



*A review of*  
**Fearie Tales:  
Stories of the Grimm  
and Gruesome**

Katherine Langrish

**I**t should be emphasised that *Fearie Tales* is not a book for children. Nor is it only for horror fans. Adults who love fairy tales should also enjoy these fifteen chilling new stories interleaved with some of the darkest Grimms' tales and adorned with creepy black-and-white illustrations by Alan Lee. 'It is not too much of a stretch,' says editor Stephen Jones, 'to consider Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm as amongst the first horror anthologists', and he supports his claim by pointing out the scenes of 'gruesome retribution' which many of the Grimms' fairy tales include, as well as their often shockingly brutal cautionary tales aimed at children (and parents). With this in mind, Jones asked a number of high-profile writers to contribute stories inspired by or based on one of the Grimms', stipulating only that the tales should lean towards horror.

Something I particularly like about this anthology is the way it acknowledges upfront the darkness and power of the Grimms' tales, working with them rather than seeking to out-do them. The collection is book-ended with two of the Grimms' shortest tales, 'The Wilful Child' (*KHM* 117) and 'The Shroud' (*KHM* 109). In the first, a disobedient child dies. Once she is buried, her stiff arm continually lifts out of the grave until her mother strikes it, after which the child rests in peace. Worse than the jolt of horror is the message: the mother who did not discipline her child in life must now punish it after death. In the second tale, a mother is visited by the ghost of her dead son who tells her to stop crying; his shroud is so soaked with her tears, he cannot sleep. Again, the mother is to blame. She loved her child to excess, so God took him away, and the only way to let him sleep is to cease grieving. These stories are deliberately shocking: little hand-grenades intended to go off with a bang and provoke strong and doubtless varied responses; there's no reason to suppose everyone who first heard them acquiesced in their didactic messages.

Reading the new stories side by side with the old is an interesting experience. We get to revisit some of the Grimms' less well-known fairy tales and then explore them further. The general standard is high, and the anthology opens strongly with 'Find My Name' by Ramsey Campbell, a clever and chilling version of 'Rumpelstiltskin'. Doreen, caring for her baby grandson Benjamin after her daughter's suicide, wakes in the night to hear a sinister voice speaking to her over the baby monitor: 'You've had your year of him, so say goodbye

while you can.' Doreen's unease rapidly turns to dread as Benjamin's first birthday approaches – the deadline set by the unseen presence he calls 'Mr Toothy'.

Barely three pages long, Neil Gaiman's 'Down To A Sunless Sea' begins with a Dickensian flourish reminiscent of the opening of 'Bleak House' – a risky strategy – and there's a hint of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner in the lonely woman who wanders the Rotherhithe docks and tells the story of her lost sailor son. However, the story is really too slight to bear the weight of the title and other literary allusions, and the denouement is less emotionally credible than that of the fairy tale on which it is based. 'Open Your Window, Golden Hair' by the late Tanith Lee, one of just three women authors in the anthology, is a long, rich and magnificently Gothic twist on 'Rapunzel' with perhaps the most satisfactorily nasty ending of any story in the book. 'Crossing the Line' by Garth Nix is a light-hearted 'fairy-bridegroom' tale with an unusual Wild West setting, incorporating one of the monsters which this writer is so good at creating.

Robert Shearman's 'Peckish' is a deeply uncomfortable, but ultimately life-affirming story inspired by 'Hansel and Gretel'. Sixteen-year-old Sieglinde steals out to visit her Grossmutti Greta, who is about to go away after scandalising the family by divorcing her husband of sixty years. Taking Sieglinde up into the dark, scary attic to help choose a suitcase, Grossmutti Greta tells her granddaughter the story of her life. 'Peckish' is an extraordinary riff on cannibalism, gingerbread men, fear of the dark, the ways in which families consume their members, and the human hunger for something 'tastier, richer, better' in life.

The tough female narrator of 'Look Inside' by Michael Marshall copes remarkably well at sharing her house with a horny (rather than horned) elemental. 'Fraülein Fearnot' by Markus Heitz successfully, if perhaps at rather too much length, reproduces the comic-strip schlock of 'The Youth Who Went Forth To Learn What Fear Was'. 'The Ash-Boy', Christopher Fowler's nihilistic take on Grimms' 'Cinderella', is too bleak for me, though I loved the striking image of the heroine's brother as a supernatural ash-being rising from the hearth.

Brian Lumley's enjoyable Lovecraftian pastiche 'The Changeling' takes time to unfold but is worth the wait, producing a cumulative effect of mournful, inescapable horror. (You know *something's* not right when your companion starts 'to wobble where he sat, like some enormous, freshly-set jelly'.) Reggie Oliver's 'The Silken Drum' is paired with the Grimms' 'Nixie of the Millpond', drawing also upon a Japanese Noh play 'Aya no Tzuzumi: The Silken Drum' – in which an old man drowns himself for love of a beautiful princess – and Lafcadio Hearn's ghost story 'Mujina', in which a weeping woman turns out to be a ghost with no face. The English narrator rents a cottage in his grounds to a Japanese woman, Yuki, and her nine-year-old son. Yuki has a collection of Noh masks, and seems to avoid mirrors . . . It's an unsettling, evocative tale, but I was uncomfortable with the way the English setting exoticises the Japanese elements. Then again, given the way the story begins – "'She's Japanese,'" said Karen from the estate agent's. I noticed a hint of apprehension in her voice. . . .' – perhaps this is the point?

Drawing inspiration from 'The Robber Bridegroom', Angela Slatter's 'By The Weeping Gate' is good dark stuff and celebrates the bond between sisters. The Madam of a brothel plans to marry the prettiest of her daughters to the city's sinister Viceroy. When Asha's sister, plain Nel, discovers the first of many murdered girls, she begins to wonder about the Viceroy ... Can she rescue Asha before it is too late? It's a rich, enjoyable read. One picky thing, though: nobody with money ever went as Nel does to buy 'a week's coal'. An establishment like Madam Dalita's would have its coal delivered in sacks each month by the coalman's cart.

The Grimms' 'Frau Trüde' is a brief cautionary tale in which a headstrong little girl disobeys her parents to go and visit the wicked Frau Trüde – who promptly burns her to death. Brian Hodge's 'Anything To Me Is Sweeter Than To Cross Shock-Headed Peter' is a chilling fable which goes much further than Hilaire Belloc in taking the 19th-century cautionary tale to its horrifically comic extreme. Mr and Mrs Crouch run a freak show of 'naughty children' to which parents can bring their own errant offspring in an attempt to terrify and subdue them. Nursery nightmares stalk the pages – and we feel sorry for them. What is truly terrifying, the story says, is the lengths to which some parents – some people? – will go to control others. For me, this was the stand-out story of the anthology.

Peter Crowther's 'The Artemis Line' is a strong, weird story about pudding elemental changelings, creepy guardian scarecrows, memory-loss, the shifting nature of reality, and a house that is a lot more than it seems. Joanne Harris's 'The Silken People' is a perfect little horror story – sharp, shocking and beautiful; and the last contribution in the book, 'Come Unto Me' by John Ajvide Lindqvist, is one for the die-hard horror fan and more than enough for me, though it does make interesting use of Swedish folklore. When Annika's new husband Robert inherits the family house at Djursholm, she braces herself to tell him she can never have children, but finds he is mysteriously delighted. Then she encounters the house's handsome but foul-breathed retainer, Erik, and falls pregnant. Bad things ensue. This tale is preceded by 'Rumpelstiltskin' which really belongs with Ramsey Campbell's opening tale, 'Find My Name' – and so the narrative circle is closed.

In all, 'Fearie Tales' is an excellent anthology, ranging in tone from fairy tales with a hint of horror to horror stories with a tint of faerie. I feel sure that readers will also come away with increased admiration for the brevity and strength of the traditional tales.

Editor: Stephen Jones. Illustrator: Alan Lee.

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