Sally Gardner.

‘Magic is electricity and needs to be treated with care’: An interview with Sally Gardner

Diana Rodríguez Bonet

British children’s writer Sally Gardner was born in Birmingham, raised in central London and lives in Hastings. She was diagnosed with severe dyslexia at 12 and didn’t start to read until she was 14. She was bullied in school for her slow academic progress, but after reading her first book – *Wuthering Heights* – no one could stop her. She graduated from Central St Martin’s Art School with a First-Class Honours degree and then worked as a theatre designer for more than 15 years. In 2019 she became an Ambassador for audiobook charity Listening Books.[1]

Gardner is an award-winning novelist who has sold over two million books and her work has been translated into more than 22 languages. Her first book, *The Little Nut Tree* (1993),[2] was a children’s picture book that she also illustrated. She has written and illustrated 27 books, including one retelling of five classic fairy tales.[3] She has had 14 non-illustrated books published as well as a series of five books called *Wings & Co: The Fairy Detective Agency*,[4] hailed as ‘Agatha Christie for kids’. Her debut novel, *I, Coriander* (2005),[5] won the Nestlé Children’s Book Award. She has worked as an illustrator for other authors on nine books. Her Young Adult fiction includes *Tinder* (2013),[6] which is a retelling of Hans Christian Andersen’s classic story ‘The Tinder Box’, and *The Red Necklace: A Story of the French Revolution* (2007),[7] shortlisted for the Guardian Book Prize. *Maggot Moon* (2012),[8] a modern fairy story, won both the Carnegie Medal and the Costa Children’s Book Award.

Gardner has also published two novels for adults under the name Wray Delaney: *An Almond for a Parrot* (2018),[9] an erotic fairy tale, and *The Beauty of the Wolf* (2019),[10] an erotic retelling of ‘Beauty and the Beast’. Under her own name she wrote *The Snow Song* (2020),[11] a feminist tale about women imprisoned by superstition. Gardner’s work, whether for children, young adults or adults, is steeped in originality and feminism. She is brilliant at transporting the audience into fantastic lands.

The following interview took place on 11 August 2021 in Hastings, during my visit as a Hosted Researcher at the Chichester Centre for Fairy Tales, Folklore and Speculative Fiction (University of Chichester), where I was researching fairy tales and folklore.

Diana Rodríguez Bonet: *Sally, thank you very much for meeting me. I'd like to start with a general question before I focus on your published work. I have noticed that you publish under your own name for children, but you publish under the penname 'Wray Delaney' for adults. Why that change of name?*

Sally Gardner: The two books I published under the pen name, *An Almond for a Parrot* (2016) and *The Beauty of the Wolf* (2020), contained scenes of explicit sex. Children need protection. My job is to tell a good story and to be a gate-keeper, and I feared parents would unwittingly buy these books if my name was on the cover. After *The Double Shadow*[12] was published, my publisher thought it would be a good idea to write a sexy version of it for adults, which I did. But an awful thing happened: I was in Dubai when a group of local schoolgirls came into the bookstore and bought every single copy. I feared I'd be arrested. I didn't want anything like that happening again so I thought it best to use a pseudonym when writing for so-called grown-ups.

DRB: *What is the biggest challenge you have encountered as a writer?*

SG: I'm severely dyslexic. My dyslexia is both a challenge and a gift. Spelling is my greatest stumbling block and I would like to go back to the time when English language wasn't pinned down by the dictionary. In those days it didn't matter how you spelled words. It's one of the reasons I came to writing late; I was so scared no one would take me seriously. I believed Pooh Bear, who thought that if you couldn't spell Tuesday you couldn't be a writer. I can't spell Wednesday. But the person who enabled me to write my stories is Jacky Bateman. I have worked with her now for 15 years and she understands my idiosyncratic ways. I have also been helped by the advances in technology. In the beginning, when I first had a laptop, I was amazed at the blue and red lines under all my words and then someone said: 'Red is spelling and blue is grammar'. Word is really helpful because it has Dictate and will read back what you have written. It's very useful to hear the beat of language. I also have Grammarly and Pages. I love Pages even though it doesn't have a very good voice recognition program. I type everything on my computer – I call it my shorthand. I have Dragon on my iPad and I dictate what I have written, then I put it back into Word again. I'll work on it more then re-dictate and on it goes until I'm happy with it. Finally, I send it to Jacky, who goes over it and reads it out to me. We do a lot of editing over the phone. I describe Jacky as my producer.

DRB: *Did you have difficulties at the beginning in publishing your work?*

SG: No. I was unbelievably lucky. I worked with Judith Elliot, the children's editor at Orion, on *The Little Nut Tree*. She suggested I write *A Book of Princesses*. She knew I was very dyslexic

and said, 'It's simple, we find some old fairy tales that are out of copyright, you change a few words and we put you down as the author.' I started rewriting the fairy stories. I wanted them to be mine. I had questions: Why was Cinderella's father so hopeless? How did the evil queen find Snow White in the forest – not once but three times? It was Judith who gave me a masterclass in writing for children: don't use long sentences and if you can't spell a word, don't use it. If you use a long word, use it three times.

DRB: *Most of your literary production is based on fairy tales. Why do you focus on this genre?*

SG: Fairy tales have fascinated me since I was small. Many tales are as old as the civilisation they come from and were told orally before finding their way to paper. My writing is inspired by them even when it's not obvious. An example would be *Maggot Moon* (2012). The most obvious borrowing from fairy tales is *I, Coriander* (2005). When I deal with magic in my books it has to be earthed; magic is electricity and needs to be treated with care. I wrote a series called *Magical Children* and in each book I give the character a magic gift, for example the child can fly, is invisible, or is strong enough to lift a bus. Everyone else in the story is normal with no magic powers. It's a way of setting rules that can't be broken.

One of my favourite fairy tales was originally written by a woman living in 18th-century France. Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve is the author of the oldest known version of *Beauty and the Beast*.

DRB: *You have a collection of fairy tale rewritings from 1998 aimed at children called* A Book of Princesses: Five Favourite Princess Stories. *Why did you rewrite those specific five tales ('Snow White', 'The Sleeping Beauty', 'Cinderella', 'The Frog Prince' and 'The Princess and the Pea')?*

SG: Those five fairy stories came from a survey the publishing house did on what children's favourite tales were. I love 'The Princess and the Pea', one of the silliest stories ever. 'Cinderella' has always fascinated me and there are some good questions that I thought I should try to answer, such as why is Cinderella's father so weak, why doesn't he protect his daughter? The genius of fairy tales is they are so malleable and can be rewritten to suit the period of time in which you live. You can heighten certain areas and take down the elements that are less suitable for today. But I didn't want to Disneyfy them. There is something completely brilliant about the start and end of a fairy tale: 'Once upon a time' and 'happily ever after' form a perfect circle. The end is the engine for another beginning. A lot of fairy tales are supremely feminist stories if you analyse them. What the old women are trying to say is a warning for girls: 'Do not fall for this'; 'Wait! He may be a loser'; 'He may be ridiculous.' Yes, they were written down by men, but they were first told by women.

DRB: *If we have a look at different rewritings of 'Cinderella', there aren't many extreme deviations from the classic tale. Authors tend to follow the classic symbolism in contrast to revisions of other tales. Would you say this is the most difficult fairy tale you have ever rewritten?*

SG: No. It's the story with most elasticity and it can be moulded into whatever shape you want. It's a story older than the Bible. It started in China[13] with the binding of girls' feet, and it travelled to Europe. The story of Rhodopis, about a Greek slave girl who marries the king of Egypt, is believed to be the earliest known variant of the Cinderella story, dating from 7 B.C. The first written European version of the story was published in Naples by Giambattista Basile, in his *Pentamerone* (1634). It came to France with the best-known version written by Charles Perrault in 1697. Cinderella's great success is not that she married the Prince but that she broke away from her family. At the heart of the story is a universal dream that we all have the potential to be something different, something better.

DRB: *Which fairy tale authors were you exposed to as a child?*

SG: As a child I was read the Grimm Brothers and Hans Christian Andersen. When I was older, it was Angela Carter, who I adored. I still love her fairy tales. Then, Italo Calvino and Hermann Hesse. I read gypsy fairy tales, Romanian fairy tales, a few Caribbean and Indian … I'm hungry for whatever fairy tales I can find.

DRB: *Which writers are influencing you at the moment? Which have influenced your writing?*

SG: Joseph O'Connor's excellent book *Shadowplay*;[14] *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr;[15] *A Gentleman in Moscow* by Amor Towles.[16] My influences are Angela Carter, Edward Gorey and Charles Dickens. I love the way he brings objects to life. When I'm writing, I read for research – old books that smell of a different century.

DRB: *I am working on a comparative analysis of Irish writer Deirdre Sullivan and your work, focusing on the rewriting of fairy tales. Are you familiar with her? Have you read her work?*

SG: No, I haven't. Has she read mine? But you know, all the English fairies ran away to Ireland. I can't blame them.

DRB: *One of the hypotheses of my thesis is that Ireland's postcolonial context influences Sullivan's rewritings. As you may know, the figure of Mother Ireland influences many Irish and British writers. How important is nationality in your work?*

SG: I live here, this is where I write. I write in English. It's difficult to answer this question and to see it from your point of view. I love James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, and my Irish grandfather, John Collins, was one of the best storytellers I have ever known. He would tell a story and I would say, 'Tell it again', and he never would. He understood the power of telling it once. He could also do magic tricks.

DRB: *I'd like to focus on your book* The Beauty of the Wolf, *which is a rewriting of 'Beauty and the Beast'. Which other fairy tales would you say have influenced this rewriting? I could see hints of 'Snow White' and 'Donkeyskin' particularly. Are you familiar with the latter tale?*

SG: 'Donkeyskin' is an interesting one because the original beginning to Cinderella was very much like Donkeyskin with the father who wishes to marry his own daughter. It's due to this that the daughter runs away, in the case of Donkeyskin to a farm and in 'Cinderella' to the house of a merchant. I think what influenced me most in the writing of *The Beauty of the Wolf* was Angela Carter's 'The Tiger's Bride'.[17]

DRB: *Why did you decide to write a whole book, about 400 pages, out of a fairy tale?*

SG: Fairy tales are tight balls of storytelling that can become long. The trick is not to lose your audience and I hope I didn't. It builds up speed at the end. Think of a fairy tale as rich chocolate; you have to melt it very carefully before you start adding anything new to it otherwise it's ruined. All fairy stories can be played with to a lesser or greater extent and *The Beauty of the Wolf* has many more themes to it than just one.

DRB: *Your rewriting empowers women and talks about silenced topics such as domestic violence, sexual harassment and the sexuality of women. Would you consider yourself a feminist writer? Do you use your writing to transmit any particular ideology?*

SG: I'm a feminist, I have been all my adult life. It's been a hard battle but I'm not transmitting any particular ideology. History has been written by men and to say that this is how the world works is simply wrong. It's how a man saw the world, through a male gaze. I try to imagine what a woman might have done in impossible circumstances. Someone pointed me out to me once that the only houses left standing from different ages are the ones made of bricks and mortar – but that wasn't all houses. So, I'm a feminist in that respect but I also feel it essential to be as accurate as possible about the past. It comes down to the way you tell a story and with which lens you see that story. Mine is a feminist lens.

DRB: *Something that I find interesting in your work is that you tend to portray enmity between women, a recurrent pattern in traditional fairy tales. Why did you include this pattern with your female characters?*

SG: This pattern doesn't recur in all my writing (see *An Almond for a Parrot*, for instance). But we women can be our own worst enemies and we are not as kind to each other as we should be. We judge others too quickly and often there is little sisterhood in it. Many writers illustrate this battle between women. There would be no story in this book if there was no animosity between the women. It is there in fairy tales; it is there in most adult novels so I don't feel I'm alone in this. I still think we have a long way to go. Hopefully we're getting better at working together. In *The Beauty of the Wolf* the main character, the witch, makes the most humongous mistake out of jealousy and bitterness but these are emotions that both men and women are susceptible to.

DRB: *Is that why you also included the figure of the midwife?*

SG: Yes, definitely, and the male domination and the taking of trees and the knocking down of forests and killing animals and the barbarity of Middle Age and Elizabethan men. It is shambolic to say the least and that was all male-orientated.

DRB: *What inspired you to rewrite 'Beauty and the Beast' in this way?*

SG: I wanted to talk about the myth of the maiden and the crone and all stages of being a woman not just from one viewpoint. Every woman has felt ugly, repulsive or disgusting at some point in their lives. Magazines and Instagram and Twitter demand the perfect image. One of the starting points of the book was a photograph that a friend took of girls at a boy band concert. They weren't looking at the band, they were taking selfies. With *The Beauty of the Wolf* I was trying to understand what happens when you've never been seen for who you are and only for how you look – and this applies to both Beau and Randa.

Beau has an unattainable, androgynous beauty which everyone falls for and it is a curse. Whereas everyone is repulsed by Randa, or she feels they are. But when Beau sees her, he thinks she's magnificent, that she is beyond beauty.

DRB: *Most people would suggest the ending of this book is a happy and not a sad one. Why did you finish it like this?*

SG: I had to finish the book with a happy ending because I was told by my editors that even adults need happy endings. I think I made it ambiguous enough, but she had to turn back

into a woman. I'd have liked for her to retain her animal qualities. Beau, too, changes. He went through a great journey to become who he is. I don't describe him in detail after he's lost his beauty, except to say his looks don't set him apart.

DRB: *Religion is a very important issue in this rewriting. On the one hand, the Devil is an important figure. On the other hand, there is a conflict between the natural world of the sorceress and religion. Why do you include this?*

SG: In the 16th century the fairy world was part of everyday life. At the same time, England was changing into the strict, religious Protestant country that in the 17th century would be ruled by Oliver Cromwell. Lord Rothermere cut down the sorceress's trees in the name of the Lord. Today we are faced with the problem of our own impact on the world, and how we might save it. In myth the fairy world tried to warn the people, who chose not to listen and abused the earth. In the background of my book is the fight between the pagan and religious worlds. The period in which *The Beauty of the Wolf* is set saw the start of witchhunts and witch trials. It is a time of transformation, the beginning of people moving away from villages to towns. This movement led to older women being left behind, isolated in the villages. Midwives or wise women often fell into this category. In my story the Widow Bott is portrayed in this light.

DRB: *Would you say that you are influenced in any way by Sussex folklore?*

SG: No. I was brought up in London and it is London stories that I know the most about. I am just beginning to take in Sussex tales.

DRB: *I'd like to ask about your current work. What are you working on at the moment?*

SG: It's called *The Weather Woman* and is about a girl called Neva who has the ability to predict the weather. The question I asked myself was, what could a young woman in Regency England do with such a gift? The answer was very little. The story is set between the Frost Fairs of 1789 and 1813/14. In 1813 we had perhaps the first manmade weather event in England, a fog so dense you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. But this story also addresses the weather of sexuality. The only way my heroine can use her gift is to dress as a man, which gives her great freedom but causes problems as she falls in love with a man who is smitten by her male persona.

DRB: *I can see some similarities between this new book and* The Beauty of the Wolf. *Would you say that you are also an LGBTQI+ writer?*

SG: I grew up in a time when it was still illegal to be gay. Those were truly dark terrible days and I'm very happy it is no longer the case. I am appalled by the hatred there is on both sides of the transgender argument, the visceral loathing of those who don't 100% support it. My question is, why? Surely we should start listening to both sides, otherwise it's just one bully shouting at another bully and nothing much is achieved. So I am not entering that arena. I'll let my writing answer the question. I believe passionately we need to learn to live in peace and accept diversity. Now at least growing up queer or transgender is a step easier than it was. There are so many amazing role models and so much to read, it's no longer the Wild West of lonely.

DRB: *What would be your advice to struggling women who want to enter the so-called 'man's world'?*

SG: I think we need to find original ways of working if we wish to stay ahead. I'm white and of a certain age and it's a battle to be seen as relevant. The only way I know how is to write a good story. Advice is for the birds. Let them teach us how to fly, I don't have any advice. Perhaps wear good shoes, they always help.

DRB: *Thank you for your time, Sally.*

Diana Rodríguez Bonet

Notes

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1. For further reference on this project, see their website.
2. Sally Gardner, *The Little Nut Tree* (London: Orion, 1993).
3. Sally Gardner, *A Book of Princesses: Five Favourite Princess Stories* (London: Orion, 1998).
4. Sally Gardner, *Wings & Co: The Fairy Detective Agency* (London: Orion, 2012), 5 vols.
5. Sally Gardner, *I, Coriander* (London: Puffin Books, 2005).
6. Sally Gardner, *Tinder* (London: Indigo, 2013).
7. Sally Gardner, *The Red Necklace: A Story of the French Revolution* (London: Orion, 2007).
8. Sally Gardner, *Maggot Moon* (Candlewick Press, 2013).
9. Wrey Delaney, *An Almond for a Parrot (*London: HQ, 2018).
10. Wrey Delaney, *The Beauty of the Wolf* (London: HQ, 2019).
11. Sally Gardner, *The Snow Song* (London: Harper Collins, 2020).
12. Sally Gardner, *The Double Shadow* (London: Orion, 2011).
13. *Cf.* 'Ye Xian', first published in c.850 by Duan Chengshi.
14. Joseph O'Connor, *Shadowplay* (London: Harvill Secker, 2019).
15. Anthony Doerr, *All the Light We Cannot See* (USA: Harper Collins, 2015).
16. Amor Towles, *A Gentleman in Moscow* (USA: Viking, 2016).
17. Angela Carter, 'The Tiger's Bride' in *The Bloody Chamber* (USA: Penguin, 1992).