



Moss Witch and Other Stories

Sara Maitland

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A bryologist enters an ancient piece of British woodland to research a rare strain of moss, only to discover an even more exotic specimen; a geologist explains the failures of the feminist movement to her teenage niece in terms of tectonic subduction; two Old Testament newlyweds scheme to make the most of their tightly negotiated dowry by applying 21st-century genetic engineering techniques...

Each story in this collection of short fiction fuses together specific pieces of scientific research with an ancient myth or folkloric archetype. In these stories, readers will encounter witches that can outwit botanists, religious soothsayers that read evolutionary biology in feverish dreams, and scientists who fall in love with the birds that they study.

A specially written afterward penned by a scientist follows each story, expanding upon the theory within the story, be it quantum mechanics, planetary physics, game theory, or nanotechnology.

Moss Witch and Other Stories Details

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From Reader Review Moss Witch and Other Stories for online ebook

Sarah says

I think these stories need to be taken as a whole from the story and the context from the consulting scientist. As a short story collection by themselves, then yeh it may sometimes seem tedious like lots of reviews say but she needs to give you a little bit of context when talking about matter and antimatter etc for the story to make any sense. I loved it. I thought she did something really special here and she made me read up on some areas that I'm not well versed in.

Lisa says

The Fairytales in Moss Witch are paired with pieces of scientific essays written by experts within their field, and although it's an interesting concept it did not quite work for me. I felt that most of the fairytales had been moulded to fit to a particular scientific theory, and the felt forced. There was too much exposition in dialogue and the stories did not ebb and flow naturally. Her Bronxie Boy was beautiful and the one about the twins was also magical, but the rest just did not stand up on their own.

Rebecca says

This collection had an interesting premise and it was cool to learn about different scientific theories after each short story... However the stories did feel a little forced to fit at times, especially when the characters would suddenly go off into complex-ish technical talk for what seems like little reason!

Flora says

I'm a bit sad to be giving up on this one as the concept is really intriguing. Each story in the collection is inspired by a scientific theory or concept and each one is followed by an essay by a scientist from that field.

However, the science and the stories never quite marry. Too often, two characters have a conversation about that theory or one character explains the theory at length to another: I would have liked to see the concepts more integrated, to have become organically part of the fabric of the story.

The stories themselves are not particularly interesting. The first one, about bird migration, is probably the best that I read. It came closest to actually having the science be part of the story, rather than being shoehorned in. However, there is also a shocking pastiche of a Kipling Just So Story, which is the point I knew I had to give up.

I might come back to these another time, but for now I have other things I would rather be reading.

Rebecca says

(3.5) These fourteen short stories inspired by scientific developments – both past and present – blend hypotheses and superstitions, biography and magic realism. Each tale is followed by an afterword from an expert in the relevant field.

The first story, "Her Bonxie Boy," and the title story are the best examples of how Maitland combines contemporary science and timeless fairy tale magic. In the former, Helen, a seabird specialist, tracks skuas from the Isle of Lewis to Africa using GPS technology. Like Amy Sackville's *Orkney*, this tale plays with the Scottish selkie myth – except this time the shape-shifting beloved is not a seal but a bird.

A number of the stories muse on genetic possibilities. In the better stories, Maitland avoids a teacher-student dialogue framework and either animates a historical moment or adapts a myth or folktale. My very favorite, "How the Humans Learned to Speak," adopts the format of Rudyard Kipling's *Just-So Stories* to tell a humorous tale of human evolution, especially the development of language: "Long, long ago, oh best beloved, the primates came down from the trees and out of the jungle."

Fans of A.S. Byatt, Andrea Barrett and Richard Powers will enjoy Maitland's strategy of mixing science and literature.

(See my full review at [Nudge](#).)

Sergio Mori says

When I read the first story ('Her Bonxie Boy'), both my brain and my heart exploded in excitement. I was so happy to see the Sara Maitland of 'Far North', with her tender folk imagination full of blood and guts. However, the rest of the stories never really reach that standard. Or so I thought, until BOOM! I reached 'The Beautiful Equation', which blew me away again. 'Moss Witch' also stands out. I guess the ones I like the most are the ones that ooze folklore, but the stories where science tips the balance left me a bit cold. Even the mythological ones, strangely.

I did enjoy the structure and the essays after each tale; I found them really interesting, even when I wasn't so keen on the actual story.

Roger Boyle says

Outstanding! If I could give 6 stars I would.

Maitland writes very well and that's a good start. There is no "sameness" between any pair of stories so the ingredients are good to begin with.

But her triumph is winning proper science and feminism in each one of them, and if there's any doubt about veracity it's dispelled by a postscript from a high-ranking practising scientist in each chosen area. Blimey, she must have learned a lot in doing this.

Fantastic.

Gretel says

Unfortunately I liked the afterwords from the academics more than the actual stories. You may like this book if you enjoy Pippa Goldschmidt and Tania Hershman's work.

Katymol says

The idea behind this collection is fascinating. Trying to marry up story and science is a worthy endeavour. However some of the connections are rather tenuous and the comments by consulting scientists didn't really give me new insights. That said I loved the first story Her Bonxie Boy

Ghost of a Rose says

The 5-star rating system doesn't work well for me. I prefer to use my own 6-star system. This book rates 6 stars: loved it, outstanding, very special, shortlisted favorite.

Mark Griffiths says

Moss Witch was great. Mot sure about the rest.

Gwen says

Moss Witch is a collection of stories inspired by discussions with scientists in several different fields, from Geology and Anthropology to Physics, Genetics, and Astronomy ... and of course, Bryology. Maitland chooses her genre for each so that fairy tales and creation myths rub shoulders with folktales and flat out horror. And it all works like a charm. The stories are enchanting, illuminating, and sometimes frightening (as you expect from an author known for her deep understanding of fairy tales). Each one is followed by a brief commentary by the scientist whose work inspired it – these are fascinating and the concept works well. Moss Witch is an inspired collection that shows us how much value – and magic – there is in looking at the world from different perspectives.

Megalion says

[http://www.shelfari.com/groups/92211/...](http://www.shelfari.com/groups/92211/)

Alex says

I'm just not a short stories person; some of these were amazing but I couldn't quite get into any of them particularly except the very last, Dark Humour, which was incredible.
