

*A review of*  
**The Rebirth of  
Rapunzel: A Mythic  
Biography of the  
Maiden in the Tower**

Jack Zipes

**T**his is a very unusual book by a very original writer of stories, novels, and essays. Kate Forsyth is one of the leading feminist writers of fairy tales in Australia. In recent years she has published a notable series of historical fairy-tale novels based on 'Rapunzel', 'All-Fur', and 'Beauty and the Beast'. They include *Bitter Greens* (2012), *The Wild Girl* (2013), and *The Beast's Garden* (2015). All of them are complex feminist adaptations that shed light on intrepid women in historical events that test their compassion and fortitude.

Forsyth's present work is part study of 'Rapunzel', part autobiography, part anthology, and part collection of essays. She divides her book into three sections: 1) 'The Rebirth of Rapunzel', 2) 'Persinette', and 3) 'Books are Dangerous'. In the first is a fascinating autobiographical exploration of how she came to write *Bitter Greens* and how an unfortunate accident in her childhood and her subsequent hospitalisation, similar to incarceration, led to an early interest in 'Rapunzel' and fairy tales in general. In fact, at age ten, she began writing stories that dealt with fairy-tale motifs of escape from imprisonment and salvation. 'As I grew into adulthood,' she explains, 'I kept on reading fairy tale retellings and wrote novels in which appear – again and again – themes of imprisonment and escape, blindness and healing, roses and thorns, flight and falling. Towers were a common motif, as was hair as a symbol of life and renewal.' (17) Two adaptations of 'Rapunzel', Nicholas Stuart Gray's *The Stone Cage* (1963) and Edith Nesbit's 'Melisande' (1901), among others, had a strong influence on her, and Forsyth does a careful detailed study of what works were significant for her and what drove her to spend seven years doing research and writing *Bitter Greens*, which is based on the life of Charlotte-Rose de Caumont de la Force and her fairy tale, 'Persinette'. In the course of her autobiographical and at times psychological analysis of her attachment to 'Rapunzel' and the conflicts in Mme de La Force's life during the reign of Louis XIV, Forsyth covers a good deal of

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cultural and political terrain that pertains to the role of French women authors in the development of the literary fairy tale, the patriarchal transformation of the original proto-feminist variants of the 'Rapunzel' tale type that include such films as the disastrous Disney corporation's *Tangled*, and the rebellion to recoup 'Rapunzel' in the 1970s undertaken by such writers as Anne Sexton, Angela Carter, Donna Jo Napoli, and many other feminist writers up through the 21st century. She concludes this section by stating:

At first I wished to understand why it is that this fairy tale has had such a fierce hold on my own imagination. I wanted to re-create some of the beauty and mystery and romance of the tale, which first enchanted me as a child, and I hoped to explore some of the more troubling aspects of the tale, the darkness and the cruelty and eroticism ignored by those retellings of the tale which depicted a smiling maiden combing her hair in a rose-decorated turret. I also wished to rescue Rapunzel from the widely held belief that she was a 'passive princess waiting patiently for her prince to come'. (148)

In the following section, Forsyth includes a translation of Mme de La Force's 'Persinette', as an example of the proto-feminist tales created by several gifted French women writers to which she would like to bring more attention. And, in her third section, Forsyth includes several short articles and talks that she has delivered in the past ten years. They repeat much that she wrote in the first section and are somewhat superfluous. However, her talk 'Rapunzel in the Antipodes', a paper she presented in 2013, is most interesting because she discusses several stories and poems inspired by 'Rapunzel' and written by Australian authors, who are often neglected in the English-speaking world.

While Forsyth's book does include a survey of the historical development of 'Rapunzel' tales from the Greco-Roman period to the present, it is not comprehensive and overlooks the importance of ritual sequestration and protection of young women in many Middle Eastern, Asian, and African folk tales. A more scholarly and analytical approach to 'Rapunzel' can be found in *Rapunzel: Tradition eines europäischen Märchenstoffes in Dichtung und Kunst* (1993) edited by Bernhard Lauer, and in the 'Rapunzel' entry in the *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*. While Forsyth's book does not provide a comprehensive history of the 'Rapunzel tale type', it is valuable for readers interested in understanding the creative process of literary adaptations of fairy tales that various authors undergo in their endeavors to deal with

contemporary issues. In particular, it is an exhaustive study of one of the finest contemporary adapters of fairy tales. Forsyth states:

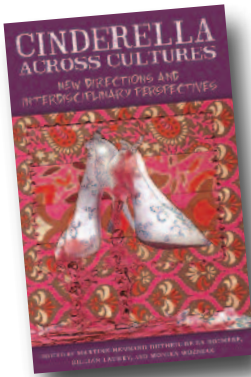
For me, the mystery and power of fairy tales is that they are shapeshifters, constantly changing and being transformed while still carrying within them the symbols and structures of far older stories. Although it is true that fairy tales speak in metaphoric codes, each teller reads these codes a little differently and, in retelling the tale, gives it deeper and wider meanings, allowing the story new relevance to each new audience. (268)

Author: Kate Forsyth.

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## Jack Zipes



# *A review of* **Cultures: New Directions and Interdisciplinary Perspectives**

D. L. Ashliman

**A** mother's death, sibling (in this case step-sibling) rivalry, a persecuted heroine unprotected by a seemingly absentee father, coming-of-age, and courtship and marriage – here with suggestive symbolism (the selection of the true bride by the fit of her shoe): these stereotypical elements, common to most versions of the Cinderella story, have made it one of the world's most enduring and popular traditional tales.

This collection of interdisciplinary studies rightly takes its place next to the now classic *Cinderella: A Casebook* (1982), edited by Alan Dundes, which in turn continued the pioneering efforts of Anna Birgitta Rooth (*The Cinderella Cycle* (1951)) and Marian Roalfe

Cox (*Cinderella: Three Hundred and Forty-Five Variants of Cinderella, Catskin, and Cap o' Rushes* (1893)). Whereas Cox's and Rooth's studies were primarily compilations of variants of this story, Dundes' *Casebook* and the volume now under review contain essays written from a wide range of perspectives.

The leading attribute of *Cinderella across Cultures* is diversity. Its nineteen contributors reside in a dozen countries from Australia to Israel to eastern and western Europe to North America. They represent such academic disciplines as linguistics, a half-dozen traditional language and literature departments, plus programs in children's literature, comparative literature, cultural studies, and gender studies. Taken as a whole, the collection does not attempt to create a universally recognised paradigm for Cinderella-type tales, but instead demonstrates how the basic plot reflects and in turn influences the diverse cultures where it has flourished. Appropriately, the essays are anchored on either end by scholars well known to students of fairy tales: Ruth B. Bottigheimer and Jack Zipes.

Bottigheimer's lead-in study, 'Cinderella: The People's Princess', traces the title heroine's development from Giambattista Basile's *Zeuzella* in the early 1600s through Charles Perrault's *Cendrillon*, Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy's *Finette Cendron*, the Grimm brothers' *Aschenputtel*, and culminating in Walt Disney's 'people's princess' Cinderella.

The book concludes with a survey of a different sort: Jack Zipes's 'The Triumph of the Underdog: Cinderella's Legacy'. The legacy outlined here is primarily the cinematic depiction of Cinderella-type characters (usually female, but possibly male, or of ambiguous gender) from the early 20th century to the present. In the dozen or more films that he carefully analyses, Zipes focuses primarily on their depiction of expected gender roles. For example, what qualities contribute to a given heroine's ultimate success: piety, thrift, humility, physical beauty and obedience; or self-reliance, independence, courage and pluckiness? Zipes closes his essay with a comprehensive filmography, chronologically listing no fewer than 162 Cinderella-type films, from George Albert Smith's pioneering *Cinderella* (1898) to Kenneth Branagh's *Cinderella* (Disney Studios, 2015).

The 16 essays between the Bottigheimer's and Zipes's 'book-ends' are too varied to be categorised collectively or to be summarised as a group, but precisely therein lies the value of this anthology: its diversity of approach.

One theme common to a number of the essays is the central role of physical objects in many Cinderella tales: slippers of glass or other material, clothing, carriages, etc. Exemplifying this approach is Kathryn A. Hoffmann's 'Perrault's "Cendrillon" among the Glass Tales'. In addition to outlining the cultural and aesthetic importance of glass or crystal objects among Perrault's contemporaries, Hoffmann presents a comprehensive review of the historical arguments as to whether the legendary shoes were made of glass (*verre*) or of fur (*vair*).

Other artifacts important in fairy-tale studies are visual depictions in print, film, and other media. Illustrations accompanying printed versions of a given story not only contribute

significantly to its aesthetic appeal but can also suggest interpretations and imply value judgments that may not be obvious in the unadorned text. Among the essays dealing with such graphic arts are 'Revisualizing Cinderella for All Ages' by Sandra L. Beckett; 'The Illustrated Cinderella in the Low Countries' by Jan Van Coillie; 'Imagining a Polish Cinderella' by Monika Wozniak; and 'Cinderella in Polish Posters' by Agata Holobut. Each of these articles is richly illustrated with black-and-white examples of the art under discussion. In addition, a separate section of the book contains a dozen handsomely printed full-colour reproductions of art and artifacts analysed in different essays.

A major section of the book is titled 'Regendering Cinderella.' The common theme in this group of essays are the gender-related identities, definitions, and values reflected in various narrations and interpretations of Cinderella stories across a range of contexts. The usual approach here is to investigate the remaking of traditional Cinderella motifs by recent authors. Examples include: 'Rejecting the Glass Slipper: The Subversion of Cinderella in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*' by Rona May-Ron; 'Fairy-Tale Refashioning in Angela Carter's Fiction' by Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère; 'Multiple Metamorphoses, or "New Skins" for an Old Tale: Emma Donoghue's Queer Cinderella in Translation' by Ashley Riggs; 'The Male Cinderella in LGBTI Fiction for Young Adults' by Mark Macleod; '*Prince Cinders* and a Fairy's Queer Invitations' by Jennifer Orme; and 'Connecting East and West in Donna Jo Napoli's *Bound*' by Roxane Hughes.

Each of the essays in this book independently reflects the transnational appeal of the Cinderella theme, and taken as a whole the collection exemplifies a cross-cultural approach to the study of a fairy tales in general. Essays focusing on international issues include: 'The Translator as Agent of Change: Robert Samber, Translator of ... the First English Version of Perrault's "Cendrillon" (1729)' by Gillian Lathey; "'Cendrillon" and "Aschenputtel"' by Cyrille François; 'The Dissemination of a Fairy Tale in [Dutch] Popular Print: Cinderella as a Case Study' by Talitha Verheij; 'Moral Adjustments to Perrault's Cinderella in French Children's Literature (1850-1900)' by Danial Aranda; and 'On the Evolution of Success Stories in Soviet Mass Culture: The "Shining Path" of Working-Class Cinderella' by Xenia Mitrokhina.

In summary, *Cinderella across Cultures* abundantly lives up to the promise of its title. Furthermore, this collection proves to be a very worthy addition to the many distinguished books and journals dedicated to the study of fairy tales published by the Wayne State University Press.

Editors: Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère, Gillian Lathey, and Monika Wozniak.

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