Introduction

How I Fell in Love with Magic

I would never have gone there but for a book that I found on my shelves. It concerned Dr John Dee, mathematician, alchemist, astrologer, angel talker and all-round Tudor wizard, and it told the strange, true story of how, in the sixteenth century, John Dee took his young wife Jane and all their children, as well as his scryer (which is to say, his medium) Edward Kelley, to Prague, which was then the occult capital of Europe. Here, the melancholy and poetic emperor Rudolf II ruled over a city of artists, poets, astronomers, astrologers and would-be magicians. Dee and Kelley wanted to talk to the angels to discover what God's intentions had been on the day that the world was born – and believed that they would find answers to their questions in Prague where there was magic on every street corner.

John Dee's home was Mortlake, a village on the River Thames a few miles west of the City of London. Here, he pursued his obsession with alchemy, and with summoning up

spirits and talking to the angels. He also had a huge library, the biggest in England, which was full of books on magic. He lived at a time when grown men and women believed in fairies, when kings and queens kept alchemists, when the heavens were filled with angels and demons, and it was widely believed that the end of the world was imminent. The sight of strange comets in the sky was thought to mean that Christ would soon be with us, that the Turks would be overthrown, and that a great new king would appear in Europe. Witches were considered so dangerous that they had to be killed wherever they were found. The world itself – the physical world in which we live – was surrounded by spheres, one inside the next, each made up of an exquisite, transparent element called the 'quintessence', an element so perfect that medieval alchemists had been searching for it for years. The earth, the sun and the stars all shared in the world soul and the planets were alive and dancing a dance called the 'Music of the Spheres', the steps to which God had laid down at the beginning of time. Everywhere, people believed that they were connected to the universe, that the universe had a soul and that just as they felt for the universe, so the universe felt for them.

This was John Dee's magic-saturated world, which I came across in the first year of the Covid pandemic when nothing surprised me – though everything astonished me.

It was a time when we were all panicking and making pacts with Fate and there was deal-making and magical thinking everywhere – please don't let me catch the virus; please don't let my children die; please let me die before them. It was the virus's invisibility that so unnerved us. I had never before been threatened by something I couldn't see. My hair grew long over my eyes. I forgot how to talk to my partner. It was as if we hadn't

breathed out for months. I got so used to a magical strangeness that I was amazed when the world obeyed its everyday laws, when I saw someone walking up ahead of me and blinked and looked again and saw they were still there.

That first pandemic spring, though harsh, was also strangely beautiful, one sunlit day after another. Out on Ally Pally hillside the trees were so thick with blossom they looked like they'd been upended and dipped in milk. We hadn't seen an aeroplane in weeks and a strange quiet had fallen on the city. On cold spring nights, I took a drink outside into the garden and sat on the stone wall or stood under the pear tree and looked up through its bare branches into the purity of the quintessence and tried to imagine what it would be like to believe we live in a snow-globe world, that the earth and the heavens are encased in crystalline spheres, that these spheres move because angels push them, and that when they do, everything in the heavens sings out to celestial music. Out in the garden during that first pandemic spring, I thought of John Dee's life and wondered what it would have been like to have lived in those magical years.

It made me remember those times when I was five, six or seven and had believed in magic, not a rabbit-out-of-a-hat magic but the magic of fairies and witches and time travel and strange transformations, such as girls into swans and grandmas into wolves. After that had come the middle years, when there were many Me's, but all of them practical, pragmatic, sceptical, not believing in magic at all; those were the Me's that went out to work to pay the mortgage.

But then, along came the pandemic and after that everything changed. After that I was no longer one hundred per cent sure of things. My world had been enchanted, in a dark sort of way.

I remembered the beautiful but alarming fairy stories of my childhood when anything could happen, a girl could turn mute or wander by mistake into fairyland or watch her brothers turn into swans and fly away, never to return unless she could sew the magic shirts for them. I thought of the magical world of Renaissance Prague and the melancholy emperor and John Dee's belief that he could talk to angels, and I decided that I was prepared to believe in strange glitches in the order of the universe, odd happenings and bumps and wrinkles in the flow of time. I wouldn't say I believed in them, but neither did I disbelieve them quite so strongly.

And of course, a part of me *wanted* these beliefs to be true, because the pandemic had made us all so jumpy, and because it is lonely living in a dead universe and because I wanted the zest and sparkle that comes from granting that the planets dance and the universe has a soul.

There are no stars in London now – the city lights have hidden them – but back in Tudor times the stars poured across the night sky in a vast and slowly moving river.

It was because of all these reasons – the pandemic, the story of John Dee, the memory of the fairy stories I read in my childhood – that I went in search of Renaissance magic and occult thinking.

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And so, as soon as the world opened up after Covid, I began to seek out the spaces that these people built – their houses, libraries and churches – and to stare at the things their minds had encompassed and their fingers had made. I went to art galleries and gazed at Renaissance paintings, admiring the painted angels, and wondered, did men and women really, *really* believe in angels?

And I started haunting the Warburg Library in London, which specialises in Renaissance history and particularly Renaissance magic. Every library has its own personality, its own ghosts that inhabit it. The Warburg is at the southern end of Gordon Square near Euston station and was the creation, 100 years ago, of Aby Warburg, a member of the German banking family. To this day it has a more 'foreign' feel than, say, the Institute of Archaeology, which looks across at it from the northern end of the square. The Warburg's quirky, un-English feel is accentuated by its distinctive layout. The books are grouped into four categories: Image, Word, Orientation and Action. A category system is like a net through which you see the books – and this one casts an odd light on the collection.

I wrote most of this book in the Warburg Library during its recent building works and some days it seemed as if I (and the builders) were the only people in the entire four-storey building. When I turned a corner and met someone, I jumped from sheer surprise. And yet, on its silent shelves there are books that tell fantastical and tumultuous stories of a time when world views fought each other, when men and women believed in dragons and when angels and witches were everywhere. The Warburg has always been haunted by scholars of Renaissance magic. Drifting along its bookshelves is like drifting through Aby Warburg's head.

Next, I went to Oxford and gazed at the portrait of John Dee in the Ashmolean Museum. In it, he wears long magus robes and a black skull cap and he gazes back at you with his clever, wary eyes. Then from here I went to the History of Science Museum, also in Oxford, and upstairs to their collection of early scientific instruments, which is a gorgeous gathering of astrolabes,

quadrants, spheres, sun dials and orreries. Astrolabes were based on scientific principles and were used by navigators to orient themselves by the stars, but they were also beautiful objects, as were all scientific instruments back then. John Dee was widely believed to be a magician, but he was also a scientist in our sense of the word, and he owned several astrolabes.

At Chetham's Library in Manchester they have five books that once belonged to Dee and which still carry his signature. I sat at the table where he is said to have called down the devil (there is a mark in the shape of a hoof burnt into the top of the table) and leafed through his books and admired his doodles. John Dee was an inveterate book-doodler, though back in the sixteenth century there was nothing reprehensible about this. On the contrary, doodling was a sign of your love for your books and a way of connecting you, through a bibliographic camaraderie, to all the readers who came afterwards. The Royal College of Physicians has John Dee's copy of *The Works of Cicero*, on one page of which he has drawn a beautiful full-bellied, three-masted sailing ship tossed on the ocean's billows. In Chetham's Library there is another book – the *Thesaurus Euonymi Philiatri de remediis secretis* written by the Swiss naturalist Conrad Gessner – with a section in Latin concerning the elixir of youth and it was here I found a doodle in the margin – apparently by Dee himself – of a naked and beautiful young woman. Oh, I think, so *that's* what it was all about?

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Sometimes in the very early Covid mornings when all was quiet outside in the London streets, I lay awake and watched the light come sifting through the folds in the bedroom curtains and pictured the characters of those times. In my mind's eye I saw

John Dee, the magus and mathematician with his charismatic and obsessive temperament; Edward Kelley, John Dee's scryer, with his astonishing visions; the other wizards (Dee was not the only one) such as the wayward, scornful wizard Giordano Bruno and the dreaming wizard Tommaso Campanella. I also saw the magician-astronomer Johannes Kepler; the melancholy emperor Rudolf II, who was in love with magic; the women like Anna Maria Zieglerin who tried to find a place for themselves in this world (and were severely punished for it) and many, many more.

By now I was reading John Dee's diaries, the survival of which is a story in itself (we'll come back to that), and from these I could see how so much of what we know of the wizards' stories has come down to us through the eyes and voices of prosperous men. So where, I wondered, were the women's viewpoints – Jane Fromond, who married John Dee, and Edward Kelley's wife Joanna? And where were all the minor characters in the story of Renaissance magic (although to themselves they did not feel minor at all) – because it is not only the women whose stories have been forgotten – the stories of the young (such as John Dee's children), the poor (such as John Dee's servants) and the very old have also been lost to time.

Much of what we know about John Dee comes from his diaries. Like all diary writers John Dee never sets out to describe himself. He assumes that this being a private diary it will never be read. And so, the John Dee that flits across its pages – a clever, sociable, gullible, obsessive, egocentric man – is entirely unself-conscious, and yet often very vividly conveyed: and at least he has a voice. History has been far less kind to Jane Dee and Joanna Kelley, Joanna even more so than Jane. Just as women back then had relatively little agency to carve out their own lives, they also

had very few ways by which to leave their stories behind. The majority of sixteenth-century women were illiterate; their voices have vanished, as have all those other people who were judged to be bit-part players in the lives of prosperous men. We simply do not know what these people thought and felt.

And so, I had to imagine them. In those early pandemic mornings, I imagined anxious, elderly fathers with wayward teenage daughters who were falling for the magic of love; worried daughters fearful their mother might be taken for a witch; girls who wanted to learn alchemy from their brothers; small children who couldn't read entranced by books; smart-arse young women alchemists; and a gang of London ragamuffins sitting on a garden wall waiting for a wizard to return.

There was something else as well. Those early morning Covid dreams, which brought me the women's and the children's stories, also reminded me that there are many ways in which the world is magical, that magical realism is more than a literary device, there is such a thing as everyday magic and it brings with it those brief moments when – through love or beauty – you feel yourself touched by the feather wings of Otherness. The wizards' wives and daughters, the old women and the servants, the elderly fathers and the ragamuffin children – none of them could perform magic, but all of them would have known everyday magic.

This is the story of Renaissance magic, told through the life, death and afterlife of John Dee and his extraordinary library – an entirely true, though utterly improbable, story. This is also the story of the women and the children, the old and the poor of that time, and the magic they might have known, and because their stories have not survived, I have imagined them for you. The final

part of this book examines how this world finished and asks the questions: what is magic? Why do we crave it? How come it is so, well, magical? And to what extent has it really ended?