



A review of **Gretel and the Dark**

Andrew Teverson

Shortly after the Second World War, in amongst the complex cultural realignments that took place in Germany, the tales of the Grimms became a focus of critical attention. The Nazis had made extensive use of them in educational propaganda, plundering the Grimm collection for folkloristic endorsements of racist and supremacist ideology, and some post-war German educationalists were calling for the tales to be removed from schools as a result. Most influentially, the historian Louis Snyder, in his 1951 article 'Nationalistic Aspects of the Grimm Brothers' Fairy Tales', drew attention to authoritarianism, cruelty, violence and anti-Semitism in the stories, and argued that these features of the tales had helped inure 'generations of German youth' to atrocity.¹

In Eliza Granville's debut novel *Gretel and the Dark*, the parallels between fairy tales and fascist violence are also explored. The story of the Pied Piper becomes a narrative paradigm for the transportation of children to a concentration camp modelled on Ravensbrück; 'Hansel and Gretel' is used to mediate the nightmare of abandonment faced by the novel's protagonists Krysta and Daniel; and the violent scenes of murder and dismemberment from 'The Robber Bridegroom' are used to evoke, at one remove, the rape and mutilation of women in Nazi camps. Granville, however, turns Snyder's post-war argument on its head. She recognises the significant role played by the stories in Fascist propaganda during the Third Reich (according to the novel's blurb, this is what sparked the idea for *Gretel and the Dark*), but her response is to mount a fictional defence of storytelling by demonstrating that the very same stories that operated as instruments of ideological conditioning for the Nazis also have a vital role to play in the imaginative resistance to dehumanising cruelty. In shaping this argument, the novel recalls the work of scholars such as Walter Benjamin (the latter's name is perhaps alluded to in the name of one of the novel's characters) and Ernst Bloch, who proposed, in their respective essays 'The Storyteller' (1936) and 'Better Castles in the Sky at the Country Fair and Circus, in Fairy Tales and Colportage' (1954), that the fairy tale gives hope to the oppressed by showing that, with courage and cunning as their shield, and intelligence as their spear, 'the clever' can win out against 'the brutes'.² In the fairy tale, as Bloch writes memorably, '[t]he power of the giant is painted as power with a hole in it through which the weak individual can crawl through triumphantly'.³

Gretel and the Dark is a novel made up of two parallel stories. One of its narrative strands, set in wartime Germany, concerns a young girl named Krysta whose father is a physician at a concentration camp for women and children. These sections of the novel are told from Krysta's child's-eye point of view, and chart her increasing exposure to, and growing comprehension of, atrocity. Simultaneously, a parallel narrative unfolds against the backdrop of turn-of-the-century Vienna in the household of the Austrian psychologist, and former collaborator with Sigmund Freud, Josef Breuer. Breuer's usual routines are disrupted when a young woman is discovered naked and brutalised outside Vienna's *Narrenturm*; the young woman's origins are obscure, but there are tantalising clues about her past, and Breuer determines to uncover her history in order to help her recover her identity. For the bulk of the novel, these two narratives are unfurled in alternating chapters, echoing one another thematically, but remaining essentially distinct in plotting. In the closing stages of the novel, however, the stories dovetail with a deft (and for me at least entirely unforeseen) narrative device that transforms what appears to be a supernatural fiction into a work of forceful realism.

Gretel and the Dark is a powerful, intelligent and engaging first novel. It conjures its atmospheres from the gothic writings of E.T.A. Hoffmann and the fairy tales of Grimm, and it shares certain preoccupations with recent young adult novels such as Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*; but it also develops a story that is all its own, original, surprising, and at times disturbing and disorientating. It has some flaws: the novel is occasionally rather too overt in the explication of its subtexts, and it wears its allusions on its sleeve, possibly because it has one eye on a young adult market. Readers, for instance (even young adult readers), do not need to be told quite so directly that the mysterious young woman who enters Breuer's house, and who presents herself as a fabricated creature, is like Galatea, Frankenstein's monster, Hoffmann's Olympia, and the mechanical nightingale in Hans Christian Andersen's story; all that was missing was a reference to *My Fair Lady*. This laboured signposting, however, is the flipside of the novel's very evident strengths: *Gretel and the Dark* is a thoughtful, well-crafted, novel; it is also a moving reflection upon the perennial vulnerability of civilisation to barbarism and the human capacity for hope, even at the nadir of history.

Author: Eliza Granville.

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Notes

1. See Snyder, *The Roots of German Nationalism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 35-51.
2. Ernst Bloch, 'Better Castles in the Sky at the Country Fair and Circus, in Fairy Tales and Colportage', in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, ed. and trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge; Mass.: MIT Press), 168.
3. *Ibid.*, 170.