



A review of **Knock Twice**

Joanna Gilar

E edited by Andrew Simms, *Knock Twice*, sequel to *There was a Knock at the Door* (2016), is an anthology of folk tales for troubling times. In the words of the editor, these stories are offerings for today's state of crisis – ecological, political, and social. They are 'new and original tales from people of goodwill' (3). While facts and figures, he argues, can often seem to further bewilder us, it is stories which 'hold our attention and pattern our lives' (1). Each of these tales 'is a practice', states Simms, 'in better understanding our errors, and a rehearsal of the journey towards making things right' (3).

It is no small thing to write a folk tale. Indeed, one could argue that the very attempt is an impossibility. Folk tales, by definition, are tales which have evolved from communal imagination: they have been told and told again, *ad infinitum*, which gives them their unique, rough, and multi-dimensional nature. On the other hand, stories have to begin somewhere, and they often begin in remarkable times. Remarkable times are the times which need stories. If each narration is the weaving of old threads of story into new coats, as it were, then Simms' aim to hold space for today's new weaving is very much an essential one.

As the biographies at the end of the book tell us, all the tales have been written by remarkable people, who are doing powerful things to meet and respond to our drastically changing world, from writers to economists, activists, archaeologists, storytellers and politicians. The folk tale concept is interpreted differently by every contributor to this anthology, and that difference creates an astonishingly varied collection of stories meditating on our contemporary state.

There is the folk tale as moral message, such as Katherine Trebeck's 'Fletcher and Steve', in which Fletcher the Fast Hare is so obsessed with speed that he sees nothing and encounters no one, until Steve the tortoise teaches him how to take his time. There is the gentle satire on our contemporary situation, such as 'The Three Sisters' by Leslie Van Gelder, in which two sisters, Alexa and Siri, seek to know everything and are bewitched by a strange man into a magical silver box. Another particularly

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moving satire is 'Joe and the Wail', in which a beached blue whale calf ingests an important business man, who, while initially trying to conduct his business through her walls, eventually comes round to his situation and sings her back out to the sea, preparing himself for retirement in the great depths of her belly. There are tales which introduce – or interpret – movements of folkloric figures in the contemporary West. Baba Yaga appears twice, in two stories by Sarah Deco, once as the stealer and/or medicine healer of souls in a supermarket, in 'The Baba Yaga's Mission', and once as the guardian on the journey of refugees, in 'Yeremey the Witch's Cat'. This tale works as a stark and unsettling fable which provides glimpses of horrifying other worlds that are not so much fantastic as fabulated interpretations of reality, as does Bill McGuire's *Incoming*, which describes the desperation experienced by a woman trying to find access for her and her dead friend's daughter into a gated city.

Folk tales often – though not always – have happy endings. They have been, throughout our cultural history, told to give us comfort, by the mother trying to settle her child at night, by companions around a fire trying to re-imagine the darkness. What is striking about this collection is that, while some tales are more and some less convincing, all are conversations with today's reality about the possibility of hope. In some of the stories, the ending is glib and difficult. I was, for example, unconvinced by David Boyle's retelling of Puss-in-Boots, 'Puss', which concludes with the suggestion that an ogre-like landlord has been turned into a beast via his excessive interaction with data, while love has transformed the bestial puss into a near human – a conclusion which, while smart, doesn't seem to hold space for the many new dialogues that are attempting to shift hierarchical perspectives between animal and man.

In other stories, the ending is deftly woven with the overall outlook of the story and with the collection as a whole. One example is the tale which closes the collection, 'The Knock' by Andrew Simms. A short realistic tale, it tells us of a young, timid man who gathers courage to stand up to a racist attack. Yet precisely in its simplicity, it holds that crucial balance between a howl at today's reality, and a lullaby which weaves hope. It acknowledges the grimness of where we are, while at the same time working as a soothing tale of 'naive morality', in which events correspond to 'our absolute instinctual judgement of what is good and just'.¹ The other story which will stay with me for a long time is the opening story, 'All the Words of all the Worlds' by Jan Dean. Like many others in the collection, it narrates the tension between greed and wisdom, between the insatiable hunger for more and the capacity to acknowledge abundance. Yet there is something about this story, the arrangement of its characters, the unassuming magic of its atmosphere, and the deep grief and simultaneous solace of its ending, that makes it a genuine folk tale – one that needs to be told by the folk, and I hope will be.

According to storyteller and mythologist Martin Shaw, there are no new stories. We don't need new stories. The world is awash, abrim, saturated with stories. What we need is space, clarity and dedication to understand the stories which surround us. But another way to voice this is to say that every new story is a re-telling of an older one at a time when it is needed, and there are many stories in this collection which are needed.

Editor: Andrew Simms.

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Notes

1. Jack Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 14.