

The Rose Fairies



Olivia
McCabe

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The Rose Fairies (1911).

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My Favourite Fairyland Fiction

Ruth B. Bottigheimer

The summer I was seven, Great-Aunt Violet invited me to visit. There wasn't a proper guest room in her house, but there was an intriguing tower on the third floor that opened up the otherwise windowless attic. With bare rafters and floor, it smelled like old wood on hot summer days. A ceiling bulb cast yellowish light at night. There I curled up on my cot and read as long as I wanted to.

Great-Aunt Violet, married to Great-Uncle Ed, an accountant, had no children and little experience with seven-year-old girls. Every afternoon she did what she was used to doing: paying calls on friends. This summer she had me in tow, and as a result, I met a great many matrons ten times my age. Each visit began with polite interrogation: "Are you having a good time here in Lansdale?" "Do you miss your Mommy?" Then the hostess would thrust a book into my hands and send me off to occupy myself at a distance from the ladies.

One of these books was a large green cloth-bound book with *The Rose Fairies* stamped in gold across the top. Glued beneath the title was a delicately coloured illustration, in which a princess stood among pink rose bushes, tall trees in the distance, a tiny filmy-winged fairy perched on her outstretched hand, the two of them gazing into each other's eyes. The princess's Renaissance cap, ruff, and billowing gown made clear that this was a long-ago encounter.

The Rose Fairies was nothing like my usual reading. My first book, also covered in green baize and even larger in my memory, had English folktales with simple but jolly primary-colour illustrations, things like a fussing hen (warning that the sky was going to fall down), a clever pig (who arose earlier each day than he'd told the wolf), and a porridge-eating Goldilocks. Between other covers it was Nan and Bert solving minor mysteries in *The Bobbsey Twins* or Dr Doolittle's whimsical adventures.

What set *The Rose Fairies* apart were its illustrations. The princess's grace and her rapt engagement with the fairy on her hand reappeared as the book's frontispiece, which was also the opening illustration for the first story, 'The Rose Fairies'. It and the story's second illustration combined gentle colours, fluid lines, clearly delineated situations, and a graceful heroine outdoors in fairy company – a cultivated garden in one and a forest clearing in the other.

The story that these illustrations adorned was – and still is – delightful. A beautiful princess rules her country wisely and justly, occasionally taking refuge from the cares of state with her childhood friend, a sympathetic and pretty shepherdess. Worryingly, her counsellors, who wish her to marry for reasons of state, betroth her to a neighbouring prince she has never met. Both prince and princess, dutifully, although reluctantly, accept their fate. Each disguised as a commoner when they accidentally meet in the countryside, they fall instantly in love, ignorant of their true identities. In turmoil, the princess wishes for a year’s delay, and passes the time in fairyland. The prince has in the meantime learned that the girl he loves is the princess to whom he’s betrothed, and goes in search of her. Complications follow, of course, but when the year is up, she and the prince marry in a double wedding that also unites the shepherdess with her beloved.

Nothing impeded this little reader’s total identification with the heroine. The princess, unnamed in the story, could easily be the reader herself. When Great-Aunt Violet and I left her friend’s house that afternoon, *The Rose Fairies* had been given to me and I held it tightly in my hands.

Today as I re-read this story, I am surprised that the book as an object is smaller than I remember. Yet I marvel at its intangible continuities. The garden (like my own today), the door in the stone wall (so like the one to which I once had a large iron key at an ancient English college), the parallel fairyland world, where time passes with deceptive speed (so like every situation that totally absorbs our adult attention). A childhood moment magically gave rise to a lifetime of reading, writing, and thinking about fairy magic, fairy tales, fairy stories, and the spells they can cast.



Ruth B. Bottigheimer

Notes

My copy of *The Rose Fairies*, written by Olivia McCabe, was published by Rand McNally in Chicago and New York in 1911 and appears to have been her only publication. If she wrote any other books, they must have appeared anonymously, since WorldCat’s listing under her name brings up only *The Rose Fairies*. The *Iowa Library Quarterly* notes that she was a member of the class of 1910, presumably at the University of Iowa Library School (1911, vol. 6:11, page 171); many magazines aimed at school, home, and family praised *The Rose Fairies* after its publication, but with no biographical information about its author.

In contrast, *The Rose Fairies’* illustrator Hope Dunlap produced a large body of illustrations, with painterly images in *The Muffin Shop* (1908, 1910, 1927), *The Little Lame Prince and His Traveling Cloak* (1909), *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* (1910, 1927), *Rowena’s Happy Summer* (1912), and *Fairy Tales by the Brothers Grimm* (1913, 1928). By 1914, Hope Dunlap’s illustrations were well known enough to be placed in the title of an English edition of the Grimms’ tales published by Duckworth. Dunlap also illustrated many of ‘Laura Lee Hope’s’ (that is by authors of the Stratemeyer Syndicate) *Bobbsey Twins* series. As little seems to be known of her biography as of Olivia McCabe’s, although it is tantalising to imagine that she might be the ‘Dunlap’ of Grosset & Dunlap, which eventually took on *The Bobbsey Twins* series.