



*A review of*  
**The Gothic Fairy Tale  
in Young Adult  
Literature:  
Essays on Stories from  
Grimm to Gaiman**

Malini Roy

**'There was a hand in the darkness, and it held a knife.'**

Neil Gaiman, *The Graveyard Book*, 2008.

**T**he deadly attack on the family of the protagonist Nobody Owens, described in the opening sentence of Neil Gaiman's Newbery-winning novel, is characteristic of the bold stirring-up of suspense and horror in readers' sensibilities that animates *The Gothic Fairy Tale in Young Adult Literature*. Aimed primarily at literary scholars and specialists, and edited by Joseph Abbruscato and Tanya Jones, this volume features 10 essays on authors ranging from Gaiman through Terry Pratchett to 'Lemony Snicket'. The volume explores, as Abbruscato's 'Introduction' puts it, prose narratives expressing characteristics of 'horror-tinged'/Gothic fairy tales (9). Certainly a critical appraisal of the moniker 'Gothic fairy tale' is timely, given the frequency with which the term appears to inhabit contemporary creative productions such as the graphic novel *Porcelain: A Gothic Fairytale* (2013), and films, fantasy art, and fashionably themed weddings. Even as the term celebrates the coupling of divergent genres, its use indicates, as Rhonda Nicol observes in her essay on urban Gothic fairy-tale heroines, a nod to the 'Goth' as well as the 'Gothic': the 'youth sub-culture' in a 'performative' aspect doubling the 'textual' facet of the Gothic literary tradition (167). While former studies such as *The Gothic in Children's Literature: Haunting the Borders* (eds Jackson, McGillis and Jackson, 2007) have explored the role of the Gothic literary tradition for young readers, this volume develops the conversation further, in a spirit of looking at 'fairies as figures of genuine menace' (167).

The essays in this volume, in pointing to the radically effective generic cross of Gothic and fairy tale in modern YA literature, revel in the joy of intertextual echo when

new forms and content improvise on the parent material. Carys Crossen's essay on David Almond's *Skellig* (1998) convincingly links the character Skellig's astonishing capacity for bodily metamorphosis to the reigning preoccupations of Victorian Gothic, that is, the shadow of Darwinian evolution as 'devolution or degeneration' (16). Tim Sadenwasser, shedding light on the plight of the Baudelaire orphans in *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (1999-2006), emphasises the ruin and decay of their new surroundings, indicating an architectural sensitivity worthy of the classic Romantic Gothic of Anne Radcliffe and Monk Lewis. Lisa K. Perdigao's deconstructionist essay reads a sinister 'pastiche' of Lewis Carroll's nonsense work *Through the Looking-Glass* into Gaiman's *Coraline*. The seemingly loving 'other mother' offers the lonely Coraline a 'ghastly parody' of family life, acting as 'the literary revisionist, attempting to re-create the fairy tale world' (102, 117-18).

While intertextuality works as a key analytical category in labelling the texts discussed here as Gothic fairy tales, ballast for the collection is provided by essays exploring 'the relationship between the reader and the dark fairy tale' (9). A number of essays in the volume draw upon psychoanalysis, particularly Freud's concept of the *unheimlich*. Tanya Jones's essay on Gaiman's *Coraline* and John Connolly's *The Book of Lost Things* delves into Freud's discussions of cannibalism as an act of consumption, in order to foreground young boys' potential fear of paedophiles as figurative cannibals. Such voicing of contemporary cultural plagues, which also revitalise the Grimms' fairy tales, resonates in Sarah R. Wakefield's essay on Robin McKinley's *Deerskin*, which teases out the subliminal and terrifying possibilities of rape and incest by the king/father on his daughter within Charles Perrault's tale *Donkeyskin*.

Predictably for a volume focused on YA literature, Gothic fears and anxieties are emulsified within fairy-tale narratives that function as *Bildungsromans* of self-development and maturation for the young protagonist. Eileen Donaldson's essay on Terry Pratchett's series *Tiffany Aching* (2003-10) illuminates Tiffany's desire to become a witch in counterpoint to the usual female role model of the princess. Donaldson's pitching for female agency receives a fugue in Nicol's discussion of two series, Holly Black's *Modern Tales of Faerie* (2005-7) and Melissa Marr's *Wicked Lovely* (2007-11), where female protagonists, such as the human Kaye who (re)turns into pixie form, learn to affirm themselves through unsettling physical transformations. By contrast, Carissa Turner Smith's essay on Merrie Haskell's *The Princess Curse* (2011), concluding the volume, offers a striking requiem to the figure of the spunky heroine – a presence almost *de rigueur* in recent YA literature. Turner Smith prises apart the female protagonist Reveka's difficulties in making ethical and self-determined choices in a mutable world, mirroring messy situations in real life. Indeed, the road to self-empowerment is revealed to be fraught with moral peril in Erin Wyble Newcomb's

essay on Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* (1985), where Ender's penchant for murderous violence remains a blot within the 'computer-simulated mind game' called Fairyland (48).

For an essay collection so rich in interpretative potential, however, the 'Introduction' appears to do less than justice. Abbruscato stakes out this collection with the claim that 'over the last 30-some years', fairy tales have become 'ghosts' of their 'former selves' or 'classic counterparts', referring presumably to the cultural phenomenon of 'Disneyfication' that scholar Jack Zipes has often decried, citing the gormless film versions of Beauty and Snow White familiar to many young viewers thanks to the global reach of American popular culture (1). Abbruscato advocates for the 'the re-inclusion of the horrifying, even Gothic, motifs into contemporary fairy tales'. This regurgitates a familiar anthem in children's literature criticism against overprotecting children, citing the pedagogical value of danger-ridden 'real life' in childhood development (6). There appears to be a chronological conundrum at work here, as the '30-some years' would include the well-known literary spate of postmodern, revisionary engagement with widely known European fairy tales, such as Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) and, for children, Roald Dahl's *Revolting Rhymes* (1982) – notorious for the prince's decapitation of Cinderella's stepsisters. Indeed, this countercultural wave has been credited in critical volumes such as *Anti-Tales: The Uses of Disenchantment* (eds Catriona McAra and David Calvin, 2011). Moreover, pleading for older versions of fairy tales as 'classic counterparts' problematically assumes an unchanging canon of the genre, which neglects not only the variants famously produced by the different tale-tellers Perrault and the Brothers Grimm, but also the body of successive – and often bowdlerised – editions of the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* issued by the Grimms themselves. This essay collection therefore, while certainly valid for a study of this nature, falls rather short of validating the occasion for the study.

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