

John George Brown,  
'Beggar Boy' (1885/7).



# Writing New Fairy Tales: The Tattered Coat

Sherryl Clark

## Introduction

The writing of new, original fairy tales presents writers with ongoing challenges of voice, originality, language, structure, authenticity and motifs. Each new author that attempts to tackle these issues is hoping to answer the question of how to write new fairy tales that have the same resonance and endurance as traditional tales. One popular theory is that the tales' endurance is due to the ways in which we respond to them on an unconscious level, a response that can transform and empower us. I use the term 'unconscious' in the way that Susan Cooper does in her essay in *Dreams and Wishes* (1996), not in a psychoanalytic or clinical way. She says about writing fantasy, 'You have to go further inside. You have to make so close a connection with the unconscious that the unbiddable door will open and the images fly out, like birds.'<sup>1</sup>

While researching these questions, I developed a writing process for myself that would help to open my 'unbiddable door', so that my own original tales might emerge, or 'fly out like birds'. Using this process will hopefully bring forth stories that would inspire both conscious and unconscious responses from my readers.

As a children's writer, I am often asked by my readers where I get my ideas from. I talk about notebooks and writing on the backs of old envelopes and serviettes, about pen and paper by the bed in case an idea comes in those moments before sleep. But what I'm really saying is – an idea can come at any time, sparked by almost anything. The notebooks and scraps of paper are to ensure these ideas don't escape, and that I write them down as soon as possible.

An important example of this occurred during my studies at Hamline University, when I researched and wrote an essay on original fairy-tale picture books. One of the books I analysed was *Fox* by Margaret Wild<sup>2</sup> and, at the time, I hoped that one day I could write such a powerful story. Three days after sending my essay to my supervisor, I was standing in the shower, and the first lines of a story came to me. I wrote them down as soon as I could and continued writing throughout the morning until I had a story called 'The Grab-Me'. This was the genesis of my first original fairy tale.

When I thought about what had happened and how, I decided it had likely been the close examination of fairy tales, thinking and reading about them, reading Susan Cooper's essay, and then my own consciously expressed desire to write something similar that had led to the door opening and 'a bird flying out'. (I also recognised elements of *Beowulf* in the

story, which I have used in my classes.) I reasoned that if it had happened once, perhaps it could happen again, if I repeated the process.

Once an idea struck, it was important to determine a writing process that would continue to make the best possible use of what might lie in my unconscious and draw out further fairy tale elements and themes. Natalie Goldberg talks about writing as practice, 'composting' experiences and learning to trust your own mind.<sup>3</sup> Although it sounds paradoxical, free writing works best using her methods and her rules. She suggests writing for at least twenty minutes and her rules include 'Keep your hand moving', 'Don't think', 'Lose control' and 'Go for the jugular'.<sup>4</sup> Over the past twenty-five years, I have used these free writing rules successfully many times, for myself and with hundreds of writing students of all ages. I know from my own experience and practice that I am able to direct my free writing to particular topics.

How might I best use this knowledge for writing fairy tales in the context of a creative thesis? Drawing on my experience of writing 'The Grab-Me', I thought that the key to the process was seizing the idea and exploring it as far as possible via fast free writing in one *sitting*. This would make it more likely and possible for me to access ideas and material from my unconscious. This laid the foundation of my practice-led research, but it was important to resist becoming circular, and ensure that my research questions regarding endurance and resonance both stimulated the creative works and also led to the discovery of new knowledge and the development of sound theoretical answers. These cautions are sounded in scholarly articles about practice-led research, such as those by Jen Webb, Scott Brook and Andrew MacNamara.<sup>5</sup>

Over the following months, as I wrote both new fairy tales and my novel, I also continued to read traditional fairy tales, particularly those of the Brothers Grimm. I also discovered that my research in academic texts was playing a significant part in informing my process. For example, one idea sprang in a few seconds from reading about the use of tablecloths in Warner's book, *Once Upon a Time*, and led to my tale, 'The Magic Tablecloth'.<sup>6</sup> Other ideas have come from paintings and installations, symbols of personal interest and current political issues of concern to me. In all, I wrote seven fairy tales during my project, and selected four for inclusion in the thesis, of which 'The Tattered Coat' is one.

At this point I am able to make several important observations on what emerged from my process. The ongoing reading of fairy tales, mainly from translations of the Brothers Grimm collections<sup>7</sup> and online versions, seemed to unconsciously influence me to use similar language, cadence and patterns in all of my free writing of fairy tales. These elements have emerged without conscious effort. For example, my tales begin 'Once there was ...' and use more formal language and sentence constructions than in my normal prose writing. I have adhered to the traditional use of third person, past tense and the fairy-tale use of specific numbers,<sup>8</sup> as well as repetitions of actions, phrases and words.

The tales I have written also draw on a range of common motifs such as the young person who gives up food to a hungry elder; duality in theme and character; and instrumental 'helper' animals and birds. All of these appeared in the free writing process, along with the language, as if I were taking on that traditional storyteller's voice. At no time did I deliberately try to create this kind of voice.

In subsequent revisions of my tales, I worked to keep this voice, rather than amend the language to modern usage and terminology, because in endeavouring to create the same resonance as the Grimms' tales, language and cadence were important. While there have been criticisms of Wilhelm Grimm's continuing embellishments and alterations in the Grimms' various editions between 1812 and 1857,<sup>9</sup> it is his later versions that have mostly been retold and republished most often. This indicates to me that his revised choices of language and construction, and the resulting cadence and rhythm, have played a significant part in their continuing popularity and in readers' and listeners' responses to them.

The process does necessarily not lend itself to all kinds of creative writing. A major part of my thesis was a novel for readers aged 11-14 years. While the free writing process worked in early explorations of story and character, by the time I had around 15,000 words of a first draft, it became clear that the demands of plotting and character in a much longer work were not being served. I continued to use free writing as an exploratory tool, but returned to my usual plotting methods in order to ensure the novel, *Red Magic*, worked for its intended audience. Nevertheless, many of the early fairy tale elements were incorporated and stayed in the final draft.

I believe 'The Tattered Coat' came from my weekends spent in the Australian bush, but also from the native animals I see. These have included many different species of birds, especially tiny wrens, robins and finches; wombats; kangaroos and wallabies; as well as foxes and fox cubs (or kits), which are hunted as vermin. In this tale, however, the animals are European, of the kind that appear in the traditional Western European tales I had been reading.

A key motif in fairy tales is the generosity and kindness shown to the elderly or impoverished, and the subsequent unexpected (but earned) reward. It is a feature that appeals to me and has appeared in several of the stories I have written, including this one. The principle of unselfishness, sharing what one has, however little, and caring for others is something I seem to feel compelled to write about.

I also like the idea of a coat with many pockets, although I am not sure where this originates. There is a Grimms' tale called 'Bearskin'<sup>10</sup> which is about a green jacket with pockets always filled with gold, but this story involves a deal with the devil. My reflection journal records no correlation that I made at the time with any other story.

Although, like the others I have written, the first draft of this tale came quickly in one sitting, I was not happy with either the beginning or ending. I wanted the characters of the boy and girl to be children, not teenagers, so the tale would be more suitable as

a contemporary fairy tale. Therefore there would be no marriage at the end to create my 'happily ever after', nor, given the parents' deaths, a happy return home. Instead I wrestled with what the boy's reward might be.

I realised that the forest was an important element in the story, both as initially a frightening place for the boy to journey through (venturing into the forest is regarded in many stories as a symbol of facing one's fears)<sup>11</sup> and as a natural environment that is now under threat in our world. I have endeavoured to tie these aspects of the forest together to create a stronger ending.

All writers hope their stories will endure and be retold. Bruno Bettelheim said, in *The Uses of Enchantment*, that fairy tales should not be explained to children, that they should be allowed to draw from a tale whatever meaning and empowerment they need.<sup>12</sup> Thus the themes in 'The Tattered Coat' of facing your fears, deep human connection with the natural world and caring for others should remain under the surface, but hopefully work to create the resonance and endurance I was seeking.

## The Tattered Coat

Once there was a boy who lived on a small farm with his father and mother. They all worked hard, and the father was a naturally cheerful man, despite their hardship, and cheered them all up with jokes and banter. The farm was owned by a wealthy man who didn't look after his tenants. The father would often send his son into the nearby forest to forage for food such as mushrooms and berries, which helped them to survive.

But when the boy's parents suddenly died in an accident with an overturned cart, the boy was left all alone. The wealthy man would not let him stay in the cottage so the boy decided to venture out into the world and look for work. He gathered the last loaf of bread and piece of cheese and set out on the road.

The sun shone, the day was warm, and he was happy to be on the road but was still deeply sad inside. He trudged along, feeling very lonely, and so was glad when an old man hailed him.

'I'm starving,' said the old man. 'I can't work and I haven't eaten for days.'

'Then you must have this loaf of bread and piece of cheese,' said the boy.

'What about you?' the old man asked.

'I'm making my way in the world,' said the boy. 'I'll find work and earn money for more bread and cheese.'

'Then let me give you my coat in return,' said the old man.

The boy looked at the tattered old coat and was of a mind to refuse, but he knew it would be bad-mannered and so agreed to take the coat. He put it on to please the old man and, as it didn't make him too hot, he kept it on as he walked.

He came to a dark forest and stopped, wondering if he should go through. It wasn't at all like the forests he knew. This one was dank and gloomy, with deep menacing shadows and no flowers, only rotting wood and black ferns. But the forest was so large that there seemed to be no way around it. He took a deep breath and set off along the forest path.

It wasn't long before night fell and he could no longer see his way. He decided to find a tree hollow to sleep in. He'd no sooner lain down than a rabbit came and curled up next to him. The boy thought about killing the rabbit, for then he'd be sure of a good breakfast for his empty rumbling stomach, but he couldn't bring himself to do it.

Then six sparrows alighted on him, tucked their heads under their wings and went to sleep. Finally, just as he was nodding off, a small fox came and settled by his feet. The boy couldn't contain his surprise, not least because the animals were not afraid of each other. He fell asleep and, when he woke in the morning, they were all lined up in front of him, watching him.

'What do you want?' he asked, but of course they didn't answer. He put his hand into the coat pocket and found a meagre handful of crumbs that he sprinkled for the sparrows. In another pocket, strangely, there was a lettuce leaf for the rabbit, and in another pocket he found a few grapes for the fox.

When he set off again, he thought the animals would leave him, but instead they kept pace, the rabbit and fox at his heels and the sparrows above his head. The boy thought this was even stranger but he didn't want to tell them to go away.

Suddenly, he heard thunderous hoof beats heading his way. There was no time to run or hide, but in a trice the sparrows flew into one pocket, the rabbit jumped into another, and the fox climbed into the largest pocket of all.

A few seconds later, two soldiers on horses raced along the path and stopped in front of him. 'What are you doing trespassing in the King's forest?' they shouted.

'I didn't know this belonged to the King,' the boy said.

'You lie,' said one soldier.

'Everyone knows they are not allowed in here,' said the other.

'You must be stealing game,' said the first.

'We'll take you to the King,' said the second.

'He will very likely hang you,' said the first.

'Very likely,' said the second.

The boy was dizzy, trying to follow what they were saying, and hardly struggled as they caught him up, tied his hands and feet and threw him across the back of the first soldier's horse. The boy hoped the animals in his pockets weren't being squashed, but he was much more afraid that the King might find them and he would surely be hanged for poaching game.

When they reached the palace, the soldiers dragged him to the King. The King looked even more grumpy and mean than the soldiers and the boy's heart sank. In fact, everyone in the court looked unhappy and frowning.

'You have been trespassing and stealing my game,' shouted the King.

The boy bowed low. 'No, Your Majesty. I have no bow or knife or sword. I am not a hunter, I promise.'

'What are you then?' the King asked.

The boy thought hard but all he could remember was his father's laughter and jokes and his mother's smiles, and how he would never see them again. Except ... if the King hanged him, maybe he would see them again!

That thought made him smile, and the King shouted, 'What is so funny, you idiot? Are you some kind of jester?'

Immediately, the boy answered, 'I believe I am, Your Majesty.' For what did he have to lose? Perhaps if his heart stopped racing and he could calm his fear, he might even remember one of his father's jokes to tell.

'Very well,' said the King. 'Show me a trick. And it had better be a good one, or you will die.'

From within the coat, the boy felt the sparrows wriggle and jiggle. He put his hands into the top pockets and drew out the six sparrows. They twittered and chirped and then flew around his head in perfect formation, swooping up and down and finally coming to rest in a rafter.

The King and the court were silent but, from somewhere in the back, he heard a faint clapping which made the King start in surprise. He didn't mention it; instead he said, 'Not bad, but not enough to save you. What else have you got to offer?'

The boy felt the rabbit wriggle then, so he put his hand in the second pocket and drew it out. When he put the rabbit on the floor, it proceeded to perform like an acrobat, doing flips and rolls and finishing with a paw-stand, wagging its little furry tail.

This time the boy saw smiles around the court. Even the King's frown had almost gone. And again there was faint clapping and a small giggle.

'Not enough to save you yet,' the King growled.

The rabbit had leapt back into its pocket and now the fox jumped out. When it sat on the floor, its whiskers twitching and its fine red fur gleaming in the lamplight, the court gasped and the King's eyebrows rose in astonishment.

The fox began to scamper around in circles, flipping and skipping, walking on its hind legs, and finally doing an amazing cartwheel before bowing to the King. All around the court applause broke out, and even the King smiled. As the fox ran back to the boy and the applause died away, the sounds of soft clapping and a tinkling laugh came closer.

From behind a screen next to the King's throne, a girl emerged. She had pale, pale skin and long dark hair. Her cheeks were flushed pink and her eyes sparkled. 'Oh Father, that was the best show I have ever seen. I feel so much better.'

The King's face was a picture of joy. 'You have worked a miracle,' said the King to the boy. 'We feared she would pine away. I promised whoever made my daughter well and happy again could have whatever they wanted.'

The boy was so astonished that at first he couldn't reply. The sparrows perched on his shoulders and the rabbit and the fox sat at his feet while he thought about the King's offer. Then he said, 'Thank you, Your Majesty. What we would like is to live in your forest, but it is such a dark, forbidding place.'

'When my daughter fell ill,' the King said, 'I was so sad and angry that I forbade everything to grow or to be bright and happy. But now that she is better, I will restore the forest. You may live there as long as you wish and you will be paid a good stipend as your reward.'

So the boy was permitted to live in the forest with all the animals, and flowers began to grow again and sunlight made its way through the branches and the rot disappeared. The princess loved to walk in the forest and often visited the boy and the animals, and she became completely well again. The boy still missed his parents greatly, but he found much joy in the forest and was not so lonely anymore.

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## Sherryl Clark

### Notes

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12. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (London: Penguin, 1991).