



*A review of*  
**Teaching  
Fairy Tales**

Lorenza Gianfrancesco

This volume is a collection of 27 essays examining the multidisciplinary nature of fairy-tale studies and its pedagogical significance. In her exhaustive introduction, Nancy Canepa provides a historiographical overview of fairy-tale studies whilst highlighting fairy-tale literature as a didactic tool which 'can encourage us to widen the parameters of how and what we think and do as educators and scholars' (4). Accordingly, the volume is divided into two big parts and six thematic chapters, each dealing with different aspects of fairy-tale teaching and scholarship.

'Foundations of Fairy-Tale Studies' (Section I) provides a theoretical analysis of the discipline and reflects on issues of defining, historicising, canonising and reconstructing specific fairy-tale traditions. In her contribution titled 'What Is a Fairy Tale', Maria Tatar views fairy tales as possessing common traits such as magic, metamorphosis, brevity and timelessness, to name a few. In her reflection, Tatar engages with an established scholarly tradition that has looked at fairy tales from folkloric, structural, anthropological, and sociological angles.

In 'The Prehistory of Fairy Tales', Graham Anderson looks at the connections between four widely known fairy tales and Graeco-Roman mythology. In so doing, Anderson interestingly reconstructs pathways of continuous transmission across the centuries whilst arguing that myths and fairy tales 'are simply tales with a variety of options available' (30). In 'The Evolution of Folk- and Fairy Tales in Europe and North America', Jack Zipes poignantly looks at the wonder tale as originating within the context of oral storytelling later appropriated by the fairy-tale literary tradition through a process of textualisation, giving voice to socially and culturally marginalised groups. By adopting a historical approach, Zipes then provides an overview of the process that established the fairy-tale genre first in Europe and then in North America. Zipes argues that it was in late 17th-century France that fairy tales became 'a legitimate genre for educated classes', although it is worth noting that Basile's tales of magic were unarguably addressed and indeed performed to an academic and courtly audience in early 17th-century Naples. In 'The Fairy-Tale Canon', Donald Haase reflects upon both the legitimacy and the complexities embraced in the concept of canon. Analysing the limitation of a crystallised fairy-tale canon within the multicultural dimension of contemporary western society, Haase interestingly argues for a

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revisionist approach to the idea of a fairy-tale canon that continually challenges, reworks and reinterprets established perceptions of traditional fairy tales.

'Teaching and Learning with Fairy Tales' (Section II) is divided into seven long chapters, each providing an extensive analysis of the historical, pedagogical and historiographical dimension of fairy-tale studies. Accordingly, Lewis C. Seifert, in 'Fairy Tales and the Classroom' (Chapter 1), reflects on the strategies and contents for fairy-tale courses aimed at enhancing students' scholarly knowledge of the field and of the meaning and function of fairy tales. Together with survey courses aimed at raising awareness on the vast thematic and geographic range of fairy tales, Seifert combines a theoretical and historical approach to teaching fairy tales which focuses on comparative reading, close engagement with primary material and, equally importantly, self-reflection and creative writing. In their contributions, Anne E. Duggan, Victoria Somoff, and Gina M. Miele discuss the teaching of specific tales. The case studies analysed in this section are 'The Beauty and the Beast', 'The Fisherman and his Wife' and Italo Calvino's 'The Parrot' respectively. Duggan reflects on the enduring popularity of 'The Beauty and the Beast' as a story about marriage, sexuality and female agency (81). Through a detailed description of her course on the genesis and variants of 'The Beauty and the Beast', which includes a detailed appendix on course material and student activities, Duggan presents her students with a number of case studies which are comparatively approached as primary sources whilst being located within a solid corpus of theoretical literature including queer studies. Among the case studies presented are Apuleius, Straparola, d'Aulnoy, Carter and Disney. Here, an analysis of Basile's 'The Goat-Faced Girl' would have provided students with an additional perspective of the link between monstrosity and female agency. In a similar vein, Somoff and Miele present the case studies analysed in their teaching, with Somoff looking at four variants of 'The Fisherman and his Wife' (ATU 555) for the opening session of a course on Russian fairy tales. Again, through a comparative reading that makes use of the Proppian model, students look at the differences in the variants under scrutiny, thereby concluding that the return of some characters to the state that precedes their encounter with the magic world is not a result of punishment but rather the results of the changing conditions 'under which the miraculous works' (109).

'Fairy Tales in Context' offers a range of interpretative approaches to fairy tales that draw upon folklore, structuralism, classical studies, gender studies, cultural history, intellectual history and visual arts. The aim here is to provide students with courses that reinforce their critical thinking and historical analysis. Focussing on early modern Italy and France, the essays contained in this chapter focus on major figures including Giovanni Francesco Straparola, Giambattista Basile, Charles Perrault, Catherine Bernard, Marie-Jeanne l'Héritier de Villandon, not to mention Baroness d'Alnoy. Thus fairy-tale literature is located within the broader context of courtly life, academies and the Republic of Letters. Here, Faith E. Beasley's essay provides an excellent example of a teaching approach that looks at the socio-historical dimension of the French Salon culture and the fairy-tale literature it produced. Indeed, knowledge of the context can considerably deepen students' understanding of fairy tales as historical sources.

'Teaching New Scholarly Approaches to Fairy Tales' offers an overview of current scholarship on fairy-tale studies and its pedagogical impact. Teaching fairy-tales through the lenses of disciplines that include women's studies, cognitive criticism, comparative studies and digital humanities discloses multiple formative outcomes. The cognitive-affective approach, for instance, exposes students to move beyond a conventional analysis of fairy tales in order to discover a network of meanings and subtleties. The didactic use of digital humanities enables students to acquire a web of research and writing skills, academic networking and even public engagement through fairy tales. This chapter also contains a brilliant contribution that approaches the teaching of fairy tales from a disability studies perspective. Indeed, fairy tales offer a variety of examples concerned with disability – whether it be cognitive, social or physical – that have the potential to widen students' horizons whilst enhancing their knowledge of how fairy-tale literature has conceptualised otherness in different historical periods.

'Fairy Tales in the Foreign-Language Classroom' contains contributions specifically concerned with the didactic use of fairy-tale literature in language teaching. By engaging in learning activities that include reading, acquiring linguistic variants and even performing fairy tales written in a foreign language, students consolidate their linguistic competence whilst deepening their knowledge of the cultural dimension that languages embrace. Moreover, as Christine A. Jones points out in her contribution, the teaching of French through fairy and folktale stories in Francophone areas can reveal its deep connections with colonial history and also forms of multilingual assimilation.

'Fairy-Tale Activities and Projects' presents learning activities which, in some cases, complement or even replace traditional class-based teaching. The variety of learning activities discussed in this chapter range from a student-centred organisation of an exhibition on fairy-tale illustrations to an approach that looks at fairy tales within the perspective of economic history. In our time, the teaching of fairy tales can also lose its 'physicality'. E-learning has proved to be a successful platform within which students debate and engage with fairy-tale literature, sharing views and stimulating self-reflection. The didactic malleability of fairy tales, as often discussed in this volume, achieves an important result in the teaching of languages and comparative literature. The concluding contribution in this chapter shows the extent to which thought-provoking learning activities enable students to challenge conventions and creatively rework old tales within a contemporary context to give voice to emotions and individual experiences.

'Fairy-Tale Courses' concludes this volume and contains a number of course syllabi which provide an in-depth description of teaching activities, reading lists, modes of assessment and approaches.

The strength of this volume lies in the wealth of pedagogical approaches to fairy-tale literature. In addition, it provides samples of teaching activities, a detailed scholarly bibliography and inspiring course descriptions. The critical, comparative and textual analysis

of fairy-tale literature is, however, not always complemented by an equally detailed historical analysis of the context wherein some important fairy tales originated. Although the 17th-century French milieu has received much attention, the impression is that more space should be devoted to the teaching of the early modern Italian context. Similarly, although a number of contributors refer to Basile, a more in-depth analysis of the context within which he operated would have been welcome.

*Teaching Fairy Tales* is an inspiring volume and a testimony to Nancy Canepa's vision and scholarship. She brings together the voices of both world-leading and new scholars, thereby providing a wealth of material on the teaching of fairy tales that is original, creative and multidisciplinary. This volume is a major contribution to the field and a demonstration of the tremendous pedagogical significance of fairy-tale studies both within and beyond the context of the humanities.

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### *A review of* **Irish Gothic Fairy Tales**

B.C. Kennedy

**H**usband and wife team Steve Lally and Paula Flynn Lally's *Irish Gothic Fairy Tales* is a compilation of fairy tales and poems about the *Sidhe*, and their magical encounters with mortals, gathered from each of the 32 counties in Ireland. These enigmatic creatures are not, the authors assure us, the magical Disneyesque flittering winged beings such as Tinkerbell in *Peter Pan*, or the delicate sweet fairies painted by the Victorian and Edwardian artists Richard Dadd and Edward Robert Hughes. They also do not resemble the photographs of the Cottingley Fairies fabricated

by Elsie Wright and Frances Griffiths during the reign of King George V. Rather the *Sidhe*, who go under many names – including the good folk, wee folk, gentle people and the fey, amongst others – lend themselves more to the imaginings of Edgar Allan Poe, H.P. Lovecraft, Harry Clarke, Sheridan Le Fanu and Bram Stoker; hence the title of this book, *Irish Gothic*: a readable collection which gives insight into the magical world of Irish fairies. Creatures such as the Pooka; the *Abhartaigh* – an ancient Celtic demon dwarf who played a harp to seduce women and then drink their blood; the banshee, a fairy woman whose keening foretells death; and the *Fear Gorta* (the Hungry Man), a phantom figure from the Great Famine (1845-9) who roamed the famine villages of West Mayo looking for food and alms, make an appearance in the stories. While all the elements of Gothic literature are not present in these stories, expressions of fear, suspense, supernatural elements and curses make for compelling reading.

Foregrounded in the Irish tradition of folklorists and storytellers such as William Butler Yeats, Eileen O' Faolain, Sinead Da Valera and John Campbell, this book was, we are told, inspired by the authors' memories of listening to tales of the 'good folk' as children, which instilled the fascination with the sublime and otherness that impelled them to research this anthology. In the introduction the authors touch on some of the problems they encountered in writing this book, such as the difficulty they had getting people to share their experiences with the *Sidhe* for 'fear of being heard and quite possibly punished', an interesting notion in the 21st century. For the Lallys this book has been a 'labour of love' and part of the process was the whimsical black-and-white artwork: James Patrick Ryan created a coat of arms for each country, and a series of ornate borders for each of the illustrations that pay tribute to the plates of the great master of fairy illustrations, Arthur Rackham.

The stories are grouped in four chapters reflecting the four Provinces of Ireland, helpfully illustrated at the beginning of the book. Each tale is preceded by the name and coat of arms of the county from where it derives. This also includes the county's Irish name, its meaning and a summary of each county's folkloric heritage. The Giant's Causeway, for example, said to have been built by the legendary hero and giant Fionn mac Cumhaill, is cited under County Antrim. In addition, legendary sites associated with the fairies, heroes, kings and queens of Ireland such as Skellig Michael (recently home to the Jedi Master, Luke Skywalker of *Star Wars* fame), Newgrange and the Caves of Kesh are listed, as well as poets, folklorists, songwriters and historical figures associated with each of the counties. This contextualises each story extremely well while providing pointers to any further studies in this area that a reader may wish to pursue. The book concludes with an imaginative addendum on how to keep on the right side of the *Sidhe*, to be ignored at your peril! It includes a bibliography and pertinent websites and overall has been well researched. More specific references in places, and an index – a surprising omission – would also have been helpful to the reader.

There is a modern sense of eco-conservation that weaves its way through the narratives. The Lellys tell us that during their research for this book they spoke with many people, old and young, who experienced first-hand the mischievous ways of the fairy folk. Some were trapped in fields for hours or even days and some were tormented after cutting a bush or a tree, but what they discovered is that most people, whether they believe in fairies or not, both respect and fear them in equal measure and don't tempt fate by interfering with what they feel is fairy property. Stories of people who built houses on fairy paths, cut down fairy trees or farmed over fairy forts all have one common denominator: none of them have happy endings. When the land is abused, the fairy folk will retaliate and the consequences were often severe. The *Sidhe* are regarded as guardians of the land with a particular fondness for the colour green, thus, we are told, it is frowned upon to have a green shed as it is the chosen colour of the good folk. A farmer's tale from Galway tells how the fairies related their anxiety to him: about how their underground world was being torn apart by modern agricultural growth and how they were losing their grip on the land as their fairy paths, forts and trees are dug up and destroyed. It would seem that the *Sidhe*, like us, are concerned that the land is being destroyed by modern chemicals and pesticides. For the authors, they feel that since collecting these stories they have become more aware of the land and the beauty of nature, how precious it is and the wonderful secrets that dwell within it. Overall this is a beautifully presented anthology, and the illustrations are in keeping with the stories that are told. The format of relating a story from each country gives an overall sense of balance and makes for an enjoyable read.

Authors: Steve Lally & Paula Flynn Lally.

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