

Tales from the woods

Storyteller **Martin Maudsley** explores our long relationship with woodlands, as revealed in literature



Once there was a woman who knew her place. Her place was in the woods – a leafy forest of towering oak and ash, mixed with smaller trees of holly, hornbeam and hazel. One day at dawn, as she wandered through the woods, she came to a huge, ancient oak that she'd never encountered before. Feeling tired, she sat down at the base of the tree, making a seat against the mossy bark and thick, sinuous roots. As she tipped her head back and gazed up into the crazed canopy, she sighed and whispered into the soft air: “thank you”. Instantly, she felt the tree behind her begin to shake. Standing up, she saw a crack appear in the trunk of the tree, which slowly widened until it revealed a great wooden door. She pushed it open, then stepped inside...

When we walk into woodland we open a door into a world of stories; a place of myth and magic. Here we can leave the hustle of busy lives and step into tree-time. The bark and branches, the leaves and light we find in the forest are the same as those in folk- and fairytales that have fuelled our imaginations for generations.

The storytelling synergy between humans and woodlands is ancient, and perhaps, as Professor Brian Bates suggests in *The Real Middle Earth*, the labyrinth of twigs, roots

and tendrils in the forest mirrors the branching neural connections in our brains.

Wild woods

For people living in Britain when the woods were still wild, trees and forests dominated their culture, spirituality and stories. Some used a written alphabet based on tree runes (ogham) and followed a calendar marked by different species of tree, each with its own symbolism that still survives today in myths and legends (see box on page 29).

In their stories, the personification of nature is rife: people shape-shift into animals, trees slip into human (usually female) form, and no protagonist enters the woods without first appeasing the genius loci, the protective spirit of the place. Such forest figures can still be found in the woods, such as Herne the Hunter, recounted by Shakespeare in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, who allegedly still stalks the oaks of Windsor Park (see page 114).

Later migrations of people to Britain brought with them stories and sagas from the north; new narratives but a continuation of the cultural belief in mystical nature and sacred woodland. Here, the world is held together in the branches of an ash tree and Iduna, the goddess of spring, tends a verdant

MAIN Step into ‘tree time’ and leave the busy modern world behind when you enter ancient woods such as these at Lineover, Gloucestershire

ABOVE RIGHT Forest maidens lurk beneath the boughs in this 19th-century illustration

Country tales

Read Martin's story about Herne the Hunter on page 114



1 *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* by Sir Joseph Noel Paton depicts the tale of Scottish prophet Thomas the Rhymer 2 Robin Hood and his Merry Men is perhaps the most enduring of British woodland tales 3 Little Red Riding Hood meets the wolf

» orchard of trees with golden apples that give Odin, Thor and the other Norse gods their youth and vitality. Local legends such as the Wild Hunt, hounds that chase sinners (such as at Wistman's Wood on Dartmoor) grew from such seeds, and Tolkien famously drew heavily on this mythology, as well as his own experiences of the English countryside, to create Middle Earth. His storytelling is both fantastical and naturalistic, pulling readers into a richly imagined world but where the details of place are precise and tangible. Walking through a dense coniferous wood with heavily filtered light, it's easy to be transported to Mirkwood with Bilbo.

Forests of fear

As people became more removed from and less connected to wild landscapes, stories of fear and danger in the forest proliferated. There are plentiful grim and gruesome cautionary tales of real dangers such as ferocious wolves, treacherous bogs and vicious villains. Such stories provide

vivid vindications of why we shouldn't, like Little Red Riding Hood, stray into the forest's depths. However, many folktales are populated by more superstitious hazards of witches, devils and ghosts. These highlight our desire to put names and narratives to fears of anything strange or unexplained; all manner of evil could be blamed on the dark things that lurk in the forbidden forest.

But not all, or even most, stories from the woods are codified warnings of its dangers. The dark woods are also a magical place of imagination and transformation. Through story characters often portrayed as ordinary and familiar, we face our fears and confront inner darkness within the woods.

Many striking examples of the transforming role of the forest are found within Grimms' collected tales, celebrating the 200th anniversary of publication this year. My favourite tale is *Iron John*, where the king's son is kept away from a dark and dangerous wood but, as he approaches adolescence, he leaves the royal palace to live in the forest, where he takes his first steps towards transforming from boy to man.

"As people became less connected to woods, stories of danger in the forest proliferated"

A menagerie of magical creatures also lives within the enchanted forest: fauns and dwarves, unicorns and centaurs, singing trees and talking beasts, each with a role to play in helping, teaching or guiding those who are prepared to let go of pride and open their eyes to possibility. Elves and faeries, in particular, are the personification of magic and mischief in the forest, and it is sometimes through them that woodlands become enchanted,

such as with Galadriel's forest in *The Lord of the Rings* or Oberon and Titania's in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Those who wander into the deep woods with a restless heart may encounter one of the fair folk, often by a birch, rowan or hawthorn tree – as was the case in the legend of Thomas the Rhymer. And you know you've crossed the border

into the enchanted forest when you can hear the bluebells ringing...

Haven for outlaws

The vast royal hunting forests, created from the Norman Conquest onwards, feature strongly in medieval stories, although often rooted in much older myths, such as the legends of King Arthur. The princely hero meets a mystery, glimpses a magical beast

or travels into the deep woods to engage his destiny, as with Gawain meeting the Green Knight at the Chapel in the Forest.

At the other end of the spectrum from knights riding into the forest on legendary quests are the tales of those outcast or outlawed from feudal society who take refuge in the woods. Each leafy corner of Britain has its own legends of bandits and robbers hiding in the trees, with the tone of the narrative varying from malicious criminals meeting their deserved demise to stirring stories of brave brigands taking on a wicked landlord – there are always two sides to a story. The honest outlaw is best typified by Robin Hood, where tales of his life sometimes portray a self-sufficient and egalitarian forest haven, perhaps echoing ancient associations with the wild woods.

Living links to legends

The diversity of woodland tales percolated through time provides an imaginative and evocative connection to our changing relationship with trees and woods. But it's not just the words, spoken or written, that have survived through the centuries. Some of the veteran trees in the British landscape also provide a living link to our nation's legends, as highlighted by a new National Trust publication, *Britain's Tree Story*. We too can sit beneath Niel Gow's oak and gather by the Tolpuddle Martyrs' sycamore; we can touch those ancient but still rooted trees that once sheltered Robin Hood, inspired Shakespeare or hid Dick Turpin.

Our connection to woodland didn't cease in the past, and neither has our passion for myth-making. From my own work as a storyteller, there is a real magic that transpires when telling tales among the trees. The woods enhance how the story is told and listeners are able to let their imaginations merge with the richness of the setting. I've also been privileged to witness the creative synergy between woodlands and children's natural instinct for stories. As one young story-maker once told me: "Some people say it's boring in the woods. But they're wrong, because if you look carefully, you can see dragons in the trees". ☞



Martin Maudsley is an ecologist turned professional storyteller, with a passion for telling tales in wild places.

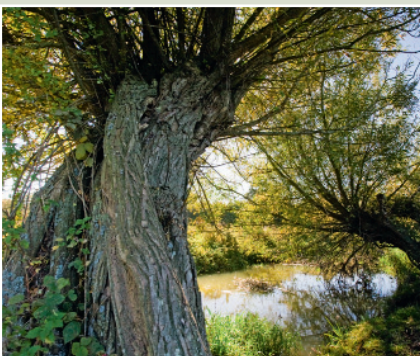
Tree tales

Each species has its own set of legends. Here are just a few...



BIRCH

Slender and graceful, birch is sometimes known as the Lady of the Woods, and in legends birch trees sometimes assume female human form. Brooms were often made from birch and symbolically it represents sweeping out the old and making new beginnings.



OAK

The King of the Forest, oak is associated in mythology with masculine deities such as Zeus and Thor. It is a symbol of courage, durability and strength (as in 'hearts of oak'), and in stories is often a doorway into the secret heart of the forest.



WILLOW

Willow is associated with the moon, water and the ebb and flow of love and life. Many folktales tell of young men who find love by a willow tree, but often end in loss. Wearing a willow leaf traditionally indicated grieving for a loved one.



HAZEL

Hazel is associated with learning and knowledge. In Celtic mythology, the salmon of wisdom ate nuts from an ancient, sacred hazel tree. Dowsing rods are traditionally made from hazel and 'to crack a nut' refers to solving a problem.



ELM

Elm has long been associated with death – it was once used as gallows and coffins were made from its wood. In mythology, elms mark the Underworld, and in legends, trees grow from elm stakes in corpses. Now it's renowned for Dutch elm disease.

HAWTHORN

The tree of love and fertility, hawthorn's flowery boughs are made into crowns, garlands and maypoles to celebrate the fecundity of spring. According to legend, a terrible fate awaits those who chop down this 'faerie tree'.



Why Willows Weep (£12.95) is an enchanting collection of short stories from the woods produced by the Woodland Trust.
www.woodlandtrust.org.uk