

The Storytellers

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The Grimm Reader: The Classic Tales of the Brothers Grimm

translated and edited by Maria Tatar

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Year after year, we print and re-print fairy tales. What is it that makes them valuable? Should we keep telling them, and if so, why? What about their detractors, the self-appointed child protectors who complain about their violence and cruelty, not to mention a different set of worriers who protest their “false” happy endings? And surely the tales do not teach morality. Remember the egregious brutality of that spoiled princess in *The Frog King* who, after hurling the little animal who helped her against the wall, gets rewarded. And we quail at even a mention of *The Jew in the Brambles*, an outrageous portrayal of barbarism and prejudice, which, in Maria Tatar’s new selection of the Grimm fairy tales, wisely appears only in a separate section marked for adults.

Nor do the tales psychologize or philosophize. What they do, instead, is what all great children’s literature does: they literalize metaphor. They lower their glittering buckets deep into the psyche’s well. Loyalty lifts spells. Jealousy becomes murder. Love trumps death. Fortune reverses. Wishes come true.

Not quite like ancient myths, which use nymphs and satyrs to explain recurring natural phenomena; nor like fables, whose timeless moral lessons are parlayed through the escapades of animal characters; nor like legends, which exude the pungent aromas of one particular locale and its history, fairy tales are stories spun into gold at the wooden wheel of a miller’s daughter: stories made to summon wonder, horror, enchantment—and not necessarily anything more. Uncanny in the purest sense of the word, which is to say, both bizarre and familiar at once, they are meant to be told, not read, and they truly possess an inexhaustible power. Children hold on tight, turn pale, close their eyes, and beg for more.

The Grimm Reader, a compilation of fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm, newly translated by Tatar, who has published voluminously and illuminatingly on these writings for decades, comes to us with a mischievous title. It reminds us that, in the wake of global terrorism, parents and teachers are questioning ever more nervously what sort of tales we ought to be telling children and why. In *Lilith* some years ago, Naomi Danis aired these anxieties, with responses from twenty writers and editors associated with children’s literature, a significant number of whom warned against “smarmy” sentimentality and against books that offer superficial “healing.”

Jacob (1785-1863) and Wilhelm Grimm (1786-1859) were brothers who collaborated closely throughout their lives. Born in Hanau, near Frankfurt am Main, they studied law at Marburg, and through their linguistic and philological studies, became fascinated by age-old popular German oral cultural traditions, which they feared were in danger of disappearing under the threat of industrialization. They began to gather tales and songs and amassed a monumental collection but did not readily reveal their sources, which later proved, in many cases, to be not of direct folk or peasant origins but filtered through intermediaries of their own social circle.

In her introductory pages, Tatar reminds us how the Grimm brothers altered successive editions of their *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, which were originally published in 1812 and 1815, cleansing them of erotic innuendo—notably of

references to pre-marital sex, pregnancy, and incest—and hoping thereby to make them more suitable for youthful readers. Violence, however, was fine. Elsewhere Tatar has shown that Wilhelm Grimm was also ready to bowdlerize the tales by routinely changing mothers into stepmothers (as in *Hansel and Gretel*), so as to preserve the sanctity of motherhood and, beyond that, to seek on all feasible occasions to link feminine attractiveness with self-sacrifice and to associate feminine beauty with the virtues of diligence and domestic labor.

One of the finest qualities of this book is that, light and unencumbered by annotation, it is clearly meant to be read lovingly to children. Fairy tales were originally recited aloud, and that format gave the listeners considerable power. They were able to exercise a direct and partially controlling effect on each recounting. If attention waned, stories were modified. They could be spiced, embellished, or curtailed. But contemporary American adults rarely tell fairy tales to children anymore. We read, slavishly adhering to a text. Such reliance denotes a diminished narrative inventiveness among us, even a dereliction in regards to the sacred task of passing on our cultural heritage. With this new book in hand, however, readers may be inspired to depart from the page and improvise. The translation is fluid and open, as if welcoming interpolation. In *Rapunzel*, for example, finding the line “Let your hair down” too blunt and insufficiently evocative, I intone rhythmically instead: “Let down your golden hair.”

The Grimm Reader also stimulates interpretation and improvisation by eschewing illustrations. In so doing, it provokes serious reflection on the function of pictures in children’s books. The dearth in this text makes us weigh their role as enhancers or detractors. Arguments against them of course claim that they tend to fix a particular visualization and tamp down what should be left loose and free. After being exposed, say, to Gustave Doré’s haunting engravings of *Little Red Riding Hood*, it would be hard to imagine those scenes any other way. Here, by contrast, words are given license to perform their sorcery unaided. Pages are decorated only occasionally with delicate borders, medallions, or illuminated letters. This pleases me immensely: in a culture determined to flood itself with garish, sensational imagery to the detriment of the unaided word, this book reminds us that, as Tatar herself has written, the words of children’s stories are magic wands in and of themselves.

Rustic, often coarse, yet sparkling with silver and gold, the Grimms’ tales match, with an almost miraculous precision, children’s own ways of thinking. They transform contiguity into causality, and they maximize contrast. Their smoky looking glasses mirror, to our glossy, high-tech, twenty-first century children, hidden aspects of their own inner lives, buried treasure all too rarely tapped. I cannot understand those who deem these fairy tales unsuitable for children, and those who would purge them of their so-called inappropriate elements. If they find these old tales powerful enough to require censorship, then perhaps they themselves have not outgrown them. Fearlessly and sometimes fearfully, the Grimms embrace a welter of intractable human dilemmas—themes that, our advancing science and technology notwithstanding, have never vanished from life. Deceptively simple, their magic appeals to us not only when we are young. They perform a lasting and invaluable educational task: they teach us to marvel, to quest, to seek. We learn from their twists and turns—from a girl’s seven brothers transformed into ravens and then back again, or from a greedy fishwife who ends her days in a pigsty—that truth may abide in the strangeness of fantasy.

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