

Heart's Home: Working with Welsh Folklore, by Jo Walton

The Mabinogion is a collection of eleven stories, written down in the twelfth and thirteenth century, in Welsh, from earlier oral tradition in the wonderfully titled White Book of Rhydderch and the Red Book of Hergest. They were written down as part of a Europe-wide rediscovery of the value of vernacular culture, at the same time that Snorri was writing his Edda in Iceland and the Nibelungiad was being written down in Germany. If they hadn't been written all we'd have of early Welsh culture would be mysterious and contextless scraps of poetry. The Mabinogion stories vary a great deal, some are Arthurian, some are explicitly Christian allegory, some are mythological. The Four Branches of the Mabinogi, the longest and most coherent section which gives the collection its name, are stories from Celtic mythology where we can see a lot of connections with Irish stories. Each story or "branch" stands alone, but the four of them together reflect on each other, and they have some characters in common.

I'm from Wales; I've known the Mabinogion stories all my life. My grandmother actually translated them, and I drew on the Arthurian questing story of Culhwch and Olwen in my first novel. What drew me to this story now was the part where the characters go up a hill to see a wonder and when they come down everyone has vanished, and the streets are empty. This spoke to my pandemic experience, and it came to mind immediately when Laurie suggested in 2020 doing a present-day version of a fairytale. Working with it I found myself trying not to do what I usually do in my writing which is to make everything make sense. This kind of story has a logic and a sense of its own, but it does not benefit from too much of what we fantasy writers call worldbuilding. I wanted to keep the sense of the magic being magical and inexplicable but nevertheless real.

When I started working on the play, it was the shapeshifting aspect that came to the fore. So many human cultures have stories of shapeshifters that it almost makes you wonder if there's something real behind it -- they're everywhere, the fox spirits of Japan, so many stories from Africa, the First Nations, and of course the werewolves of Eastern Europe. I think the thing that is there behind them is the blurring of lines between what is animal and what is human, a recognition that animals have their own kind of intelligence and things to teach us. It's a natural human thing to look into the eyes of an animal and feel a sense of recognition, the knowledge that although an animal cannot speak, they are like us. In the Welsh stories the Tigrath shift easily from human to bird or animal, and flow from one human form into another. In some Irish stories there are enchanted sticks, where if you break the stick on yourself you can turn into a dolphin or a hawk, or if you break it on someone else you make them undergo that transformation, as we see T.H. White's Merlin do in *The Once and Future King*. It's the fluidity of shapeshifting that makes it so fascinating, the ability to just be a gull or a dog or even an ant -- and to truly partake in the nature of the animal while you are one. It's not just a matter of appearance and disguise; when my characters soar and fall as gannets in the first lines of the play, they really are gannets in that moment, leaning into the wind. Thinking about my version of Rhiannon, who leaves the magical underworld of the Tigrath to live in the sunlight and marry an incomer, this is what she can't bear to leave behind, this easy shifting between human form and animal and bird form, the sheer joy of easily becoming a gannet or a horse or a mouse is what she can't resist. And it certainly is appealing. I'd want to experience it if I could!