to build on what was known rather than use pure invention. I had to create a religion for the Picts, which was an interesting exercise. My membership of a modern druid order made that a little easier.

How many of your stories involve Scottish history and folklore?

Quite a few. Apart from the *Bridei Chronicles*, I've written a two-novel sequence based on the (imagined) first voyage of the Norsemen to Orkney and the clash of cultures that ensued. Those books are called *Wolfskin* and *Foxmask*. And there are the *Shadowfell* books, set in a fictional country called Alban, which bears striking similarities to Scotland and is peopled with creatures from Scottish folklore such as the brollachan, the urisk and some others I invented. I've also written a short story I'm very fond of, called *Prickle Moon*, about a wise woman and a clan of hedgehogs. That one is set in Scotland.

Why are you interested in Scottish history and folklore? Have you always been interested in it?

My ancestry is largely Scottish – the Scotts, the Pringles and the Fletts. I was born and brought up in Dunedin, New Zealand, known as the most Scottish city outside Scotland itself! So it was pretty much inevitable that I would develop a love for Celtic history and folklore from a very early age, and go on to pursue it in reading and writing (and travel). My parents were musicians and I love Scottish music too, bagpipes included. My interest expanded to include other Celtic countries, Ireland in particular.

Would you label your work as ‘historical fantasy’ or do you prefer another term?

I'm wary about labelling novels as one genre or another. Some of the most wonderful and rewarding fiction doesn't fit neatly into any category. I see mine as containing elements of many genres: history, folklore, fairy tale, love story, mystery, personal drama and so on. But sometimes you do need a label, and 'historical fantasy' works pretty well. A lot of readers see the word 'fantasy' and immediately think elves, dwarves and women in gauze and leather. They won't find any of those in my novels.

You've written about Scotland before in the *Bridei Chronicles* but in your *Shadowfell* series you present a much more magical version of it. Was this a conscious move?

Yes, very much so. The *Shadowfell* series is more of an attempt to capture the spirit of Scotland. The characters and events of the story don't fit anywhere in real Scottish history, and are not intended to. And I'm well aware that the Scots dialect spoken by the entire cast of uncanny characters does not fit with the implied period of the books. The fact is, those characters insisted on speaking that way from the start. It felt weirdly like ancestral voices insisting on being part of the story.

Regarding the *Shadowfell* series, how much research did you do into Scottish history and folklore? What sources did you use?

I did a lot of research into Scottish folklore, but less on history, as the *Shadowfell* series is not based on real history. Some of the useful books on my shelf were:

Katherine M. Briggs' *Folk Tales of Britain* (Folio Society, 2011) and *The Vanishing People: A study of traditional fairy beliefs* (Batsford, 1978)

Scottish Fairy Tales (Lomond Books, 1998)

John and Caitlin Matthews, *British and Irish Mythology: An Encyclopedia of Myth and Legend* (Diamond Books, 1995)

Diane Purkiss's *Troublesome Things: A History of Fairies and Fairy Stories* (Penguin, 2000)

Alexander Carmichael's (ed.) *Carmina Gadelica: Hymns and Incantations* (Floris Books, 1992; reprinted 2006)

Alistair Moffat's *The Faded Map: Lost Kingdoms of Scotland* (Birlinn, 2010)

I have a substantial collection of books on the Picts and the Scots, which I first acquired while researching for the *Bridei Chronicles*. That same material was helpful for the *Shadowfell* series. I used various sources for my geographical information as well as observations made during travel in the Highlands, but I did stretch the geography quite a bit in the interests of good storytelling. Then there are books on herb lore and

weaponry and the medicine of the times (though I tend to consult my doctor daughter first on medical matters – she has years of experience in accident and emergency).

I researched the etymology of the Pictish language when working out names for my (human) characters in this series, using combinations that could have developed from the same roots and making sure the names were linguistically consistent, but avoiding anything obviously Pictish or Scottish. I didn't want to suggest the series was based on real history.

Where did the idea of a 'Caller' come from?

I can't pinpoint this so I have to assume I invented it! It seemed to me there would be a fundamental difficulty in getting human and fey folk to work together even for a worthwhile cause, as the lore indicates different manners of thinking, different life spans, a whole different set of priorities. If you were expecting to live for, say, five hundred years, you'd probably decide to wait out a human crisis such as the rule of a tyrant rather than take action that might result in losses to your own people. Also, traditions suggest humankind is fearful of uncanny folk, whose help often comes at a higher price than is at first evident. So it seemed to me a person who had the ability to draw the two together would be not only extremely valuable, but also potentially dangerous.

What inspiration or sources did you draw on in your physical descriptions of the 'Good Folk'?

It felt as if the Good Folk sprang to life fully formed! A race of very small uncanny folk often does come into my novels, the ones set in Ireland as well as the Scottish books. They vary in nature from series to series. The Good Folk in *Shadowfell* come in many shapes and sizes. The descriptions most likely arise from a lifetime of reading and enjoying traditional stories. And from looking at fairy-tale illustrations by artists like Arthur Rackham and more contemporary illustrators such as Kinuko Y Craft and Brian and Wendy Froud.

Where did the idea of the 'Guardians of Alban', the 'ancient, wise presences of the land' who tutor Neryn in her magical ability, come from?

Pagan/earth-based faiths tend to be structured around the seasonal cycles and the elements (earth, water, fire and air). It seemed to me that if Neryn was to learn the wise use of her gift, which could potentially see her wield a lot of power, she'd need to understand those elements, each of which is associated, in both Wiccan and druidic lore, with one of the quarters (north, west, south, east). I felt she would use each to form her Call. Where I have a human character using magic in a story, I generally make it 'natural magic' or 'elemental magic' i.e. it is derived from what is already present in nature.

It disturbs me that humankind in the 21st century is losing its connection with and respect for the land and other living things, losing its natural compass, if you like, and in the *Shadowfell* story I looked at the dangers of that – what happens when the desire for power blinds a leader to the wisdom of nature and the responsibility humankind should feel for the natural world. The Guardians stand for that natural world, its wisdom and power, its enduring qualities. In Wiccan and druidic lore, beings like the Guardians are known as Elementals.

The biggest threat to *Shadowfell*'s 'Good Folk' is the 'destructive influence of cold iron' – where do you think this belief came from?

It comes up in the folklore of many different countries. I don't have a definitive origin for the belief, but I've read that iron was considered to be the lifeblood of the earth, perhaps because blood smells of iron, and iron is found deep underground. Iron was considered to have a protective quality, hence iron amulets or horseshoes nailed up above house doors to keep those inside safe from evil spirits and the like. There are many traditional tales in which iron acts as a bane to fey folk.

You've set your stories in a variety of places (Ireland, Transylvania, Turkey). Is there anything about Scotland and its folklore that makes it stand out?

I do have Scots ancestry as well as an upbringing in a very Scottish setting (albeit on the other side of the world). It was probably inevitable that Scottish folklore would become a favourite. I love the down-to-earth qualities of Scottish traditional stories, and the way they seem to grow and develop from the drama of the wild landscape.

I felt quite privileged to make my own contribution with characters like the Hag of the Isles and her partner, Himself, who demonstrate what I think are inherently Scottish qualities of patience and quiet strength (Himself), wry humour, straight talking and old wisdom (the Hag). I have met Scottish couples who are a lot like those two! Writing these books makes me feel like a link in a long chain of storytellers, and that is quite a powerful thing.

And finally, as part of a great *Gramarye* tradition, what was your favourite story when you were young?

The Six Swans, because of the strong young woman at the centre of the story, also because I didn't have any brothers and would have liked some!



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