



*A review of*  
**The Sorcerer's  
Apprentice:  
An Anthology  
of Magical Tales**

Donald Haase

**J**ack Zipes' English-language anthology of tales about master magicians and their pupils is a book of our time and for our time. As Zipes says in the preface, '[A]s I was developing this project, it gradually became clear to me why I had become infatuated with these tales: they have given me some signs of hope when it seemed that we were living in hopeless times. The more I dug into the 'Sorcerer's Apprentice' tradition, the more I discovered examples of opposition and resistance to wicked sorcerers of all kinds, who exploit magic for their own gain, and the ways magic can enlighten readers about oppressive conditions under which they live. It is this hope that prompted me to publish the tales in this book' (xi). The anthology's more than 50 magical tales – from different periods and different African, American, Asian, and European countries and cultures – offer readers the potential for that enlightenment.

The book's power lies not only in the tales themselves but also in its substantial introduction, which gives readers an original and provocative framework in which to read the tales, a hallmark of Zipes' anthologies. Entitled 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice, Harry Potter, and Why Magic Matters', Zipes' introduction uses historical, cultural, philosophical, and theoretical perspectives to show that Sorcerer's Apprentice tales 'deal with problems of attaining awareness of the self and of the world' (4) and 'evinces a deep belief in the power of magic/mana as a supernatural means to "fashion" or "create" one's life as one personally desires and to triumph over nefarious forces that seek to hinder self-development' (6). Because we all must undergo these struggles, Zipes argues, it is imperative 'that we recognize how the "Sorcerer's Apprentice" tales inform our lives more than we realize' (6). He makes his case by ascribing the popularity of the Harry Potter novels 'to the rich worldwide tradition of "Sorcerer's Apprentice" tales' (6), which he categorises into two 'antagonistic tale types' (28)—the Humiliated Apprentice, in which 'the struggle between master and pupil is always won by the master' (18), and the Rebellious Apprentice, in which the student uses acquired knowledge (mana) to defeat and be freed from the master.

The introduction proceeds to lay out the long history of the Humiliated Apprentice and the Rebellious Apprentice tale types in oral and literary culture, before explaining the two tale types in terms of Friedrich Hegel's master-slave dialectic. Zipes also draws on the memetic theory of cultural transmission, which he originally applied to folktales

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and fairy tales in *Why Fairy Tales Stick* (2006), to maintain that ‘tales related to the “Rebellious Apprentice” and to the “Humiliated Apprentice” form a memplex that reflects positive and negative cultural attitudes about magic, power, and knowledge in most parts of the world’ (38). Whereas the introduction began by positing the role of the master-pupil relationship in the phenomenal popularity of the Harry Potter novels, it concludes by demonstrating the importance of the Sorcerer’s Apprentice memplex and the dialectical master-slave conflicts in three specific contexts: in Krabat tales from Lusatia and Central Europe, in cinema, and in novels and stories for children, young adults, and adults. In the end, Zipes’ thoroughly researched 82-page introduction – rich in detail, cultural and historical breadth, and relevant theory – offers compelling evidence that Sorcerer’s Apprentice tales are indeed more important than we might have realised, and that, in Zipes’ terms, ‘the memetic driving force is rooted in the cultural memory of worldwide master-slave conflicts that persist today’ (54).

The 56 tales Zipes has selected for *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* fall respectively into sections reflecting the categories identified in the introduction – Humiliated Apprentice tales and Rebellious Apprentice tales – with a third section for Krabat tales. While texts range chronologically from 170 CE to 1997, most are from the 19th and 20th centuries. Having these tales between the covers of a single volume and framed by Zipes’ illuminating introduction is a boon to readers and fairy-tale scholars. *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* is perfectly framed and organised to prompt us to read the tales dialectically and critically, to compare not only the two tale types but also the nuances and differences among tales of the same type, and to use the depiction of the master-slave conflict to examine our own position(s) in that struggle.

It is a striking paradox that a tale type of such historical stamina and cultural significance should have been, until recently, relatively neglected by folktale and fairy-tale scholars. ‘My hope,’ says Zipes, ‘is that other scholars and critics will use my research to continue to explore the “magic” not only in the “Sorcerer’s Apprentice” tales but also in tale types that are rooted in our cultural memories’ (xxiv). He has provided us the inspiration and the tools to do just that. In addition to important leads in its introduction, the book includes a filmography and a selected chronological list of Sorcerer’s Apprentice tales encompassing 12 pages, as well as a 17-page bibliography of primary and secondary literature, offering readers a starting point for further reading and viewing. As always, Zipes shows us how a knowledgeable master can put these mundane tools of scholarship to work to reveal the magic.

Editor: Jack Zipes.

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