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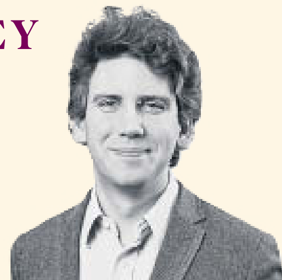
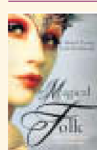
SHELF LIFE



Britain once teemed with fairies – and each county had its style

MAGICAL FOLK

ed Simon Young and Ceri Houlbrook



320PP, GIBSON SQUARE, **£16.99**, EBOOK **£7.59**

★★★★☆

The poet William Blake was sitting in his garden one day, between 1800 and 1803, when he heard "a low and pleasant sound". A leaf shifted to reveal "a procession of creatures, of the colour and size of green and grey grasshoppers, bearing a body laid out on a rose-leaf, which they buried with songs, and then disappeared." Blake claimed to have witnessed the funeral of a fairy.

Now Brexit is coming, superstitious patriots may well judge that it's time to revisit these British myths. If you think we've been flooded for too long with imports – werewolves, vampires and little grey men – then *Magical Folk: British and Irish Fairies, 500 AD to the Present*, a collection of essays by historians, turns the tide.

Did you even know that Britain once teemed with fairy sightings? I saw a couple of ghosts when I was a child and have a friend who spotted a giant cat in the West Country. These things are rarer now, because non-human phenomena generally take the form of whatever society is obsessed with at that particular moment. When we believed in witches, we saw old women on broomsticks. When we started to look beyond the Earth, we saw flying saucers.

If we're less interested in fairies today, we can probably blame some mixture of urbanisation (they aren't city folk) and Walt Disney's *Peter Pan*, which encouraged the idea that fairies were all small, winged and girly (JM Barrie's more grown-up original was clothed in "a skeleton leaf cut low and square, through which her figure could be seen to the best advantage"). As recently as the Twenties, however, things were very different. The novelist Arthur Conan Doyle innocently publicised a fraud called the Cottingley Fairies, a series of photographs of two girls playing with the little folk in their garden. The pictures look laughable to us today, but the fact that anyone took a few cardboard figures held up by hairpins seriously shows how important the fairy used to be to the British imagination.

ALAMY

Fairy play: the third in the Cottingley Fairies series of five hoax photographs, this one taken in 1920

In the 19th century, fairies were almost ubiquitous in the countryside, came in many sizes and, in Ireland at least, were as tall as a man. They could also be surprisingly malicious. The Cornish piskie, according to one 19th-century chronicler, "is a most mischievous and very unsocial sprite. His favourite fun is to entice people into bogs." A witness to a Devonshire pixy, the piskie's neighbour, described this horror as "about 18 inches tall" wearing "a little odd hat, a pipe in his mouth, and he had an old jug in his hand".

Fairies were known to pinch babies, leaving behind an effigy or else one of their own kind, known as a "changeling", in the hope that the parent wouldn't notice. The stolen human baby was then raised as a fairy – leading, one imagines, to some difficult questions later on when it outgrew its adopted brothers and sisters. Another witness, from circa 1900: "I have been told of [the fairies] taking babies, although I can't be sure if it is true. But this did happen to my own mother… She was in bed with her baby… when she felt the baby pulled off her arm and heard the rush of 'them'. Then she mentioned the Almighty's name, and, as 'they' were hurrying away, a little table alongside the bed went round about the floor 20 times."

A doctor might speculate that the lady's mother suffered from sleep paralysis, a condition of being not quite asleep yet not quite awake, creating the dreamy impression that one is pinned to the bed and surrounded by strangers. (I suffer from it too, which may well be the source of those ghosts that haunted me when I was a tot.) An historian might note that this fairy account is based upon knowledge handed down from generation-to-generation – a way of building a family narrative about who we are and what we commonly believe.

Part of the effect of the engaging and authoritative essays in *Magical Folk* is to show how much belief in fairies was defined by location, and therefore defined regional identity.

> **In Cornwall, the fairies rode hares, but in Devon, they wore green boots**

"Round these parts, the fairies ride hares," a man from Cornwall might say, while another might mark the boundaries of Devon by the fact that "over here they wear green boots".

The fairies were not, as is widely thought today, only residents of the "Celtic fringe" but throughout the 19th century were found all over these islands, spawning societies of spotters just as dedicated to their quarry as others are to birds or trains. The little folk of Worcestershire were said to love peace and quiet. If things started to break or go missing around the home, it was probably because the human occupant was making too much noise. The remedy: leave out some bread dipped in milk or honey and they'd soon simmer down.

Fairies, it turns out, are classic British eccentrics. In Sussex, farmers reported that a creature called Master Dobbs would churn their butter at night. He wore a tatty old hat and so, to show his gratitude, one farmer left out a new one for him to wear. Master Dobbs grabbed it eagerly and shouted: "New hat, new hat! Dobbs will do no more good!" He ran off and was never seen again.

To order *Magical Folk* from the Telegraph for **£14.99**, call 0844 871 1514

Best of the rest

This week in Books

THE TRAVELLING CAT CHRONICLES

by Hiro Arikawa, tr Philip Gabriel

256PP, DOUBLEDAY, **£8.99**, EBOOK **£4.99**

★★★★★

Has the dog had its day? In books, at least, being a cat is where it's at. Since James Bowen's 2012 megahit *A Street Cat Named Bob*, which was made into a film last year, the charts have been clogged up with imitation "miaow-moirs". Now comes another book about a street cat, also destined for the big screen: Hiro Arikawa's *The Travelling Cat Chronicles*, already a bestseller in her native Japan. Unlike *Bob*, it's not a memoir but a novel – and distinctly free of sentimentalism. Instead, it's as self-possessed and yet comforting as – well, a cat.

A stray tom with an admirably *che sera sera* attitude finds a new home with Satoru, an isolated man in his thirties, who names the cat Nana in remembrance of his much-loved childhood pet, whom he had to give away when his parents died. But after five happy years with Nana, Satoru finds himself (for reasons that slowly emerge) unable to care for him, and so takes Nana on a trip to visit three sets of old friends to see whether one of them can give his beloved cat a home. At each stop, Satoru and Nana unwittingly help their hosts smooth over a rough patch in their lives, like the couple whose fertility problems have led to their estrangement, or the high-school friend whose violent jealousy of Satoru has been taken out on his own dog.

It's hinted that something beyond the name "Nana" might connect the old and new cats, but that's as far as down the reincarnation path as the novel goes. One gets the impression that the laconic Nana wouldn't approve at all: "I didn't think we needed to explain the origin of my name to every passing stranger, but Satoru was always so conscious like that."

Philip Gabriel, the translator, also translates for Haruki Murakami, another Japanese cat-lover. Arikawa's feline tales may be less fantastical than Murakami's, but they are no less bewitching. ***Kat Brown***

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