

MARINA WARNER SEES THE MYTHS IN OUR MOMENT

Warner has spent decades studying how our oldest stories speak to modern life, from the lure of fake news to the politics of abortion.

By Katy Waldman

June 26, 2022



"I suppose the stories that I like illuminate cruelty," Marina Warner says. "Scenes that give warning about not attending to people's inner worlds." Photographs by Bowen Fernie for The New Yorker

 Save this story

Marina Warner, the English writer, lecturer, and former president of the Royal Society of Literature, is an authority on things that don't exist.

Magic spells, monstrous beasts, pregnant virgins—if the imagination can conjure it, she has probably written about it in one of her almost forty books, which quarry myths, folk and fairy tales, and religious texts for the human truths that they reveal. The work offers jolts of associative surprise: Oedipus, who blinds himself after sleeping with his mother, is linked to the Sandman of nursery rhyme, who scatters dust in children’s eyes to punish forbidden desires. In Warner’s hall of mirrors, there’s no predicting whose face—Scheherazade’s, Jorge Luis Borges’s, Derek Walcott’s—might glide by next.

Warner, a regular contributor to *The New York Review of Books* and the *London Review of Books*, is no stranger to controversy. “Alone of All Her Sex,” her study of the cult of the Virgin Mary, enraged Catholic conservatives with its feminist arguments, and she has published blistering essays about how market ideologies deform academia. (In 2014, she wrote about feeling pushed out of her professorship, at the University of Essex, after she protested the school’s treatment of faculty.) She has also written short fiction and novels. “The Lost Father,” which considers the situation of Italian women under Fascism, was short-listed for the Booker Prize in 1988, and draws on Warner’s own ancestry. Her mother, Ilia, grew up in Bari, and met Warner’s father when his regiment was deployed in Italy, in 1944. Soon after Marina was born, in 1946, the family relocated from London to Cairo, where a cosmopolitan élite flourished against a backdrop of resistance to the West. (Another novel, “Indigo,” scrutinizes Britain’s colonial legacy.) After the Cairo fire of 1952, in which Egyptian revolutionaries torched hundreds of foreign-owned businesses, including the Warners’ bookstore, the family decamped to Belgium, and then to Cambridge. “Esmond and Ilia: An Unreliable Memoir” (New York Review Books), Warner’s first full-length work of autobiography, is out this month, and it traces both the early years of her parents’ union and the residue of her oldest memories.

To read Warner’s writing is to appreciate how stories, persisting over thousands of years, shape and are shaped by the societies that tell them. Her ability to tease out a stock character’s hidden relevance makes her a sought-after

commentator on modern politics, gender relations, and Internet culture. And her willingness to listen when a tale's message is unpalatable—when Mother Goose spews misogyny, say, rather than sisterly empowerment—distinguishes her from a crop of scholars who seek to press our collective dreams and nightmares into ideological service. I recently spoke to Warner about myths, #MeToo, and her turn to memoir. Our conversation has been edited for clarity.

As a mythographer, you study the roots of all stories. Do you often have “Aha!” moments while reading the news? “This is just like Odysseus and the Sirens. . . .”

It's not *quite* as one to one. I'm constantly marvelling at how the vicissitudes of human existence are covered by these very ancient texts. It's really quite strange that people from so long ago seem to have understood so much. And, if you're looking at things like sexual relations, it's amazing: there's hardly a permutation that has not been covered by a myth. They knew everything.

I remember once hearing John Berger give a lecture. It was about art, and it took place in a disused station of the London Underground. And we went down to the very bottom, and as we did he took us down a time line of art. At the beginning, we were looking at Renaissance portraits, and then we were looking at Egyptian mummies, and then we got to the bottom and we lay down on the platforms like the figures in Henry Moore's drawings of people sheltering from the Blitz. And Berger came down the tunnel—he was a very charismatic man with an amazing voice, and his voice came gravelling out of the tunnel. He said, “In the beginning, there was no fumbling.” He was talking about cave paintings, the first paintings we have. There is something similar in literature: in the beginning, there was no fumbling. “Gilgamesh” is very rich in psychology, about death, about friendship, about love between men, and about monsters. And the Iliad, the Odyssey, as you said. These works are inexhaustible.

Is there a story or myth that you think is particularly illuminating of the present moment?

I suppose the stories that I like illuminate cruelty. Scenes that give warning about not attending to people's inner worlds. One story that has obsessed me for a long time is the story of Callisto, who is seduced by Jupiter. He masquerades as the goddess Diana, to whom Callisto, as a nymph, is vowed. When Callisto gets pregnant, Diana throws her out, and she's persecuted and scorned. That particular triangle of deception and cruelty is illuminating.

And the way that she wasn't listened to. There was no mercy for her. So I suppose the lesson there is that we need to listen to people's stories about what has happened to them. And then, of course, there's also a very strong #MeToo element to Jupiter's deception. He is in a position of power and destroys someone without power, and seems completely unrepentant.

Several years back, you offered a stunning reading of the Rapunzel story. You looked at the beginning, in which a pregnant woman so craves the parsley growing in a witch's garden that she steals some, and the witch punishes her by taking her baby. The baby grows up to be Rapunzel, the girl with long hair who is locked in a tower. I'm thinking of the story now because our Supreme Court seems poised to strike down *Roe v. Wade*. [On Friday, the Court overturned Roe.]

Yes, I had read a book called "The Poison Principle," by Gail Bell, whose grandfather was guilty of murder by poison. The author mentioned in passing that parsley was an abortifacient, and a poison in great quantities. This struck me as an absolute bolt of lightning. It's not unusual for fairy tales to not make sense—it's part of their charm, part of their power. But, in this case, why would the mother crave this particular herb and then apparently not mind giving her child away? So that's how I worked it out: that the story showed a buried lesson, about both the need for abortion and the dangers of seeking or getting one. And, of course, you have the witch, too, who perhaps offers an insight into women who are childless and want children. So the story presents a double meeting of the need.

In 1994, you gave a series of lectures on "Managing Monsters," describing six

tropes that you found to be omnipresent in contemporary life: the evil mother, the male warrior, the innocent child, the cannibal, etc. Have your thoughts about any of these types evolved since then?

Well, they have all continued to flourish in a strange way. I'm still quite proud of those lectures. I'm rather surprised that they haven't been superannuated more fully—it's a bit alarming. The interesting thing about the diabolical mother is that this is now a subject of women's work. There's a lot of writing by women about their mothers' oppressive role in their lives. I'd be interested to revisit the theme, in fact, because I was first attracted to studying fairy tales because there was so much misogyny in them. The same is true of myths. And I wondered why that was so, because it seemed to me that this was also a female form, a kind of writing or storytelling that was very associated with women. Why did women write and speak against each other in these stories? And I think that's an interesting thing that one could continue to explore.

On the second lecture, about masculinity in boys, I feel we've made very little progress, except among what you might call the liberal élite. It's certainly true that there's much more of an attempt to be helpful around the house and with the children. There's a lot more affection shown by men of a certain education to children, but it's not spread very wide. And, if anything, from what I observe in this country [the U.K.], it's almost worse. We see it in the criminal statistics: domestic violence, acute during the pandemic. It's a great shame, and God knows how one goes about trying to change it. Trump likely doesn't help. Nor do other leaders, actually.

It's bleak. One thought I had, about the "Boys Will Be Boys" lecture, was that there seems to be a mini-flowering of the trickster hero, who you'd noted was in decline around the eighties and nineties. This is the man who can't exercise traditional power. Maybe he doesn't have it or maybe the usual avenues for success have been closed. So he scams the system. I don't know whether you watch "Better Call Saul" or any of these female-grifter stories—

That's Odysseus—the wiliness, that idea of the cunning trickster. It's very deep

and goes across, also, to Eastern literature and Indian literature. And sometimes it's a female trickster. The weak position means resorting to tricks that are not to do with being physically strong but to do with clever tongues, cunning, and high spirits. Odysseus is unusual because he's also a soldier.

And yes, I have mixed feelings about it. There are lots of ethical problems around cunning, but, at the same time, it's a strategy that perhaps we could think about a bit more. In the Arabic version of Aesop's Fables, the jackal isn't held up as a virtuous figure, but he has his message. And some of the smaller, weaker animals actually manage to prevail against the strong. For instance, the old monkey outsmarts the turtle who wants to take him home and give him to his wife for supper. That sort of proverbial cunning isn't pure deception but a strategy of protection against an aggressor. I'm interested in the range of ways that the weak can defend themselves and become strong, using the gift of the tongue, of wit. A lot of brilliant standup comedians do this very effectively.

Has your feminism changed much over the years? You were one of the first feminists I read who applauded the achievements of the third wave but who argued that maybe reclaiming a stereotype isn't as useful as rewriting it. That feels so prescient now. It seems to me that we've been slow to realize how often we reproduce narratives while telling ourselves we're challenging or subverting them.

It's obviously a quick and effective strategy. I just wrote about it, actually, because we have an exhibition that just opened at the British Museum about goddesses. The whole exhibition has reclaimed a lot of figures who were thought to be either demonic or virtuous in an instrumental way, like the Virgin Mary. This exhibition seizes those stereotypes and turns them into positives, and it's an exhilarating experience.

But, on the whole, as Audre Lorde says, you cannot use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house. And I'm afraid that, as with many things in my life, I have mixed views. I think, prima facie, that Lorde is right. We need to generate counter-images, a different way of thinking. But it's very hard because

you need brilliant creative minds to come up with the alternatives, and then they have to be disseminated, which is doubly difficult because we struggle to recognize and understand new ideas.

You were once a journalist, right? At the *Telegraph*. What was that like?

I was a very young staff writer. I learned a lot, and one thing that was absolutely invaluable was how to work in a very noisy office. Because we were all on typewriters, with telephones. It's been a great boon in my life. But I wasn't there that long because I then went to *Vogue*. My plan was that I would finance my writing by writing for magazines.

I lived in D.C. during the Watergate years. It was fascinating. The journalists were completely consumed all the time; they spoke of nothing else. I was living as a journalist, but I was married to a congressional journalist who was more in the thick of things. He was working with the *Sunday Times* team that covered Watergate for readers here in Britain, and I was at the Library of Congress writing my book on the Virgin Mary.

That's quite a contrast.

It was amazing, because the Library of Congress, you know, they give you a carrel. You hunker down with your own carrel in the dome! And the library was thematically catalogued, which was very unusual at the time. Now we're used to it because of the Internet. But it was unusual to be able to just look up subjects rather than actually knowing the titles beforehand. There were drawers and drawers called "the Virgin Mary."

How do you organize your own library?

That's a subject rather dear to my heart. The materials I'm using at the time are very near me, round my desk. Then they gradually move down into properly organized sections. All the poetry is together alphabetically. The novels are also alphabetical. The biographies are under subjects. There are all sorts of difficulties, for the two of us, in getting around. The whole house has become a

library; it's standing up only because of the books, I think. I'm very fond of books. My husband gets very cross because he says there is *no more room*.

Your books are so rich with other texts, and you draw such unlikely connections between them: across genres, time periods, continents. I'm curious how it feels to manage all of that information.

I do cluster things. It's largely associative. But I was influenced, early on, by the organization of the Warburg Library. Aby Warburg [the German art historian] had a particular idea of how the library should mirror the life of a concept. So it begins with the foundational text at the bottom, the original material from which many things spring. Then there's the imagery associated with it on the next floor. The end is action: what effects in the world this concept might have had. Broadly speaking, if you took the Iliad, you would find different editions of the poem at the bottom, and then representations and interpretations of it. And then, on the top floor, you'd have what the work has wrought: history, battles, ideals of heroism, ideals of gods and goddesses in the world, and so forth.

What is your relationship to digital media like?

Rather distant. I'm scared of the time consumption. I'm also quite interested in its politics, the rhetoric around Twitter as a public arena. I don't do much Twitter myself. I only send tiny messages related to events I have coming up.

You've compared memes to fairy tales: they mutate, they repeat, the pleasure is in the iteration. And you've called the landscape of the Internet "hallucinatory," which feels right to me—the idea of the Internet as a fiction. But I was wondering whether you could unpack those comments.

I just mean that, online, the types of discourse could be differentiated more clearly. At the moment, we tend to receive every piece of information coming at us as part of a news feed. That's why conspiracy stories flourish, because they look like news. If they were packaged in yellow paperbacks with screaming headlines—"The Phantom Rides Again"—if there were some sort of Stephen

King frame, it would give the subliminal signal that this was a fiction.

For me, the difficulty is that I am a believer in fictions. I don't want us to be leached of all fantasy. It wouldn't be healthy, nor enjoyable, nor possible. But, at the same time, when people believe these fictions in a dangerous way—and some of them truly are lethal, the racist fictions and so forth—we need to think about how to prevent such toxic credulity.

You've also compared hate speech to magical speech. Can you tease out the connection there?

You must never have been on the receiving end of hate speech! It's quite extraordinary what an effect it has. And it's not happened to me in very serious ways, but it's happened driving a car. Another driver coming out of his car, coming up to the window, and raging, foaming at the mouth. A torrent of filthy curses. And you do feel assaulted; it isn't just words. It reverberates. And it has the intention of magic, I think, which is that it wishes to harm the person being addressed, like a bad spell.

There's a danger, of course, because we don't want people to believe in witchcraft. But I do believe in the power of language—not only in this negative respect but also, in many respects, in its enchantment. Enchantment doesn't have to be sweet and nice, you know; it can be tragic. And yet it can make us feel much better. That's one of its great mysteries. Going to a weepy or experiencing a tragedy in a book has a strengthening effect. So I am a believer in the magic of words and the importance of using them with care—which is what writers mostly try to do. That's our calling.

Speaking of, I'd love to ask you a little about “Esmond and Ilia.” In it, you write that one of your earliest memories is of the charred contents of your father's bookshop after the Cairo fire. You suggest that this image shaped your career.

I took a very long time to write this book. I had been meaning to write it all my life, though not quite in this form. And I had always felt that the absolute ur-

moment for me was when my father took me to see the shop after the fire. I remember holding his hand. I was five. And my memory played me for a fool because, when I later looked at photographs of the scene, I saw that I had misremembered, recalling only the girders, the iron grid of the building's shape, and the pile of ash in the middle. But, in fact, there was quite a bit more left of it all—you can see the burned books.

It formed me as a writer. The fact that my father was a bookseller was helpful; I was borne by a following wind. But, at the same time, this attack on the bookshop was a puzzle. When I was young, from my father's point of view, it was simply an outrage, an act of barbarism. But I was being brought up in the sixties, during the independence movements, the liberation movements, and I began to be much more critical of my father. I began to feel that there was something there, something we British had done, which had made us enemies. That was the puzzle that I wanted to explore, but it took me a long time to get around to it. I haven't really written autobiographically before. This was a coming-out for me. I had to admit to my background, which I hadn't ever done.



It made me think of the way you described Lot's wife in a piece of art criticism, as "an incinerated figure of memory." It's a striking phrase because she wasn't burned up, but she was looking back at the cities that were, and then somehow that fate transferred to her.

I was referring to Kiki Smith's sculpture, which inspired the piece. I do think memory can be dangerous. I think memory has become much more real to us because of our media, our ability to store and archive, and above all, photography. In the past, we never knew what we looked like when we were children. If we were very rich, very élite, we had our portrait painted. But now we all know what we look like at every age. And it forces us to have a very retrospective concept of our identities and a very consistent one. We don't necessarily see how contingent and inconsistent we are.

Much of the book describes true things that happened before you were born. But your subtitle is "An Unreliable Memoir." Could you walk me through

those words?

It's partly unreliable because I'm only about six years old when it ends, so, when I included some of my own vivid memories, they are themselves entirely unreliable. I also wanted to draw attention to the fact that, in order to create a portrait of that period, I needed to resort to forms of invention. I wanted to use the novel's techniques. I wanted to include dialogue, internal thoughts. There have been lots of experiments, but, on the whole, the traditional memoir doesn't allow such things, and yet I wanted to draw attention to the unreliability of memoir per se.

The book began as a novel. But I was advised by friends not to continue it as a novel, because some of the people were real people, and interesting in themselves, and I was persuaded by that argument—that my parents were of more interest as real people than they would be as fictional characters. There'd be something more stereotypical about them, perhaps, if they'd been in a novel.

They seem larger than life in the way that our parents often are. Was it ever useful for you to think of your parents in mythic terms?

At times in my life, I did mythologize my mother. And, if I'd written the book that way, I would have done it very differently. I had not expected to be so sympathetic to my mother. She was my creator and I was her creature. I found writing it to be a very passionate experience. I now dream about her all the time, which I hadn't done for years. She came alive to me again. It was an act of reconnection that was close to love.

There is a lot of tenderness and curiosity in the picture of your father as well. But you're critical of how he treated her. Was it challenging to write about him?

I feel remorse, in a way, because I think he was a decent man, but he was very flawed. His background entirely imprisoned him. He never could escape this class background that he felt was his due. It was very bitter, really. I feel in some ways that I didn't do him justice because he absolutely supported me and my

sister. He was a very generous father. He wanted us to be educated and to have jobs. And so, no, I don't think I did him justice. I couldn't have written the book if they were alive.

When you said you discovered new depths of sympathy for your mother, what hadn't you appreciated before?

Both my sister and I always took her side, and we were always aware that our father was tyrannical toward her. He made her live his life without any concession. At the same time, I fought with her very bitterly and powerfully for many years, because she believed that a woman should use her beauty to make her way. And that a woman should keep quiet. She said certain things to me: "Why do you contradict men? They don't like it." And this is true of a lot of women in her generation, but, if I appeared on television, I would ask, "Mummy, what did you think? Was I all right? Did I say anything interesting?" And she'd say, "Why did you wear your glasses?"

I was struck by the lines about reading your mother's diary, in which she documents the distress she felt during the marriage. You say you were inflamed with rage on her behalf. But you write that "the scenes aren't to be repeated here: her ghost would shudder at the memory of those times of deep unhappiness." And you compare writing to creating a kind of decoy that stands in for the unspeakable. But why write a decoy book?

I suppose it is just psychological inhibition. I could say two things. One, that I really felt a very deep shame on her part. I didn't want to expose them. But the other is that I'm not very keen on portraying abjection, in any sphere, personal or political. I was interested to read the other day that there's a group of Syrian filmmakers [Abounaddara, which means "the man with glasses"] who are committed to presenting their peoples in a particular light. They refuse to show them as dead or wounded bodies. They're not glossing over the horrors, or pretending that they aren't happening, but the films won't allow that particular gaze on abjection.

In fact, this is a difference that I have with some very good critical thinkers. I'm

worried about a gaze that is supposedly empathetic and compassionate, but actually has an undertow of pleasure. That's not a pleasure that I wanted to invite.

You don't spare yourself. You write about wishing for a nanny with white skin. How were you thinking about the potential value and the potential costs of including an anecdote like that?

I felt that it was important. Owning up to one's upbringing and how its values have been inculcated is quite important. I'm very frightened that I had values somehow absorbed into me that I haven't yet managed to recognize or expunge.

The nanny scene made me think about confession and apology, and how those genres relate to life-writing. It seems like, these days, the three genres are deeply interwoven. There's a sense that a memoirist should make some gesture of acknowledging complicity or fault before proceeding. And that telling the story is a way to achieve absolution. But I wondered whether, as a literary scholar, you think that those forms have always been as entangled as they are now.

I know that I've written a memoir and it has got moments of confession, as you say. But, on the whole, I've been trying quite hard to give value to forms of literature that aren't testimony. It relates to the earlier point about the Internet and the non-differentiation between forms of narrative. We've allowed testimony to become such a dominant structure for literary expression that we risk losing some of the elasticity and horizons that other forms can give us. In the memoir, I introduced quite a lot of invention.

But it is interesting. Readers do really want to feel as though they're in the hands of someone telling them true stories, of someone owning up. This idea of owning up has become very, very important.

Do you see a connection between your more personal writing and your academic work?

I've always tried to write my academic work in a writerly way. I wanted my books to be narratives, not just discourse, and I always tried to keep the language full of imagery and energy. There's a deep connection to my former Catholicism. Some of those structures have remained: I'm interested in images, in thinking in pictures, and in some elements of ritual.

I was thinking about your idea of the storied landscape, a place with narratives inscribed into it. Is that Cairo for you?

No, not really! I've been back twice and I don't know it that well. And yet going back was one of those Proustian moments of total recognition: the feeling of the floor falling away from you as you meet your younger self, in the exact same position, looking at the same scene.

But I *am* working on the storied landscape at the moment, for a book about sanctuary and a program called "Stories in Transit." I'm interested in whether it could be a method for helping refugees feel more at home, if they could be encouraged to attach their own stories to the new landscape in which they find themselves. We've done a few walks with people who've been displaced, and invited them to make a map of the new place, with their own memories, things that they like about it. Weave that into a story. It's very easy to think of Jerusalem, for instance, as the place where Jesus was crucified. But those are imaginative projections on the landscape. It complicates the concept of fake news, because the term, which describes disinformation for political ends, is so entirely dismissive of fantasy. But there's also a very long history of projection, of imagining things, and of people making their worlds out of what they've imagined. The storied landscape can be an act of collective memory. ♦



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