



# My Favourite Stories

## When I Was Young

Cristina Bacchilega

**M**y title is a variation on the formula we've grown accustomed to in *Gramarye*: though I can easily adjust to British English spelling, I found I simply could not write about my childhood favourites in the singular. Bear with me!

The Preface to my *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*<sup>1</sup> suggests that very early on in life I was attached to one tale only. I wrote:

When I was very young, four or five, my favorite story was 'Little Red Riding Hood': I would ask for it over and over again; protest when my mother would skip a detail in her retelling or change a word; and wear my bright red coat and hat with an air of self-possession. . . . I do not recall the ending of this fairy tale as told to me then, but the image of the girl has stayed with me and has taken different forms. I wish to thank my mother, Shanta, who cultivated a passion for words and stories in me as well as the confidence that transforms life's points of arrival into adventurous departures.

Assuming that what my parents told me was true, I did have quite an attachment to 'Little Red Riding Hood', and I do remember my red coat and hat—but the exclusivity of this relationship was a short-lived experience for me. It strikes me now that in addition to not knowing the outcome of the girl-wolf encounter, I don't know for sure the language in which the tale was told to me. My Anglo-Indian mother would have probably told it to me in English, but could she have also been reading it to me from an Italian-language book? I grew up with multiple languages in Italy: my mother's British-accented English, my father's and grandmother's northern-accented Italian, my kindergarten's American English, and once I was in elementary school the television's standard Italian. My intimacy with multiple languages as a young child is relevant in many ways. Not least, once in third grade I attended Italian school but also read a lot in English. One of my favourites was a richly illustrated collection of fairy tales that I continued to remember fondly over the years but would not

identify and be reunited with until much later in life, way after my daughter could have enjoyed it while growing up in Hawai'i.

I read *The Fairy Tale Book* over and over again because I loved it but also because it was one of the few children's books we had that did not come from the library to be with me temporarily. I was eight years old, and this book felt large and precious to me. It included what I would now call simplified translations and adaptations of fairy tales: Charles Perrault's 'Sleeping Beauty', the Grimms' 'Little Red Riding Hood', and Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Tinder Box', but also 'Queen Cat' and 'Bluecrest' by Madame d'Aulnoy, 'Urashima and the Turtle' and 'Kuzma and the Fox' from the Japanese tradition, and 'The Frog Princess' and 'Silvershod' from the Russian. I am writing this information down from the table of contents in the book's recent edition. I'm not sure what happened to my old volume, probably a 1958 edition,<sup>2</sup> after I moved away from my parents' home, but in 2005 thanks to my friend Sara Collins, who is part of an online community of children's literature fans, I recognised my book of fairy tales to be the *Golden Book of Fairy Tales*,<sup>3</sup> the 1999 reissue of which many women our age in North America were purchasing with euphoric nostalgia. I did the same of course, finally realising how varied my experience with fairy tales had been from an early age and how unusual it had been for a child growing up in Italy, but also how common and generation-specific it was in the English-reading world (see comments on amazon.com).

Among the stories translated by Marie Ponsot or the full-page illustrations by Adrienne Ségur, I do not remember having one favourite in the book. I spent hours re-reading the tales but also staring at the illustrations and letting them transport me into a storyworld that would germinate in my mind from the image but not be the same, partly because my boyish haircut and skin-colour were not a match for most of Ségur's heroines. I often skipped over 'Thumbelina', and I disliked the 'Little Red Riding Hood' illustration. Among my favourites were two that I now see as sister tales, with protagonists from different social milieux: Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy's 'Bluecrest' and the Russian 'Finn, The Keen Falcon'. Their protagonists – a princess and a farmer's daughter respectively – fight hard to be reunited with their loved ones who, one involuntarily and the other by choice, also have bird personae. In one tale, the princess has four magic eggs, a fairy's gifts, to help her make contact with her prince who is about to marry a 'false bride'. In the other, the farmer's daughter receives magic gifts from three old women living in huts on chicken legs whom she meets at different points in her quest, but she must also 'break three iron staves ... wear out three pairs of iron shoes ... eat three loaves of iron bread' (152) before seeing Finn the Keen Falcon again and freeing him from the spell of 'his silly princess' (154). The illustrations accompanying these tales are

vastly different from one another, but there are tears on the face of the two women. That suffering as well as their bravery, determination, and loyalty left an impression on me.

My favourite stories when I was young – in books, movies, conversations and in whatever languages I got them – continued to have young women protagonists who felt or were imprisoned in their lives and faced hardships in order to gain freedom and happiness for themselves and their loved ones. Heroes. The more exposed I became to popular culture, the more I realised the women I saw as heroes were a small minority among the many passive victims, trophy wives, and villains populating widely known fairy tales but also westerns and Hollywood dramas. That was discouraging only to a point. I was already trained to insert myself and my superpowers into a storyworld, hoping to change it. While the stories I told myself were not all succeeding at that, my various favourites I think prepped me for Angela Carter and other wonderful adapters.

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## Cristina Bacchilega

### Notes

1. Cristina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).
2. *The Fairy Tale Book*, ill. Adrienne Ségur, trans. Marie Ponsot (Golden Press, 1958).
3. *The Golden Book of Fairy Tales*, ill. Adrienne Ségur, trans. Marie Ponsot (Golden Books, 1999).