

Absence of Monster

'Here be dragons' - Lenox Globe ca. 1509

As the maps were filled in so the monsters were pushed out — to some distant planet or x,000 leagues under the sea. We'd still say we could see them in malefactors, but it was just a metaphor, a weak twist of language. They didn't have dog-heads, tentacles, or eyes in their chests; they simply did bad things. Monstrous things? No, transgressive — sometimes dreadful — things, but you couldn't really play the monster card here.

Occasionally we'd hear about communities too poor to afford new maps or too caught up in local matters to need them; they still believed. Their creatures were invisible or lived in the shadows, conveniently out of sight, which we found charming. Others might criticise us, considering we still harbour a fondness for ghosts. But that's quite different. I have a fondness for the idea of life on other planets. She has a fondness for the notion of Father Christmas. We have a fondness, but we don't actually *believe*.

Return of the never gone

But they hadn't gone anywhere. Instead they'd gotten small, micron small, and were all over the place: in our houses, on our pets, on the bus, in our pockets, on the threads in the stitching of the lining of those pockets. And then one day they suddenly got large again and made a big show of running off into the woods. They moved just fast-slow enough that we caught sight of them as they broached the tree line.

They'd been listening in all this time. Sneaky fuckers. They knew everything about us – and now they'd run off.

We vacuumed our houses, stripped away the carpets, burnt mattresses, and got the experts in. They eventually gave us the all clear but strongly recommended steering clear of the woods for fear of re-infection. These were creatures that could do *big-small-big* at will, and

if we wanted to stay clean, we should really think about taking our doses of nature elsewhere.

The dawn of the monster hunters

After an intensely busy period, the cleaning and pest control firms now found themselves relatively underemployed and were feeling the pinch. Needing to look beyond the domestic market, they lobbied the council and regional government, reminding them of their legal responsibilities in the event of an unfortunate encounter on what was — is — council land; of how there was no guarantee the monsters were going to stay put in the woods; and of how scavenging beasts always went where the food was. They made a convincing case for an interventionist approach.

Fast-tracking the tendering process, the rival firms divided the territory up amongst themselves and decided upon competition by results. A flat fee would be paid to all for an initial sweep, and then contracts were to be awarded on the basis of:

- success
- effectiveness
- lack of disruption to the native habitat and wildlife
- sustainability

It would be like a dragon quest from days of yore, but done responsibly, ethically.

Correspondence course

Shortly before the first sweep the monsters started sending us letters – from the woods – asking how things were going and talking about personal things that only an intimate acquaintance could or should know. Their handwriting was neat and the paper of exceptional quality. People wondered where they were getting it from, but as they could do *big-small-big* at will, this didn't seem like much of a challenge for them.

They offered advice in matters of the heart and suggestions for domestic improvements, which — despite the impertinence — was generally thoughtful and well considered.

The advance of the monster hunters

At daybreak the assembled hunters, masked and body-armoured, ducked under the perimeter rope and strode off into the woods. About an hour later they emerged on the other side. The various crews conferred with one another at the tree line, made some gestures, nodded, and had a quick cigarette, before turning round and marching a return path. Back at the start point they climbed into their vehicles and drove away.

The following day a jointly worded letter arrived at the council offices explaining that the only guaranteed way of eradicating size-shifting creatures — with possible powers of invisibility — would be to raze the woods to the ground. The council wrote back, explaining that destroying the:

wood anemones, bluebells, foxgloves, purslanes, stitchworts, yews, blackthorns, cedars, ash, alders, boxes, limes, beech, field maples, dogwoods, junipers, hazels, chanterelles, puff balls, milk caps, ink caps, jelly ears, stinkhorns, penny buns, hedgehogs, badgers, dormice, common shrews, pigmy shrews, water shrews, stoats, voles, squirrels, honey bees, alder flies, pond skaters, hornets, sloe bugs, shield bugs, sabre wasps, damsel flies, lacewings, grasshoppers, earwigs, woodlice, centipedes, demoiselles, weevils, leatherbugs, leafhoppers, robberflies, ants, mining bees, mason bees, bumblebees, zebra spiders, wolf spiders, raft spiders, soldier beetles, ladybirds, cock chafers, leaf beetles, click beetles, nut weevils, stag beetles, hawk moths, black rats, brown rats, pipistrelles, noctules, daubentons bats, mouse-eared bats, newts, yellow slugs, tree slugs, netted slugs, leopard slugs, chaffinches, green finches, tree creepers, bramblings, siskins, linnets, all the tits, the warblers, the buntings, thrushes, fieldfares, blackbirds, redstarts, robins, cuckoos, swifts, wrens, sparrows, dunnocks, starlings, woodpeckers, crows, little owls, barn owls and tawny owls

was outside their remit, so no thanks.

The matter of the furniture

Soon after the unsuccessful rout several residents complained that items of domestic furniture were missing: rocking chairs, piano stools, arm chairs — things that could be sat upon mostly. It was possible they'd been misplaced during the fumigation phase, or maybe unscrupulous cleaners had taken their pick. Most likely they'd been put in storage somewhere and an administrative oversight had left them there.

The monster hunters felt the community were looking to blame them for something and so quickly nipped the accusations in the bud, releasing all their paperwork for the fumigation contracts, right down to expenses sheets, hire receipts, and space rentals.

They also added — in a tersely worded statement — that creatures who could do *big-small-big* and *invisible* could also have the powers to do *looks like*. Maybe some of us had been sitting on a monster all this time? In fact, *looks like* is pretty close to *invisible* when it's something you take for granted. Which is why razing the woods to the ground was such a good suggestion in the first place. And here we all were in the second or third, from where it was looking even better.

The exam season is almost upon us

Recent years have seen a dishearteningly high level of cheating, particularly amongst the older children. A reluctance by teachers to believe their students capable of such dishonesty has led to the Examination Board annually circulating a reminder document drawing attention to tell-tale signs and subtleties. This year's edition features a new section on plagiarism in which it details:

Hidden referencing

Starting off the piece — essay, report etc. — with a very small or almost imperceptibly faint inverted comma and ending with similar, and then concealing the relevant footnote or endnote within the body of another quote (usually a long one).

Probable outcome: Can only be marked down for bad layout as attribution has been given.

Embedded referencing

Presenting one's script as a very long video or radio broadcast then publishing it (usually) online; references are accessible via a link whose URL is mentioned briefly, possibly almost inaudibly, in the voice-over during the piece. With 20 minutes allocated marking time per script the use of, say, a three-hour long video format problematises tracing sources.

Probable outcome: Rouses suspicion and likely to be referred, but unlikely that anyone will have the time to investigate.

Unstable inks

A more technologically advanced version of invisible ink. References, attribution, and relevant markers are given in the essay, but written in unstable or 'mutable' inks that flux back and forth between full visibility/complete transparency. Heat and motion sensitivity can act as stimuli, so the simple act of reading and page turning can activate these state changes. Sophistication in chemical engineering has also seen the introduction of these 'trigger' variations: daylight to artificial light; shifts in altitude; scent signatures (hormonal, environmental etc.); sound; activation by remote sources.

Probable outcome: Uncertain.

On questioning the Board about unstable inks, they responded with incomprehension until sent a copy of the document. This was not produced by them, they assured us, nor have they ever circulated any advisory documents to unsuspecting teachers. Whoever has been supplying these though, they added, must have substantial financial support — a conclusion they'd arrived at due to the superior quality of materials (paper, reprographics, and binding) employed.

Visitors to the lake

Despite everyone's concerns, the council has held back from

going public about the threat within the woods. All the residents know, of course, but no official statement has been made, and any meeting discussing the issues has avoided public record by remaining unminuted. This may seem unscrupulous, possibly dishonest, but it's apparent that the impact on the local economy could prove devastating. The townsfolk are near unanimous in supporting this decision.

In the meantime, paths into the woods have been barricaded off and dressed with day-glo posters warning of an intense tick infestation. Similar signs and leaflets have been displayed liberally around town.

This has proven effective — no one likes ticks — but there were still potential problems up by Hunter's Lake, in particular the sandy cove it forms along the park's western edge. This has always been a popular picnicking spot, as well as having some renown as an old haunt of the Group of Six.

Although most varieties of tick live quite happily in sand and sun, we'd chosen to signpost about one that thrived exclusively in leafy cover and shade. At the time it just sounded like a more convincing deterrent, reinforcing the idea of them lurking in the woods, but this now left the cove open to visitors.

Some extra time was bought by feigning a rare algae bloom along the shoreline, which was then 'protected' by cordon, but this could only serve as a temporary fix. Eventually we came up with a long-term solution: the woods have their ticks, whilst the sandy cove would have its *skunks*.

A large consignment was deposited on the shore, and in order to stop them wandering off into the woods we make a daily delivery of high protein foodstuffs just before sunrise, scattering it generously along the cove. A mild sedative is mixed in just to make sure they linger a while after eating, but one we're assured has no lasting effect and — for the skunks — provides a lightly euphoric, floating sensation.

Local author not helping

There'd been a widely held understanding that we would keep our problem within the community, so it was disappointing to hear that local poet Mary P has entitled her new collection *The Wisdom of our Monsters*. Mary is a very energetic character, known widely for her plain speaking and love of Celtic folklore. She's also a mainstay at the

local goat sanctuary.

Despite the council's objections and generous offer to pay for a re-titled print run, she refuses to budge. Three of her rescue goats have gone missing during the dispute, which has polarised things further.

The return of the monster hunters

After several months away, the hunters have returned and called a Town Hall meeting. They look thinner, a little weather-beaten, possibly a bit more piratical. And although their actions haven't exactly inspired confidence so far, we don't feel like we've made any notable progress on our own. Half an hour before start time, the hall is packed out.

Their spokesperson, the scarecrow-like Seth, takes to the podium, grips its sides, and meets our eyes.

"During our time away, we've been studying up on the problem," Seth tells us. "We've read through all the key texts and then moved on to more esoteric ones.

"After this," he confides, "we progressed to teachings that *had not been written down.*"

Despite its ambiguity this sounds impressive.

They now understood the monsters that much better, and with this understanding had come the realisation that eradication is not the answer — it's possible, but not right. So they were thankful for the council's stand on razing the woods — that's what he'd come back to tell us, first off.

Secondly, they'd come to realise that they were approaching this with a very binary mindset — on/off, here/gone — when what was required was much more nuanced. Thirdly...

The thrall Seth had held us in quickly melted away, and our attention began to wander.

I watched a moth batter itself repeatedly against the window. I became aware of a dried toothpaste mark on my trousers, up by my inner left thigh, and pondered ways to remove it here, now, that wouldn't look suspicious. I listened to the cistern refilling in the back room.

Somewhere around seven or eight he came to the point, how they were returning to offer their services as monster shamen.

The revision

After the muffled laughter and a couple of whoops of derision, Seth clarified that we may also like to think of them as mediators — or even go-betweens.

Ten cars explode in the space of a month

This has never happened before — or, at least, no one can remember the like. Explanations have been given: a gas leak, problems with the fuel line on the new Nexus Prima, marital acrimony, and the sad but inevitable copycat cases. The clustering is understandable as a consequence of probability — making the insignificant seem meaningful — but counter explanations by the accused suggest other forces.

Out of desperation the council ask the former monster hunters for their advice but feel shame even as they do so. Their consensus is that it's extremely unlikely to be monster-related, but where does that get us? If they're brought into court as expert witnesses then the whole business will officially go on the record, exposing our town to probable financial ruin. But if we don't, how can we stop any subsequent law-breaker from pleading the same monster-blaming defence?

Strange sights seen

A snake with two heads; a stationary cloud; a butterfly with markings like a circus clown; a limbless juggler at a local talent show; a double rainbow bisecting itself; a green sunset; a whistling cow.

We thought after the monsters that we wouldn't see 'strange' again, that somehow our threshold for the uncanny would be that much higher. It seems we were mistaken.

Reconsideration of the former monster hunters

Despite their status as something of a local joke, the former monster hunters do seem to be in earnest — as if they've finally found their calling. They're no longer gung-ho, largely (all?) teetotal, and have remained in town despite the lack of take-up of their services.

Nevertheless they're determined to contribute to the community, with many spending their afternoons working for local volunteer groups, as they sleep through the mornings. At first we thought this was the result of carousing, but it's now widely known that come sunset they take it in turns to head off into the woods, with the last re-emerging just as day breaks.

Reconsideration of the children

Each day they're more truculent, less communicative. It's almost as if their essential goodness is being drained off and transfused into the former monster hunters. Their school marks are suffering too, though this may be due to their teachers' new alertness.

Their current 'thing' is how they don't believe the monsters exist as:

they never saw them (it's true, the monsters did abscond at night)
they only have our word to go on.

This questioning may be part of an inevitable generational mistrust, but seems precociously early to be happening with the six and seven year olds.

Some of us are wondering whether they're being taught this, maybe through tampering with their course books. But then surely their teachers would notice? Unless they were somehow in league with the monsters — but, again, why should this be so?

Children have been seen going off to play in the woods. We chastise them, but they head off there again the next day or their friends do, or they go the day after. Are the monsters lying low when they play there? Do they play with the children? But if they were playing with the children then the children would know for certain that that they do exist, so getting *them* to tell *us* that they believe they *don't* exist must involve an ulterior motive — and what could that be?

The old cabin

Burnt to a cinder overnight.

The winning of trust

We do not trust the children, who do not trust us. Neither of us trusts the teachers.

Nobody trusts the monster shamen either, though perhaps the children do — but they won't tell us.

Mary P trusts none of us, and though we think of her as a generally trustworthy sort, that incident with the book has introduced the idea of unreliability — so, no, we don't trust her either.

The skunks aren't eating much of the food we leave for them, preferring to go off foraging in the woods — so I think we've lost their trust too.

And then there's the gas mains, the Nexus Prima, several local citizens, various forms of printed matter etc.

Why do we say one *wins* someone's trust, like it's somehow a stake in a game of chance?