

# Fairy Tales as a Gateway to Reading

Becca Price

# Introduction

- I'm Becca Price, and I write fairy tales.
- I publish through Amazon.
- I was a technical writer for 30 years.
- I started to write fairy tales when my children were small and I couldn't find many I liked.

# Waldorf Education

- I'll be mentioning Waldorf education periodically for two reasons:
  - My children attended a Waldorf school through 4th grade
  - Waldorf early education stresses fairy tales, particularly in kindergarten and 1st grade
    - Waldorf education has the most resources for information on teaching with fairy tales

# About Waldorf Education

- Started in the early 20th Century by Rudolf Steiner in Germany.
- First Waldorf school opened in 1919.
- Alternative, humanistic approach to teaching
- World-wide movement
- One of the largest independent school movements internationally.

# Once Upon A Time

- Powerful words
- These words signal that a STORY is coming.
  - Silly, serious, or scary.
  - Familiar or new - we know what to expect when we hear those words.
- Signal that the story will have certain features so we know what to expect.

# What is a Fairy Tale?

- Subset of Folk Tales
- Originally referred to as wonder tales.
- Usually brief and simple - no sub plot
- Anything can happen.
- Magic works
- There may be elves, gnomes, fairies, and other magical creatures, but don't have to have fairies in them.

# Fairy Tales v. Fantasy

- Book-length fairy tales written for adults.
- Cinderella is a fairy tale, even in the earliest versions where there is no fairy godmother
- Harry Potter is a fantasy.
- The Wizard of Oz is considered an American fairy tale by scholars in the field (Jack Zipes).

# Fairy Tales v. Fantasy

- Fairy tales are frequently set apart in time
  - “Once upon a time,” and “Once there was and was not” are frequent opening lines for fairy tales.
- Distinguished from a folk tale or a fantasy by the writing tone - have a quality of other-worldliness or slightly more formalized language.
- Take place in an indeterminate location.



# Brief History of Fairy Tales

- Oral v. Literary
  - Early fairy tales were raw, often vulgar or scatological.
  - Tales of “the folk” v. tales of “higher classes” is reflected the heroes and heroines and the ultimate prize.

# Brief History (2)

- Fairy tale motifs can be found in ancient Indian, Chinese, Arabic scripts as well as in Greek and Roman literature.
  - Cinderella is found in its earliest form in ancient Egypt, written down around 1st century BCE, but dates back probably to the 3rd century BCE.
  - Bluebeard and the “animal grooms” stories like Beauty and the Beast have their roots in the Greek story of Psyche and Eros.

# Brief History (3)

- Early literary (14th century CE)
  - Stories of courtly love
  - Canterbury Tales
  - Decameron.

# Brief History (4)

- No distinct genre of fairy tales until the 17th century, when scholars began to collect tales of the folk, first in Italy, but most importantly in France.
  - The term Fairy Tales comes from the French *contes de fees*.
- Later in the 18th century, there was a vogue for telling literary fairy tales in the French salons.

# Brief History (5)

- 19th century - Romantic movement that was counter to the Enlightenment Age of Reason.
  - Rise in interest in national identities after the Napoleonic and Thirty Years War, particularly in Germany, Russia, and Scandinavia, trying to find the “real” essence of the folk of those nations while trying to re-create a cultural identity.
  - The fairy tales of each country reflects the culture of that country

# Brief History (6)

- The Grimms were part of this Romantic movement.
  - They started collecting songs and stories of “the folk” in 1810.
  - They published their first book, which was considered scholarly and not intended for children, in 1812.
  - The last edition, in 1857, tends to be the version most often reprinted.

# Traits of early v. modern fairy tales

- Might makes right v. appropriate kindness pays off
- Through different editions, the Grimm brothers edited the stories
  - Anything that related to sex (pregnancy) was edited out.
  - Increase in violence, particularly as retribution against wrong-doers.

# Tropes: common elements or themes

- Exile / return from exile.
- Quest for magic object or person.
- Mentor or helper
  - An old man, wise woman, or animal, usually in return for some kindness.
- Things come in 3s.
- Good is generally rewarded
- Evil either fails or is punished.



# Tropes (2)

- Underdog must persist and can succeed.
  - Third child, simpleton or “dumbling”
- Fairy tales tend to be optimistic.
  - Teaching tales: earliest form - Red Riding Hood gets eaten and that’s the end of the story.
- Anthropomorphism – animals with human traits – provides a safe way to explore scary things.

# Tropes (3)

- Stories tend to be linear - beginning, middle, end.
- Problem to be solved or a confrontation with evil in every fairy tale
- Tend to be black or white.

# Trickster Stories

- Tailors tend to be trickster figures.
  - The Brave Tailor, The Emperor's New Clothes
- "Jack" stories
  - Jack and the Beanstalk
- All cultures have tricksters
  - Coyote (Native American)
  - Anansi (African)
  - Fox (Japan)

# Why are Fairy Tales Important?

- **If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales.”**
- Albert Einstein

# Are Fairy Tales Too Scary?

- “While children are listening to these often horrifying fairy tales, they will become silent, fascinated, upset, appalled, aghast, and may even cry. But if they feel safe with us while reading the story – and indeed this is essential – the more often they will want to relive the drama.
- In frightening stories, it’s someone else’s drama, which is why frightening stories are so appealing.
- In the end, the child is rescued by a life buoy of happiness when the good live happily ever after and the bad come to a sticky end.

# Are Fairy Tales Too Scary (2)

- Experiencing this heightened level of emotion through literature is seen by squeamish parents and educators as a Bad Thing, but child psychologists disagree.
- The whole point of books is to allow us to experience troubled realities that are different from our own - to feel the appropriate emotions, to empathize, to make judgments, and to have our interests held.
- If we sanitize everything children read, how much more shocking and confusing will the real world be when they finally have to face it?”
- Mem Fox, Reading Magic, pages 141-142

# Are Fairy Tales Too Scary (3)

- You need to consider the time of day the story is told.
  - Some are not good for bedtime stories.
- You also need to consider the developmental age of the child

# Relevance

- “It is the celebration of the miraculous or fabulous transformations in the name of hope that accounts for its major appeal” – Jack Zipes, Why Fairy Tales Stick



# Relevance

- Huge demand these days for children to learn “traditional” school skills like reading and writing during their early childhood years.
- This movement to get a jump on standardized testing is not developmentally appropriate. Everyone in this audience knows this. But parents, and sometimes principals or directors, still come to teachers and ask why the children are “wasting time.”

# Fairy Tales Teach Lessons

- Fairy tales help to teach children an understanding of right and wrong, not through direct teaching, but through implication.
- Fairy tales teach morals and lessons
  - Some may not be lessons we want. In many of the Grimm tales, girls are passive, boys are active.
  - This can be used to teach critical thinking.

# Fairy Tales as Socialization

- Fairy tales are an important mechanism for socializing children.
  - Teach the right way to handle problems, and the consequences.
  - In my stories, the “right way” to handle a situation is rarely through violence. My stories tend to teach communication and compromise over might makes right. (CF Heart of Rock.)

# Fairy Tales Show Kids How to Handle Problems

- “Fairy tales do not tell children the dragons exist. Children already know that dragons exist. Fairy tales tell children the dragons can be killed.” G.K. Chesterton
- Dragons are tamed, reasoned with, have tea with different characters in my fairly tales.
- Dragons don't have to be scary once you get to know them.

# Fairy Tales Build Emotional Resiliency

- Fairy tales show real life issues in a fantastical scenario where most often the hero triumphs.
- Children need to discover in a safe environment that bad things happen to everyone.
- No one in life is immune from challenges—so we need to build capacity in our children.
- Sheltering children may leave them unprepared for real life.

# Fairy Tales Give Us a Common Language

- Cultural Literacy and Canon
- Neil Gaiman writes, *“We encounter fairytales as kids, in retellings or panto. We breathe them. We know how they go.”*

# Fairy Tales Cross Cultural Boundaries

- Many cultures share common fairy tales.
- We read the versions and know we all share something important, the need to make sense of life with story, and the hope for good to triumph over evil.
- They teach children about cultural differences in the world outside their own, gifting them with a curiosity to learn new things and experience new places.

# Fairy Tales Teach Story

- The basics of story-telling, including setting, characters, and plot (rising action, climax, and resolution)
- Difference between fiction and nonfiction.



# Fairy Tales Develop a Child's Imagination

- *“When I examine myself and my methods of thought, I come to the conclusion that the gift of fantasy has meant more to me than any talent for abstract, positive thinking.”* Albert Einstein
- A key factor in their creative thoughts and can define the type of education, career and life they have.

# Fairy Tales Teach Critical Thinking Skills

- Consequences of the characters' decisions and learn that what will happen to them depends on the choices they make.
  - Not all choices are good ones.
- Not all characters can be good role models
- Sheltering doesn't give my kids critical thinking skills. Exposure to difficult concepts and guided conversation does.

# Fairy Tales help children deal with emotions

- Not only do fairy tales prepare our kids for society and making moral decisions, they teach them how to deal with conflict within themselves.
- Can aid children in dealing with anxiety or problems
  - Healing tales
  - My story The Dark was written expressly to help my daughter get over her fear of the dark. It worked--for her and for other children.

# Fairy Tales help with Identity Formation

- Children learn from imitation.
  - Acting out the stories -testing and trying different roles and responsibilities and less about identification. (Maria Tartar, Waldorf education)
- There is a psychological school that says that the earliest story you remember as an adult, and how you remember that story, tells a great deal about who you are as an adult. (Eric Berne, Maria Pincola Estes)

- “She could not be a prince, and she’d never be a princess, and she didn’t want to be a wood cutter, so she’d be a witch and know things.”  
Tiffany Aching, in Terry Pratchett’s Wee Free Men.

- “She could not be a prince, and she’d never be a princess, and she didn’t want to be a wood cutter, so she’d be a witch and know things.”  
Tiffany Aching, in Terry Pratchett’s Wee Free Men.

# Identity Formation (2)

- “When you read a book as a child, it becomes a part of your identity in a way that no other reading can.” Meg Ryan in “You’ve Got Mail”
- “Some books, people, or places hardly matter, others change our lives, and still others plant some idea or sentiment that influence our world forever.”
  - Both quoted in Maria Tartar’s The Enchanted Hunter

# Grade appropriate fairy tales

- The modern world is not the Grimms' 19th century world, so the lessons of those may not be appropriate for modern children.
- If you read a story to a child who is too young for that story, they may take away the wrong message.
  - Girls don't need to learn that all princesses are passive and need to be rescued



# Three Year Olds

- Three year olds in the nursery or mixed-age kindergarten are happy with little nature stories or with simple tales, such as "Sweet Porridge."
- The older threes are often ready to hear the "sequential" tales, such as the "Tale of the Turnip."
- Look for a strong pattern of repetition and order

# Waldorf Recommendations for Three Year Olds

- Sweet Porridge (Grimm, 103\*)
- Goldilocks and the Three Bears (Russian\*)
- Little Louse and Little Flea (Spindrift)
- The Turnip (Russian)
- The Mitten
- Little Madam (Spindrift)
- The Gingerbread Man
- The Johnny Cake (English)
- The Hungry Cat (Norwegian)

# Waldorf Recommendations for Fours and Young Fives

- Stories are more complex - overall mood is cheerful without too much sorrow or struggle.
  - Billy Goats Gruff (Norwegian)
  - Three Little Pigs (English;
  - Wolf and Seven Kids (Grimm, 5)
  - Mashenka and the Bear (Russian, Plays for Puppets)
  - The Shoemaker and The Elves (Grimm, 39)

# Waldorf Recommendations for Five and Six Year Olds

- More challenge and more detail.
- The main character often sets out in the world with a simple task to perform.
- Obstacles are encountered, they do not weigh too heavily on the soul of the individual.
- My book Fairies and Fireflies is aimed at this age group.

# Five and Six Year Old Lists

- Star Money (Grimm, 153)
- Frog Prince (Grimm, 1)
- Mother Holle (Grimm, 24)
- Little Red Cap (Grimm, 26)
- Bremen Town Musicians (Grimm, 27)
- Golden Goose (Grimm, 64)
- Spindle, Shuttle and Needle (Grimm, 186)
- Hut in the Forest (Grimm, 169);
- Queen Bee (Grimm, 62)

# Five and Six Year Old List (2)

- Snow Maiden (Russian, Plays for Puppets)
- The Seven Ravens (Grimm, 25)
- Snow-White and Rose Red (Grimm, 161)
- Little Briar Rose (Grimm, 50)
- Princess in the Flaming Castle (this Newsletter)
- The Donkey (Grimm, 144)
- Rumpelstitskin (Grimm, 55)
- Snow-White and the Seven Dwarves (Grimm, 53)
- Hansel and Gretel (Grimm, 15)

# More Advanced Six Year Olds

- Transition to first grade can be stressful.
  - Associated with losing baby teeth
- Characters have a personal experience of suffering or sorrow.

# Stories for Older Six Year Olds

- Jorinda and Joringel (Grimm, 69)
- Brother and Sister (Grimm, 13)
- Cinderella (Grimm, 21)
- Rapunzel (Grimm, 12)
- My Bridge of Seven Stones fits this group.



# Hans Christian Andersen

- Be careful with these.
  - Many are very morbid.
  - He tends to put his characters through harrowing events.
  - Heroes or heroines often die in the end, frequently with no purpose - The Little Mermaid

# Compare and Contrast

- The Ugly Duckling
  - Has to change self to fit in with others (growth into swan)
- The Littlest Firefly
  - Stays who he is, finds group (tribe) that fits him best.

# Teaching Fairy Tales

- Telling v. reading
  - Encouraged in Waldorf schools
  - Mem Fox also recommends to encourage children to imagine rather than depending on pictures.
    - Children raised on television or picture books will often have a hard time with this.

# Teaching Fairy Tales

- Create Sacred Space
  - Special time, place
- Make a ritual out of when telling the story begins.
  - Sound a chime, sing a simple song
  - This time is different from everyday time.

# Teaching the Concept of Story

- Beginning Middle, End
  - Use Unifix cubes (Goldilocks)
  - Use charts, drawings, felt boards
- Work on recall. What is the first thing you remember? What happens next?
- Don't tell children "meaning" of story – let each child decide for themselves what the story means to them.

# Conclusion

- “We learn from the characters in stories, even as adults. They help us because we connect to our own lives, dreams, anxieties, and make us consider what we would do in their shoes. Fairy tales help children learn how to navigate life. “(Bruno Bettelheim. *Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales.*)

# Conclusion (2)

- Fairy tales stretch the imagination & encourage creativity in all ages.
  - Foster a sense of wonder and a sense of optimism that difficulties can be overcome.
  - Childhood is a time of transitions and fairy tales provide a road map for navigating those transitions.
  - The weak become strong & the powerless gain power through cleverness rather than feats of arms.

# Conclusion (3)

- One of the best reasons to foster a love of fairy tales in children is so the stories become a gateway to a love of stories in general.
  - Andrew Lang’s colorful fairy books can lead to the Narnia books and onward to Lord of the Rings.
- Stories can be appreciated because they’re fun.
- Mysteries & Romance are optimistic in their outlook. Justice prevails, even through non-typical ways. Happily ever after endings happen.