

1. Would you briefly introduce yourself?

I have been a professional storyteller for over 20 years, performing around the UK (and internationally) in schools, festivals and theatres. More recently, I have worked as a writer on folklore and mythology. My 2022 book *Telling the Seasons* is a storyteller's guide through the twelve months of the year in stories, customs and celebrations. *Monsterlogica* is my first children's book, in collaboration with visual artist Victoria Topping.

2. How did your love of storytelling develop?

Fantasy books were my indulgence and inspiration in childhood; they fed my ever-hungry imagination. I especially loved those stories that involved mythical creatures and talking animals (the C.S. Lewis Narnia books being a great example). After training in science, I worked in environmental education for a while, where I discovered (through first-hand experience) that storytelling is an amazing way to engage children and convey ideas in a meaningful way. I love the way that children respond so naturally and enthusiastically to being told a story simply by word of mouth – so I have carried on telling tales whenever I can! I'm still passionate about telling stories about the natural world.

3. In your career as a professional storyteller, you've specialized in reinterpreting traditional tales—from local legends and traditional folk tales to magical myths and epic sagas. What makes these stories so special to you?

I think traditional tales are like pebbles on the beach – they have been rolled and shaped by hundreds of tellings and retellings, and so become easy for people to tell and to listen to. At the same time, I think stories – myths in particular – can carry deep meanings and hold complex ideas; they help us connect with the world around us and understand our own human condition. The way I remember stories is through mental imagery (rather than scripted words) and folktales offer such a rich array of vivid imagination, that can readily be brought back to life through spoken-word storytelling.

4. What is particularly important when storytelling for children?

I think that storytelling is a universal human attribute – we all naturally connect with stories told by word of mouth, even amidst modern technology. Children are often the best audiences because they still have the power to believe, to allow their own imaginations to soar. When I'm telling tales with children I can see from their faces that they are re-creating the images and emotions of the story in their own minds. Stories are both entertaining and able to carry deeper meanings because they allow children to think for themselves. When I'm storytelling, I try to connect with the inner world of the story, allowing the images and the language to flow spontaneously, so that they become a shared experience in the moment between teller and listener. Children always enjoy being taken on a wild and wonderful



journey through storytelling, but I think they also need descriptive details in order to feel rooted into that imaginative world. Even fantastical creatures have forests, rivers, and mountains to live in!

5. How did you go about researching the book? What was particularly helpful during your research?

My starting point was those monsters that I already knew well, from the folktales and legends that I tell. For instance, the first chapter I wrote was about Trolls: gruesome in both appearance and behavior, but thankfully slow-moving and dim-witted. I drew on several stories from northern European countries where a Troll confronts a character (often a child) who defeats them using their courage and cunning. After that, I tried to cover a greater range of monstrous creatures from other countries and cultures, and really enjoyed the process of researching them. I already owned large number of books on folklore and mythology, but soon my shelves were bugling with second-hand volumes about mythical beasts and magical beings. One the oldest sources of information for *Monsterlogica* was the Roman writer Pliny the Elder, from two thousand years ago!

6. Which beast did you find particularly interesting? And which one was the scariest?

I found the Peryton really interesting – a hybrid beast crossed between a deer and an eagle; and not one that I was already familiar with. According to ancient legend, these creatures escaped from the fabled city of Atlantis before it sank beneath the waves. They are also unusual in having the shadows of human beings. OK – my top three scariest monsters from the book are... The Manticore – with a lion's body, human face and scorpion's tail, which can shoot its poisonous spins; the Mongolian Death Worm – living beneath the sand in the Gobi desert (the name says it all, really!); and the Basilisk – small but deadly, with its breath, blood and glare all capable of causing instant death. Although with each one there are certain precautions that could protect you during an encounter (you'll have to read the book to find out more!).

7. Which other creatures would you have liked to introduce, but there wasn't enough information to include them in the book?

Actually, we did write and illustrate two that didn't end up in the final book. These were creatures drawn from Indigenous cultures in Australia and North America, which were withdrawn after consulting with sensitivity readers at the draft stage. So, although I was sad to miss those two particular beings, I was glad that we were able to listen and respond to the wider community at an early stage. A couple of other beasts – the Jackalope and the



Squonk – had great names and physical features, but not quite enough material to write about. There are also a few others that (hopefully) might end up in later books...

8. What was your biggest challenge while working on the book?

To be honest, I've really enjoyed the whole process of writing *Monsterlogica*, from initial research through to the final editing. I'm really grateful for the crafted way that the words have been brought to the page by the editorial and production team. I'm also delighted by the colourful, larger-than-life images of monsters that Victoria Topping has created to accompany the text. If anything, perhaps, it would have been good to have more interaction with her as the book's content was being developed. The good news is: we are already working together on our next children's mythology book, and have been in regular contact with each other during the writing and illustration.