Nicole Galland

The Fool's Tale
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A Conversation with Nicole Galland

How much time did you spend researching *The Fool's Tale*? And how much time actually writing it?

The two were completely intermingled until the final draft, so it's tricky to say. I'd been working on it on and off (mostly off) for 14 years. When I returned to it after five years of neglect, I still didn't know what year, or what kingdom, to use. During a five-month obsessive stint, I was simultaneously researching medieval Wales and writing the first draft.

Then I went to the UK for two weeks. I spent time in the British Library, the National Library of Wales, and especially in "Maelienydd" itself, where I learned an enormous amount from the locals and a few out-of-print books I found at the inn. I then stayed in England a further month while working on the second draft — continuing my research thanks to the couple who hosted me and their amazing historical library. I worked at least 16 hours a day. Back in the US, I fidgeted with this second draft for a couple of months, and then I did a third revision, which was purely for style and language. From the time I returned to the project until I finished that third draft was only 11 months, but I'd had 14 years of rumination to prepare for it.

What first inspired you to write this book?

Since childhood I've had a fascination with fools — from the zero in the Tarot deck to the trickster, the jester. I love their ability to challenge the established order of things through either wit or innocence, never violence or malevolence. The fool—king relationship is fascinating, because they're each other's inverse: only a king is allowed to command, and only a fool is allowed to disobey. At the same time, there's a paradox about fools that is frequently true of queen-consort figures too: here's a person with immense privilege and yet no actual power. The privilege and the powerlessness are intertwined. I wondered what would happen if I threw two people together who shared that same privileged/powerless status, but had nothing else in common. It might sound miserably academic, but that's the thing I was most interested in finding out when I began the story. I'm sure a qualified shrink could read all sorts of things into that.

And is there a story behind your writing of it?

Yes! There's definitely a story behind the book, with several chapters to it and full of strange coincidences. First of all, the earliest draft had been lying stagnant on my computer for over six years, and then one insomniac night during a terrible stretch of writer's block I decided to purge my computer of all my old files in the hopes of also purging the block. I had dragged the document to the trash bin and was about to hit "empty trash" when I thought, just for some self-indulgent fun, I'd re-read it one last time. I ended up reading it all night, and literally as the sun rose decided to continue working on it rather than delete it.

When I'd started the story, it didn't have a setting. When I decided to finish the project I chose Wales in the late 1190s, because I needed a contentious border — something England and Wales have always had. At that moment in time, alas, there were three kingdoms in Wales, and all of them happened to be ruled by well-known rulers whom I could not appropriate for my tale. So, as horrendously cheesy as this was, I decided that I would, yes, invent a fourth kingdom and, yes, a fourth ruler. I could hardly look at myself in the mirror for doing something so cheap.

And to make matters worse, that wasn't my only invention:

- Welsh rulers of the age were called "princes" not kings. But I needed a king to work my archetypal king—fool angle, so I made up some feeble excuse to call the fellow in charge a king.

- I invented borders for my kingdom and chose its chief castle at random from maps of ruined Welsh fortresses.

- I needed an English family on the border for my king to have a feud with; I chose the Mortimers solely because I recognized the name from Shakespeare.

Then I began to do detailed research, and it turned out:

- There really was a fourth kingdom — a recent historical discovery and too obscure for most history books.

- Its last great ruler was the only Welshman of the century to be called king, not prince, in the British chronicles.

- The borders were almost exactly as I'd set them and the castle I had chosen was in fact the castle over which the king and nearby English barons were continually fighting. And who were those English barons? The Mortimers of course, with whom "my" rulers had a century-long blood feud infinitely nastier than anything I could dream up.

Everything I invented turned out to be real history! I know this borders on the far-fetched, and I admit I have no explanation as to how it happened.

But the coincidences didn't stop there. An opportunity arose, abruptly, for me to visit Wales to continue my research. I particularly wanted to find out the ruling family's coat of arms — I have zero interest in heraldry, but since it turned out the family actually existed, I wanted to get the details right. But I had no professional contacts. No leads. No way to find out the coat of arms. I was simply going to the Welsh countryside in the hope that things would fall into my lap. After a grueling journey, I arrived at the inn I was to stay at near midnight. Ray the innkeeper took one look at me and said in a melodic-yet-deadpan voice, "Welcome to Wales! Let's get you a drink." We sat there talking; he asked why I was staying in the middle of nowhere for two weeks and I explained I was researching a historical novel set in the areA:

"Did you notice our pub sign driving up?" he asked. "That's the old ruling family's coat of arms. Had it professionally researched. We're the only place that has it."

From that moment on, everything I needed fell into my lap.

How did you balance the need for historical authenticity with the desire to take creative license? What was your greatest concern in so doing?

The rule I invented for myself was that it was alright to invent material as long as it would be credible if it had happened. If Isabel existed, Maelgwyn really might have married her; if he had, Mortimer really might have schemed against him anyhow, and so on. The Welsh are very proud and protective of their history, and I respect that. Llewelyn is a national hero, and some may complain that his depiction in the book is not credible. But from the start of his ascendancy, he had to convince those who were not inclined to follow him — and no intelligent leader does that entirely by blunt force. While I have no doubt that Llewelyn used various tactics to gather followers, I know what I'm doing is like a non-American writing a story in which George Washington is a bit of a sneak. But if that story were told, I would enjoy it!

After researching this book, how do you respond to other depictions of, and/or popular conceptions of, the Middle Ages?

In general, I'd say many perceptions of the Middle Ages fall into one of two categories — both of which are equally inaccurate.

First is the silly, romanticized, good-old-days view, in which Ivanhoe and Lancelot are for real and all women are either wanton wenches or damsels in distress.

Second, and very pervasive recently, is the antithetical view which over-corrects for the first by taking the other extreme: the Middle Ages were ugly and dirty and smelly and repressive, life was cheap, the ordinary peasant had nothing to live for. That's also off. I'm not saying things were peachy — they weren't — but I think we read our own modern biases and assumptions into what we know. The world-view of the time was one of profound interdependency, especially before there was much of a money economy. Yes, people had to "know their place," but they did not necessarily experience that as a bad thing just because we, as modern Americans, would experience it as a bad thing. They were coming out of a very prolonged period of anarchy and violence; everyone knowing their place was reassuring. We think medieval living conditions were appalling because they differ from ours; but if someone were to describe to a 12th-century person, of any rank, the constant buzz of electricity, light pollution, the flavorlessness of commercially grown fruit and vegetables, the roar of traffic, the inorganic feel of plastic, a dissolving sense of community, the superfluity of most modern jobs, and other things we are inured to… they would pity us.

We think the life of a serf was cheap, because we hear that a lord could kill his serf with impunity — but a lord arbitrarily killing a serf would make as much sense as a modern dairy farmer going out and slaughtering one of his dairy cows just for the hell of it. He could do it, but if he had half a brain he wouldn't. The lord was quite possibly more conscious of the contribution made to his life by that serf than we tend to be of the people who grow the food we eat, make the clothes we wear or build the homes we inhabit.

How does your writing reflect your theatre background?

I started studying acting when I was 14. I think that hardwired me to write novels the way an actor experiences a rehearsal process. First it's just you and the script — character, dialogue and story. My first rough draft reads almost like a script; there are few descriptions and only the most important movement.

Then in rehearsal you have what's called table-work, where you discuss everything, break it down beat by beat, seek information to illuminate anything you're uncertain about; sort of like initial note-taking and research for a novel. Then you add basic blocking, rehearsal props and costumes, which are there to acclimatize the actors to anything non-contemporary — but the details are not important. My first drafts, similarly, have only functional necessities — somebody sits here, somebody wears a wimple there, somebody crosses to the fireplace — but they are devoid of anything like lighting, colors, weather, or sensory impressions. This part of the rehearsal process is the most important for actors (and for characters in a novel). It's all about behavior, a combination of the psychological and the active — figuring out motives, unspoken desires, how to react to others.

After that, the technical details are added — the generic plastic cup is replaced by a green goblet; a monologue is suddenly lit by sunset; a clock chimes; a door creaks. Tech rehearsal can be tedious — and frankly, its equivalent is the biggest chore to me as an author; it doesn't come naturally. I have to remind myself to fill in these kinds of details.

And then finally you have dress rehearsal, a final chance to mess around with everything in place but without outsiders' eyes on it. Then there are previews, which corresponds to letting other people read it, but people who know it's not in its final form. You learn a lot, seeing how it holds up with an audience, and you have a window of opportunity to adjust things based on what you learn.

For all I know, this is exactly the process every novelist goes through, but writing this first book I was struck by all the parallels between putting on a play and writing a novel.

How did the project and the characters change over the course of your working on it?

Originally it was more obviously "archetypal" — for the first few years I worked on it, I didn't even have a real-world setting for it. I wasn't researching medieval Wales, I was reading books like The Fool and His Scepter. The focus was almost exclusively on the king—fool

relationship; almost nobody else at Cymaron — including Isabel! — was given a first name until the final draft. Gwirion was both more mystical and more tricksterish; my original plan was to have him pull a major subversive stunt in every chapter. Noble, because his manipulations were not yet grounded in realpolitik, came across like a charismatic sadist. I was glad to re-envision him in a real-world context — he made a lot more sense — but I was a little sad to yield up Gwirion's more extreme antics. For example, Noble toys with the idea of making Gwirion "king for a day." In the original vision of the book, this would have happened, and it would have had far-reaching consequences, but a beleaguered medieval ruler would never have actually done it, so I couldn't let it happen. I think the story is much improved for the changes, but I suspect somewhere inside of me floats a little fairytale about fools and their kings that still wants to come out.

What was the most outrageous thing that you learned in your research?

There were two statements in the medieval Welsh law texts that were so startling I had to re-read them a few times, and then I was desperate to get them both in; I only succeeded with the first one. That's the law stating that when a female claims she's had her virginity forcibly stolen, the first thing that happens in the criminal trial is that she is examined to see if she is still "intact"... and the only person qualified to do this is the heir to the throne. The other law I tried but failed to include says that it is not criminal if a woman kills her husband's concubine — as long as she does the deed with her own hands. (As I recall, a man killing his wife's lover is not afforded the same leniency — a very rare medieval example of reverse sexism!)

Do you feel there is any similarity between the 12th-century Anglo-Welsh discord and modern-day political situations?

The similarities are legion. I know a Welsh historian who identifies strongly with the Palestinians, but ironically, I've also heard Welsh people compare their ancestral persecution with both the Israeli and pre-Israeli Jews' persecution by their neighbors. I also see strong similarities with the Kurds of northern Iraq. Humanity as a whole keeps repeating the same patterns, sadly.

What did you learn from writing this project that affects a) how you're writing your next book, b) how you look at the world in general, c) anything else?

I learned, as an editor friend put it, to "send the model home." The point isn't to "accurately depict medieval man," which is probably impossible and even if it wasn't would probably be very alienating, and frankly sort of pointless. The point is to depict human character and behavior that is recognizable and meaningful to a contemporary reader.