

Mermaids Part One: Mermaids for Life
Thoughts from Emma Merrick, a mermaid enthusiast
Narrated and produced by Margaret Barry

[Gasp] Merrrmaaaids

Emma Merrick is an animator, artist, storyteller, and a dear friend of mine. She's also obsessed with mermaids.

I've made films and animations that explore the idea of sea mythology, I've written short stories. Ever since I was really little I really liked them, you know, whenever I was in the pool I'd try to do like mermaid swim, my parents would joke about and call me mermaid girl, or, like, water-baby was another one that they'd call me.

Emma's relationship with mermaids has evolved to become more complicated today. But I wanted to start at the beginning. I asked her where this childhood infatuation with mermaids originated, and she said that children just like to have secrets.

Those secrets are somehow empowering, and, you appear normal but you scratch the surface and there's something more to it, there's something either freaky or magical about you, and I think that also attracted me, this idea of being somebody who, there was more than meets the eye.

I do really strongly believe that there are aspects of all fantasy creatures that people can relate to. By the time I was 14 I had lived in eight different countries and five U.S. states and currently I've lived in nine different countries and seven U.S. states. And so I do think a lot about mermaids being nomadic, they are sort of country-less and they don't have material lives. They can go anywhere, you know, they pop up anywhere around the world and there's still this adaptability in which they change or they learn when they're on land. And then there are also other things, just the storyline of being a fish out of water or the storyline of not being able to fall in love with someone because of leaving. I really think I enjoyed that and identified with that as kid.

I had a set of the little Mermaid TV series, I had an Eyewitness Documentary about the ocean, which was just, it was the tits, it was so good. When I got a bit older I watched movies like Aquamarine and every single time I came home from school I would put it on and watch it every single day for a month. When I got my own computer, when I got access to the internet and YouTube, then I would go on and watch anything mermaid I could. And there's a lot, there's a lot of TV shows and cartoons and stuff like that.

I've never seen a mermaid in person, and I don't know that they're real, but they may as well be. Their pervasive presence in Hollywood and on TV in the last century has made them key figures in the collective cultural realities of millions. As Emma grew older, she continued watching mermaids in movies

and TV shows and loved them just as much. But she began doing research that took her out of Hollywood and soon discovered a dark and unsettling past.

Many of the traditional folk tales that inspired Ariel and other modern day mermaid stories are rife with violent misogyny. Hans Christian Anderson's famously grim version of the Little Mermaid ends with the mermaid's suicide. In some legends, mermaids lure sailors to their deaths by seducing them, demonizing the free woman. Others paint women of the sea as elusive beauties for men to fantasize about catching. Emma told me about a version of the mermaid from Ireland and Scotland called a selkie.

In the cases of the women, the female selkie, men would steal their skins while they'd be dancing on the beach naked with each other and not only would they never be able to return to the sea but they'd have to marry the man who stole their skin and it's a pretty terrifying idea, this non-consensual marriage. And it's interesting too because there are so many patterns of these stories of fairy wives, is what they're called. You know you've got the kitsune in Japan, of a fox wife, which is very similar. You take the tail and you can marry the fox woman. Sometimes they're evil. Same thing with swan maidens, which are, you know, women who turn into swans. There's even a Filipino story called the crocodile wife which is about a man who accidentally marries a crocodile.

But I totally digress because when it comes to the selkie, the thing that is so badass, I love this. So you know female selkies. Steal their skin, you got it. But a male selkie. Male selkies can be summoned by women. And here is how you do it. If you are a sexually frustrated woman, you cry seven tears into the ocean at high tide and a male selkie will come and have sex with you. And that is the legend.

The gender-swapping in the selkie story hardly remedies the narrative of a human plucking a lover from the sea against their will. However, mermaid legends are diverse and complex. They can be picked apart and re-purposed to be meaningful to an individual. Looking beyond some troubling narratives straight through to the mermaids themselves, Emma sees independent and compassionate femininity.

I think something about that is really empowering, to you know, destroy men with your beauty and your sexiness, you know? Even though there's characters like King Triton or Poseidon who kind of rule over the ocean, you know you're still looking at this entity of female power and a lot of times as well mermaids in movies and the media and books are very much represented in a sisterhood.

For thousands of years, mermaid stories have been ever evolving, from sailors' legends to blockbuster Hollywood teen flicks. We can learn about societies by looking back at the stories they told, or the stories they're telling now. But another story is shared in whispers between the mermaids themselves and the people who know what to listen for.

I think there is like this secret, fun thing when you're little, when things are getting a bit awkward and you don't know what's happening, being attracted to this idea of there being something more and having there be something secretive and different and cool about you when

you're trying to find your way. And then as I approach adulthood I'm just like aw man, like, what if I could just jump into the ocean, escape everything and go back to having nothing and the freeness that mermaids have. What I said before. And then you get to swim around topless. That'd feel really nice.