



THE  
GOBLINS  
OF  
BELLWATER

MOLLY RINGLE

## Q & A With Molly Ringle

*The Goblins of Bellwater*

### **How closely did you follow Christina Rossetti's poem "Goblin Market" as a basis for the story?**

I call this a book "inspired by" Rossetti's poem rather than saying it's "based upon" it, because I did veer from the poem a significant amount. I first read the poem a few years ago, and it intrigued me deeply. It's evocative and strange, and, like a fairy tale, has many symbols and events that could be interpreted as having several different meanings. My assignment to myself was to use it as a jumping-off point for a modern paranormal novel, which would then go its own way as the plot required. What I kept from the poem was the basic surface framework: we have a pair of sisters, grown but on the young side, one of whom becomes enchanted by eating goblin fruit in the forest and begins wasting away as a result, alarming the other sister into seeking a way to save her. Since Rossetti's poem ends with a fast-forward to the women being "wives" and telling their children about their adventures, and since I wanted to write a paranormal romance anyway, I gave my modern sister characters a pair of men to get involved with, in a double love story with eerie angles that I think match the eeriness of the original poem. Mind you, another interpretation of the poem is that the two women aren't really sisters but lovers, which would be a different route to take and which I think would be lovely to see too!

### **For those of us who haven't been there, what is Puget Sound like and why did you choose it as a setting for a retold fairy tale?**

Puget Sound is a vast area of Pacific seawater, meandering into countless inlets and coves in skinny, deep fjords left behind by glaciers. Seattle and Tacoma and Olympia lie on its shores, on some of its largest bays, but it also has many wilder and more rural shores, especially on the western side where it backs up against a huge national forest on the Olympic Peninsula. That's the region where my grandparents bought a vacation cabin decades ago, and where my family has been going for many vacations ever since. I can safely say it's one of my favorite places on Earth. In order to agree, you have to enjoy a cool, rainy climate and all the thick moss and ferns and mushrooms and huge evergreens such a climate produces, and I happen to love those things. Fairy tales, at least those from Northern Europe, almost all involve a deep dark forest. That's where the faeries, witches, werewolves, vampires, elves, and all the other interesting beings live. Everyone knows that. I haven't spent much time in the forests of Europe (alas! I will someday), but I reckoned our Pacific Northwest deep dark forests were more than adequate for housing supernatural creatures. My grandmother used to tell us that the mossy ruins of big tree trunks in the Puget Sound forests were the homes of Teeny-tinies, whom I always took to be faeries. So I set the story there, at the edge of the Sound, where saltwater meets woods and where the Teeny-tinies live.

### **What is the significance of the four elements (Earth, Air, Fire, Water) in this story?**

The four elements are common fixtures in many ancient cultures, and have remained popular into the modern day. One of my favorite TV shows is *Avatar: the Last Airbender*, which uses the four-element framework brilliantly in its world-building. In reading up on faery lore for this book, I found that scholars often classify types of fae under the four elements, and since that appealed to me, I did the same. As one of the characters in *The Goblins of Bellwater* muses, there's something human and emotionally real about looking at nature that way, even if we technically know, thanks to science, that nature contains far more than four elements. And in my novel, the only way to break the goblin spells involves respecting and trusting each of the four elements, even when they're at their most daunting.

### **Why do you think fairy tale and other myth and legend retellings are so popular right now?**

I think they've always been popular! Maybe it's a case of selection bias, because I personally have always been into ghost stories, fairy tales, and other supernatural lore, but it seems to me that human culture has never stopped telling such stories. As scholars of fairy tales will tell you, reading and writing about fantasy and the paranormal may look like escapism from reality, and sometimes I tell myself that's what I'm doing, but in truth these stories end up giving us all the useful lessons about real life that any good stories do: empathy, courage, love, respect for nature and community, and the importance of thinking fancifully and creatively.

### **What are the goblins like in this book?**

In keeping with both the "Goblin Market" poem and the bulk of faery lore, they are mischievous and villainous. They laugh a lot, but they are decidedly laughing at you, not with you. They steal, and in particular they lust after gold. Like other fae, they enjoy making deals with humans, but humans would be wise not to enter into such deals, as the obligation tends to be heavier than it sounds at the outset. These goblins go further than merely theft, too; they assault and sometimes steal away humans and turn them into fellow goblins, and at other times enchant them into wandering unhappily in the woods until they waste away and die. Although the goblins are sometimes amusing in their level of witty rudeness, they are nearly all amoral and highly dangerous to get involved with. Only a scant few of them, who were once humans, manage to retain any human empathy. However, not all of the fae in my book are this cruel—the goblins are the worst of the lot! Others are willing to be quite helpful to humans as long as they are respected in return.

### **What kind of magic system does this book involve?**

In this book, my main characters are ordinary humans who can't do any magic, but they become involved in the dealings of the fae realm, which is a bit like another dimension. It can be entered or glimpsed by summoning the fae (which includes goblins), who might or might not answer you. But you're luckier on the whole if they don't, because many of them are treacherous, and the realm itself is a wilderness containing many uncanny dangers. From the point of view of the human characters, the magical rules and the cultural norms of the fae are nonsensical, almost inexplicable, but since some of these people have fallen under curses, they have to step in among those dangers and work with the rules as best as they can anyway.

### **What do you find most challenging in writing a novel?**

At first, it's usually getting to know the characters. I tend to start with a general idea of who they are, but then when I begin writing, I realize there's too much I still don't know about these people and therefore they aren't coming across as real yet. It slows me down in the early stages while I take breaks to write notes in which I interview them and figure them out. I also have a perennial problem with writing antagonists. They have to do fairly awful things (being antagonists and all), but I still want them to feel like real people (or other beings), and therefore I have to get into their heads and figure out why they would feel justified in doing such a thing. It's not a comfortable place for my mind to go. I suppose that's why I gravitate more toward romance and lightheartedness: I much prefer spending time with those who love and laugh.

### **What are the easiest parts of writing a novel for you?**

No part of the process is exactly easy. But sometimes lines will occur to me seemingly out of nowhere when I'm writing, and they're perfect for the moment; or I'll find my characters talking to each other in my head when I'm not writing. And I love those moments, because for them to have come to life in my imagination like that, it means I must have done sufficient groundwork in figuring out the world and the characters. So although the groundwork is the hard part, it pays off and leads to easier parts later!

### **How did the writing of this novel, a fairly short stand-alone paranormal, compare to the writing of the *Persephone* trilogy?**

It was far simpler! The *Persephone's Orchard* trilogy had dual timelines, for one thing: the ancient world in Greece, and the reincarnations of those people in the modern day. For another thing, it had far more characters, both in original and reincarnated versions. And for any series, you need to have plot arcs that stretch over the whole series as well as smaller ones that get wrapped up within each volume; and you have to keep the whole thing internally consistent in terms of mood and themes and character personalities. It turned out exhausting enough that I didn't want to write another series again anytime soon. So I picked *The Goblins of Bellwater* as my follow-up project: small cast, straightforward plot, and simple timeline. Most of the action takes place within about six weeks, in this small town, which is indeed a contrast to the millennia of world-spanning events covered in the trilogy!

### **Would you want to live in any of the fictional magical worlds you've created?**

Strange though it might sound, I'd love to visit the Underworld as I wrote it in *Persephone's Orchard* and its sequels. I made it much less scary, for the most part, than it is in traditional Greek mythology; and besides that, I love caves and glowing things, and definitely would be interested in a ride on a ghost horse as long as an immortal was keeping me safe during it. As for the fae realm we see in *The Goblins of Bellwater*, I'd like to catch glimpses of it, and of the fae themselves, but I wouldn't want to actually enter the realm. Too perilous!

### **What are you writing next?**

One of the genres I love, and haven't written enough of myself, is male/male love stories, so I've been working on a couple of those. One is contemporary, no magic or supernatural stuff, and it's undergoing the feedback-and-revision stage right now. Another will involve a fae realm like that of *The Goblins of Bellwater*, only in a new location in the world, a fictional setting I'm creating. I still have to figure out how this place works and what its magic system is like, in addition to getting to know the characters, but I'm excited about the idea and it has definitely taken root in my brain.

### **What are the most magical places you've been to in real life?**

Puget Sound and its surrounding forests and mountains—which is why I chose the area for the enchanted lands in *The Goblins of Bellwater*. Also some of the forests and meadows in the Willamette Valley in Oregon, where I grew up. Oregon and Washington are both overflowing with natural beauty and I'm spoiled to have spent most of my life here. In addition, some places in Great Britain have felt quite magical to me, such as Tomnahurich (Hill of the Fairies) in Inverness, Scotland; or Old Town Edinburgh with its many close alleys and dark medieval buildings and brick-paved streets; or Westminster Abbey, not only because of its beauty and its many graves of astoundingly famous historical figures, but because when I first visited it as a 19-year-old, I'd never been in any building anywhere near that old before (having grown up in the Pacific Northwest), and it blew my mind.



Molly Ringle was one of the quiet, weird kids in school, and is now one of the quiet, weird writers of the world. She likes thinking up innovative romantic obstacles and mixing them with topics like Greek mythology, ghost stories, fairy tales, or regular-world scandalous gossip. With her intense devotion to humor, she was proud to win the grand prize in the 2010 Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest with one (intentionally) terrible sentence. She's into mild rainy climates, gardens, '80s new wave music, chocolate, tea, and perfume (or really anything that smells good). She has lived in the Pacific Northwest most of her life, aside from grad school in California and one work-abroad season in Edinburgh in the 1990s. (She's also really into the U.K., though has a love/stress relationship with travel.) She currently lives in Seattle with her husband, kids, guinea pigs, and a lot of moss.

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