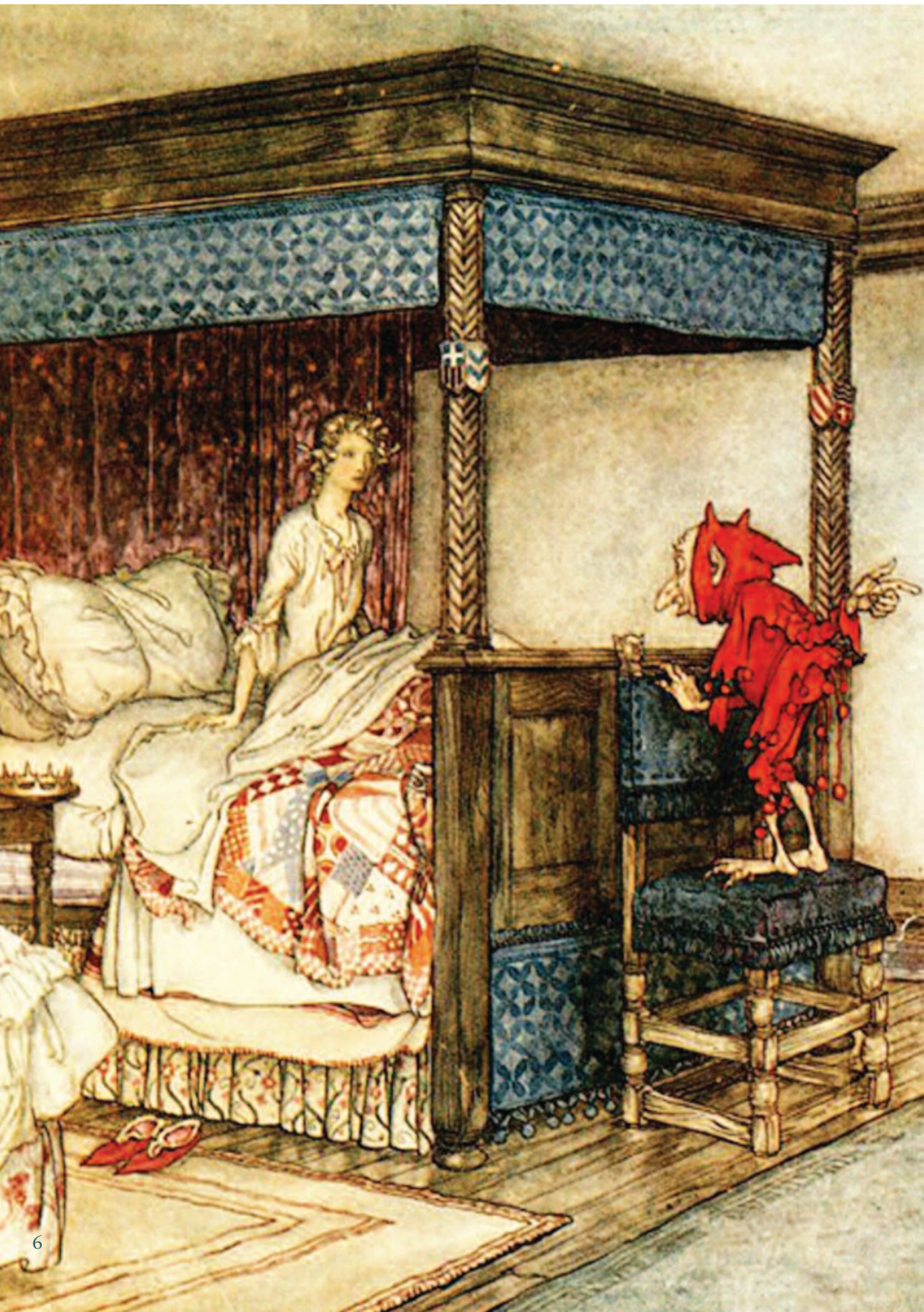


Arthur Rackham, 'O waken,
waken, Burd Isbel', from 'Young
Beichan', Child Ballad.



To tell or not to tell: are fairy tales suitable for children?

Nicholas Tucker and Jacqueline Simpson

A discussion between children's literature expert Nick Tucker and folklore expert Jacqueline Simpson about the suitability of fairy tales for children. This is the continuation of a dialogue begun on BBC Radio 4's Today programme last February.

Nicholas Tucker

The chief fear aroused by fairy tales these days is that not enough children are encouraged to read them. Lauded by psychoanalysts from Freud onwards for their understanding of the human psyche, affectionately recalled in legions of autobiographies, beautifully illustrated by generations of brilliant artists, turned into plays, operas or ballets, and reinterpreted by adult novelists, they are seen today as an invaluable European treasure-house of the imagination that should continue to have as wide a readership as possible.

I too have read or told fairy tales to children at home or in school over the years, and can attest to how well they still work. But there are also elements to them that I dislike. Stories that have survived in an oral culture for so long before eventually being written down and published must contain matter of enduring relevance and interest to the human imagination. But what if there are elements in this same imagination better not served or encouraged by literature? Humans over the centuries, for example, have found deformity a matter for cruel humour. Does this mean it is therefore acceptable to continue lampooning the bent, the ugly or the deformed in fairy tales, as some of them still do, both in print and in accompanying illustrations?

Carl Jung once opined that the German veneration of Hitler at the time was a reflection of the eternal human fantasy of a great leader arriving on the scene to lead us out of all our troubles – the plot of so many myths and fairy tales. Such plots are universal – think

of the traditional cowboy film. But how often do children have access to stories that question this heroic myth? As it is, committees, town councils, government advisors or any other more or less representational body nearly always receive short shrift in heroic literature from fairy tales to the sagas of Tolkien. Far better allow the leader, whoever he – or, rarely, she – is, to work everything out on their own or along with a small body of equally heroic friends. Would young readers ever guess from such reading that organisations such as the Red Cross or Médecins Sans Frontières put their names to collective achievements every bit as heroic and brave? Or that brave leaders today sometimes turn into unelected dictators tomorrow? Such issues are often taken on by modern children's writers, but fairy tales remain stuck in a heroic groove that needs far more questioning from other sources outside the genre.

And what about the rampant sexism in fairy tales? It is idle to deny its existence, and attempts by modern writers to come up with non-sexist fairy tales have seldom succeeded. I still believe that children have a right to such tales. There can be something deliciously regressive in escaping into a story embodying patently out-of-date images when in real life females of any age know that they have now to be responsible for themselves and make their own way regardless of beauty or wealth. But fairy tales embodying such passive approaches should at the least be balanced by other stories suggesting more positive attitudes.

Past critics of fairy tales tend to be dismissed for their lack of understanding or humour but what they had to say at the time was often quite sensible. When the great Italian educationalist Maria Montessori wrote that children under seven should not have access to fairy tales, this was against a cultural background when they often had access to little else. Feeding small children with an exclusive diet of fantasy is surely questionable. Years later, Professors John and Elizabeth Newson also roundly condemned what they termed 'bamboozlement' in the parenting practices they were examining among largely working-class families in Nottingham in the 1960s (Newson and Newson 1968). By this they meant a diet of misinformation or denial fed to children whenever they asked questions thought either difficult or potentially embarrassing. At around the same time the American psychologists Robert Hess and Virginia Shipman coined the phrase 'the meaning of deprivation is the deprivation of meaning' in their seminal paper *Early Experience and the Socialization of Cognitive Modes in Children* (Hess and Shipman 1965).

Are fairy tales also guilty of depriving small children of meaning? Hardly, because they do not set out to tell the literal truth. Their proper realm is with human dreams and fantasy, and most young readers quickly come to understand this. But there is also an enduring role for stories from which children can learn more about the world's realities. Fairy tales are not enough in themselves. Their early critics made this point even more forcefully at a time when there was little or no realistic fiction around for young readers to act as a counterweight.

Critics were also surely justified in condemning the way fairy tales sometimes enshrined and indeed propagated superstition. Creating realistically wicked witches in stories was a different matter at a time when belief in witchcraft remained widespread. No wonder this caused pain to enlightened liberals who hated how these primitive beliefs continued to be supported by children's favourite reading matter. This concern is still not an entirely closed issue. Would a primary school teacher read out a fairy story about witches to a class containing recent immigrants from Uganda, where witchcraft beliefs are still current? Would any British publisher try to sell fairy tales that included witches to present-day Ugandan schools with an easy conscience?

Today compilers and publishers treat fairy tales as a rich, out-of-copyright store selected from and often altered at will for whatever version of the tales best suits contemporary sensitivities. This process started with the brothers Grimm, happy to rewrite some of the more savage fairy tales while omitting others considered too gross even then. Other early anthologists, like Sir George Dasent in his great collection *Popular Tales from the Norse*, retained some of the rougher, more earthy stories. But for Dasent this meant also including two comically defensive prefaces warning young readers – on their honour – not to look at these tales themselves. History does not record whether a single child ever obeyed this injunction.

Modern publishers often include more gruesome stories like the Grimms' *The Juniper Tree*, omitted for most of the 20th century. Older readers will have no problems with stories like this. But there are many accounts of small children scared almost out of their wits in the past by particularly frightening stories, especially those warning them of the dire consequences of not staying quietly in their beds during the night. This was a favourite way for some mothers or nursemaids to ensure they had some peace for themselves during the evenings at a time when goodnight stories were as much an arm of adult discipline as an opportunity for loving bonding. Small children today can still be frightened by stories, fairy or otherwise, that threaten to overload their sometimes fragile state of self-confidence. Any parent misjudging the potential effect on an infant of, say, *Hansel and Gretel* or *Babes in the Wood* could still be in for some troubled nights to follow.

What about traditional fairy story settings? For John Ruskin, in his 1868 essay 'Fairy Stories':

All the best fairy tales have owed their birth, and the greater part of their power, to narrowness of social circumstances: they belonged properly to districts in which walled cities are surrounded by bright and unblemished country, and in which a healthy and bustling town life, not highly refined, is relieved by, and contrasted with, the calm enchantment of pastoral and woodland scenery, either under humble cultivation by peasant masters, or left to its natural solitude.

Today, these rural settings are increasingly distant from the day-to-day realities of most children in the developed world. This could for some remain part of their enduring appeal, but children also want at least some stories set in the world they know.

Yet comforting stereotypes of past rural life have always played an important part in art and fiction. Charming and seductive, they nevertheless disguise the harsher realities of pre-industrial times. While fairy stories often mention poverty there is normally a happy ending when such concerns no longer seem an issue. This worship of extreme wealth for its own sake is not a pretty sight – does a fairy-tale hero ever share out the fortune he comes into rather than immediately joining the ruling class that had previously kept him poor and will continue to do the same to the less fortunate? For Marxist critic Jack Zipes, 'In all Grimms' fairy tales, male domination and master-slave relationships are rationalized so long as the rulers are benevolent and use their power justly. If tyrants and parents are challenged, they relent or are replaced, but the property relationships and patriarchy are not transformed' (Zipes 1983).

Preaching acceptance rather than protest, protecting the social status quo by occasionally making a few cosmetic changes at the top – these stories can only contemplate change that comes through either magic or luck. Such are the immemorial fantasies of the poor and dispossessed with no expectation in their own lives of ever changing their condition. Thankfully, modern children have other literature to hand advocating more positive attitudes to challenging an unjust social order.

The regular appearance of royalty in fairy tales is another aspect of their inherent conservatism. Beautiful princesses and handsome princes are regularly held up as romantic ideals, although once they appear as mature kings and queens in succeeding stories after an initial spell of 'living happily ever after' they often no longer seem quite so contented. Luxuriating in fantasies about the rich and attractive is part of the essence of fantasy. But there should also be other books around offering radically different points of view along with some changes in cast. Step-parents, for example, always receive such a bad press in fairy tales at a time when there are more around than ever before. Other stories painting step-parents in a better light would do something to redress this balance.

Walt Disney – usually excoriated by those who love traditional fairy tales – has in fact done many of these stories a singular service over the years. Introducing tuneful music, jokes and contemporary accents to his fairy story films has made these tales newly accessible to young audiences who might otherwise have started seeing them as somewhat quaint and antique. Just as the Grimm brothers polished up fairy tales mainly drawn – as they thought – from the oral tradition, so has Disney made some of the same tales more accessible to modern audiences.

And I am glad that he has. Because for all their faults, at their best traditional fairy tales remain wonderful stories and often have something to tell us that is wise at one moment

and consoling the next. But I would also contend that they have been allowed an uncritical ride for too long now. Some of them are really not as nice as you might remember and they do need to be balanced by other sorts of children's literature doing something quite different.

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Jacqueline Simpson

I'm probably not the right person to discuss Nick Tucker's article, for I have no children or grandchildren, and as a teacher I dealt only with teenagers, so I have never been in a position to watch how the very young react to fairy tales. All I can do is summon up memories of my own reactions, and they only reach back to when I was five or six, not to earliest childhood.

I can certainly agree that a child's fears and prejudices grow out of early impressions drawn from fiction (including fairy tales) as well as from real life, but I doubt that it is desirable, or indeed possible, to eliminate all negative imagery and associations by resorting to censorship. Nick Tucker does not in fact demand this; his point, a wiser and more practical one, is simply to ensure that some positives are available as a counter-balance. I can readily agree, with back-up from my own recollections. For instance, I encountered Captain Hook in *Peter Pan* a year or two earlier than Captain Cuttle in *Dombey and Son*, but the latter has ensured that I am not scared or disgusted by hooks in real life, even though horror films and James Bond thrillers regularly use them as indicators of evil.

I suspect that negative stereotyping in fiction will have little effect unless reinforced by social attitudes and real-life experience. Thus, black people are threatening figures in the *Arabian Nights*, but for me this was far outweighed by admiration for Paul Robeson's voice and for Jesse Owens in the film of the 1936 Olympics. On the other hand, the mockery of a Jew in one of the Grimms' tales fitted in perfectly with the casual scornful anti-Semitism so widespread in Britain in the 1930s, and so I accepted it without a second thought. As for wicked stepmothers and mothers-in-law, jealous half-sisters, and murderous uncles, I don't think it ever occurred to me that I might encounter one in real life; but then, I was an only child in a stable nuclear family, and

I am sadly aware that others are less lucky than I was. For them, such stereotypes might well engender fears and suspicions.

However, though you can vary the type of figure representing evil in your fairy tales, you cannot eliminate evil itself, for narrative requires contrast, or even conflict. Moreover, traditional fairy tales carry moral messages about courage, persistence, patience, kindness, generosity, and so forth, virtues which shine out best when set against evil and danger. Their courageous optimism is summed up in a famous saying attributed to G.K. Chesterton: 'Fairy tales don't tell children dragons exist. Children already know dragons exist. Fairy tales tell children that the dragons can be killed.'

Related to this is the concept of justice, of fairness, so important in children's minds. As they themselves are so frequently scolded and punished, they demand that in their stories 'the good end happily *and the bad unhappily*' (Wilde's definition of fiction in *The Importance of Being Ernest*). At any rate, I did. I was positively delighted when wicked queens were forced to dance to death in red-hot shoes or rolled down steep hills inside a spiked barrel, as happened in my unexpurgated 19th-century edition of Grimm. But I was disgusted and upset by the fate of Andersen's Little Mermaid, which I saw as sheer cruelty – turning into some sort of semi-angel was, to my mind, no compensation for the injustice of losing the prince for whom she had sacrificed so much. Indeed, rejection and injustice is such a recurrent theme in Andersen that there was little apart from the Ugly Duckling that I could read with pleasure, and the book mostly lay unopened. Similarly, I was eight when I saw the *Wizard of Oz*, and I vividly remember how the whole film was ruined for me by its ending – it's *unfair*, I wailed, we've been so looking forward to meeting this wonderful wizard, and it turns out he's an old fraud; and as for Dorothy, she just asks to go home! How stupid, how boring is that! Nowadays, of course, I realise that Andersen was a paranoid masochist, and that Frank L. Baum had an agenda, to debunk the concept of God. At the time, I simply thought they wrote very feeble and unpleasant stories. Authentic traditional fairy tales never cheated my expectation of justice in this way.

Nick Tucker has raised three issues: that the total repertoire of tales to which a child is exposed should strike a balance between fantasy and realism; that the moral and social messages they convey should be acceptable by the criteria of our own times; and that some tales are too frightening for very young children. As regards the first, this balance is indeed a healthy one, but can there really be many children for whom it is lacking – who grow up knowing *only* fairy tales, or *only* stories about the everyday world around them? As for the second, I would contend that fairy tales teach many virtues that are, or should be, still valid and desirable in our time; their chief flaw is their sexism, which the story-telling parent or teacher can counteract by encouraging a little girl to identify herself with the active, questing hero rather than the passive 'princess' he seeks or rescues. As for frightening stories, if the parent or teacher is *telling* the story, rather than reading it from a book, and if she or he has a smidgen of common sense, she/he will observe the child's reaction, and drop that particular tale from the repertoire. Fairy tales, after all, were meant for telling, and what is told will shift and change a little as it goes, to suit the needs and tastes of teller and hearers alike.



Adelaide Claxton,
'Wonderland'.