Over the wall…

Alan Maley is off with the fairies.

Fairy stories have been around since humans started living in groups. They are so ancient that no one can trace their origins, and they permeate every language and culture on earth. The most well-known collections of such stories include *The Arabian Nights*, *Grimms' Tales* and the Kalila and Dimna version of *The Tales of Bidpai*. And there are wonderful country-specific collections, such as A K Ramanujan's Indian stories and the Italian folktales collected by Italo Calvino. The way near-identical stories crop up across widely-separated countries and cultures seems to indicate a universal origin, as documented in the fascinating *World Tales* by Idries Shah. There is obviously something compelling about fairy stories which gives them an enduring appeal even in our contemporary world of fast food, fast information, fast travel and celebrity sensationalism.

The fairy story as a genre has been having a field day recently. So here I will be reviewing some of the more interesting books published in the past few years.

Grimm Tales for Young and Old

Philip Pullman's new collection of re-told stories from Grimm starts with a clear and useful characterisation of the essential elements of fairy stories. Fairy stories are lean and hungry: everything is reduced to essentials. In fairy stories, the teller is anonymous. The action takes place long ago and far away, but neither time nor place is specified. They deploy a cast of stock characters – a woodcutter, a king, a wicked stepmother – and these are not named, except by a common first name such as Jack or Hans. They are like two-dimensional cut-out figures in a shadow-puppet play. Some characters are good, others evil; some are weak and some strong; some clever and some stupid; and that's that. No subtlety or reflection is involved. The plots are arbitrary and devoid of logic: things happen, sometimes extremely violent things, but we are not told why, they just happen. And they happen fast – the story cuts immediately to the action and one thing follows another without a pause. There is rarely any imagery or description – the focus is all on the action. What is more, they are not texts in the literary sense, even if they have been written down. Stories evolved as oral performance, not as deliberate and permanent written text: *'The fairy tale is in a perpetual state of becoming and alteration.'* They are outlines which the storyteller expands on: *'Like jazz, storytelling is an art of performance.'* Pullman's stance towards the Grimm stories he re-tells here was to *'produce a version that was as clear as water'*. He *'didn't want to put them in modern settings, or produce personal interpretations or compose poetic variations on the original'*. By and large, that is just what he has done – offering us unadorned yet crystal-clear re-tellings of 53 of Grimm's stories, ranging from the very well-known, such as *Hansel and Gretel*, to much less familiar stories, such as *Jorinda and Joringel*. It is an impressive achievement.

Once Upon a Time

This book, by Marina Warner, is subtitled *A Short History of Fairy Tale*. In fact, it is much more than a simple history: it is a wide-ranging and scholarly account of virtually all aspects of fairy stories. She reminds us of the constantly shifting, evolving nature of fairy tales: *'Fairyland undergoes constant re-stocking and re-invention'*, especially since the explosion of interest in them in the 19th century. She describes a world where

animals can speak, time and space shrink and expand, objects acquire magical properties, things morph into other things, and where words have power in the form of curses and spells. There is a chapter detailing the re-discovery of fairy tales from Perrault in France, through Basile in Italy to the Grimm brothers in Germany, including discussion of competing explanations for the universality of storylines across cultures. Is it because they are archetypes, or because of widespread contact across space and time? She also reflects on the two-way traffic between written and spoken forms.

One feature of the stories is that they reflect the arduous quality of life in earlier centuries: hunger, sickness, infanticide, incest, the fate of younger brothers, backbreaking toil, despotism and extreme crimes. Stories are a way of dealing with such adversity: *'The stories face up to the inadmissible facts of reality and promise deliverance.'*

Warner shows how such stories only became aimed at children in the 19th century, leading to the lavishly illustrated books which are now so familiar. There is mention of artists fascinated by the fairy

tale, including David Hockney's haunting *Six Fairy Tales*, which she claims are *'the way fairy tales should be: like splinters from the spindle, they can enter you and remain for a hundred years of dreams'*.

There is a chapter on stories and psychoanalysis, with discussion of Bettelheim, Jung and Freud: *'fairytale narratives are dream-like; they're disjointed, brilliantly coloured, they overlook rational cause and effect, they stage outlandish scenes of sex and violence, and they make abrupt transitions without rhyme or reason. They also contain significant repetitions and recurrent symbols.'* Warner also documents the feminist backlash against the stereotypical female characters, and re-selections and re-writings of stories with a different twist, with Angela Carter to the fore.

An interesting chapter documents the way stories can be interpreted simultaneously as sophisticated and naïve accounts, and how writers such as Kafka and Rushdie have appropriated aspects of the fairy tale into their own narratives. Finally, Warner examines the legacy of fairy tales to opera, ballet, theatre and film. She points out that *'so much is being done for us by animators and film-makers, there is no room for personal imaginings'*, and one can only regret the cute, saccharine Disneyfication of many film versions.

Gossip from the Forest

In her fascinating book *Gossip from the Forest*, Sara Maitland argues that our fairy stories are inextricably entwined with the forests which once covered large tracts of Europe. And perhaps, in some way, the dark side of our psyche corresponds with the dark places deep in the forest where unspeakable deeds can be done.

The book is elegantly structured: Maitland visits twelve areas of ancient woodland in the British Isles, one for each month of the year, beginning in March in Airyolland Wood in Galloway and coming full-circle to Knockman Wood back in Galloway in February. Each of her accounts is threaded with reflections and stories about the links between forests and stories, as well as offering some beautifully lyrical descriptions of the woods themselves and their unique character and histories. But the truly original aspect of her book is that each chapter is followed by the re-telling of a traditional fairy story. Sometimes the re-tellings are strikingly different from the traditional versions, as when Rumpelstiltskin is portrayed as a kind character, a victim not a monster, or Rapunzel as a greedy, venial girl and the witch as her kind surrogate mother. Sometimes the re-tellings shift the time zone, as in *Hansel and Gretel*, where the twins look back on their experiences from the vantage point of middle age. Or even more radically, when the hunter and the wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood* turn out to be one and the same. What all these re-told stories have in common, however, is their literary quality. Maitland writes beautifully, with striking images and turns of phrase. The plots are elaborate, there is more exploration of motives and the characters are more fully fleshed out than in a traditional fairy story. This will not please the purists, who tend to prefer the unvarnished versions, but they are a fine addition to the repertoire and they reward careful reading with great enjoyment.

★ ★ ★

For teaching, fairy stories are a godsend! Because they are universal, everyone can relate to them. Because in their traditional form they are stripped down to bare essentials, they are easy to understand. Yet they touch a common core of human emotion and experience. The illustrations alone can be a rich source of imaginative work, too: try using the Hockney etchings, for example. And because they exist in so many versions, they offer abundant opportunities for comparison and contrast. Long live the fairy story, in all its bountiful variety! ETp

Maitland, S *Gossip from the Forest* Granta 2012

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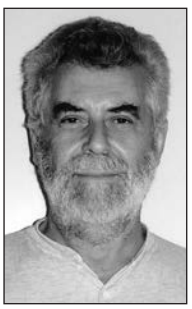

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