



# Once Upon a 'Fairy Tale Revolution': Adapting Canonical Fairy Tales Beyond Happily Ever After

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**T**he staying power of the fairy tale as a genre relies on its transformative potential, its endless potential to be always remade to meet the needs of the current world, creating a continuum of story and dialogue between past and present. As Cristina Bacchilega notes, 'the multiplicity of fairy-tale versions and the multivocality of the genre offer a fertile opportunity for intervening in an already multi-layered reflection on story, social practices, and cultural values'.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, Maria Tatar notes that 'the pleasures of the genre arouse curiosity about the world around us and provide social, cultural, and intellectual capital for navigating its perils. For that reason, fairy tales have been credited with an insurrectionary and emancipatory potential'.<sup>2</sup> The two critics here both highlight the social and cultural positioning of the genre and its potential to provoke new ways of viewing the world, as products of the tales' historical contexts.

The new 'Fairy Tale Revolution' series from the Penguin Random House's Vintage Children's Classics imprint seizes on this transformative impulse, commissioning new tales 'with compassion and freedom at their core'.<sup>3</sup> The books are marketed as reinventions, remixes and updates, specifically for children: *Hansel and Greta* by Jeanette Winterson, *Cinderella Liberator* by Rebecca Solnit, *Duckling* by Kamila Shamsie, and *Blueblood* by Malorie Blackman. These picture books were published in the UK in late 2020, and three of them are due to be published in the US in late 2021 (*Cinderella Liberator* is available in the US at the time of writing, published in 2019 by Haymarket Books). But though the marketing emphasises compassion and freedom, the 'revolutionary' nature of these texts is really the transformation of the concept of the 'happy ending' – something Marina Warner identifies as characterising the wonder tale<sup>4</sup> – each of them moving away from the individual's happiness or transcendence of their situation, and towards a happily ever after as a greater sense of justice, or the potential to build a more just world, with resolutions that are more attainable than acts of magic and wonder. Together, these books indicate a new direction for the transformation of the genre, and the evolution of both the fairy tale itself and the concept of what makes a 'happy ending' after all.

Imagine 'Hansel and Gretel' but where food insecurity and greed is replaced with the evils of capitalist conspicuous consumption and resource-grabbing, and the resolution involves a rejection of that mode of contemporary life. Or 'The Ugly Duckling', but at the end the duckling realises not that they are beautiful, but that they are more than their appearance to others. Or a retelling of 'Bluebeard' where there is no enchanted key, but in which abusive men are brought to their knees. Or maybe a version of 'Cinderella' that questions child labour and argues for dignity in work to liberate everyone. These are postmodern retellings, descendants of writers such as Margaret Atwood, Anne Sexton and Angela Carter, providing a 'revised magic'<sup>5</sup> that does 'more than alter our reading of these narratives. Like metafolklore, they constitute an ideological test for previous interpretations and in doing so, postmodern fairy tales exhibit an awareness of how the folktale, which modern humans relegate to the nursery, almost vindictively patterns our unconscious.'<sup>6</sup> This patterning can also be thought of as what Maria Tatar calls 'palimpsestic memory, a vibrant process of building and demolishing, all the while leaving traces of the stories antecedent to the new telling.'<sup>7</sup>

This 'fairy tale revolution' plays with both the patterns of folktales and the conventions of illustrated fairy-tale books from the golden age of children's picture books. Three of the texts are accompanied by illustrations commissioned from Laura Barrett to coordinate with the Arthur Rackham silhouettes paired with Rebecca Solnit's 'Cinderella' retelling, connecting the past and the present. They are then further tied together with covers designed by Anna Morrison, who creates continuity across the series with bold colours and silhouettes reflecting the style of the illustrations within and the narratives themselves. Just as Warner notes that it was women who 'consciously invented the modern fairy tale',<sup>8</sup> these four female authors are consciously disrupting the fairy tale as it has been known, witnessed by the author's 'Afterword' at the end of each book explaining their individual inspirations and intentions with their recreations. As such they can be considered intertextual, critical interventions, recollecting Vanessa Joosen's critical work<sup>9</sup> realised creatively and contemporarily: in dialogue not with fairy-tale criticism, but openly critical in an unabashed, unapologetic way of contemporary conditions. The open criticism is part of these retellings.

Bacchilega defines a postmodern fairy tale as 'characterized by a double movement of exposure: one that reveals the ideological framing of women in the most popular fairy tales and another that makes visible or activates unexploited or forgotten possibilities in these well-known stories'.<sup>10</sup> While satisfying retellings alone, together these texts reinvent the canonical fairy tale for the contemporary reader, specifically as framed by female voices. These authors remake the tales to fit modern audiences, inviting as works of postmodern adaptation a new take on the dangers of the present as part of a continuum of timeless ills such as food insecurity, domestic violence and discrimination. Hansel and Gretel's story becomes transformed through the much larger implications of global climate crisis; Bluebeard's control of his wife, and his violent murders of his past wives, are reinterpreted

into a tale where the consequences of vengeance are realised rather than glorified; the duckling finds hope in a cruel world, but the plight of the outsider has remained and become exacerbated; Cinderella becomes liberated from her two choices of marriage or servitude, and liberates others along with herself. The pursuit of a more just world puts these tales in dialogue with not only the postmodern retellings from the 1970s onwards, but the tradition of *les précieuses* and their successors – educated women in 17th-century France using the genre to argue for more equal and just treatment<sup>11</sup> – making them books that overtly deploy politics of both wonder and intertextuality to generate their commentary, literary acts of both critical and creative adaptation.

*Cinderella Liberator* by Rebecca Solnit is perhaps retold the closest to its originating tale, while also greatly expanding the narrative. Though fidelity is a somewhat meaningless metric of the value of an adaptation, especially when considering fairy tales and folklore, it is worth mentioning here because of how the series as a whole deploys, or does not deploy, wonder or magic in its resolutions. In her Afterword, Solnit writes about being struck by the scene of the transformation of pumpkin and mice into coach and horses, not just the magic itself, but ‘Cinderella’s active collaboration in bringing about the metamorphosis’.<sup>12</sup> In identifying this as a ‘story about transformation, not just about getting your prince’, as well as other relationships,<sup>13</sup> Solnit centres at her transformation of the text itself the question of ‘how to preserve something of the charm of transformation and the plight of the child, and how to work out a more palatable exit from her plight than the one we all know’.<sup>14</sup>

Solnit’s version decouples the idea of virtue from one’s self-worth, honours the working child ‘without kindness or security in their everyday lives’,<sup>15</sup> and disrupts the assumption that marriage is a route to a woman’s finding herself. She writes, reflecting on the story she created, that ‘it seemed to me that the solution to overwork and degrading work is not the leisure of a princess, passing off the work to others, but good, meaningful work with dignity and self-determination’.<sup>16</sup> Solnit makes the story more about the stepmother’s control, which moves the story to a frame of liberation beyond Cinderella’s alone, and redresses the idea that beauty has anything to do with someone’s intrinsic worth: agency and purpose can be revolutionary.

In *Cinderella Liberator*, the stepsisters are renamed Pearlita and Paloma (the Prince is also renamed from Charming to Nevermind). The stepmother remains unnamed, but from the beginning it is clear that Pearlita and Paloma are also oppressed in this narrative, as Solnit writes that the stepmother ‘wanted a lot for her own two daughters ... (Nobody asked what Cinderella or Pearlita or Paloma wanted)’.<sup>17</sup> Cinderella was able to interact with townspeople and so she ‘became a good cook. She got to know everyone in the marketplace. She grew strong and capable’.<sup>18</sup> In comparison, ‘Pearlita and Paloma sat upstairs trying on clothes and arranging their hair and not going out, because the people in the town were not fancy enough for them, according to their mother’.<sup>19</sup> Solnit removes the dichotomy of beauty and virtue layered into other versions of the story, most notably permeating the

popular imagination in modernity via Disney's cinematic adaptations of 1950 and 2015. By doing this she removes the taint of ugliness and its automatic condemnation from the stepsisters and also frees Cinderella from the implications of beauty as her only gift, highlighting her skills and capabilities.

The commentary on beauty is made more explicit when Paloma and Pearlita are getting ready for the ball, to which Cinderella has not been invited. The stepsisters are concerned with what they think will make them beautiful, but the narrative text shows that the sisters are constricted as well: 'their ballgowns [...] were so long and tight they couldn't have run after a dog or climbed a fence. They were not sure they were beautiful, but they were sure that being beautiful would make them happy.'<sup>20</sup>

On the same page, two paragraphs higher, Solnit dedicates the longest paragraph of text to explaining, 'But there isn't actually a most beautiful person in the world, because there are so many kinds of beauty', and goes on to describe many different versions of what might be found beautiful.<sup>21</sup> The text frames a black silhouette of Cinderella in her rags, while the facing page depicts Cinderella sitting on a stool, a line of rags drying about over her head, crying into a handkerchief. This discourse about love and beauty, and the accompanying illustration, highlight Cinderella's neglect, abandonment and loneliness, and also undermine the connections between beauty, self-worth and happiness held over from antecedent versions. The stepsisters are not evil here, but they are not happy. They cannot tell if they are beautiful or not, nor have they been shown another way to find their own sense of self-worth. Cinderella, too, cannot find happiness in her situation, because she is neglected and alone, but without a path to an improved situation.

The introduction of the fairy godmother and the scenes of transformation, the ball and the lost slipper unfold much as expected before the real disruptions to the narrative begin. The fairy godmother is waiting for Cinderella when she returns home, and passes on the lesson that 'true magic is to help each thing become its best and most free self',<sup>22</sup> before asking all of the transformed animals if they would like to be turned back to what they were or not. In this way, Solnit centres both agency and consent: the power of choice and right to self-determination extends to servants and animals. The Prince does search for Cinderella, but not to offer marriage. He does it because he 'was a very polite person, and he was sad he had frightened his guest and she had lost her shoe.'<sup>23</sup> Marriage is not the goal for either the prince or Cinderella in this narrative, and he too becomes more rounded a character with feelings and agency. Cinderella identifies herself as the owner of the slipper while her stepsisters are trying it on. This is the moment that Solnit pushes her disruption of the known 'Cinderella' narrative into a liberating reimagining, as the story's resolution is achieved through Cinderella's own agency. She provides a counternarrative to what it means to have wealth, stating that 'there is always enough for everyone, if you share it properly, or if it has been shared properly before you got there',<sup>24</sup> the use of 'you' addressing the reader directly, outside of the frame of the narrative itself. The fairy godmother returns to provide further

commentary, prophecy and backstory: this Cinderella is not the Disneyfied orphan,<sup>25</sup> her father is a judge 'who had to go far away to help others and thought his new wife and her daughters would be kind' and her mother is 'a great sea captain, who lost her ship at sea and will come home one day on another ship.'<sup>26</sup> Instead of the implication of a marriage and a new family, this Cinderella will be restored to the family she thought she had lost.

Where other versions of Cinderella end with the Prince finding her, or the punishment of the stepfamily, Solnit instead chooses to write new endings for everyone: Cinderella has a cake shop, Pearlita runs a hair salon, Paloma is a seamstress, and the stepmother becomes the 'roaring in the trees on stormy nights . . . saying *More and more and more* . . .'<sup>27</sup> In Solnit's telling, 'they became their truest selves.'<sup>28</sup> In the end, Cinderella gets to reclaim her name, Ella, as the final word of the story. By writing past the known end of a well-known fairy tale, Solnit seizes the potential of fairy-tale retellers to comment on society and call for change, most notably in line with postmodern feminist fairy-tale writers. Jack Zipes notes that writers such as Carter and Sexton were revolutionary not because they 'break with the past' but rather because their work reflects a pattern of 'working through, absorbing, and elaborating the past.'<sup>29</sup> He continues:

One of the important political purposes of women's writing of fairy tales was to demonstrate that nobody lived happily ever after the fairy tale seemingly ended, whether in fantasy or reality, and nobody will ever live happily ever after unless we change not only fairy-tale writing but social and economic conditions that further exploitative relations among the sexes, races, and social classes. This general purpose is still at the root of the best and most serious writing of fairy tales by women . . .<sup>30</sup>

Solnit seizes on this purpose, imagining new conditions where happiness might be realised, liberating both characters and readers alike.

Kamila Shamsie's *Duckling* also draws on themes of liberation, opening up Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Ugly Duckling' as a narrative of personal acceptance, but also about 'what happens when an outsider enters a homogenous world that is hostile to difference – and then what happens when that same outsider finds "her own tribe" again.'<sup>31</sup> Though the frame and scope of Shamsie's narrative remains far closer to Andersen's version than Solnit's did to other versions of 'Cinderella', it differs greatly in terms of the titular character's internal life, and how those thoughts are presented to readers as motivating the duckling's actions throughout the narrative. Shamsie reinvents 'The Ugly Duckling', dropping the 'ugly', changing the genders of several characters (the duckling becomes female, the old female duck in the barnyard becomes the male Grand Old Duck, among others) and deliberately layering

kindness throughout the narrative. In this version, the mother duck is kind to the duckling until her fear of expulsion from the safety of the barnyard wins out over her care for the child, and she too acts cruelly to her. The duckling sets off on her own, meeting many other creatures on her way, including two young goslings who call themselves adventurers and invite her to join them, before hunters disturb them. The duckling continues to travel, and suffer, until after a hard winter she asks herself, 'Is it better, perhaps, to risk cruelty if it also means taking a chance on kindness?'<sup>32</sup> This leads her to meet the swans who accept her, and this is where Shamsie, like Solnit, writes past the end of the antecedent tale, tapping into an 'improvisational energy [that] has always kept the fairy tale alive. Tellers walk down familiar paths but can branch off into new territory.'<sup>33</sup> Andersen's story ends with the Ugly Duckling's joy at his acceptance by the swans; Shamsie's story takes readers back to the beginning, returning the Egyptian stork who begins both tales but never appears again in Andersen's version. The duckling, who is now accepted by her own kind, observes those who accept her rejecting someone else for being different, when the stork returns looking for help to find the 'raincloud duck.'<sup>34</sup> The duckling is reunited with her mother and the two goslings who were kind to her. The swans first refuse to help, and then both the swans and the mother duck fight over who and what the duckling is. Shamsie's retelling closes with the duckling's declaration that she is 'an adventurer' and the closing narration line of 'Then she turned and looked at the geese, at the duck, at the stork, at the swans and at you who are reading this story. "Who's coming with me?" she said.'<sup>35</sup> Shamsie breaks the fourth wall and invites readers to also seize control of their own identities and determine for themselves who they are and who they will become, as well as how they will treat others.

*Hansel and Greta* by Jeanette Winterson takes a wider look at the world, retelling 'Hansel and Gretel' with an ecocritical, climate justice-oriented bent. The title includes an allusion to activist Greta Thunberg, and Winterson writes in her Afterword about 'all-consuming greed on the loose'<sup>36</sup> as a point of departure for her retelling. In this version, Gretel becomes Greta, and she, her brother Hansel who can talk to trees, and their dad (a lumberjack only referred to as Dad) live '[d]eep in the wood' with their dead mother's big sister GreedyGuts, who is 'at least 10 feet tall and 5 feet wide' and might be an ogre.<sup>37</sup> Greta's narration relates how her father works in the woods cutting down trees to clear space for a high-speed railway, and how GreedyGuts consumes food and resources insatiably. One day Greta's father decides destroying the forest is making him sad, so the family start planting trees in the forest to replace those being cut down and he eventually quits his job. From the outset, Winterson's version of the fairy tale questions the cost of so-called progress, drawing attention to what is lost in the face of technological improvements such as high-speed rail. While GreedyGuts is away in the city visiting her friend GuzzleGuts, Greta, Hansel and their dad start living more sustainably, planting a garden, raising chickens for eggs, and fishing, this version of the story becoming an unabashedly ecocritical revision of the fairy tale. Winterson's call for sustainability is put in direct contrast to GreedyGuts' worldview where 'the point of life is to eat as much



as possible [and] make as much money as possible.<sup>38</sup> Eventually Dad goes to the city to find work to support GreedyGuts' consumption. She then has Dad's ex-boss (BeardFace) drop Hansel and Greta in the middle of a destroyed part of the woods where they have never been before, near an abandoned house, a rhetorical move that absolves Hansel and Greta's father of his active abandonment of his children in antecedent versions. Hansel and Greta meet a Little Tree, who tells them about the Witch in the Wood who had been driven out of the woods by the bulldozers. The three make their way back home to try to call their dad and tell him what has happened, but find their house occupied by GreedyGuts, GuzzleGuts, BeardFace, and his brother BogFace. The children and Little Tree are then abandoned in the city by BogFace who says, 'Now go and get a job and don't come back until you've made a million pounds',<sup>39</sup> reiterating the consumerist values that Winterson villainises through the narrative. The children then meet a lady in a park with 'a pointy nose, lots of black hair, only two teeth, and her eyes were red',<sup>40</sup> who offers to help them with the caveat that they 'don't eat her house'.<sup>41</sup> This is, in fact, the Little Tree's friend, the Witch of the Wood. She lives in a Gingerbread House in a compound that can only be accessed by ticketholders. She has been put there by GuzzleGuts, and the gingerbread is not made of 'normal sugar and normal chocolate and normal cake. It's a special recipe – and when you eat it, all you want is to eat more and more and more.'<sup>42</sup> GuzzleGuts sells this Evil Gingerbread through her website and gets rich; the witch is stuck as part of a type of 'Santa's Grotto thing' where 'kids come to see the wicked witch'.<sup>43</sup> The Witch is not an evil figure in and of herself, but has been forced to fit into a capitalist narrative. Winterson's version is especially unique in how it treats the figure of the stepmother who urges the abandonment of the children in the wood, and the figure of the witch who wants to eat children. Evil is shifted away from the witch and onto the capitalist construct that GreedyGuts and her friends represent: all-consuming consumption with no thought of what is destroyed in the process. The witch takes Hansel and Greta to find their dad, and they make a plan to defeat GreedyGuts and GuzzleGuts. They all return to the house in the woods. BeardFace and BogFace are turned into frogs, and GreedyGuts is exposed as an ogre (GuzzleGuts has already died, suffocated by her own clothing). The witch then removes the fake teeth and the red contacts and introduces herself as Ruby, saying that the children have freed her from 'My own spell! The ones you cast on yourself are the really scary ones. I believed I had no power left. Just a life of Evil Gingerbread.'<sup>44</sup> They plant the Little Tree in their garden, and Dad proposes elopement to Ruby who answers, 'You're not so bad, Mr. Dad, but we have to get to know each other first and see how the children feel about it all',<sup>45</sup> and the book ends on them all living 'happily ever after' in the wood together. The resolution of Winterson's narrative reaffirms the agency of its protagonists and calls into question the idea of marriage as the end goal of one's self-realisation, much like Shamsie's and Solnit's own retellings do in their own ways,<sup>46</sup> but with the added implication that the agency of the planet, here represented in the forest and the trees that Hansel can speak to, also needs consideration and recognition.



*Blueblood* by Malorie Blackman is perhaps the most postmodern of the retellings, stepping furthest away from its originating story, and consciously asking 'In fighting back against that which we deplore, how do we stop ourselves from becoming deplorable? ... can the ends ever justify the means?'<sup>47</sup> Not only does technology replace the magic of 'Bluebeard,' it is written as both an allusive retelling and a continuation of Bluebeard's own story, and the resolution does not celebrate the vigilante justice of the narrative, but rather acknowledges that all violence, including that in the pursuit of justice, has a price. In this way, *Blueblood* embraces the legacy of postmodernism, 'the blurring of boundaries between fiction and criticism, a blurring that depends both on intertextuality and self-conscious reflexivity',<sup>48</sup> or as Blackman puts it, it's 'a modern-day retelling with a viper's twist in the tale.'<sup>49</sup>

*Blueblood* moves between the third-person omniscient perspectives of Nia and her husband Marcus. The only other characters named are Nia's brothers Jakob and Desmond, who predominantly feature in the first chapter as protesting her plans to marry Marcus. Marcus is fifteen years older than Nia, has a 'thick and crusty-looking' beard,<sup>50</sup> and 'shifty eyes, all the better to constantly watch you with.'<sup>51</sup> Nia marries him anyway, despite her brothers' concerns and other 'rumours',<sup>52</sup> and the perspective switches to focus on Marcus's point of view for the duration of the next chapter. When embedded in his perspective, readers find out that there is also 'malicious gossip' centred around Nia regarding a previous marriage and a husband who had run off and left her,<sup>53</sup> and that Marcus feels unsettled by Nia's success and wealth as a jewellery designer. He will be moving into her house with the request that she will stay out of his space in the attic he needs to stay out of her studio in the basement. These first two chapters allude to versions of 'Bluebeard': a woman marrying a much older man, mention of a beard that is 'so black, in certain lights it looks almost midnight blue',<sup>54</sup> rumours about past spouses, and forbidden rooms, but with a different dynamic as he has moved into her house, and she has forbidden certain rooms to him. Over the course of the text, Marcus becomes more jealous and controlling, demanding to see her studio and be with her whenever she goes out. Nia leaves for a business trip, and he decides to look for the entrance to the basement, not knowing that she had installed cameras around the house to see if he would betray her and intrude on her space – the cameras replacing the magical key or egg from the antecedent versions. He finds his way in, thinking Nia is still away on her trip for a few more days, not knowing she is waiting inside, and not ready for the secret she is keeping: human ears in hermetically sealed display cases, 'from an ex-husband and others, bullies like you who were too arrogant and full of themselves to listen.'<sup>55</sup>

This is Blackman's 'vipers' twist; Nia is the descendant of Aloysius Barbleue: Nia Bluebeard. She explains: 'It's ironic that I follow in his footsteps while trying to atone for what he did to so many women.'<sup>56</sup> She enacts a vigilante justice against Marcus, who has had three previous wives, two who divorced him and one who died before she could, and whose other relationships required police intervention due to 'controlling, bullying, emotional

and physical abuse',<sup>57</sup> who has never been touched by the law because of his High Court Judge mother:<sup>58</sup> Marcus's ear is added to her collection. But the book does not end on a heroic note. Blackman's narrator does not condone Nia's actions. The last scene sees her sitting in the study looking at her favourite wedding photo, realising 'she'd become the very thing she abhorred' and resolving that 'there would be no more husbands, no more partnerships. And when her time finally came, she would come down to this basement, disable the lift – and never leave. That would be her punishment and her penance.'<sup>59</sup>

Maria Tatar notes that 'fairy tales are always more interesting when something is added to them ... each new retelling recharges the narrative, making it crackle and hiss with cultural energy'.<sup>60</sup> Blackman's appropriation of 'Bluebeard' – in the sense of appropriation as a text that 'effects a more decisive journey away from the informing text into a wholly new cultural product and domain, often through the acts of interpolation and critique as much as through the movement from one genre to others'<sup>61</sup> – asks what is worse, a serial killer or a domestic abuser; and valorises neither in the resolution, managing also to include a subtle indictment of a justice system that protects abusers. There is something stunning about reading this text against the backdrops of the #MeToo movement and the Sarah Everard case and protests, women sharing their encounters with abuse, protesting the same issues over several decades with no real change, and the knowledge that what Blackman presents in this postmodern retelling is not a fairy tale in the sense of encapsulating a moment of wonder; but rather an impossible wish fulfilment: what if a woman *could* take her revenge against one of the most banal evils of the world past, present, and probably future. Tatar writes that 'much of the magic of fairy tales derives from their mutability',<sup>62</sup> but there is no happy ending or magic here, no riding away from the controlling, abusive husband, no brothers coming in to save Nia. Nia saves herself, saves other women, but to do so outside the boundaries of a system that has, in the case of Marcus, protected a known abuser; Nia is the one who has become the serial killer – not a hero. And she knows that she too must face a form of justice. There can be no magic, no happy endings for women facing a persistent, systemic evil as old as time.

Especially considering the themes, the twist, and the lack of a 'happy ending' in *Blueblood*, it might seem curious that the form of the picture book, something associated with and marketed specifically to and for children, was the format of choice for Vintage's 'Fairy Tale Revolution'. The idea of fairy-tale versions, especially as more and more cinematic versions are produced, provokes ideas of limitless possibilities. In contrast, these are limited to a textual length of 32 pages, and adorned with very simple, if bold, single-coloured silhouetted illustrations. *Cinderella Liberator* only features shades of blue, whereas *Blueblood* is dominated by red, *Hansel and Greta* by shades of green, and *Duckling* by yellow. The strict page count of a commercial picture book format and the bold but sparse colour scheme seem like they should serve to constrict imagination, as there is very little detail provided, or room for embellishment. Likewise, the peritext of the Afterword in each

book guides and shapes interpretation of the preceding narrative instead of leaving it up to the individual reader. It is rare to have simultaneously subversive and didactic authorial intentions so explicitly provided, even if traditionally fairy tale collections were also shaped by various intentions – to domesticate, to instruct, to build nations, and to criticise the directions in which societies might be headed. In some ways, the confines of the picture book form make apparent the inherent contradictions in the adaptation of fairy tales to new contexts: the dual impetuses of subversion and didacticism, and the audience these stories are aimed at – the children to whom the picture book is marketed, or the adults who choose to purchase these books. Maria Tatar notes that 'Fairy tales, rather than sending messages, teaching morals, or constructive lessons, get conversations going. Piling on one outrage after another, they oblige us to react, to take positions and make judgements, enabling us to work through cultural contradiction using the power of a symbolic story',<sup>63</sup> highlighting not the instructive use of the fairy tale genre, but its capacity to serve as a mirror for the world and its 'outrages', provoking reaction from its audience. And yet Marina Warner's observation that, especially perhaps when it comes to these modern picture books, 'the fairy way of writing packaged and pictured for younger readers, become a mode of communicating moral values, political dreams, and even scientific knowledge',<sup>64</sup> also holds true, as these books are openly didactic, addressing the reader directly with instructions for how to navigate their world, providing mandates for what a more just world might look like. These two statements become unified in the picture book because, as noted by Nathalie op de Beeck, in the picture book format, 'content and form are intertwined', yielding almost the 'ideal format ... to express the fairy tale of modernity'.<sup>65</sup> Where op de Beeck is writing about the role of picture books in constructing the mythos of postwar society and progress, it is a statement that extends to fairy tales adapted in other times and contexts.<sup>66</sup> Ergo, the structure of the physical picture book and the narrative function of the fairy-tale form combine to draw paratextual ties between old stories in their multiple versions and new iterations, unlocking a new sense of wonder to be rediscovered. The silhouettes in the *Fairy Tale Revolution* series tap into the symbolic power of the fairy tale and, where they might lack illustrative detail, their shadows in some ways recall the shadows of past versions. That GreedyGuts is an ogre is shown through the images, as is the Duckling's many encounters with other animals, and even the tension between Nia and Marcus. By eliding the various violences of the text with symbolic images, a space is created for conversations, for 'outrages' to be reacted to. These books are direct in their lessons – not with directives nor concluding morals in verse-form, but consequences for behaving in unjust or harmful ways.

Postmodern feminist adaptations often unlock the darker potential of fairy tales away from the nursery they had been consigned to, and move the genre 'along a different path, producing creative adaptations that unsettle the genre by breaking with tradition and renewing it'.<sup>67</sup> These picture books, too, are in dialogue with both the fairy tale canon and

female-authored fairy tale adaptations as counter-texts,<sup>68</sup> written against the normative gender, social and cultural hierarchies of their day. The depth achieved by featuring four female writers of various backgrounds, each taking on a particular kind of contemporary injustice or violence to assert that 'it need not continue',<sup>69</sup> recalls Warner's assertion that 'it is worth trying to puzzle out in what different ways the patterns of fairytale romancing might be drawn when women are the tellers'.<sup>70</sup> Changes to the traditional tales are deliberate, weighted, with intention to affect how the narrative is received and what is taken from it. As noted above, there is a sense of a didactic or pedagogic function to these four books, in part because of the form of the fairy-tale picture book and in part because of the peritext of the Afterword. As Warner writes:

The pedagogical function of the wonder story deepens the sympathy between the social category women occupy and fairy tale. Fairy tales exchange knowledge between the older voice of experience and a younger audience, they present pictures of perils and possibilities that lie ahead, they use terror to set limits on choice and offer consolation to the wronged, they draw social outlines around boys and girls, fathers and mothers, the rich and the poor, the rulers and the ruled, they point out the evildoers and garland the virtuous, they stand up to adversity with dreams of vengeance, power and vindication.<sup>71</sup>

The authors of these four retellings participate in this knowledge exchange, making visible evils of the contemporary world and providing resolutions. It is in their resolutions that these books might be considered revolutionary, both in terms of what they impart, and in how they might indicate a direction in which the genre might be remade.

For all the changes in each story, the endings of these retellings are the most divergent from antecedent canonical versions. The 'happy ending' has become one of the most recognisable components of fairy tales – it is what is implied when people mention 'fairy tale weddings' or when fashion shoots draw from fairy tale iconography to create luxury tableaux.<sup>72</sup> The implication is that there is a story, and it is going to end happily, with wealth, fortune, and ease for those involved in the story, which has transcended the mundane, brought a sense of wonder into the world, and might just be also attainable for everyday people. This commercialised fairy-tale ending can be tied to many different cultural narratives from Hollywood to the fairy-tale canon where wonder and enchantment lead to changed circumstances for protagonists. However, despite being themselves commercial projects as published picture books, it is revolutionary that these four retellings together abandoned that concept for an ending,

whether writing past the antecedent versions' endings or changing the parameters for what constitutes happiness.

These narratives choose instead, as consciously described in the Afterwords, structures of contentment, agency, and justice over unattainable utopian bliss. For example, Solnit writes at the end of her Afterword that 'this book is also with love and hope for liberation for every child who's overworked and undervalued, every kid who feels alone – with hope that they get to write their own story, and make it come out with love and liberation'.<sup>73</sup> Here love is not a romantic love; the liberated Ella learns to love and honour herself above all. Shamsie's *Duckling* chooses to define herself not as a duck or a swan, but as an adventurer, neither relying on others' definitions of who she is to validate her, nor choosing to close her world to new relationships and experiences. Blackman's *Nia* ends her story in sadness, but also on the note that two wrongs do not actually make a right, highlighting the danger of becoming the thing one hates under the banner of serving deserved justice. Winterson's witch, Ruby, does not believe in the romance of elopement as her route to 'happily ever after', but rather defines it as knowing exactly who one is and how powerful they are, and believing that one can change the world. The retellings together encourage readers, especially those reading in dialogue with antecedent versions they already know, to ask what is happiness, but also, what is security, where does it come from, and can everyone have it? They raise questions of belonging and community while reaffirming individuals' power and agency to remake their understandings of the world and their place in it, and changing the lives of others. They address very real contemporary evils, crises, and modes of existence, while also placing limits on behaviour, asserting that, while there is always a choice of how to act, all choices have consequences.

In his study of the remaking of the fairy tale in relation to childhood, Zipes cites Ernst Bloch's insistence that 'the fairy tale would always address what is lacking in society and would illuminate a better future'.<sup>74</sup> Arguably, these retellings do exactly that, but illuminating options for a better present – the ideas of liberation for those working without kindness, dignity, or security, of living more consciously regarding the effects of consumption on the planet, of being aware of domestic violence as a real and contemporary problem, of how to see and break cycles of xenophobia, can all be acted upon now. And even with the albeit at times heavy-handed didacticism of the narratorial voice, these retellings encapsulate Tatar's description of being 'to double duty bound, entertaining and provoking, and above all ensuring that a culture of silence cannot descend on us'.<sup>75</sup> The uniting, revolutionary thread through all of these is a refusal to be silent or meek in the face of injustice. If part of the political purpose of female-voiced retellings is to show that 'no one will have a happy ending unless we change',<sup>76</sup> then these retellings specifically explicate how society might be changed, breaking from the emphasis on the patriarchal structures of marriage embedded in the canonical versions, and embracing newly imagined, transformative futures with more power

vested in the individual's potential. With these new versions adding to the multivocality of the fairy tale genre, just like these authors, readers can retell old tales, remake old patterns into what they want to hear, and remake the world into what they want the world to be.

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### Notes

1. Cristina Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 76.
2. Maria Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales: Expanded Edition* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019 (2003)), xviii.
3. Penguin Books. 'Introducing A Fairy Tale Revolution', accessed 8 March 2021, <https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2020/october/a-fairy-tale-revolution.html>.
4. Marina Warner, *Wonder Tales: Six Stories of Enchantment* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), 6.
5. Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, 141.
6. Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, 22.
7. Tatar, *Hard Facts*, xix.
8. Warner, *Wonder Tales*, 4.
9. See Vanessa Joosen, *Critical & Creative Perspectives on Fairy Tales: An Intertextual Dialogue between Fairy-Tale Scholarship and Postmodern Retellings*. (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2011).
10. Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, 76.
11. Warner, *Wonder Tales*, 7.
12. Rebecca Solnit, *Cinderella Liberator* (London: Vintage Classics, 2020), 30.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. Solnit, *Cinderella Liberator*, 3-4.
18. Solnit, *Cinderella Liberator*, 4.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Solnit, *Cinderella Liberator*, 6.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Solnit, *Cinderella Liberator*, 19.
23. Solnit, *Cinderella Liberator*, 21.
24. Solnit, *Cinderella Liberator*, 22.
25. Contemporary film adaptations, especially those made after the 1950 Disney animation, have followed a narrative of her father remarrying after her mother's death, and then her father dying so Cinderella is left under the control of the stepmother – the five 'A Cinderella Story' films made since 2004 and 'Ever After: A Cinderella Story' (1998) all follow this plot. The 2017 Disney live-action version also explicitly kills the father after the mother dies instead of just implying it, and there have also been about 30 other made-for-TV films from the Hallmark, Freeform, and ABC Family networks over the last 15 years that explicitly played with this concept, and in all cases kill off both of Cinderella's parents.
26. Solnit, *Cinderella Liberator*, 23.
27. Solnit, *Cinderella Liberator*, 27 (italics original).
28. *Ibid.*
29. Jack Zipes, *Relentless Progress: The Reconfiguration of Children's Literature, Fairy Tales, and Storytelling* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 126.
30. Zipes, *Relentless Progress*, 129.

31. Kamila Shamsie, *Duckling* (London: Vintage Books, 2020), 31.
32. Shamsie, *Duckling*, 23.
33. Maria Tatar, *The Classic Fairy Tales*, 2nd edn (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017 (1999)), xv.
34. Shamsie, *Duckling*, 26.
35. Shamsie, *Duckling*, 30.
36. Jeanette Winterson, *Hansel and Greta* (London: Vintage Books, 2020), 31.
37. Winterson, *Hansel and Greta*, 2-3.
38. Winterson, *Hansel and Greta*, 11.
39. Winterson, *Hansel and Greta*, 21.
40. Winterson, *Hansel and Greta*, 22.
41. *Ibid.*
42. Winterson, *Hansel and Greta*, 24.
43. *Ibid.*
44. Winterson, *Hansel and Greta*, 29.
45. Winterson, *Hansel and Greta*, 30.
46. Shamsie, *Duckling*, 14; Solnit, *Cinderella Liberator*, 28.
47. Malorie Blackman, *Blueblood* (London: Vintage Books, 2020), 31.
48. Bacchilega, *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, 77.
49. Blackman, *Blueblood*, 31.
50. Blackman, *Blueblood*, 4.
51. *Ibid.*
52. Blackman, *Blueblood*, 6.
53. Blackman, *Blueblood*, 7.
54. *Ibid.*
55. Blackman, *Blueblood*, 25.
56. Blackman, *Blueblood*, 29.
57. Blackman, *Blueblood*, 25.
58. Blackman, *Blueblood*, 4, 25.
59. Blackman, *Blueblood*, 30.
60. Tatar, *The Classic Fairy Tales*, xiii.
61. Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2016 (2006)), 35.
62. Maria Tatar, 'Introduction', *The Cambridge Companion to Fairy Tales*, ed. by Maria Tatar (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015), 3.
63. *Ibid.*
64. Marina Warner, *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tale* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016), 109.
65. Nathalie op de Beeck, *Suspended Animation: Children's Picture Books and the Fairy Tale of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xvii.
66. Op de Beeck, *Suspended Animation*, 23.
67. Tatar, *The Classic Fairy Tales*, xix.
68. See Donald Haase (ed.), *Fairy Tales and Feminism: New Approaches* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2004).
69. Warner, *Once Upon a Time*, xxv.
70. Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and their Tellers* (London: Vintage, 1995), 21.
71. *Ibid.*
72. See Cristina Bacchilega, *Fairy Tales Transformed? Twenty-First-Century Adaptations and the Politics of Wonder* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2013).
73. Solnit, *Cinderella Liberator*, 31.
74. Zipes, *Relentless Progress*, 128.
75. Tatar, 'Introduction', *The Cambridge Companion to Fairy Tales*, 3.
76. Zipes, *Relentless Progress*, 129.