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BOTANICAL FOLK TALES OF BRITAIN AND IRELAND,

LISA SCHNEIDAU

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Conservationist Lisa Schneidau's collection of folk tales connects the natural landscape and plants with the human and enchanted worlds. It is a world of fairies, witches, nature spirits and 'magical beings'. Ideally, the book's short stories might inspire the reader to feel a curiosity or a closer connection to nature and folklore. It consists of 39 stories about how indigenous 'British' plants (flowers, bushes and trees) affect our imagination and collective consciousness. The work is a resource for storytellers to use and reinterpret (p. 13).

The book's argument investigates a selection of botanical folk tales known (and unknown to some people) in Britain and Ireland. In particular, related to the *'things that grow and live and die here, the traditions of our own wildlife: And could those stories help us, living in Britain and Ireland, to reconnect to our own fragmented ecology?'* (p. 12). The author continues by saying, *'This book is the first result of my search to answer those questions'* (p. 12). The focus is the central role of plants in the folk stories (as living plants and trees, as food sources, and as fibres derived from plants for everyday use by humans) (p. 13). Schneidau highlights tales that *'resonate with our natural history and our heritage'*; however, she remarks they are *'my own versions'* of the stories (p. 13). For example, the 5,000-year-old folk tale, 'Jack and the Beanstalk', includes reworked elements designed to ignite thought about contemporary modern agricultural methods and ecological problems (p. 103). While the Cinderella story is slightly changed to include a magical undercoat made from moss ('Mossycoat', p. 25)

The chapters are divided by season, starting in Winter and passing through Spring, Summer, and Autumn. Schneidau's research stems from folklore archives and collections, natural history literature. She has also sat and listened to British and foreign storytellers. The author seeks to source the oldest reference. The book contains a short section entitled 'Study Sources and Further Reading' but no book index.

In three particular areas, the book does well. Firstly, the book's short stories are succinct and diverse. Each tale is enjoyable and humorous in some places, while

in others, a darker force is at work (making it unsuitable for younger readers). The characters range from humans (some of whom are materialistic, greedy or lazy, as well as others who are reasonable and fair) and fairies, brownies, piskies, witches (including one elder-tree witch), conjurors, shape-shifting water spirits, evil spirits, leprechauns, and spectres. However, the plant life discussed is equally diverse, and each plant is briefly explained in the context of folklore and the supernatural. The tree list comprises yews, blackthorn, whitethorn, willow, juniper, hornbeam, and pear (and wild dandelion flowers).

Second, Schneidau gives credit to the gypsies' oral tradition and the passing on of stories about coming of age, morality, and materialist living vis-a-vis a communal one. For example, tales retold by gypsies and travellers and non-gypsies include 'Mossycoat' (p. 26) and 'The Basketmaker's Donkey' (that emphasises the willow tree and weaving) (p. 51). Third, the stories about plants and the fairies, the 'Fair Folk', make for engaging reading and is a strong theme throughout the book. However, we are reminded not to anger the magical creatures as they can turn annoyed and vengeful, causing misery for years ahead (see 'Yallery Brown', p. 78, 'Tom Fitzpatrick and the Leprechaun', p. 129). Fourth, some stories are apt in the age of sustainable living and environmental consciousness. They highlight the need to share resources, conserve them, and only take what one needs from nature and the land. For instance, 'No Man's Land' (p. 70), 'The Field' (p. 85), and 'That's Enough to Go On With' (p. 123).

Notwithstanding, the book could be improved had the author clarified in the 'Introduction' that folktales reflect a universal moral code transcending national borders and identities; for instance, in terms of stories about 'good' and 'bad' behaviour and what they mean for the wider community. Equally, the notion of the magical creatures might have incorporated parallels to similar entities in the non-Western tradition (for instance, the *Jinn* of the Arabic culture). It would allow the incorporation of Britain's and Ireland's multicultural society into the broader narrative of domestic folk culture. The hemp plant is mentioned as originating in

India (p. 175), though the home of tulips (Turkiye and Central Asia) is not reported in the story ‘The Tulip Pixies’ (p. 90). In Western Europe, tulips were cultivated in the Netherlands during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries AD. Though in the story, this plant has an important role. While the piskies danced and sang at night, they laid their babies in this flower to rest: ‘*The piskie folks had brought their babies to the tulip bed, and laid each one within a separate flower*’ (p. 92). This is an interesting connection between a Turkish-origin flower and pixies! However, as this book is a resource, future storytellers might weave in this multicultural element.

Botanical Folk Tales is readable and suitable, in most cases, for all age groups, though some accounts require explanation. The collection of stories has the potential to reignite and help to reimagine our childhood fascination with the mysteries of nature and otherworldly beings. In a social context, the collection of stories makes us think about how pre-modern and agricultural societies transmitted their moral values outside religious and state institutions. Furthermore, the book is topical because Schneidau has chosen to emphasise and reinterpret some of the tales from a contemporary environmental and ecological stance; for instance, modern farming’s overuse of pesticides, fungicides and other chemicals and the marginalisation of holistic agricultural methods. The book suits general readers, students, and researchers of British and Irish folklore and culture.

Source

Lisa Schneidau. (2019). *Botanical Folk Tales of Britain and Ireland*. Stroud, UK: The History Press.