Telling Tales

By The Unreliable Narrator

> *'Trust the story. … the storyteller may dissemble and deceive,*
> *the story can't; the story can only ever be itself.'*
> *– And the Land Lay Still, James Robertson*

2022 marks a celebration across the nation for Scotland's Year of Stories – but what is a story without its storyteller? (A question on which I, and the generations of dutiful Unreliable Narrators before me, place much emphasis.)

Storytelling is our most ancient craft, almost as old as language itself. Huddled close around the burning embers and composing tales out of starlight and earth, our forebears forged community through oral tricks of the trade. Repetition, rhyme, the right order of parts – all of these techniques enabled the audiences gathered round to remember the information being transferred through the power of story. Often, fairly *key* messages about avoiding disease and lurking beasts – which means that since their inception stories have nurtured human survival and connection.

"Picture-books in winter" by Jessie Willcox Smith, published in the 1905 edition of *A Child's Garden of Verses* by Robert Louis Stevenson

Scotland's stories tell us about who we are and where we come from, reveal our

relationship to this here land and memorialise the melting-pot of our cultural ecology. In these tales we catch sudden glimpses of ourselves within wild, weird and wonderful worlds, bearing witness to hushed conversations between our past and present.

Our story today, then, is about our stories: their history and future, influences and influence. We cast the spotlight not only on Scotland's tales but on their tellers – the folklorists and the fabulists, short story writers and the seanachaidhean – those who have delicately spun their colourful yarns from the threads that connect us all.

But such a complex tale can offer no straightforward narrative arc, no denouement or easy unravelling of this intricate, entangled web. To tell it in its entirety would be to speak of Nordic neighbours and Traveller tradition-bearers, Gaelic bards and Border balladeers; a tale that would stretch back to the Picts who carved images – their now-silent stories – on the walls of the Wemyss Caves. It is a yarn that would wind up, round and down the salt path that coasts around the mainland's edge, over to the northern isles and out west to the Hebrides, through bustling cities and dormant mountains, into the sea and then back out again.

A lot of work, then, for one Unreliable Narrator and so my thanks to this issue's raconteurs, here to tell a fraction of the tale. Settling us around the campfire is minstrel Michael Newton with his longform saga 'Better than Gold: The People Behind the Folktales in the Highlands'. He passes the baton to Gerard McKeever, who offers an account of Allan Cunningham and nineteenth-century storytelling in 'Ezra Peden and the Thousand Tales'. In a surprising twist, our own *New Writing Scotland* celebrates a big birthday in this year of stories, and former editor Valerie Thornton casts an eye over the anthology's evolution as the nation's principal forum for short fiction and poetry in '*New Writing Scotland* at 40'. Tom Muir nudges the narrative north in 'Orkney Folk Tales and Literature', and Carl MacDougall closes our tale by peering back to the past and forwards to the future of 'Scottish Short Stories'.

If you have arrived at the hearth seeking tips for recitation tricks, then gather round for 'Walking with Robert Burns' in which Thomas Fox Averill turns to auld Tam o' Shanter to discuss his process of committing poems to memory. And if you're foraging for more fables to add to your folio, we have a bundle of book

reviews too.

On with the story!

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