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# BOOKS

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## ESSAY

# Happily Ever After

The folk tales gathered by the Brothers Grimm not only enchant us; they record the hardships European families endured for centuries

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THE FIRST VOLUME OF Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's *Children's and Household Tales* was published 200 years ago, but the stories gathered there come from much older oral and written sources. Wilhelm Grimm's preface asserted that some of the tales were already 300 years old then, and today's folklorists consider "Little Red Riding Hood," which emerged at the end of the Middle Ages, a late addition.

"Historians tell us that fairy tales originated in an age marked by wars, plague, and famine," Maria Tatar writes in *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*, a 200th-anniversary reprint (W. W. Norton, 552 pp., \$35) of her 2004 English-language edition. But that could be said about any age in human history, as Tatar knows. The Grimms' tales take place in a European landscape of villages and castles surrounded by forests, and they feature recognizable preindustrial types: long-suffering peasants, quick-witted artisans, privileged yet insecure royalty. (Even the witches and talking animals wouldn't have been startling at a time when many people still believed in magic.) But those particulars accumulated over centuries

in myriad retellings of stories, their basic elements—journeys taken, dangers surmounted, trials endured, rewards gained—involving the eternal processes of growing up, acquiring knowledge, and claiming a place in the world.

Not that anyone was particularly concerned with plumbing the depths of Rapunzel or Hansel and Gretel, among the few protagonists with names that aren't merely descriptive. It's all about the story, writes Philip Pullman, who pays homage to the oral tradition with his lively renditions in *Fairy Tales from the Brothers Grimm*, another bicentennial volume (Penguin, 400 pp., \$27.95). "There is no psychology in a fairy tale," Pullman writes. "The characters have little interior life; their motives are clear and obvious. ... The tale is far more interested in what happens to them, or in what they make happen, than in their individuality."

In his commentaries for the stories, Pullman is genially contemptuous of "Jungian twaddle" and other efforts to recast folk tales as dramas of identity integration or Oedipal conflict resolution. He rolls his eyes when considering analyses such as Robert Bly's interpretation of "Iron Hans" as a saga of "initiation into true manhood." These tales are too rich and mysterious to confine in any

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theoretical straitjacket, but Pullman's verdict on "Iron Hans"—"It's a very good story, whatever it means"—is hardly better. Storytelling matters, but there is more to the enduring appeal of folk tales.

Since *fairy tale* has such widespread and longstanding circulation in Anglo-Saxon countries, English-speaking folklorists such as Tatar (professor of Germanic languages and literatures at Harvard) use the term interchangeably with *folk tale*. What they're talking about in either case is what the Grimms defined as "folk poetry": stories told by ordinary men and women that have been passed down orally through the generations.

FOLK TALES ARE ROOTED in the most universal and fundamental human emotions: love, hate, jealousy, envy, greed, fear, ambition. Pride is a mortal sin, kindness the cardinal virtue; these are the values of people who see the world as a dangerous place, where a helping hand may be required to snatch you from the clutches of capricious fate. The ubiquity of magical creatures and events hints at an underlying understanding that in reality happy endings are hard to come by—that without supernatural assistance, Cinderella would still be sleeping in the ashes after a hard day's work and the miller's daughter in "Rumpelstiltskin" would have been put to death for failing to spin straw into gold.

Courage and resourcefulness matter in folk tales, but luck matters more. Although Wilhelm Grimm added some pious exhortations, particularly in later editions aimed at children, folk tales inhabit and illuminate a morally ambiguous universe. Pure, virtuous girls who suffer in silence are rewarded ("The Goose Girl"), but so are stupid youngest sons who ignore wise advice ("The Golden Bird"). Wicked wives who try to

kill their stepchildren are punished with horrible deaths, but weak fathers who let it hap-

pen disappear from the narrative without comment ("Snow White") or are joyfully reunited with their offspring ("The Juniper Tree").

It's now well known, as Pullman and Tatar both mention, that the Grimms were so disturbed by the abundance of murderous mothers in folk tales that they recast some as stepmothers. Psychologist Bruno Bettelheim argues in his famous defense of fairy tales, *The Uses of Enchantment*, that this split between the good, conveniently dead mother and the bad stepmother allows children safely to vent their hostility toward the most overwhelming presence in their young lives and helps them negotiate the path to adult independence. You



Kenneth Whitley's 1930s silk-screen poster depicting Red Riding Hood was a project of the WPA.



needn't buy the specifics of Bettelheim's ultra-Freudian interpretation—he also argues that folk tales disguise threatening fathers as dragons or other monsters so that they can be killed by their sons without guilt—to recognize that these tales grapple with the basic truth that family life is riddled with conflict. Children resent their parents' authority and compete for their affection. Parents are infuriated by ungrateful and rebellious children who don't appreciate how difficult it is to care for them. In a folk tale, the scorned youngest son can prove himself smarter and worthier of an inheritance than his nasty brothers ("The Three Feathers"), and the father whose hasty wish turns his disobedient sons into birds can be redeemed by the daughter who breaks the spell and brings her brothers home ("The Seven Ravens").

Yet to see folk tales only as variants on family psychodrama is to miss their grit rooted in historical circumstance. The Grimms may have added a few stepmothers to lift the moral burden from Mom, but second wives were quite common long before divorce was; women frequently died in childbirth, and men frequently remarried. Folk tales voice the tensions in these families, as well as the stark choices facing families with limited resources. Famines occurred regularly in Europe well into the 18th century. Whether it's their mother who persuades her husband that the only way to avoid starvation is to leave Hansel and Gretel in the woods (1812 edition) or it's their stepmother (1840 on), the woman is confronting the man with the grim knowledge that the two of them can feed themselves or feed the children, but not both.

Folk tales take place in a harsh universe. Innocent children are killed, chopped up, and eaten. Wrongdoers suffer gruesome public deaths, readily described by storytellers familiar with frequent brutal public executions. An undercurrent of class-consciousness lurks, as in "Godfather Death," where a man rejects the Almighty's offer to be godfather to his 13th child because "you give to the rich and let the poor go hungry." The feisty animals in "The Bremen Town Musicians," running away from masters who plan to kill them

because they're too old to work, surely struck a chord with many a cast-off servant—or workers of any sort, for that matter. But the preferred resolution to life's injustice is marrying the prince or princess, not storming the palace. Individual advancement is the best you can hope for in Grimms' tales, which display an age-old peasant fatalism about the unchanging social and natural order.

But the brothers' sources were not necessarily the simple *Volk* enshrined in Wilhelm's prefaces. Many were middle-class raconteurs, and some of the most famous stories, including "The Juniper Tree" and "The Fisherman and His Wife," were based on written literature. In her informative discussion on the origins of the Grimms' collection, Tatar reminds us that even before they began to be fixed in print (as early as the 16th century in Italy), folk stories passed on from mouth to mouth were a stew: accounts of exotic lands from returning sailors, tales related by women to pass the time over their spinning and sewing, nostalgic invocations of a bygone golden age—and, after Charles Perrault sparked a craze for fairy tales at the court of Louis XIV, polished narratives crafted by aristocrats and artists far removed from the peasants they romanticized.

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PULLMAN JOINS this polyphonic melee with gusto. His retellings incorporate foreign variations when he thinks they improve the German versions, and he cheerfully adds anachronistic details. The stepmother in "The Three Little Men in the Woods" finds out that the girl she sent to drown is now a queen because "it was reported in all the newspapers." (Tatar's more orthodox translation merely states that "the stepmother learned of her great happiness.") His commentaries aren't merely blunt, they're often quite funny: he characterizes "the tone of never-shaken piety" in "The Girl with No Hands" as "nauseating," and he finds "The Goose Girl" tiresome because "it's hard for a storyteller to make an attractive character out of a meek and docile victim."



Pullman, author of the provocative and popular fantasy trilogy for young adults *His Dark Materials*, is very conscious of his storytelling predecessors; each commentary lists the Grimms' source and evaluates its stylistic effect on the tale. He's particularly fond of the "swiftness and economy of movement" typical of stories collected from Dorothea Viehmann, a tailor's wife passed off as "a peasant woman" in Wilhelm Grimm's preface to Volume II. Even in 1815, intellectuals were obsessed with authenticity, but Pullman cares little about that. His goal was simply to find the best stories, and to clear "out of the way anything that would prevent them from running freely."

He succeeded. *Fairy Tales from the Brothers Grimm* has a brisk pace and engagingly conversational tone. Pullman hasn't modernized the stories, but you hear a distinctly contemporary voice in the rhythms of his sentences and the English words he chooses. He makes no apologies for this. "The fairy tale is in a perpetual state of becoming and alteration," he writes. "If you, the reader, want to tell any of the tales in this book, I hope you will feel free to be no more faithful than you want to be."

Tatar chose to be faithful to the cadences of the Grimms' 19th-century German texts in her translations. Her collection and Pullman's overlap in the 24 best-known stories (both contain about two dozen additional selections from the Grimms' roughly 200 originals), and their individual versions reflect their different approaches. Compare Tatar's version of the bird's warning in "The Robber Bridegroom":

*Turn back, turn back, my pretty young bride,  
In a house of murderers you've arrived.*

with Pullman's:

*Turn back! Get out! Go home! Take care!  
This is a murderer's house! Beware!*

There's a whiff of the unearthly, a strangeness in Tatar's translations that is an essential part of the tales' allure for modern readers—and in this context, *modern* means anyone from the Grimms' contemporaries, idealizing the agrarian past in a rap-

idly industrializing society, to a 21st-century child who has never seen a forest yet still feels the primal pull of the dark woods where anything can happen.

"I traveled to mysterious places to meet ancient beauties or terrible monsters," writes Cultural Revolution survivor Ji-li Jiang of her earliest encounters with fairy tales. On hearing "Bluebeard" for the first time, the novelist Richard Wright recalls, "Reality changed, the look of things altered, and the world became peopled with magical presences. My sense of life deepened and the feel of things was different, somehow."

You can't really imagine Pullman expressing sentiments like these, which appear in a final section of *The Annotated Brothers Grimm* containing quotations from several dozen 19th- and 20th-century authors. The sense of wonder that simmers beneath the surface of Tatar's text, reinforced by the beautiful illustrations (his book has none), is slightly scanted in *Fairy Tales from the Brothers Grimm*. Pullman's nonsense approach to the tales may well be closer in attitude to that of the people who entertained their listeners around a medieval hearth or over their labor in the fields. They weren't crafting literature or folk poetry; they were telling stories. Still, an awful lot of those stories begin, "Once upon a time," beckoning us into another world, where the moon and stars give counsel and talking animals guide us on our way.

Folk tales are familiar *and* strange. Pullman's versions better capture their earthy directness; Tatar's volume emphasizes their mystery and magic, not just in the more stately English of her translations, but in the extensive supporting material investigating the tales' ancient lineage and powerful hold on our collective imagination. Neither is definitive, nor should it be. The Brothers Grimm themselves felt free to smooth their sources' spoken words into more readable form, relegating variants to an appendix; they saw value in "numerous approaches [to] an inexhaustibly rich ideal type." Or, as Pullman puts it, "To keep to one version or translation alone is to put a robin redbreast in a cage." ●