

‘Open Questions’ – An Interview with Marina Warner

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Marina Warner © Edward Park

Interview by Karina Jakubowicz

I first encountered the work of Marina Warner as an undergraduate when I found *Alone of All her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* in the university library. While it wasn't on any of my reading lists, I was drawn to its reputation for being stridently feminist, experimental and groundbreaking. My expectations were far from disappointed.

In a way that was both highly personal and academically rigorous, Warner had proposed that Mary was an ideological tool that encouraged women to fulfil sexual stereotypes. The Virgin Mary was, Warner stated, a product of social conditioning, venerated by the women that it freely undermined. As a long-lapsed Catholic I had witnessed this veneration first hand. Mary had been held up as the archetypal idol for little girls like me; she was indicative of our mothers (who we liked) and of a person we could never be (and consequently did not like). Needless to say Mary had been a confusing influence, and I was impressed at how Warner had tamed such a slippery and emotional issue into something comprehensible – even elegant.

On further reading I found that Marina Warner was something of a genius for tackling difficult subjects. She had written about modern childhood, symbolism and the female form, monsters, myths, spirit visions, fairytales and bogeymen, to name a few.

In each case she had gathered together a miscellany of information, and shaped it to suit her deeply complex, sometimes psychological subject matter. Her critical method struck me as almost artistic, and I was not surprised when I later learned that she wrote fiction.

To date, she has written five novels and three collections of short stories. One of these novels (*The Lost Father*) had been shortlisted for the Booker Prize (1988) and awarded the Commonwealth Writer's Prize (1989). Over the past decade her critical work has continued to go from strength to strength. Her book *Stranger Magic: Charmed States and the Arabian Nights* won the National Book Critics Circle Award (2012), The Truman Capote Award for Literary Criticism (2013) and The Sheikh Zayed Book Award (2013).

Marina Warner was born in London, and spent her early childhood in Cairo and Brussels. She attended St Mary's Convent in Ascot, and then studied Italian and French at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford. She became a journalist for *The Daily Telegraph* and a features editor for *Vogue*, before undertaking a long period of independent scholarship. She was awarded the title of CBE in 2008, after having been given the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (France, 2000) and the Commendatore dell' Ordine della Stella di Solidarieta (Italy, 2005).

In 2004 she became a Professor in the Department of Literature, Film and Theatre Studies at the University of Essex. She was chair of the judges for the 2015 Man Booker International Prize, and was recently awarded the 2015 Holberg Prize. She is currently Professor of English and Creative Writing at Birkbeck, University of London.

Ten years after reading *Alone of All Her Sex*, I met Marina Warner at her house in London. The building was tucked into the end of a terrace, and a burgeoning garden gave it a romantic, even fairytale quality.

"It's going over sadly," was Marina's reply to my enthusiastic praise. We settled opposite one another in her kitchen, two lapsed Catholics blowing over teacups.

"I've read your books," I said.



Marina Warner © Edward Park

You have written a great deal about icons in your work – specifically those that are used to craft or judge the identities of women. When you were growing up did you have your own icons that you looked up to and wanted to emulate?

Marina: When I was a child we were in the heroic period, and there were heroines held up for emulation. Indeed, the comic called *Girl* that I took, had a biography on the back, usually of an exemplary female figure, but not always. I remember Albert Schweitzer was one [male example], but there was Joan of Arc, Marie Curie, Florence Nightingale and sometimes some medieval examples – Eleanor of Aquitaine, who were definitely heroic – exceptional and heroic.

So my early work really remained with the idea of the heroic. The first book I published was a biography of the Empress Dowager [Cixi] of China who seemed to me to be a mega-heroine. She ruled millions of people and was an exact contemporary of Queen Victoria, and so forth.

And she was quite vicious as well!

Exactly, a real monster, a powerful female monster. In fact she was rather disappointing when I researched her, but I was very much still in that mode – this was in the mid-seventies (well not even mid-seventies, it came out in seventy-two) when we were looking for these exceptions. There's still a very important strand in female historiography and female biography, of actually uncovering forgotten [figures].

Just the other day, I discovered Emilie du Chatelet. I should have known about her but I didn't. No, I knew that she was Voltaire's mistress and patron, and a clever, intellectual woman, but I had no idea how significant and appealing a person she was until I went to a play that was put on as part of a series at my old college, Lady Margaret Hall. [The series] is meant to raise awareness of women in science; it's pedagogical theatre.

It turned out to be rather a good play, written by an American [Lauren Gunderson], very vivid and alive. It was about Voltaire's and Chatelet's love affair and intellectual rivalry, and Voltaire's unfathomably awful behaviour towards her. The terrible thing is that she died in childbirth.

Another play, about Ada Lovelace, was also part of the series. She's another heroine whom I am now, in my late sixties, passionate about. So that tendency in my explorations hasn't completely dwindled, but it was overtaken by looking for the generic. In a way the fairy tale does both [the generic and heroic], but I began by looking closely at the ordinary lives of women – at that history.

In *From the Beast to the Blonde* (1994), I tried to draw out of literary history women who had significantly used the fairy tale form, and modified it for their own purposes, and been very lively and inventive with it. They were mostly French, but not only – and mostly forgotten.

Some of them are even catalogued mysteriously in the British Library so that you can't find them. For example, Madame d'Aulnoy, who was a successful (and notorious) woman of letters in the eighteenth century, used to be – in the days of the print catalogue – entered under 'La Motte' her family name. A.S. Byatt knew this, and called her heroine Christabel LaMotte in her novel *Possession*, playing tribute to her, because this novel is filled with allusions to the kind of fairy tales D'Aulnoy wrote.

The women were often plagiarized, too. This is before copyright as you know, and so they were often taken over, issued in pirate editions and so forth. You know the kind of thing: 'the salacious memoirs of Baronne – four asterisks.' In her persona as a storyteller, D'Aulnoy became known as Mother Bunch in England – she was turned into an old woman, and massaged into a familiar old crone.

While *From the Beast to the Blonde* was about certain significant individuals of great accomplishment, inspiration and genius. I was also very committed to the work that women writers had done to create the relation between self and world, family and self through these kinds of stories – because fairy tales are so much about women. So my study of them was about anonymity as well; which was one of Virginia Woolf's great themes – Anon. as a woman.

Did you always want to be a writer? You describe yourself as a writer and mythographer, and yet you do so much more than that. Did you always want to have an amalgamation of vocations, or was there one fixed thing that you wanted to be?

I was very aware, quite young, that my father would have liked me to have been a boy. They were never unkind to me, my parents, on this point, or to my sister (in fact we were incredibly well educated and everything was done to help us succeed) but we were made aware that we were female and that somehow this destined us in a different direction.

My father thought that I should marry well, and he didn't think I should write – well, he thought that I could write dilettantishly – I can't remember who he was quoting, but he said '[writing] was a very good stick but a very poor crutch!'

I always wanted to write, but the mythographer handle was actually suggested by the original maker of my website. He said, 'If you just put 'writer' nobody will find you.' He asked me, 'What do you write about?' and I said 'myths'. So he then asked, 'Is there a word that describes that?' It stuck and I feel slightly apologetic. It's too pompous, but it tries to capture the fact that I do chiefly explore myths.

I always wanted to write imaginatively, and so it's a bit of a sorrow to me that I've not written as much fiction as I've written criticism and history. But I'm now determined once again to return to a novel, though I've made this resolution once before and I haven't succeeded.

In an interview in 2011 you said that you weren't going to do any more critical work, and you were just going to focus on fiction and smaller things. Have you kept to that?

No, not at all! I tried to clear my desk and failed, because two things cascaded onto me. I was given a fellowship at All Souls [Oxford] which I couldn't really say no to, and I didn't really have the chutzpah to say, 'I'm writing a novel,' so I embarked on more critical research again.

This ties into another question I wanted to ask – whether you use different processes for different literary forms?

Yes. That's why it's more difficult. Novels are more difficult because I think literary criticism is a bit like having a lump of clay and making a pot. You have to choose your clay and you have to have an idea or concept of what you're going to do with it. With a novel you have to make the clay, and that's tiring – interesting and tiring. Sometimes the clay that you're using, even if it's not immediately your life or loves or losses, it still comes from much, much deeper and more painful places than criticism.

That's not to say that writing literary criticism doesn't engage you on some profound level, because it does. Especially if you see the activity as I do, and as Edward Said puts it in *The World, the Text and the Critic*: that a work of literature is an event in action in the world and has a relationship with it.

A text is made at a certain time, but every time it's read again it's happening in a different context. It's still in action, it's not a passive and inert thing and the critic's task is one of responsive engagement. I think people accept it now but for a while there was a desire to put a cordon sanitaire around a culture as if it had no effect on other cultures, or just existed in its pure aesthetic beauty – but even those are political statements.

Art for art's sake may be a very high ideal for literary culture – to make art a place you can go where you have the greatest liberty, where you are free from thinking about relations to the world and to the times.

When you are writing cultural history it isn't easy, but it isn't quite as personal as fiction, even when you're not being personal in fiction, because you have to use your observations from life. You may create a totally different setting from your own circumstances, the characters may be people you've never met, but you can't really animate anything if you don't remember and bring memories to it. At least I do, anyway, and that makes the process of fiction more intense.

This is a selfish question since it's one that I often ask myself. I went to a Catholic school, and I know that you attended a convent school in Berkshire before going to Oxford. You

then went on to renounce Catholicism and have a very difficult relationship with it, yet it inspired so much of your work.

Looking back, are you glad that you had a Catholic education?

Yes, it's a sharp question. For example I didn't bring up my son in any religious way, he wasn't baptized (deliberately) and it's true that as a result he doesn't have the culture that I had. Also, it turned out that I had (compared to today) a very good education, even though the convent I went to was really more a ladies' finishing school.

I don't know what yours was like but you're much younger than me, and education for women has improved ... at least the ambitions for women are higher. We were being polished, but that meant that we were taught a very broad range of subjects, everything from embroidery to cooking. We had singing and dancing, as well as the curriculum. It was a boarding school so they could fit it all in. I was in the choir, and that probably began my love of music.

The Catholic imagination hasn't left me at all. However one thing that has changed over time is that it used to upset me when I went into a church, or when I was moved by a Catholic painting or piece of music – until not that long ago.

I remember in 1998, I was in Cambridge for a year, and I went to an evensong in one of the chapels because a friend of mine was singing in it.^[1] It was a motet, a motet of unbelievable beauty, and the words were '*Totus tuus, mater mundi*,' [wholly yours, mother of the world] and it was commissioned by the pope, John Paul, and written by a Polish composer.^[2] That distressed me very much, that it moved me and it wasn't just a personal piece of music, but an official papal commission, and had a design upon me, doctrinally. But now I don't care anymore, I can be moved by a religious piece of music or a poem and not worry about faith or consent or doubt or apostasy...

I was invited to Ledbury Festival the other day to read with Rowan Williams. We were asked to choose poems – the theme was 'poetry and belief' – and I chose almost more religious poetry than he did, which is quite strange! I read from Dante. I've somehow got to a less troubled place.

I have truly lost my faith because I absolutely don't believe in the redemption, I don't believe in original sin, I don't believe in sacrifice of the cross – and I actually feel quite opposed to these tenets of Christian faith.

The religions that appeal to me more, though I don't believe in them either, are the ones that do not involve sacrifice as a central principle. Mary, of course, has changed a lot – well, she's constantly evolving. That was the surprise I experienced when I first wrote my book about her. I hadn't really expected her to be historic, I expected her to be eternal, because that was the way we were brought up to see her, as eternal and divine.

I think she's now changing in many ways for the better, returning to becoming a symbol for the poor, for mercy, rather than a symbol of the power of the church. And of course she's acquired some feminist followers, and that's changed her.

When you were talking about your mixed feelings about Christian art and music it made me think of Griselda Pollock. I remember reading that she often felt conflicted about the presentation of women in art, sometimes finding it both offensive and beautiful. I wonder how you reconcile those feelings, even outside of a religious context?

I think more work should be done on this question of consent on the part of the viewer or reader, but you can actually bypass it in a different way, by proposing that the question of belief is really the wrong question. We posit it today because it's much more of a choice now, but in so many of the cultures before there were few people who were not a part of this imaginative world, and they didn't imagine themselves outside of it. Their works are not asking for us to submit to their beliefs, they're just made within that cultural framework. It's like a language – you don't believe in English, you speak it.

Yes, and yet it's laden with all of these political meanings and connotations of which you don't have control. I think the worry is endorsing it; by presenting it, and loving it, and putting it in a gallery you are endorsing it.

One of the interesting developments in feminism has been the very strong attraction that misogynistic texts have for women. A myth such as Medea for example, exercises an incredible fascination on women, women performers, women poets, women novelists: they rewrite it, they retract it, they create variations, but they don't always defend Medea herself.

Christa Wolf actually exonerated her, and so did Christine de Pisan in the fifteenth century – they say she didn't murder her children. But that's not always what feminist producers, such as Deborah Warner, or actors, such as Fiona Shaw and Helen McCrory do. They say she did it, but she did it *because*...

She's a very compelling figure for women, as are other passionate and destructive mythic women: Hecuba, Clytemnestra, even the wicked queen in Snow White.

If you look at developments in contemporary art, I think that in some cases – think of Sarah Lucas – if a man was doing that work, you wouldn't feel the same about it. It's a huge issue so this is very broad brush, but the desire has grown strongly to inhabit negative tropes in order to reconfigure them, bring them into a new, fresh context that jolts us into thinking about them differently.

I think so, I often have that feeling when reading Angela Carter. I love her work but sometimes wonder if I would be celebrating it as much if a man had written it. She was very keen on de Sade as well...

It's very interesting, her essay on de Sade, and it was written in the context of her broader attack on bourgeois marriage: she argues that de Sade had seen the reality of the transaction, and he'd seen it plain. He'd simply magnified it into a phantasmagoria of horror.

The transaction of bourgeois marriage and its emotional cruelty resembled, *au fond*, the master slave relationship in the period of slavery. Her essay is a work of its date, 1979, the same date as *The Bloody Chamber*, but it was written more quickly. She started writing the stories in *The Bloody Chamber* in the early seventies or maybe mid-seventies, but she wrote *The Sadeian Woman* in a white-hot jet.

She was very transgressive and contrary, and she wanted to shock, and in the sixties and seventies there was so much more open discussion, much more experimental thinking about sex and freedom than there is now. Even with *Fifty Shades* being a bestseller – it isn't the same thing at all.

The underground press, the independent revolutionary feminist press, were full of exuberant hypotheses and calls to tear down the barriers. I don't know what Angela Carter and the many others involved would think now of pornography, which was then thought to be an expression of freedom against the authority of the establishment.

There were so many horrible practices going on, grubby transactions between rich old men and young women, so there was almost a puritan desire to clean it up, to be open and celebratory and have love-ins without shame or secrecy. I really wish Angela were alive. I'd love to know what she would have thought –

I thought of her at the Alexander McQueen exhibition, because she loved clothes too. She ceased to be interested in wearing [fashion] herself, she took to dungarees, but she was very interested in and knew a lot about clothes, and you can see it in the work. She is supremely sensuous about textures, fabrics, the rustle of clothes, and this interest runs through all her work, not only *The Bloody Chamber*.

When my father died and my mother sold the house, we had a complete run of *Vogues* all the way back to the Fifties. I told Angela that a man in a van had come and taken them away, and she said "Oh you didn't let them go! What a resource for a writer!"

I wanted to ask you about political responsibility, because I know you were talking recently about the political responsibility of writers. Do you feel that academics have the same responsibility, even though it's arguably harder for them to express their views?

Yes. And to exercise freedom. I think we lived in those halcyon days when we didn't feel we had to assert our freedoms, they were just there.

But now if you don't rebel, they are taken away, and that's true of everything. Liberty [the campaign group] just marched in protest against the government because of some extension

of surveillance. You have to protest now in this way, or else rights, freedoms, will be taken bit by bit.

In academia I think things are not quite as bad as they were. I think the critics have to keep up the pressure. It's possible that it's not quite so bad because the next REF [Research Excellence Framework] is not for another five years. One or two children of my friends, who have gone into academe, are getting leave to do their work and there seems to be a little more nurturing of the younger scholars.

I saw the horrendous hours academics were putting in [at the University of Essex] which were very difficult for young women to withstand, because young women are, in my experience, always more obliging and much less selfish. It's quite extraordinary, but men are much better at quietly leaving their offices at five.

That's interesting because I thought you were going to say it was having children that made the difference?

Yes, well that too. Having children can affect things in a different way. It makes it quite difficult for those women with children to speak out because there's so much at stake.

And what do you feel needs to change about universities to make them better?

It has to come from your generation, because it's all very well for people like me to belly ache about it, but I am practically retired and it can look as if I am merely being nostalgic and impractical. It has to come from you.

I would advocate that one of the big universities should withdraw from the REF. If Oxford or Cambridge said 'this is a system that's draining people's time, creating terrible enmity, not helping the humanities because it's modelled on a science basis' –the whole thing would collapse.

I was sitting next to Jacqueline Rose at the REF meeting and we were being told that we had to know what we were going to do in five years' time – what our four offerings would be in 2020. She was about to give her inaugural lecture called 'Bantu in the Bathroom [: Sex and Race in the New Millennium'] about the Pistorius case and the issues that Pistorius' murder brought up. Five years ago the murder hadn't happened. So there was no way she could have offered this as a major contribution to Birkbeck research into the politics of gender.

And similarly in my case, my work on Orientalism in fiction, although I had a feeling about the Middle East, Isis/Daesh hadn't happened five years ago. Since then they have driven people into the refugee camps and culture has become an even more crucial issue, or rather the lack of culture, because it becomes a void into which propaganda is sucked.

I don't understand the government, because they want to extend education, and they were talking about it on the radio today, quite rightly, but with the current fees – how are they going to do that? How are they going to persuade people? It's bizarre.

I think we may see an increase in places like Birkbeck, where you tend to get a job first and do a degree afterwards, because how are you going to afford it otherwise?

Birkbeck was suffering because the government wouldn't allow student loans for part-time courses, but we – and others – argued against this, and now if you study part-time you can borrow. Yet it's still very expensive. The finances of Higher Education are extremely problematic, and it's the key issue, in my view. My son was educated for free – he's 37, and he was the last of that generation who were educated for free.

I just did this series on the radio [What Is a Story?]^[3] They finish today – it was quite a mammoth haul, I was exhausted.

Was it you doing all of the interviews?

Yes. I was chairing the judges for the Man Booker International, so I did the interviews while we were working on that. I thought, if I'm going to be reading a hundred writers and reading them in depth I want to think about them a bit more.

I think it's wonderful to have the series for the readers as well. The Man Booker International Prize seems very distant to me; the results come out, and sometimes I might read some books by the author that won, but I rarely get a sense of the process or people involved. The best part about the series was that it created some familiarity with the shortlisted writers.

Yes, I not only wanted to make it more interesting for myself, to make it a richer experience for me, but I also know that some of these writers have very difficult lives – in fact I argued very strongly to adopt a different format, instead of going down to the wire, and winner takes all.

The organisers have now modified it so now all of the shortlisted writers are going to get some money, not very much but a bit, because previously they've been given nothing. Two or three of them didn't come, and it meant I didn't interview them, so they didn't quite get the same coverage.

César Aira didn't come from Argentina – you don't come from Argentina to sit in the bloody banqueting hall to be told you didn't win. I said, let's just have a shortlist, and declare that all these writers are really good. Let's hear their work, interview them, celebrate them, and share the prize.

And you would prefer to have that format?

Yes, and they said no because the press won't do it. I'm afraid the press and the book trade have had their way and changed the prize. One change is that it's no longer going to be for a body of work but for a single title, published that year, as with the ordinary Booker. But the much more serious change is that it will now be given only to a book published in Britain. It means that several of the writers who were shortlisted would simply not have been on it, because they're out of print or only published by small presses in America.

There are some small presses here – And Other Stories, The White Review, Fitzcarraldo – it really is a growing thing, your generation making these marvellous platforms and discussions and websites, run by people really passionate about literature.

With any luck the new rules for the international Booker will help them. But it does mean that a writer like Fanny Howe won't get a look in – even László Krasznahorki was only just published in England, [by Tuskar Rock Press] a tiny press Colm Tóibín runs. He seems almost to have created it for László Krasznahorki, he admires him so much.

The question of how culture is disseminated links to a question I wanted to ask about the evolution of fairy tales. Part of what makes fairy tales so difficult to analyse is the fact that they are part of an oral tradition. Do you think that with the advent of print culture and film that we are getting more homogenous versions of the tales, or does this environment create even more dynamism and creativity?

I think that the film and media developments over the last 20 years are actually returning us to a kind of oral culture. A story like 'Snow White' will suddenly be given two or three new tellings, and some versions even combine stories – the beautiful Catalan film, 'Blancanieves' [Snow White], is a direct response to Disney, and a challenge – one storyteller interpolating another storyteller across time. It has extraordinary power and consciousness.

It was very aware of the tradition: there were all kinds of quotes from Disney, which are changed and exaggerated – you must see it. It's in black and white, filmed as if it was a silent film and expressionist in lighting and acting. It's very beautiful.

Anyway, the same year saw the absolutely egregious 'Snow White and the Huntsman,' an appalling piece of Hollywood trash. You could [almost] hear the producers had said, "Why is the wicked stepmother so cruel? We can't have this wicked character, we have to explain

her!” So there’s a terribly clumsy back-story about how she was abused as a child, but then of course they can’t explore this, because the film is for children. You can easily imagine the laboured committee meetings, but one thing is sure about the essence of the fairy tale: you don’t explain.

The risk of losing dynamism exists across popular culture. If you think of a singer like ‘Florence and the Machine,’ she begins with an independent, imaginative voice – will she be able to continue like that? Or will the machine (a different machine, not her machine), the larger machine of corporate business, audiences, exhaustion, being a star, will it just somehow overwhelm her?

Responses to fairy tales are very varied. A significant number of artists are taking elements of fairy tales, features and aspects, especially women artists but some men too. There’s also a lot of poetry: interestingly, Sylvia Plath uses fairy tale imagery. Anne Sexton’s sequence, *Transformations*, is very famous – she’s engaging with the stories directly, whereas Plath’s absorbing the feel of them and the images. The works change, depending on who is doing the work and their medium.

Fairy tale isn’t a psychological medium, yet the effect on the reader can be psychological (as with *The Bloody Chamber*). The material has huge psychological riches in it – as we know from the psychologists who’ve worked with fairy tales – but it doesn’t itself psychologise. Philip Pullman has gone so far as to say that the characters barely seem conscious.

Virginia Woolf doesn’t write fairy tales, though of course she knows them – and uses them. Mrs. Ramsay tells a fairy tale, if you remember, and it’s important in *To the Lighthouse*: she tells ‘The fisherman and his wife’, and it has an important function. But I don’t want to be too sweeping – psychological novels can revisit a fairy tale and explore it quite deeply (Bluebeard, for example) but it then moves beyond fairy tale, and becomes a novel.

This leads onto another question that I wanted to ask. If you could modernise or adapt a single fairy tale in your writing, which one would it be?

Yes, I’ve often thought about that myself. It’s slightly strange that I haven’t done it more. There are fairy tale elements in all my novels. *Indigo* in particular is consciously structured as a fairy tale, draws on fairy tale imagery throughout (it has two sisters and one of them is golden-haired and wicked and the other is dark and good) and ends with a happy ending.

I deliberately stretched the plot that way, because that’s what a fairy tale does, it throws down a wager against despair and disappointment and expands possibility. *The Leto Bundle* tells a fairy tale of a different kind, but has a sad ending, because I wanted to do a different kind of thing, and it’s about refugees.

I’m quite proud of that book because it’s really about something that’s become a much, much more serious issue since I wrote it. I’ve now written some short stories – *I’ve got a book coming out in September*, and several of them are fairy tales. The closing one, ‘The Difference in the Dose,’ is a retelling of ‘Rapunzel’ and actually it is fairly psychologized. If

I hadn't told you it was Rapunzel you might not even recognise it. I took the idea of an older woman taking a child, but in my story she adopts her from a young girl who has a baby that she doesn't want, and then the child, when she's growing up, resents her adopted state. The collection's called *Fly Away Home* from the nursery rhyme. It's got various others: there's a very, very strongly disguised Salome, set in a war zone where the father has committed a crime. He says he'll do anything for her if she'll dance for him on his birthday, and she asks him to own up and turn himself in. It's a moral tale for our times! I was thinking about what it would be like to be Stalin's daughter, or Mladic's – they both killed themselves.

I would love to write more fairy tales inspired by the Arabian Nights too – I probably will go back to them. At the moment the novel I'm writing is based on my mother's life in Egypt after the war, so it doesn't have much fairy tale in it yet. But it might develop. I'm also writing a ballet – the story line and there might be some sung elements, too. I was asked to go to the Center for Ballet and the Arts in New York this autumn, and they wanted me to give lectures and seminars, and I've done so many lectures and seminars over the last year that I thought, 'I want to write something poetic.'

And because so much dance is inspired by myth or fairy tale, I asked if I could work instead on an idea for a ballet. We have a composer – Joanna MacGregor, the pianist, has agreed to collaborate with me and Kim Brandstrup, the choreographer. Joanna is very passionate about medieval literature and is actually doing an MA at Birkbeck. She is Head of Piano at the Royal Academy, and she's a concert pianist, and she managed to find time – incredible. And because she loves medieval literature I think we might use a medieval fairy tale to appeal to her interests.

I thought about 'The girl without hands' from the Grimms, as it's connected to the cycle of stories about a falsely accused queen. The young heroine is accused falsely and her hands are cut off – sometimes she mutilates herself – and then she wanders the world as a mutilated figure, but her hands have been swallowed by a fish and the fish is caught and her hands are discovered safe and sound inside.

But I am thinking of drawing on the poetry of the women at the Abbasid court in Baghdad from the 9th century, some of whom were slaves who rose by their wits.

I was wondering if there was a key theme that you felt united your novels, but it sounds like that theme might be fairy tales?

There are some themes in common, but there's a difference of method that's very important: fiction really is an arena for taking up different angles of view. Actually one of the things that László Krasznahorki said in the interview at Hay [literary festival] was that his older brother used to put him on his shoulders and take him to school, and that this was the first time he realized that you could look at the world from a different angle.

That's what he tries to do in his fiction, he said. He looks at the same thing but he goes around it from different points of view. He doesn't write in the first person but he's very

interior in each person as he writes as he goes round the subject. This is the principal difference between literary criticism, cultural history and fiction for me.

For example, while discussing fairy tales I might say “The Jungians say that the symbol of the gold ball that the princess and the frog wants to throw down the well is a symbol of warmth purity light – a solar symbol. I however...” You might invoke other points of view, but on the whole you don’t go prismatically around a topic, you have to take the reader along a path and you have to appear to be a guide.

There are some very interesting critics who will confess, “I don’t know where I’m going,’ but you have to be pretty secure – famous – to do that, to start saying “I’m floundering here – I actually haven’t got a clue what any of this means.” But when you’re writing a novel that’s what you do. Say you’re writing a tragic fiction about Medea, you don’t know [who is to blame], you’re at a loss. The chorus says one thing, she says another, Jason says this, and the poor children! It’s a multifaceted artifact, mobile, alive, impossible to resolve, and the resolution of a fiction is usually emotional, not intellectual or analytical.

In the past (although this rhythm has since broken down) I used to pretty much write a novel after each work of non-fiction, because I would be left with questions I wanted to explore in a different way. For example, the first novel I wrote, *In a Dark Wood*, describes how one of the characters has a vision of Our Lady – I wanted to be inside the mind of someone to whom that had happened.

In *The Skating Party*, the anthropologist-antihero observes a witch being punished in a society on a South Sea Island. So again I wanted to work out that kind of horrendous situation, but in a different way from the historical case of Joan of Arc, whom I had just written about.

There was even quite a close relationship between *Monuments and Maidens* and *The Lost Father*. *The Lost Father* was about fascism in Italy and my mother’s childhood. It was about the way the fascists applied propaganda of maternity and the motherland, and the way Mussolini played the part of the father.

The ‘lost father’ is my mother’s father, who did indeed die when she was nine, but it’s also the idea of the phantasmic patriarch, the position that Mussolini occupied. When my mother was growing up not only was he a paternal figure, but you needed to have a father, because the whole culture was so centred on the idea of having this kind of authority figure.

My ‘Egyptian’ novel, the one I’ve been writing for so long, really runs in counterpoint to my various writings on the Middle East, from the book on the Arabian Nights onwards.

The recent seminar series at Oxford was called ‘Orienting Fiction’, and explored motifs traveling from East to West, and the different kinds of forms of Orientalism that occur in the encounter. The two streams will converge in different places. It’s the open questions that fiction gives us access to that are valuable.

Marina Warner’s new collection of short stories ‘Fly Away Home’ was published on the 15th of September by Salt Publishing.

^[1] She describes this in the introduction to the new edition new Virgin Mary book [The new edition of *Alone of All Her Sex*, 2013])

^[2] [Henryk Górecki Op. 60]