Hope Dunlap, frontispiece from *Fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm*, (New York, 1913).

My Favourite Story When I Was Young, or: The Boy Who Went Forth to Unlearn What Fear Was

Donald Haase

I'm afraid that this account of my favourite story from childhood will disappoint – if not you personally, dear reader, then at least your expert expectations of this autobiographical genre. The truth is, I do not remember reading or being told fairy tales as a child. For someone who has spent over thirty years arguing that storytelling and the fairy tales of childhood profoundly influence the way we construct our identities and worldview, this is an awkward admission.

I don't mean to suggest that I have complete amnesia (or that I am in denial) about my youthful experience of fairy tales and fantasy. As I looked back on my childhood while preparing to write this piece, I suddenly recalled, for the first time in many decades, a book of Grimms' fairy tales that had sat on my family's modest bookshelf in the den of our suburban Cincinnati home. My memory of the book's front-cover pastedown leads me to believe it was *Fairy Tales by the Brothers Grimm*, illustrated by Hope Dunlap and published in the Windermere Series by Rand, McNally and Company in 1913 or 1928. However, my sole, unemotional memory of that book is entirely visual, limited to the colourful illustrations and not the stories themselves.

Although I lack any memory of cozy storytelling scenes and cannot recall actually reading fairy tales as a child, I do remember *watching* them. That is not surprising for a Baby Boomer who grew up nurtured and acculturated by television. I remember vividly – at least as vividly as I can after sixty years – watching *Peter Pan* on TV in the famous adaptation starring Mary Martin, which first aired live in 1955, just days before my fifth birthday, and again in 1956. Watching the classic film version of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), which also appeared on television in 1956, became an annual family ritual after it was rebroadcast in 1959 and repeatedly in the years following. And, of course, there was no escaping Disney. I remember seeing *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* with my mother in a downtown Cincinnati movie theatre, probably on its re-release in 1958, when I was eight years old.

I can't say what lasting impact these postwar American cultural rituals might have had on me, but I can say that I don't look back on any of these stories as a favourite. If experiencing these films was supposed to engage me in a rite of passage, that was lost on

me. Still, they stand out in my memory. What I recall most clearly were the terrifying moments. Terror that produced no pleasure. Fear that was evoked but not cast out. The ticking crocodile stalking Captain Hook, the Wicked Witch's flying monkeys pursuing Dorothy and her friends, and the evil Queen's homicidal plots against Snow White – none of this endeared these stories to me, happy endings notwithstanding. Sorry, Dr Bettelheim.

I derived much more pleasure from the 'Fractured Fairy Tales' televised as part of the *Rocky and Bullwinkle Show* from 1959 to 1964, the years during which I was transformed from a nine-year-old child into a fourteen-year-old adolescent. While I can't claim any of the individual episodes as my favorite childhood fairy tale, I relished the series as a whole. The appeal, as I can now articulate it, lay in the show's satirical bent, its clever dialogue and narration, and its irreverent play with generic conventions and classical tales (which, to appreciate, I clearly must have encountered in forgotten moments of hearing and reading). In retrospect, I believe that I responded to the subversive qualities of these fractured fairy tales, which not only reflected my passage into the rebellion of adolescence but also offered empowerment, a way of disarming and taking control of a genre that had so far – at least as I recall – induced primarily anxiety.

It was 1966, in the wake of 'Fractured Fairy Tales', roughly a week before my sixteenth birthday, when I experienced a telling transformation in my relationship to the fairy tale. In my tenth-grade English class, our teacher assigned a fairy-tale reading that consisted not of a fairy tale per se but of a parody analysis of 'Little Red Riding Hood'. I do not remember the source of the reading or the details of the humorous interpretation, which mocked both the tale and literary analysis. But I do remember the inspiration it evoked. When our teacher gave us a writing assignment in which we were to use the words from our most recent vocabulary list, I took the opportunity to write a fairy-tale interpretation in the style of the spoof we had just read. Little did I know that my tenth-grade, tongue-in-cheek 'Analysis of Goldilocks and the Three Bears' would foreshadow thirty years of serious research and writing as a fairy-tale scholar. I like to think that 'Fractured Fairy Tales' and the scholarly spoof we had read empowered me to look behind the green curtain and come to grips with a genre that, for whatever reasons, had given me no memorable unadulterated pleasure.

In the end, fairy-tale criticism and not the fairy tale itself was my rite of passage. So, if I have my own story right, my most memorable and meaningful youthful experience of fairy tales occurred when I was able to make them mine through self-conscious critical engagement. In that way did the fairy tale play a crucial role in my finding the way beyond childhood and adolescence, constructing my identity, and giving me a meaningful vocation and purpose. At least that's the way I'll now remember it.

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