


THE ANNOTATED

# CLASSIC FAIRY TALES



*Little Red Riding Hood • Beauty and the Beast  
Jack and the Beanstalk • Bluebeard  
and many more*



Edited with an Introduction by  
**MARIA TATAR**



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## INTRODUCTION

**F**or many of us childhood books are sacred objects. Often read to pieces, those books took us on voyages of discovery, leading us into secret new worlds that magnify childhood desires and anxieties and address the great existential mysteries. Like David Copperfield, who comforted himself by reading fairy tales, some of us once read “as if for life,” using books not merely as consolation but as a way of navigating reality, of figuring out how to survive in a world ruled by adults. In a profound meditation on childhood reading, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., writes about how the classical tales “tell children what they unconsciously know—that human nature is not innately good, that conflict is real, that life is harsh before it is happy—and thereby reassure them about their own fears and their own sense of self.”

“What do we ever get nowadays from reading to equal the excitement and the revelation in those first fourteen years?” Graham Greene once asked. Many of us can recall moments of breathless excitement as we settled into our favorite chairs, our secret corners, or our cozy beds, eager to find out how Dorothy would escape the witch, whether the little mermaid would win an immortal soul, or what would become of Mary and Colin in the secret garden. “I hungered for the sharp, frightening, breath-taking, almost painful excitement that the story had given me,” Richard Wright observes in recol-

lecting his childhood encounter with the story “Bluebeard and His Seven Wives.” In that world of imagination, we not only escape the drab realities of everyday life but also indulge in the cathartic pleasures of defeating those giants, stepmothers, ogres, monsters, and trolls known as the grown-ups.

Yet much as we treasure the stories of childhood, we also outgrow them, cast them off, and dismiss them as childish things, forgetting their power not only to build the childhood world of imagination but also to construct the adult world of reality. Fairy tales, according to the British illustrator Arthur Rackham, have become “part of our everyday thought and expression, and help to shape our lives.” There is no doubt, he adds, “that we should be behaving ourselves very differently if Beauty had never been united to her Beast . . . or if Sister Anne hadn’t seen anybody coming; or if ‘Open Sesame!’ hadn’t cleared the way, or Sindbad sailed.” Whether we are aware of it or not, fairy tales have modeled behavioral codes and developmental paths, even as they provide us with terms for thinking about what happens in our world.

Part of the power of these stories derives not just from the words but also from the images that accompany them. In my own childhood copy of the Grimms’ fairy tales, held together by rubber bands and tape, there is one picture worth many thousands of words. Each time I open the book to that page, I feel a rush of childhood memories and experience, for a few moments, what it was like to be a child. The images that accompanied “Cinderella,” “Little Red Riding Hood,” or “Jack and the Beanstalk” in volumes of classic fairy tales from an earlier era have an aesthetic power that produces an emotional hold rarely encountered in the work of contemporary illustrators, and for this reason I have returned to earlier times and places for the images accompanying the stories in this volume.

Fairy tales are up close and personal, telling us about the quest for romance and riches, for power and privilege, and, most important, for a way out of the woods back to the safety and security of home. Bringing myths down to earth and inflecting them in human rather than heroic terms, fairy tales put a familiar spin on the stories in the archive of our collective imagination. Think of Tom Thumb, who miniaturizes David’s killing of Goliath in the Bible, Odysseus’ blinding of the Cyclops in *The Odyssey*, and Siegfried’s conquest of the dragon Fafner in Richard Wagner’s *Ring of the Nibelung*. Or of Cinderella, who is sister under the skin to Shakespeare’s Cordelia and to Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre. Fairy tales take us into a reality that is familiar in the double sense of the term—deeply personal and at the same time centered on the family and its conflicts rather than on what is at stake in the world at large.

John Updike reminds us that the fairy tales we read to children today had their origins in a culture of adult storytelling: "They were the television and pornography of their day, the life-lightening trash of preliterate peoples." If we look at the stories in their earliest written forms, we discover preoccupations and ambitions that conform to adult anxieties and desires. Sleeping Beauty may act like a careless, disobedient child when she reaches for the spindle that puts her to sleep, but her real troubles come in the form of a hostile mother-in-law who plans to serve her for dinner with a sauce Robert. "Bluebeard," with its forbidden chamber filled with the corpses of former wives, engages with issues of marital trust, fidelity, and betrayal, showing how marriage is haunted by the threat of murder. "Rumpelstiltskin" charts a woman's narrow escape from a bargain that could cost the life of her first-born. And "Rapunzel" turns on the perilous cravings of a pregnant woman and on the desire to safeguard a girl's virtue by locking her up in a tower.

Fairy tales, once told by peasants around the fireside to distract them from the tedium of domestic chores, were transplanted with great success into the nursery, where they thrive in the form of entertainment and edification for children. These tales, which have come to constitute a powerful cultural legacy passed on from one generation to the next, provide more than gentle pleasures, charming enchantments, and playful delights. They contain much that is "painful and terrifying," as the art historian Kenneth Clark recalled in reminiscing about his childhood encounters with the stories of the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen. Arousing dread as well as wonder, fairy tales have, over the centuries, always attracted both enthusiastic advocates, who celebrate their robust charms, and hard-edged critics, who deplore their violence.

Our deepest desires as well as our most profound anxieties enter the folkloric bloodstream and remain in it through stories that find favor with a community of listeners or readers. As repositories of a collective cultural consciousness and unconscious, fairy tales have attracted the attention of psychologists, most notably the renowned child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim. In his landmark study, *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bettelheim argued that fairy tales have a powerful therapeutic value, teaching children that "a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable." "If one does not shy away," Bettelheim added with great optimism, "but steadfastly meets unexpected and often unjust hardships, one masters all obstacles and at the end emerges victorious."

Over the past decades child psychologists have mobilized fairy tales as powerful therapeutic vehicles for helping children and adults solve their

problems by meditating on the dramas staged in them. Each text becomes an enabling device, allowing readers to work through their fears and to purge themselves of hostile feelings and damaging desires. By entering the world of fantasy and imagination, children and adults secure for themselves a safe space where fears can be confronted, mastered, and banished. Beyond that, the real magic of the fairy tale lies in its ability to extract pleasure from pain. In bringing to life the dark figures of our imagination as ogres, witches, cannibals, and giants, fairy tales may stir up dread, but in the end they always supply the pleasure of seeing it vanquished.

Like Bettelheim, the German philosopher Walter Benjamin applauded the feisty determination of fairy-tale heroes and heroines: "The wisest thing—so the fairy tale taught mankind in olden times, and teaches children to this day—is to meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning and with high spirits." If Bettelheim emphasized the value of "struggle" and "mastery" and saw in fairy tales an "experience in moral education," Benjamin reminded us that the morality endorsed in fairy tales is not without complications and complexities. While we may all agree that promoting "high spirits" is a good thing for the child outside the book, we may not necessarily concur that "cunning" is a quality we wish to encourage by displaying its advantages. Early commentators on fairy tales quickly detected that the moral economy of the fairy tale did not necessarily square with the didactic agendas set by parents. The British illustrator George Cruikshank was appalled by the story "Puss in Boots," which seemed to him "a succession of successful falsehoods—a clever lesson in lying!—a system of imposture rewarded by the greatest worldly advantage!" He found Jack's theft of the giant's treasures morally reprehensible and felt obliged to rewrite the story, turning the robbery into a reappropriation of the dead father's fortune. Cruikshank would have reacted similarly to Aladdin, that prototypical fairy-tale hero who is described as "headstrong," as an "incorrigible good-for-nothing," and as a boy who will never amount to anything. Wherever we turn, fairy-tale characters always seem to be lying, cheating, or stealing their way to good fortune.

In stories for children, we have come to desire and expect clear, positive moral direction, along with straightforward messages. The popular success of William Bennett's *Book of Virtues*, a collection of stories chosen for their ability to transmit "timeless and universal" cultural values, reveals just how invested we are in the notion that moral literature can produce good citizens. Bennett is completely at ease with his list of the virtues we all embrace: self-discipline, compassion, responsibility, friendship, work, courage, perse-

verance, honesty, loyalty, and faith. But he fails to recognize the complexities of reading, the degree to which children often focus on single details, produce idiosyncratic interpretations, or become passionate about vices as well as virtues.

In her memoir *Leaving a Doll's House*, the actress Claire Bloom reminisces about the "sound of Mother's voice as she read to me from Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* and *The Snow Queen*." Although the experience of reading produced "a pleasurable sense of warmth and comfort and safety," Bloom also emphasizes that "these emotionally wrenching tales . . . instilled in me a longing to be overwhelmed by romantic passion and led me in my teens and early twenties to attempt to emulate these self-sacrificing heroines." That Bloom played the tragic, self-effacing heroine not only on stage but in real life becomes clear from the painful account of her many failed romances and marriages. The stories, to be sure, may merely have reinforced what was already part of Bloom's character and disposition, but it is troubling to read her real-life history in light of her strong identification with figures like Andersen's Little Mermaid. Bloom's recollection of childhood reading reminds us that reading may yield warmth and pleasure, but that there can be real consequences to reading without reflecting on the effect of what is on the page.

*The Book of Virtues*, like many anthologies of stories "for children," endorses a kind of mindless reading that fails to interrogate the cultural values embedded in stories written once upon a time, in a different time and place. In its enunciation of a moral beneath each title, it also insists on reducing every story to a flat one-liner about one virtue or another, failing to take into account Eudora Welty's observation that "there is absolutely everything in great fiction but a clear answer." Even fairy tales, with their naïve sense of justice, their tenacious materialism, their reworking of familiar territory, and their sometimes narrow imaginative range, rarely send unambiguous messages.

This lack of ethical clarity did not present a problem for many of the collectors who put fairy tales between the covers of books. When Charles Perrault published his *Tales of Mother Goose* in 1697, he appended at least one moral, sometimes two. Yet those morals often did not square with the events in the story and sometimes offered nothing more than an opportunity for random social commentary and digressions on character. The explicit behavioral directives added by Perrault and others also have a tendency to misfire when they are aimed at children. It did not take Rousseau to discover that when you observe children learning lessons from stories, "you will see

that when they are in a position to apply them, they almost always do so in a way opposite to the author's intention." Nearly every former child has learned this lesson through self-observation or through personal experience with children.

Do we, then, abandon the notion of finding moral guidance in fairy tales? Is reading reduced to an activity that yields nothing but aesthetic delight or pure pleasure? If fairy tales do not provide us with the tidy morals and messages for which we sometimes long, they still present us with opportunities to think about the anxieties and desires to which the tale gives shape, to reflect on and discuss the values encapsulated in the narrative, and to contemplate the perils and possibilities opened up by the story.

Today we recognize that fairy tales are as much about conflict and violence as about enchantment and happily-ever-after endings. When we read "Cinderella," we are fascinated more by her trials and tribulations at the hearth than by her social elevation. We spend more time thinking about the life-threatening chant of the giant in "Jack and the Beanstalk" than about Jack's acquisition of wealth. And Hansel and Gretel's encounter with the seemingly magnanimous witch in the woods haunts our imagination long after we have put the story down.

Through the medium of stories, adults can talk with children about what matters in their lives, about issues ranging from fear of abandonment and death to fantasies of revenge and triumphs that lead to happily-ever-after endings. While looking at pictures, reading episodes, and turning pages, adults and children can engage in what the cultural critic Ellen Handler-Spitz calls "conversational reading," dialogues that meditate on the story's effects and offer guidance for thinking about similar matters in the real world. This kind of reading can take many different turns: earnest, playful, meditative, didactic, empathetic, or intellectual.

In her recollections of reading "Little Red Riding Hood" with her grandmother, Angela Carter gives us one such scene of reading fairy tales: "My maternal grandmother used to say, 'Lift up the latch and walk in,' when she told it to me when I was a child; and at the conclusion, when the wolf jumps on Little Red Riding Hood and gobbles her up, my grandmother used to pretend to eat me, which made me squeak and gibber with excited pleasure." Carter's account of her experience with "Little Red Riding Hood" reveals the degree to which the meaning of a tale is generated in its performance. This scene of reading—with its cathartic pleasures—tells us more about what the story means than the "timeless truths" that were enunciated by Charles Perrault in his moral to the first literary version of the tale.



Luciano Pavarotti, by contrast, had a very different experience with “Little Red Riding Hood.” “In my house,” he recalls, “when I was a little boy, it was my grandfather who told the stories. He was wonderful. He told violent, mysterious tales that enchanted me. . . . My favorite one was *Little Red Riding Hood*. I identified with Little Red Riding Hood. I had the same fears as she. I didn’t want her to die. I dreaded her death—or what we think death is.” Charles Dickens had an even more powerful sentiment about the girl in this story. Little Red Riding Hood was his “first love”: “I felt that if I could have married Little Red Riding Hood, I should have known perfect bliss.”

Each of these three readers responded in very different ways to a story that we are accustomed to considering as a cautionary tale warning about the dangers of straying from the path. Often it is the experience of reading out loud or retelling that produces the most powerful resonances and responses. Since the stories in this collection were once part of an oral tradition and since they are meant to be read aloud and revised, I have sought to recapture the rhythms of oral storytelling in my translations, using phrasing, diction, and pacing that reminds us that these stories were once broadcast, spoken out loud to an audience of young and old.

It is the readers of these fairy tales who will reinvigorate them, making them hiss and crackle with narrative energy with each retelling. Hans Christian Andersen, according to his friend Edvard Collin, had a special way of breathing new life into fairy tales:

Whether the tale was his own or someone else’s, the way of telling it was completely his own, and so lively that the children were thrilled. He, too, enjoyed giving his humor free rein, his speaking was without stop, richly adorned with the figures of speech well known to children, and with gestures to match the situation. Even the driest sentence came to life. He did not say, “The children got into the carriage and then drove away,” but “They got into the carriage—‘goodbye, Dad! Goodbye, Mum!’—the whip cracked smack! smack! and away they went, come on! gee up!”

Reading these stories in the fashion of Andersen is a way of reclaiming them, turning them into *our* cultural stories by inflecting them in new ways and in some cases rescripting what happened “once upon a time.”

The fairy tales in this volume did not require editorial interventions in an earlier age, precisely because they were brought up to date by their tellers and tailored to the cultural context in which they were told. In presenting the “classic” versions of the tales, this volume is offering foundational texts

that may not necessarily be completely transparent to readers today. They offer the basis for retelling, but in many cases they will call out for parental intervention. The background material on each fairy tale anchors the story in its historical context, revealing the textual peculiarities and ideological twists and turns taken over time at different cultural sites. Knowing that Cinderella lives happily ever after with her stepsisters in some versions of her story and that doves are summoned to peck out the eyes of the stepsisters in others is something that parents will want to know when they read "Cinderella" to their children. That Little Red Riding Hood outwits the wolf in some versions of her story will be an important point to bear in mind when reading Perrault's version of the story, in which the girl is devoured by the wolf. Understanding something about how Bluebeard's wife is sometimes censured for her curiosity and sometimes praised for her resourcefulness will help adults reflect on how to talk about this story with a child.

The annotations to the stories are intended to enrich the reading experience, providing cues for points in the story where adult and child can contemplate alternative possibilities, improvise new directions, or imagine different endings. These notes draw attention to moments at which adult and child can engage with issues raised, sometimes simply indulging in the pleasures of the narrative, but sometimes also thinking about the values endorsed in the story and questioning whether the plot has to take the particular turn that it does in the printed version.

The illustrations for *The Annotated Classic Fairy Tales* have been drawn largely from the image repertoire of nineteenth-century artists, contemporaries of the collectors and editors of the great national anthologies of fairy tales. Arthur Rackham, Gustave Doré, Edmund Dulac, Walter Crane, Edward Burne-Jones, George Cruikshank, and others produced illustrations that provide not only visual pleasure but also powerful commentaries on the tales, interrupting the flow of the story at critical moments and offering opportunities for further reflection and interpretation. For many of us, the most memorable encounters with fairy tales came in the form of illustrated books. Those volumes, as Walter Benjamin points out, always had "one saving grace: their illustration." The pictures in those anthologies escaped the kind of censorship and bowdlerization to which the texts were often subjected. "They eluded the control of philanthropic theories and quickly, behind the backs of the pedagogues, children and artists came together."

*The Annotated Classic Fairy Tales* seeks to reclaim a powerful cultural legacy, creating a storytelling archive for children and adults. While the fairy tales have been drawn from a variety of cultures, they constitute a canon



that has gained nearly universal currency in the Western world and that has remained remarkably stable over the centuries. Even those unfamiliar with the details of “The Frog Prince” or “The Little Match Girl” have some sense of what these stories are about and how the salient points in them (attraction and repulsion in the one, compassion in the other) are mobilized in everyday discourse to underscore an argument or to embellish a point. This volume collects the stories that we all think we know—even when we are unable to retell them—providing also the texts and historical contexts that we often do not have firmly in mind.

Disseminated across a wide variety of media, ranging from opera and drama to cinema and advertising, fairy tales have become a vital part of our cultural capital. What keeps them alive and pulsing with vitality and variety is exactly what keeps life pulsing: anxieties, fears, desires, romance, passion, and love. Like our ancestors, who listened to these stories at the fireside, in taverns, and in spinning rooms, we remain transfixed by stories about wicked stepmothers, bloodthirsty ogres, sibling rivals, and fairy godmothers. For us, too, the stories are irresistible, for they offer opportunities to talk, to negotiate, to deliberate, to chatter, and to prattle on endlessly as did the old wives from whom the stories are thought to derive. And from the tangle of that talk and chitchat, we begin to define our own values, desires, appetites, and aspirations, creating identities that will allow us to produce happily-ever-after endings for ourselves and for our children.

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