

MOMTAZA: This is a retelling of a retelling. A nation is only as elastic as its symbols. Make it make sense, make us make sense.

JAMIE: Friend, there will be a place where we can start again. My wound, a badge. The land, not sore, but healing.

ELEANOR: Welcome to bedtime stories for the end of the world. A podcast where we throw a magic key into the river and arrive back home to find it waiting for us on the mantelpiece. We've assembled some of the finest poets that the UK has to offer and asked them to rewrite the myths, legends and fairy stories that they want to pass down the generations. Stories they want to preserve for whatever future comes next. I'm your host, Eleanor Penny, and today I have the infinite pleasure by being joined by Jamie Hale and Momtaza Mehri, hello guys

MOMTAZA: Hi

JAMIE: Hello

ELEANOR: Jamie Hale is a poet, performer, and multidisciplinary creative. Their work explores interrelationships between embodiment, disability, deviance, power, and nature. They've been published in *The Rialto* and *Magma*, and performed their poetry at the Southbank Centre, Tate Modern, and Barbican Centre, which featured their solo show, 'Not Dying' in 2019. Jamie curates CRIPtic, a D/deaf and disabled artist development programme and showcase, and recently won the Evening Standard Future Theatre Award for Directing and Theatre Making. Their first pamphlet, 'Shield' was published by Verve in January of this year. Momtaza Merhi is a poet and independent researcher. Her work has appeared in *Granta*, *Art Forum*, *The Guardian*, *Bomb Magazine* and *Real Life Mag*. She's the former Young People's Laureate for London, and columnist in residence at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's Open Space. Her latest Pamphlet, 'Doing The Most

With *The Least* was published in 2019. And first up, we have Jamie. Now what story have you decided to retell for us?

JAMIE: I decided to retell a series of myths from the Arthurian canon. I didn't want to be pinned down to an accurate retelling of a single myth when there have been so many beautiful versions. So instead I decided to take aspects or sections of a series of different myths, and kind of brought them into the structure of a mythic journey, so that we follow this journey but through a series of different characters, at different time points in history. I was interested in the idea in Arthurian legend that the King under the hill will waken at a time of crisis, and thought about how different characters from the myths could be situated at different points of crisis.

ELEANOR: That is beautiful. I'd love to hear it in your own time.

JAMIE: Guinevere. Hastings. 1066. He called me long legged. Like a statue. And I was swept, a waved carved stone, a natural body of legs. And we were young. (POEMS HERE)

ELEANOR: What an absolutely gorgeous reading, thank you. I'm so curious as to what drew you to these particular stories, or these particular figures, in all of the wild, sprawling, pantheon that is the Arthurian Legends.

JAMIE: I think I wanted complex characters, so whether that was ones that had been told and retold in many different ways. Or whether that was ones that kind of fitted with the interests I had and the stories I wanted to tell. I struggled a bit with the fact that the Arthurian legends are not exactly replete with women, and I didn't want to be telling stories that were entirely men and I feel like Guinevere is such an overlooked character, because she's told in so many different ways - from the downtrodden wife to the rebellious woman - and I wanted to ask what it would be if she was

going to shape her own myth, and decide that actually, neither Arthur nor Lancelot were what she wanted, and she wanted to find herself. So that began my exploration of kind of the hero's journey, the descent, the leaving. And then I liked Percival because of all the religious and holy associations, and for Guinevere taking her to the Battle of Hastings was an interesting place because it was a loss after a series of wins, and I thought about that moment of loss as a chance for her to leave. And then for Percival with his kind of, holy associations, I wanted to ask what it would be if he was the most destructive force and the story of the plague village of Eyam which had some bales of cloth with plague-carrying fleas delivered. And when they discovered the black plague in the village, they completely shut themselves off, and refused to let anyone enter or leave, and a huge proportion of the residents died - but they didn't transmit the plague further. So I thought about Percival, and the idea that in attempting to do something good, one can instead be such a destructive force. And Galahowt was a real desire to bring in some of the queer narratives that come into Arthurian legend, particularly the associations between Galahowt and Lancelot. And for me some of that was very much inspired by a book called 'Love Alone' by Paul Monette, which explored living in the early years of the AIDS crisis and losing one's partner.

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JAMIE: And, I thought about how young people were, I think. I think with this pandemic it has really made me realise how young we all are. That I lost my father and I still feel like a child again. And, it really, I was thinking about how young so many of the people that died in so many of these narratives were, and indeed how young the people in the Arthurian legends were, and for me that was very much about that acknowledgment of youth and death and mortality, and that love is ultimately all that matters.

ELEANOR: Could you tell me a little bit more about the ending, about the fisher king, who you place at the sort of, nebulous, possible end of the world, possible moment of ecological healing?

JAMIE: I think the story of the fisher king was the one that I sort of divorced most from the original myth. I was interested in the fisher king because they're described as having a wound to the thigh, in lots of different myths, which is often interpreted by scholars now as a genital wound. Erm, and the fisher king is described as barren. And I thought about what it is to - as somebody who is female-assigned and lives in a kind of nebulously man-gendered space, for lack of better language, because language fails - I wanted to see people like myself and disabled bodies like my own reflected. And I didn't want that to be tragic. So for me the fisher king's decision to stay in the boat was an act of choice, that they had chosen to live in that world, that healing wasn't what they desired unless it was healing the world. I liked the idea of this almost mother figure emerging from the myth of the fisher king, kind of renewing the world, bearing daughters, letting the land refresh and come back. There's a myth about a fairy stolen cauldron in Frensham, where this is set, so I thought about the cauldron and the grail, and it just felt like a very appropriate place to set that last myth. So I think, overall, I was going for a kind of queer-ing and cripp-ing of myth in many ways.

ELEANOR: It's completely haunting, it's sort of a multi-faceted take on these moments of crisis. And what strikes me, most of all, is the sort of absence, the notable absence of this legendary king who will come. There's no messianic figure hovering towards us over the horizon, we're just sort of left without a sense that there is someone coming to save us.

JAMIE: What happens when you abstract Arthur from the myths, I think, was at the heart of what I was trying to do. And, by abstracting him, I think I was able to explore the other stories more.

Gawain was very much about that kind of Arthurian concept of honour and manhood, and about the idea that even somebody who prides themselves on meeting these masculine ideas of honour, also has that softness and emotional need. And I wanted all of the characters I explored to have those different sides, the softness, the grace I think.

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ELEANOR: Momtaza, how do you respond to this kind of Arthurian legend without Arthur, this sort of time-travelling mythical journey that Jamie's brought us along on?

MOMTAZA: When I was sort of editing and working with my own poems, I think I was really inspired by James' approach of de-centring the figure that we would perhaps like most associate with a particular myth, right, or finding a different sort of entry point. And that for me was really generative, because what it allowed for me to try and do in my own work was, to track it, or to sort of track the journey of a myth and its metamorphosis. And how the figure itself or the key figures could be these sort of murky, um, murky objects of symbolism, and how they are read perhaps today is not necessarily how they were first encountered in their various sort of um, in their various sort of incarnations. And for me particularly that was really pertinent as I was working with um the mythology of like Gog and Magog, which is something that has its origins in Abrahamic texts, even though in many ways it predates the Biblical and Quranic and Talmudic incarnations. But also, this is, you know, this is a mythology that has so many different variations and echoes and reverberations throughout different cultures, and yeah, for me it was just like trying to work against this, um, this notion of a, like you a messianic, or perhaps a centralised figure, and trying to follow that sort of disaggregation of mythology that is so, that is such a part of myths, really.

23:24

ELEANOR: Fabulous. And, actually at that moment, I would love to go over to your poem. Can you tell us just a little bit more about Gog and Magog, for people who might not be familiar?

MOMTAZA: Well, um, the figures of Gog and Magog are mostly depicted and understood as giants, or monstrous figures. And, I wanted to sort of, think through the idea of the end of the world, um through Gog and Magog, and their history, throughout, you know, Abrahamic texts and also various different traditions, and how they had been associated with impending Armeggedon, civilisation or collapse, invading hordes, and just generalised total destruction. So it is a very literal understanding of the end of the world. But in many ways, Welsh and English mythology subverts that greatly, because Gog and Magog are these ferocious giants that are tamed by Brutus of Troy, who is, um, the first king of Britain. And they are now chained, or they are chained to, what's now called Guildhall. And the mascots are still there actually, and they were supposed to be, um, understood as guarding the city of London, where the buildings still bear the emblems today. So, I was interested again in tracking the movement of these figures, and the way they transformed from these symbols of barbarian Eastern hordes, to these very like, localised guardians and mascots of capital and crown. And I wanted to explore also what other monsters, or monstrous figures they may have been replaced by. So, um, the end of all that deliberation, resulted in a poem -

ELEANOR: [laugh]

MOMTAZA: - and, the poem is called, 'A Portfolio of Investment'.

[POEM HERE]

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ELEANOR: That was absolutely beautiful, thank you. I'm so intrigued by the line: "Nightmares are endlessly adaptable", it sort of brings to mind what you were saying just before about the metamorphosis of these myths, and I guess how, useful and efficient really monsters can be, in the stories that we tell ourselves, both mythical and kind of, more, prosaic.

MOMTAZA: I mean I was struck by, um, the transformation of a symbol or of a myth, or the many different ways that it can be utilised. And with Gog and Magog, particularly in English and Welsh mythology, the myth takes on this entirely different nationalistic character, which is missing from many of its interpretations, in um, not just the Biblical sense but also in, that you find in Persian and Arabic contexts, um, that were particularly, quite formative for me, because I used to have this - there was this big compendium, this like massive book, that I used to read a lot growing up. And it was called [NAME], and it was like this compendium of legends and stories and fables, and I think it was written in the 14th century. And I remember reading that and leafing through when I was a kid and it had sections on everything, so like, okay, mermaids, and ghosts, and all sorts of different, you know, collected legends of the time itself. And, um, one entire section of it was actually dedicated to Gog and Magog, so I knew that there was this like longer, much more entangled history. But then, when I was thinking about 'The History of Gog and Magog, The Champions of London', which is a work of historical fiction, written by um, the Scottish novelist John Galt, um, that was published in 1819. And works like that, which were very much resituating this myth within the context of the industrial revolution, the context of London as this, um, space for hyper-accelerated movement of finance capital, and how that also relates to just, myself, as a Londoner, never really looking up to see the emblems, and like Guildhall, and around those sorts of spaces, and never knowing that they were kind of intimately connected to these figures, that I would never really have associated with, you

know, the foundational myths of London and Britain. So I think this was a real, writing this poem was like a real journey in itself, because I didn't think that the myth lived so persistently within spaces that I was familiar with? And that it had this various sort of multiple lives and afterlives. So yeah, that's, and I was very much struck by that, and that's how I came to trying to tackle the idea of the myth that is constantly reinterpreted, but also a translatable phenomenon.

ELEANOR: Yeah, in the first part you talk about Europa and Britannia as sort of mythic figures in themselves, which I was so fascinated by.

MOMTAZA: Yeah I mean I was just trying to draw from, again, this vast inventory of symbols and figures, and um, and the longer version of the whole thing, the sort of initial drafts that I had, were trying to I think incorporate a bit too much, because again, with Gog and Magog, you know, we can also think about how they stand ins for various civilizational anxieties, around you know, invading, or the impending invasion of like Barbarians or Mongols or Tartars or musnum hordes, and how that very much is related to um this idea of you know Alexander as a Greco-Roman figure who erects these massive gates, and those gates keep them out. But there's also always this looming threat of penetration, right, and that's something that I found very interesting. So how did these figures then become mascots, how did they then become you know defanged? You know, these kind of, these figures of celebration. And I was watching these reels of Londoners, you know, in like the 1950's just like, having these, hoisting these effigies up into the air and walking in these processions, and it was really interesting to see, yeah, the transformation of Gog and Magog into, I guess, you know, London's very own.

ELEANOR: I'm curious as to sort of why *these* figures appeal to you as ways of talking about that tension between sort of crisis and

apocalypse, and the ways in which these myths become normalized. Because there's almost a sense of like, possibility and potential, as well as a sense of like, impending doom. I don't know if that's just me because I really like the idea that there are sort of monsters under the city of London that are about to break out at any time.

MOMTAZA: I think for me, I was really interested in anything that sort of represents this idea of the great unknown, right. And even, it's a matter of speculation amongst researchers and historians, how Gog and Magog in many ways represent the lack of knowledge that was available at the time of the construction of some of these myths, or actually I wouldn't say the construction, but perhaps the entrenchment of some of these myths into the European understandings, because it really revealed their lack of knowledge about interior Asia, right, or the interiors and spaces within Asia where these myths were coming from. So therefore it took on all these various interpretations about where it could be, or where they could be coming from, and you know, there are many people who contributed, you know Marco Polo contributed to some of the entrenchment of the myths in his own accounts of his travels. But I think for me, I think I'm always really interested in how people come to understand the apocalypse, right, or this idea of a coming apocalypse. And to condense them into these two figures, and to see that, that process, through so many cultures, I think is really interesting, this whole transcultural element of a myth. But also just in terms of my sort of own personal understanding, I think, I used to be the kind of person who is obsessed with like, religious interpretations of the apocalypse, so I'd just like, find it really fun, like oh okay, this is how the world ends. But maybe I was a really weird, morose teenager, but I found that like, super interesting, to be like okay what are the signs, let's watch out for the signs, these are the minor signs, these are the major signs, that kinda thing. Because in many ways what people think about the end of the world reveals a lot about how they see the world as it is right now.

So, for me, I wanted to draw upon figures that had interested me for a very long time, since childhood really. Um, Yeah.

ELEANOR: And Jamie you write about sort of the end of the world, or like these ends of the world, these crises, as sort of multiple unfolding things that keep repeating and echoing down history, which sort of, resonates so much with what Momtaza is talking about in the way in which these myths mutate.

JAMIE: I found it really fascinating when I started reading Momtaza's work, because in many ways it felt like she had seen where I was going, and gone a step further, in a way I found fascinating. In terms of this kind of, I had moved through time in a defined way, and Momtaza had just moved away from time, and to explore what time is, not what it is to be in a time. I had kind of moved Arthur out of the centre of the myth, and Momtaza had moved Gog and Magog right to the very edges. So it was really interesting seeing all of the possibilities that could be done when you take this incredible, incredible approach to decentering that goes far beyond just moving Arthur out of the way, and into moving the whole myth out the way, which gave I think an awful lot of creative positivity, creative possibility, perhaps. Momtaza writes "everything is born slippery, everyone is made slippery, like the detours of a maddening storyteller." And this felt like that slippery, maddening storyteller, where you think you've got a grip on part of it, and then something else comes along, and it all just kind of coheres into this apocalyptic whole. I think given the times we're living in it's no surprise that we both took approaches that took kind of apocalyptic and world-ending myths. But I really enjoyed the way that it moved between the, kind of, Biblical with your ambitions, to the tiny - a man tenderly scrubs a monster's face. Again it's this slipperiness, it's this shift in size between one thing and another that happens almost without you knowing it, so you can drift between this great overview and these tiny details, which I just found fascinating."

ELEANOR: And if the very beginning is a very good place to start, the very end of the world is where we shall have to leave it for this week. So thank you so much to you both Jamie Hale and Momtaza Mehri, it has been beyond a pleasure talking to you about Arthurian heroes and quasi-Abrahamic portents of doom. This has been 'Bedtime Stories for the End of the World', I've been your host, Eleanor Penny, and until next time, sweet dreams, and thanks for listening.

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ELEANOR: This has been 'Bedtime Stories for the End of the World'. Our project producer is Tom MacAndrew and our podcast producer is Mair Bosworth. This project is funded by Arts Council England and supported by the good folks at Spread the Word.

We have a book out, also entitled 'Bedtime Stories for the End of The World'. It's illustrated by the artist Inquisitive and published by Studio Press. To get your copy you can go to our website endoftheworldpodcast.com. There you can also explore all our previous episodes, and find out more about our writers and their stories. You can find us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram at 'goodbyeworldpod'.