

The Importance of Fairy Tales

By Meg Moseley

Some people believe fiction is frivolous, but I'm not one of them. As a matter of fact, my debut novel, *When Sparrows Fall*, includes a plot thread about the importance of children's literature.

One of my earliest and best memories is of going to bed, supposedly, but then sneaking a flashlight from under the bed and a book from the shelves above my bed. My dad built the shelves in the form of cubbyholes of various sizes, my mom painted the cubbyholes in different pastel colors, and my sister and I organized our books in them. Horse stories in the lavender cubbyhole, poetry in the yellow, fairy tales in the blue.... I went through a horse phase and a fairy tale phase, but the fairy tales are the ones that stuck with me.

One of my favorite books was the "Folk and Fairy Tales" volume of the old Bookshelf for Boys and Girls series. Many a night, my bedtime reading included beautiful princesses, noble princes and kind fairy godmothers. Oh, and it included dragons, ogres, witches, evil spells, wicked stepmothers, magic, and murder. None of it gave me nightmares. I was safe in bed, knowing the stories were fantasy.

You want to know what gave me nightmares? Bugs Bunny cartoons. My mom couldn't take me to the theater when cartoons were shown before the main features, because Bugs Bunny always made me cry. But fairy tales? No problem whatsoever. Fairy tales were sheer fun.

One of the joys of fairy tales is their diversity. Some are more action-oriented, others are slow-paced and thoughtful and may include a romantic angle. Every culture has its own flavor too, so reading fairy tales from around the world can be an education in our differences and similarities as human beings.

There are many different kinds of folk and fairy tales, myths, and fantasies, and sometimes the lines blur between them. Except for the "authored" fairy tales like those by Hans Christian Andersen and Oscar Wilde, most of them have been handed down from one generation to the next, and they've changed over the years. For instance, in an older version of Cinderella, her slipper wasn't made of glass but of squirrel fur. There's some controversy about whether that change was a deliberate reinvention or an error in translation, but does it matter? I don't think so.

Personally, I prefer the classics to the Disney versions, but that may be partially because I almost always prefer books to movies. With a book, I can form my own mental images of the characters—unless I'm too influenced by illustrations—but with a movie, Hollywood plugs a cartoon version of a character into my brain, where it will stay forever. I don't like that. I already "know" what the old-time Beauty and the Beast look like, thank you very much, and they are far more beautiful and more brutal—and more lovable—than their

Hollywood counterparts version. But that's just a matter of personal taste, as all of this is. Fairy tales are entertainment.

Like other good fiction, though, a good fairy tale can provide a moral compass. Fantasy can be a very efficient vehicle for truth. While fairy tales entertain us, they also teach us about love, honor, sacrifice, hope, courage, hard work, justice. Sometimes, being detached from our everyday world, they free our minds to see intangibles with special clarity.

Fairy tales also contribute to our cultural literacy. A child who has never heard the stories of Rapunzel's hair or Achilles' heel is culturally illiterate. Fairy tales will also expand a child's vocabulary, develop his ear for rhythm, and prepare him to enjoy richer, deeper words and stories.

I believe fairy tales will help a child develop a vivid imagination, too, and a sense of wonder and strong curiosity about the world. A child who's capable of imagining fairy wings and magic bean stalks is also capable of imagining other wonders. Imagine a grown man, a surgeon, who was raised on fairy tales. He envisions an entirely new medical procedure and he's told that it's impossible. But his heart, if not his mind, remembers that the impossible is possible, so he tries it...and it works.

There are even deeper values to fairy tales. Because they don't have to follow the conventions of the real world, they are wonderful vehicles for conveying deep truths. Wherever God walks and talks, it's holy ground.

C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and George McDonald all discovered holy ground in fairy tales and myths. Lewis was especially taken with "Baldr the Beautiful" of Norse mythology, and I can see why. It's like a near-miss version of Jesus. So near and yet so far. Baldr couldn't be Jesus, yet if you look closely, you'll see glimmers of the Gospel in the story. I think that's true of many, many fairy tales.

Those are some of the benefits of fairy tales and myths. Now, a few warnings.

Fairy tales are seldom politically correct. If you think a damsel in distress should solve her own problems instead of relying on a handsome prince to bail her out, you might have a problem with traditional fairy tales. Also, depending on their era and their country of origin, they may be racist, sexist, and inconsiderate of various minorities like step-mothers and dwarves.

Not all fairy tales are appropriate for all ages. You know your own children. Pay attention to their signals. Use discernment and common sense. In general, though, most fairy tales don't contain graphic violence. It's clearly fantasy, distanced from the real world, and that's why I, as a little kid, could happily read about murder and mayhem and evil ogres, then turn out the light and sleep without nightmares. At the same time, though, I was learning, through fantasy, about the very real existence of evil in the world.

I think it's healthy for a child to visit a story-world that includes good and evil, heroes and villains, happy endings and sad endings. We can't raise our children in a world that's scrubbed clean of all evil. We must acknowledge that evil exists before we can acknowledge the need for redemption. Fairy tales, although they're fantasies, can help parents introduce children to realities about the world.

We still haven't talked about one sticky subject. Magic. I don't want to mess with the occult. On the other hand, if we're afraid of a story that includes magic, like Cinderella or Beauty and the Beast, what's to keep us from being afraid of a story that includes talking animals or a singing teapot? Or Balaam's talking donkey, for that matter?

There's a slippery slope on either side. I don't want to slide into dark stories of the occult, but I don't want to slide into a bland, unimaginative world, either. A world without wonder, a world without fairies, is sorely lacking in joy. As J.R.R. Tolkien said:

The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous "turn" (for there is no true end to any fairy-tale): this joy, which is one of the things which fairy-stories can produce supremely well, is not essentially escapist, nor "fugitive." In its fairy-tale – or otherworld – setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.

Joy beyond the walls of the world a very good reason to read fairy tales.