



Gustave Doré, 'A Voyage to the Moon', *The Adventures of Baron von Münchhausen* (c.1880).

Tales beyond Europe: A World full of other Worlds

Rosalind Kerven

The concept of a magical 'otherworld' is common in traditional tales all over the world. But what is an otherworld? Who lives there? How can it be accessed? And what are the consequences of doing so?

Magic Lands

Anyone raised on the folklore of Britain and Ireland will be familiar with the notion of otherworlds which lie under the ground or inside a hill. The best known one is Faeryland. In similar locations one might happen upon enchanted chambers in which a legendary king lies sleeping, waiting for some rescuer to blow the horn that will wake him in time to save his realm.

In Celtic mythology, other enchanted lands lie not only underground, but also over the sea – usually in the west towards the sunset – or across a mist-shrouded lake. The Irish Tir na nÓg is a beautiful, peaceful country of wisdom and eternal youth. In the Welsh Annwn the inhabitants enjoy the finest food and drink served in vessels made of gold and jewels.¹ England has Avalon, sometimes called the Isle of Apples: the mortally wounded King Arthur is taken across the water to it by nine black-robed queens in a black barge, with the promise that he will be healed.

Of the same ilk, 'somewhere across the sea', are two Swahili (East African) otherworlds. One, the Land of Gold, is a wondrous place that a dying man describes to his daughter as their ancestral home. She marries a sultan who helps her find it; sure enough, the palace, streets, houses, minarets and all the ships in the harbour are made of the precious metal.² The other, the Land of Happiness, reflects the male ascendancy of traditional culture, for it fulfils its promise for men only. A shipwrecked sailor is carried there by a gigantic bird, and finds it covered in trees whose enormous fruits burst to reveal a series of beautiful girls. The sailor marries one, and takes the others back to sell as brides to the sultan. He becomes happy indeed, for he obtains great riches in the process.³

However, Otherworlds are also commonly found in two more exotic domains: under the water and up in the sky.

Underwater Worlds

Stories of mermaids and their kin are familiar around the British Isles and some coastal regions of Europe. In the west country of England and the Brittany region of north-west France they are known as sea-morgans. In an Irish story a merrow (merman) keeps the souls of drowned sailors in an underwater cage. A fisherman, visiting beneath the waves, manages to get the merrow drunk and frees the souls.⁴ In Wales many stories mention a faery tribe that lives mysteriously under certain inland lakes. Related to these are the little known English Asrai – beautiful, web-footed women who inhabit the rivers of Cheshire and Shropshire, emerging once every hundred years to look at the moon and grow.⁵ As well as mermaids, many Scottish stories tell of selkies – shapeshifters who are seals in their under-sea world, but cast their skins and turn into dancing women when they haul out on land. Unfortunately, though all these water dwellers are significant characters, the old tales give little information about what their secret worlds are actually like.

However, some Middle Eastern stories are more explicit. For example the story of *The Land Abdallah and the Sea Abdallah* from *The Arabian Nights* – featuring a man and a merman who share the same name – vividly describes the realm under the sea as follows:

He saw the water stretching an emerald pavilion above his head, even as on land a pavilion of topaz is spread above the sea. At his feet lay the marine meadows which no eye from earth had violated since the dawn of time. A calm rested on the mountains and valleys of the deep; a delicate light bathed the infinite transparency of the water; enchantment led the eye down quiet vistas; he saw forests of red coral, of white coral and of rose coral, with branches motionless in the silence; there were diamond caves held up by pillars of ruby, of chrysolite, of beryl, of gold sapphire, and of topaz; extravagant trees nodded to the whispering water over tracts as great as cities; and shells of a thousand colours and tortured forms shot gay reflections from the silver sand into the crystal above them. In the light about him Land Abdallah saw fishes like flowers, fishes like fruit, fishes like birds, fishes dressed in red and silver scales and with the shape of lizards, fishes like buffaloes, like cows, like dogs, and even in some sort, like men. He walked between vast banks of royal jewels, burning with a hundred coloured fires which the water brightened as oil would flames on earth; between banks of gaping oysters holding white pearls, rose pearls, and golden pearls; between hedges of swollen sponge swaying heavily and slowly...⁶



Modern representations of traditional designs of killer whales by unnamed local artists of the Kitasoo/Xai'Xais First Nation, hung in public view on the walls of the Spirit Bear Lodge, Klemtu, BC, Canada.

This dazzling landscape has echoes of the world of the Chinese, Japanese and Korean dragon-kings, discussed in *Grammarye* issue 3.⁷

The underwater worlds of Africa are equally exotic. In one Yoruba (Nigeria and Benin) story a starving man tries to retrieve some waterside palm nuts he was harvesting – and inadvertently sinks into the sea. He finds himself in the palace of Olokun, the Sea God, who gives him a curious magic present. The man is able to return to the shore via a long passage.⁸ Other Yoruba sources say Olokun is a female deity and that she also rules an uninhabited area of desolate marshes and the mist.⁹ He or she lives in a splendid underwater palace with servants who are a mixture of humans and fishes¹⁰ – again rather like the far eastern Dragon Kings. Also from the Yoruba tradition, we discover a realm under a pool rather than the sea, ruled by a goddess called Oluweri who snatches away a girl being bullied by her father's co-wife.¹¹ The subaqueous world is not described in this source, but it is clearly a wondrous place, for the girl later rises from the water dressed like a queen and surrounded by mats woven in gold and silver.¹² Related to this is a Chaga (Tanzania) tale of a girl who flees her parents' anger by jumping into a pool. In this way, she enters a subaqueous world where she finds work with an old woman who rewards her with both fine gifts and the promise of a good husband.¹³ This last story seems to have travelled with the slaves to the Caribbean, where a delightful Barbados folk tale tells of a girl called Rose Petal who, escaping her cruel stepmother, finds herself in an idyllic underwater world ruled by kindly Mother Nature.¹⁴

Some Native American stories feature even stranger subaqueous worlds. One from the Kitasoo/Xi'xais people of coastal British Columbia, Canada tells of four seal hunters who fall asleep and wake at the noise of a ratfish slapping on the side of their boat. In anger one of the hunters breaks a fin off the fish; at which it transforms into an armless man and hauls them down to an undersea world to be punished by his master, the Killer Whale. They find themselves in a Big House similar to the one in their own village, except that the walls are formed from four grizzly bears and hung with skulls dripping with water. The men are held hostage for four days while the North, South, East and West Winds consider their case. After this, the Killer Whale opens the door and allows them to rise to the surface, covered in seaweed. When they eventually find their way home they are dismayed to discover that their four days underwater were actually four years in the real world; and that three of their wives, having given up hope of seeing them again, have remarried.¹⁵ Another source, which describes a young woman abducted by a killer whale, mentions that these animals were considered the greatest powers of the sea.¹⁶

There is a enthralling Blackfoot (Great Plains, USA and Canada) tale about a boy misfit called Long Arrow who embarks on a journey to prove himself by finding his way to the bottom of the fabled Great Mystery Lake:

There is a lake far, far away...Many young men have tried to find it, but no one who has begun the search has ever returned. At the bottom of this lake it is said that some strange spirit-people dwell. Everyone who speaks of them is afraid. These spirit-people are said to share their world-below-water with animals more beautiful and powerful than any on Earth. They are as large as elks. Their bodies are like music, shaped to run in harmony with the wind. They are strong and gentle and clever. They can do all the work that a dog can do, and much more. All who know of them long to find them. No one has ever done so.

After overcoming a series of trials, he manages to reach it. On its shores he meets a 'magic helper' who takes him below the surface of the lake:

When he woke, the sun was high. A young boy was crouching by his side, dressed in a soft white buckskin robe, decorated with porcupine quills of many rainbow colours.

"Come," he said softly, "my grandfather does not like to be kept waiting."

With these words, the boy rose in a flash of brilliant blue, and turned himself into a kingfisher. Then he dived straight down into the lake.

Long Arrow stared after him. He imagined death by drowning; he pictured what slow, cruel tortures the underwater spirit-people might weave about him with their spells. But he shook himself like a dog, took a deep breath and plunged in after the kingfisher.

Down, down he sank. His eyes were open – and the waters parted before him.

At last he came to the bottom. He stood on dry, white sand that sloped gently down, still further, to a circular valley. Alone in the middle stood a tipi, its walls painted with curious, dazzling patterns.

Here he meets the guardian spirit of the strange and wondrous new animals he has been seeking, called in the source 'elk-dogs' – actually horses. He eventually returns to Earth, bringing the first ever horses to his people.¹⁷

Sky Worlds

An even more extraordinary type of supernatural domain is the Sky World.

If we exclude folktales inspired by the Biblical concept of 'heaven', and the rather vague setting of Asgard, the Old Norse realm of the gods, this location is virtually unknown in European tradition. (The Greek gods do not live as high as the sky, but on the peak of Mount Olympus.) 'Heaven' is important in Chinese mythology as the domain of deities and spirits, but is rather too esoteric to be included in the current discussion. 'Sky Worlds' as recognisable locations occasionally occur in other Asian and in Pacific tales, and are fairly common in Africa and the Americas.

Wherever they come from, Sky World stories feature characters that often include the Sun, the Moon – either female or male – the stars and particular named deities. However, the sun, moon and stars are not always living beings; in some 'origin' myths they are mere objects that must be set in the sky to shine on earth. Other Sky inhabitants can be animals or supernatural 'sky maidens'.¹⁸

Although they are entirely separate realms, it is often possible for both supernatural characters and ordinary humans to travel between the Sky and Earth. An obvious method is to use a rope (Luyia (Kenya)¹⁹ and Blackfoot²⁰). In a story of the Juruna people from the Xingu River region of Brazil, a man finds a ladder coming down from the Sky in the middle of a forest clearing.²¹ A Yoruba folk tale describes an anthropomorphic dog who visits his mother in Heaven by riding up and down on a small bench fixed to a long cord; this appears on demand when he sings a magic song.²² A Yoruba myth, on the other hand, says that the god Obatala travels from heaven to earth and back again on a chain fashioned from all the gold in the sky.²³ In a Cheyenne (Great Plains, USA) tale a young woman and her brothers find themselves in a tree which miraculously grows until they reach the sky itself, after which it is simply a matter of stepping off it.²⁴ A very similar tree features in a Brazilian folk tale:

There came a day when the Silver One told Rairu that it would be well if they visited the sky-world for a season, and to do that Rairu was quite willing. So at her bidding Rairu sat among the leaves of a palm tree and the Silver One crept out of the gourd and took her place by his side. With a little stick she touched the tree, and at that it grew rapidly, grew until it carried them into a place all bare and treeless, without birds or flowers... he saw, close at hand, a beautiful city with shining towers and moving lights of many colours...²⁵

In a Slavey (North West Territories, Canada) story, birds fly to the Sky world, carrying their animal friends on their backs, and entering through a trap-door.²⁶ Similarly in a Hopi (Arizona, USA) tale it is an eagle that carries a wayward boy into the heavens:

Blue Wing looked up at the huge, wheeling birds and now his heart soared. They had chosen him, of all people, to fly with them! Perhaps they would take him to meet the gods. He raised his arms and the eagles swooped down to carry him off to the Sky.

Far, far he flew with them, riding on their great strong backs. The sun moved round and sank in a blaze of crimson flames. In the quiet darkness, now they rose up through a hole in the clouds.

At last, high in the Sky world, they stopped on a bleak, lonely crag.²⁷

Sky maidens travel up and down by flying canoe²⁸ or a dangling willow basket, as in this Ojibwe (Lake Superior, USA and Canada) tale:

The young hunter... heard the sound of music, so faint and sweet that it surpassed anything he had ever dreamed of. The strains grew fuller and richer, and as they seemed to come from above he turned his eyes toward the sky. Far in the blue he could see a tiny white speck like a floating cloud. Nearer and nearer it came, and the astonished hunter saw that it was no cloud, but a dainty osier car, in which were seated twelve beautiful maidens.²⁹

Similarly, a Blackfoot girl is abducted by Thunder Man who simply takes her in his arms and springs with her 'to the land of the Above People'.³⁰

Some journeys are more original and inventive. In a Chaga tale, a boy flies to the Sky on a magic stool.³¹ Most unusually, a Tlingit (Alaska) story tells of a boy shooting a series of arrows into the air. They join together into a chain, which he is able to ascend:

Two boys went out to try their new bows and arrows. One said to the other: 'Let us see how high we can shoot,' so one shot and then a wonderful thing happened. The arrow, instead of falling back, kept on going until it disappeared. It went in the direction of the moon. He shot again and the arrow did likewise and again, and again, and each arrow never fell back to earth. Finally he shot, and this arrow seemed to fasten itself in the sky. He shot again, and this one pierced the preceding arrow and hung there and this continued until a string of arrows reached from the earth right up into the sky.³²

When this arrow chain is complete, he climbs it and thus enters the Sky world. Then there is the beautiful Kimbundu (Angola) tale in which a frog hides in a bucket and is

unwittingly carried to the Sky by the Moon King's water bearers. The same journey is made in reverse by the Moon Princess herself, who descends to earth on a spider's silvery thread.³³ In a Wabanaki (New England, USA and the Canadian Maritimes) story, a father follows his son to the 'upper country' of the Northern Lights by a mystical transportation along the 'path' of the Milky Way.³⁴

Occasionally, supernatural Sky people may come down to Earth. This is usually a solemn occasion, reflecting the sacred nature of such visitors; inevitably, it has significant consequences.

In a Yoruba creation story, the god Obatala descends from the Sky to Earth, carrying a snail shell full of sand, a white hen, a black cat and a palm nut. At this time, the Earth is completely covered by water. He pours the sand from the shell, and the hen scatters it to form the hills and valleys of dry land. Next Obatala plants the nut, which grows into the first palm tree. He settles down to live on Earth with the cat as his only companion; and eventually fashions the first people out of clay.³⁵ In a Ganda (Uganda) tale, a solitary man called Kintu meets the goddess Nambi when she descends from the Sky to become the first woman on Earth. She asks Kintu to marry her and with their children they form the world's first family. This happy result is marred when Nambi's brother later comes down from the Sky to join them, and – true to his name – he brings death into the world.³⁶

More common are stories in which Earth dwellers make the journey to the Sky World. As with traffic in the opposite direction, this is usually not just an exciting adventure, but also an experience destined to bring about major change – either for the visitor personally or for the whole world.

On a personal level, many of the stories could be classified as 'instructional': they reinforce the values of the people and offer subtle threats to listeners who might rebel or fail to reach the expected standards of behaviour. A lazy Hopi boy who refuses to do his share of work finds himself abandoned in the Sky wilderness where he must prove his worth by working as a hunter for the female deity Spider Woman: he returns home filled with the work ethic expected by his people.³⁷ A Chinese tale tells of a boy whose greed and cruelty are punished when he is taken up a ladder to the Palace of Boundless Cold next to the moon. Here he is set a task which is impossible to complete, since every time he tries he is attacked by a fierce cockerel. He is said to be still in the Sky, suffering the penalty, to this very day.³⁸ An Inuit tale from Greenland tells of a man who obstinately refuses to follow wiser people's advice. A visit to the world of Moon Man enables him to look down to Earth and observe the results of his own foolish actions. By the time he returns home, he has completely mended his ways.³⁹

On the other hand, in some stories the dissenter who travels to the Sky actually triumphs in the end, suggesting an understanding of how increased self esteem can encourage better behaviour. For example, the Chaga boy, who flies to the Sky on a magic stool, does so because he is trying to escape his mother's constant scolding. In the Sky world he finds that the Moon Chief and his people have no knowledge of fire, so he shows them how to make it and also teaches them the art of cooking. Thus, though once considered worthless by his own family, the

boy is now hailed as a great magician, and in contrast to his ignominious departure, he returns to Earth in a blaze of glory.⁴⁰ Then there is a Luyia (Kenya) girl who climbs a rope to the Sky in order to escape an unwanted marriage, a terrible disgrace amongst her people. Once there, she finds herself courted by a far superior suitor: none other than the Sun himself. She marries him and becomes responsible for sending his rays to shine down on earth, a prime example of a weak character triumphing in the end to become strong.⁴¹

This heroine is not the only ordinary person who becomes transformed into a Sky person as a result of visiting the upper realms. When the Cheyenne young woman and her seven adopted brothers step off their magically growing tree – mentioned above – into the upper regions, they are all transformed into stars – the constellation we call the Plough.⁴² The Aleutian islanders (Alaska) tell of two girl cousins who fantasise each night about making love to the Moon. It turns out that the Moon really is a man, and he chooses the most patient of the two and takes her away to marry. Eventually, she is allowed to help her new husband with his nightly tasks.⁴³

Other visitors to the Sky manage to change our own world in some way as a result of their adventure, usually for the better. The Slavey story mentioned above, in which the birds carry their animal friends to the Sky, is set in a time before there were people. One day the whole Earth suddenly turns completely dark and freezing cold in an everlasting winter. Once they reach the upper regions, the animals manage to steal a secret bag from their Sky counterparts:

“Seize the bag!” yelled Fox.

Mouse scurried up and gnawed through the rope that held it. At once the bag, bulging with secrets, tumbled into Fox’s outstretched paws. He pulled open the strings. Light burst out, warm and brilliant. It was the Sun, the Moon, the Stars!

“This is what we need: this is what will break the winter!”

The birds caught them all in their beaks. They flew with them to the Sky trapdoor and pushed them out, down towards the Earth.

Soft and golden, warmly, gently, the Sun, the Moon, the Stars drifted across that blue place that lies between Earth and Sky.

And the big Snow melted. Peering down, the Earth creatures saw spring unfold itself, the rivers flow again, the Earth turn green.⁴⁴

A tale from the Australian Aborigines has a related theme: in this case, flowers have completely disappeared from the Earth. The tribal elders climb a sacred mountain and are whisked from its peak into the Sky camp by some spirits. This realm is literally smothered in flowers and the great creator, Baiame, allows them to gather some of the sacred blooms and scatter them back to earth, where they have grown ever since.⁴⁵ A Tahitian story tells of the goddess Hina who leaves Earth to sail her canoe up to the Moon; she likes it so much that she makes her solitary home there. This produces two useful results. Firstly, she begins the task of watching over travellers to keep

them safe. Secondly, she establishes the world's first banyan tree by breaking off a branch of the enormous tree that covers the Moon, and hurling it down to Earth.⁴⁶

This brief survey gives some insights into the universality of otherworlds – up, down and ‘over there’ – in the collective human imagination. No doubt readers have themselves unearthed many other examples. As the genre continues to live and grow in current fantasy and children’s literature, it is a sobering thought that it is not a modern invention, but actually as old as story telling itself.

Rosalind Kerven

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9. Harold Courlander, *A Treasury of African Folklore* (New York: Marlowe & Company 1996), 189
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11. African tales originate from a time when polygamy was the norm. Thus the villainess of a family folk tale is often a jealous co-wife rather than the jealous stepmother of European stories.
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13. Parrinder, *African Mythology*, 64
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18. Sky maidens are supernatural female spirits who travel between Earth and Sky, often shapeshifting between human and bird forms. They are known in the stories of cultures across the world. Selkies, mentioned earlier in this article, are another variant, in this case travelling between Earth and Underwater.
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