

“One of my earliest memories is my father’s bookshop being burned. It shaped my concerns. Why culture had this precedence, why it is so important to us, that it could be destroyed, as well it could be appreciated. I learned that very early.”

A light in a cloud of darkness

The Holberg Interview: Marina Warner

Professor Marina Warner was never destined to be an academic, and definitely not an academic who gathered prizes. We caught up with the 2015 Holberg Prize Laureate to discuss fairy tales, myths and how fantasy and reality are interwoven. TEXT: KNUT MELVÆR

On 10 June 2015, Professor Marina Warner stepped into Håkon’s Hall (Håkonshallen) in Bergen and received the Holberg Prize from the Crown Prince of Norway, Haakon Magnus. It is tempting to draw parallels between her subject matter where encounters with princes have been a frequent theme since the invention of a monarchy.

Warner’s extensive work on myths and fairy tales – or “wonder tales” as she refers to them – is now honoured with the most prestigious international prize within the Humanities and Social Sciences – the Holberg Prize.

Her path is not your typical run of the mill university career story.

Quite unlike it. To get a grip on it, it is necessary to begin with the beginning, namely her childhood and upbringing.

Beginnings and a zigzag route

“I was dealt a very unusual and inspiring hand by fate. My mother was from Italy, a place of extraordinary historical layering. She grew up in a period of fascism, political oppression and ignorance; but the inhabitants there were very aware of the depth of history. That part of the world, the Mediterranean basin, remains essential to my preoccupation. From the Atlantic in the West to the Fertile Crescent in the East. That

is the geography of my imagination,” says Warner.

As a young child, Warner was brought by her parents to Egypt where her father opened a bookshop. She spoke Arabic as a child, but it faded away. Their stay in Egypt did not last for long. The bookshop was burned to the ground during the riots of the national revolution of 1952. At which point, the family decided to move back to England.

“One of my earliest memories is my father’s bookshop being burned. It shaped my concerns. Why culture had this precedence, why it is so important to us, that it could be destroyed, as well it could be ap-



THE TRUTH AND UNTRUTH ABOUT MYTHS: “Myth has two dominant meanings. One is a lie and an illusion. The other is a story of greater truth,” says the 2015 Holberg Prize Laureate, Marina Warner. PHOTO: DAN WELLDON/THE HOLBERG PRIZE

preciated. I learned that very early,” she says.

Warner’s path into the academy is an unusual one, at least by today’s standards. Her aspiration as a teenager was to become a writer. In her early twenties, after college, she went from being a writer for the British newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* to feature editor at the renowned fashion magazine *Vogue*. She did not imagine that she would end up a scholar.

Venturing into academia

“I always wanted to write, and did things to finance my writing. I did not want to adapt to the demands of sales.

So I began as a journalist. I wrote a lot about fashion, cinema and was the theatre reviewer at *Vogue*,” she says. “Meanwhile, I wrote books, like *Alone of All Her Sex*. I became more and more in demand as an academic. However, I was quite surprised when I was invited as a visiting scholar to what is now called the Getty Institute for the Humanities. And so I entered academic life.”

It is important to remember that when Warner grew up, women were still a rarity in academia.

“It was not so common in those days, in the kind of class I came from, for women to be intellectuals. I was much more destined to be the orna-

ment of some household. Because of my gender, I was brought up with narrow ambitions. It would have been very different if I were a man. I had to get to it by a zigzag route, by the fact of the expectations and anxieties people had about me,” she says.

Gender and fairy tales

The role of gender is prevalent in Warner’s retelling of her own background; it has also been a substantial part of her scholarship. Her first book, *The Dragon Empress* (1972), retold the story about China’s Empress Dowager Cixi. But it was *Alone of All Her Sex* (1976), a survey of the many myths, symbols and iconography of the Vir-

FACTS

Marina Warner

- Born in London on 9 November 1946.
- Novelist, historian and mythographer.

- Professor of English and creative writing at Birkbeck, University of London.

- The first female scholar to give the BBC Reith Lectures.

- Publishing author of several acclaimed novels. *The Lost Father* (1988) was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize.

- She writes regularly for *The Guardian* and *The London Review of Books*.

- She quit her position as a professor at the University of Essex in protest.

- In 2015, she was appointed Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire for services to higher education and literary scholarship.

- She has published 15 non-fiction books and five novels in addition to many short stories, columns and articles.

- Her latest book is *Once Upon a Time: A Short Story of Fairy Tale* (2014).

- She has contributed to the study of myth and fairy tale by making it a more legitimate field of inquiry, and by an extensive array of studies, analysis and theory.

- *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (1976) caused controversy, but created a new wave of scholarly interest in the mythic figure.

- Marina Warner's work has influenced many fields in the humanities: mythography, film-studies, visual arts, religious studies, literature, theology, gender studies, history, literary criticism, and media-studies.

one gets a good idea of how Warner connects fantastic stories to political realities. From dinosaur mothers in *Jurassic Park* and the Greek sun's granddaughter Medea — infamous

▶ gin Mary, which put Warner on the academic map. She then went past the oriental myths that surrounded Empress Cixi to the pious and religious myth of Virgin Mary and *Joan of Arc* (1981).

Her work on fairy tales showed her as a real pioneer. This was because her perspective allowed her to study fairy tales across the many forms in which they exist. Be it transcription of oral telling, literature, the cinema or even video games. This also includes how creatures and tropes from fairy tales play a role both in our everyday language and also in political propaganda.

"I supposed that my work has been an attempt to understand the human ways of telling fantastic stories. Both from the illusory perspective, which often has an ideological and political component, to the radiant and satisfying conception of myth as a deeper and poetic truth. It is a very complicated territory, which is why I have continued to ask questions," she says.

"I am very interested in attitudes to race, power, tyranny, oppression, silencing, and slavery. I am very concerned about how fairy tales, the common currency of a culture, circulate values all the time. One of the tasks is to capture the work of those values, the shaping of them, and how they change over time."

Connecting fantasy and reality

Listening to the six part BBC radio lecture *Managing Monsters* (1995),

for having murdered her children — to a critique of how single mothers are portrayed by politicians and in the media, given the blame for raising welfare leeches, child murderers and criminal monsters.

"There have been some changes in gender sensibilities and values. For example, it is no longer surprising for a woman to be minister of state. That really is an achievement. It is also a profound social change that there are now more women than men that attend university. That is a huge social revolution," she says.

"When I went to university, only five per cent of the country went there, and only one in five were women. The education of women is the key to social transformation. One of the things that has not followed, and this is absolutely puzzling to me, is the emancipation of men. In the culture of the United Kingdom, it is not very easy to find a way of being coded in a violent and aggressive fashion. I really do not know why that is."

East and west share the past

On the surface, it may seem that Warner's academic geography is set mostly in Europe. If you take a closer look, however, you will find that she also travels beyond Europe's borders and mythological landscapes.

Some people worry that European culture will dissolve in the face of foreign cultures. Warner's book *Stranger Magic: Charmed States and*

“We think of Europe and the Middle East as separate because of the way we are taught and of the patterns of publication and translation. But that is a misjudgement.”

the Arabian Nights (2012) is an important reminder that even in the time where Europe was at its most European, there was a fascination and appreciation of the Middle East. *Arabian Nights* was at this time arguably more popular in the West than in the Middle East.

"I became interested in *Arabian Nights*. First of all, I realised that I had overlooked the incredible importance of the contact with the Middle East in the development of our folklore and our fairy tales. We think of Europe and the Middle East as separate because of the way we are taught and of the patterns of publication and translation. But that is a misjudgement. The whole corpus of imaginative narrative poured from the Middle East into our own stories along the sea and land routes," says Warner.

For Warner this was a very powerful political incentive. When the first Iraq war broke out, she was teaching in Paris.

"I wanted to do something about the war. I did not have the political knowledge, but I could look to the

literary and the cultural conversation. To produce a response asking for peace and harmony through cultural interchange. Our ignorance of Arabic and Islamic tradition is much deeper than our ignorance of, for example, the Chinese, even though the British and the French have been all around the Middle East for centuries," she points out.

An unexpected recognition

It is her inquisitive mind that has brought Marina Warner to the point where she is today. But her questioning of academic truths has also got her into trouble. She had a very public falling out with the University of Essex and left her position there, after which she was at a loss for short while.

"I preferred to have my freedom, but I thought that was the end of my official life. But since then, I have been covered in honours! Absolutely incredible," she exclaims.

The Holberg Prize 2015 is one of these honours which point to the future as well as her past achievements in academia.

Despite the rain that (not surprisingly) greeted Professor Marina Warner when she arrived in Bergen, one can be in no doubt that she will continue her journey of opening up, scrutinising and disseminating the fantastic world of fairy tales to all who need hope, inspiration and wonder. ●

**ABOUT THE HOLBERG PRIZE**

The Holberg Prize is awarded every year to a scholar who has made a substantial contribution to the humanities, social sciences, law, or theological studies. The prize consists of 4.5 million Norwegian kroner (NOK), approximately 550,000 Euro. The prize is often referred to as the 'Nobel Prize of the arts, humanities, and social sciences'.

The 2015 Holberg Prize Laureate was the British historian, writer and mythologist Marina Warner. Previous winners include Islamic history scholar Michael Cook (2014), sociologist Manuel Castells (2012) and the philosophers Jürgen Habermas (2005) and Julia Kristeva (2004, when the prize was first awarded).

The Holberg Prize winner is announced in March every year, and the prize ceremony takes place in Bergen in the first half of June. The University of Bergen hosts the Holberg Prize.

For more information, and to follow the announcement of next year's winner, visit: holbergprisen.no/en



PHOTO: OLE ENSTAD/UTEN



Knut Melvær is a PhD candidate at the Department of Archaeology, History, Cultural Studies and Religion at the University of Bergen (UiB). The UiB Magazine asked him to write this interview based on a podcast and an interview he had previously done for the Holberg Prize.