



*A review of*  
**Gossip From the Forest:  
The Tangled Roots of  
our Forests and Fairytales**

**Hugh Dunkerley**

**I**n this wide-ranging and genre-crossing book, Sara Maitland sets out to explore twelve woods, one in each month of the year. The woods range from genuine forest to pine plantation to fragments of ancient woodland now cut off by suburbia. Each chapter begins with a description of a walk into the wood, before digressing into reflections on natural history, folklore and fairy tales. After each section, there is a retelling of a well-known fairy tale.

The structure of the book works well, moving us from the real into the fantastic via the historical. The retellings of the tales are particularly good. My favourite is the chilling re-setting of 'Little Red Riding Hood' in contemporary Kielder Forest, which has echoes of television dramas such as *The Killing*. At other times the stories are knowingly meta-fictional, commenting on the nature of stories themselves. So in 'Hansel and Gretel' the now grown-up siblings can't quite remember what happened all those years ago. Gretel asks Hansel if he thinks what they remember is really true.

'I don't know,' he says, 'I've never known. But we were away for months and we survived. Perhaps we dreamed the witch, I don't know; perhaps we made her up so that we had some sort of story to tell. It was a dark place, a dark time and we were somewhere so bad we had to tell a story to make it bearable, to allow us to come back into the sunshine. That is what stories are for.'

Running through the whole book is a theory that fairy tales come from forests and are always intimately linked to them. Of course, Maitland is wise enough to know that she cannot 'prove' this idea. 'It is', as she says, 'an imaginative rather than a logical connection, and none the worse for that.' One of her reasons for associating fairy stories with forests is to do with

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magic. The magic of fairy tales, she suggests, is very different from the kind of magic one finds in stories with their roots in Celtic or Middle Eastern cultures with their wizards and magi.

In the fairy stories, the usual providers of magical assistance are not in fact human at all – they are the natural inhabitants of the forest: most often birds and trees, but also flowers and other plants, fish, frogs and toads, animals both wild and domesticated, and also the sun and the moon, streams and ponds.

A second reason for associating fairy stories with forests, Maitland suggests, is that anyone who works in a wood in a story turns out to be good. 'It is not unreasonable to speculate', she argues, 'that the tellers of these stories and the audience they told them to were people who worked in the woods.' Linked to this is her idea about fear and forests. As she points out, forests themselves are not characterised as particularly scary in fairy tales. While Hansel and Gretel are lost in the forest, they don't panic at any stage. It is usually people, or occasionally wild animals, that are a threat. This, she suggests, is more evidence that the people who told these stories didn't see woods as wilderness, something to be feared or admired as sublime; rather woods were familiar. 'There were concrete and actual dangers in the deep forest,' she argues, 'but they were problems to be dealt with rather than terrors emerging ferociously from the subconscious.' In fact forests in fairy tales are populated. They are working forests.

Later in the book, Maitland visits a wood in Glenlee, Scotland, which is an example of a 19th-century enthusiasm for all things Gothic. Here the existing wood was subtly reordered to create a certain effect. Douglas firs were introduced, along with larch and beech. The result is a wood that seems to come straight out of Grimms' fairy tales. Ruminating on this, she suggests that the reason for this is that the popularity of both stories and Gothic woods arose at the same time.

Thus, both the idea of collecting folk tales as 'authentic' expressions of a deep and ancient sensibility and the picturesque aesthetic which informed ornamental woods like Glenlee grew out of the same historical impulse. Not surprisingly then, the illustrations of the first published versions of the Grimm stories, and the many other collections that followed swiftly, showed forests that looked very like these woods. The influence of these illustrations on the way we visualise fairy tales is profound.

Maitland finishes the book with a plea for a return, not to an idealised past, but to a notion that humans and forests are intimately linked. 'The atmosphere of so many of the stories seems to emerge out of lives lived deep in the woods – scary, optimistic, beautiful and cruel.' In particular she believes that children today are regularly taught that human beings are the problem and that nature is fragile and endangered. Added to this, children often don't have access to nature to play in. Maitland believes we need to give children a greater sense that we are a forest people.

The woods are our home. We need to give children confidence in their own roots, to remind them – and ourselves – that northern European deciduous woodland likes human beings; it flourishes best in relationship with human beings, and it rewards human beings who go into it and get to know it. This is what fairy stories tell us and it happens to be true.

In places this book reminded me of Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory* in terms of breadth and range. *Gossip From The Forest* is a fascinating walk through landscape, history and story. In particular, Maitland's book doesn't try to tie things down too much, avoiding increasingly redundant tropes such as 'the wild' as opposed to 'the cultural'. Key to her writing is the idea that forests and humans have long been affecting each other. She sees landscape, history and story as fluidly interrelated and ever changing.

Author: Sara Maitland.  
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