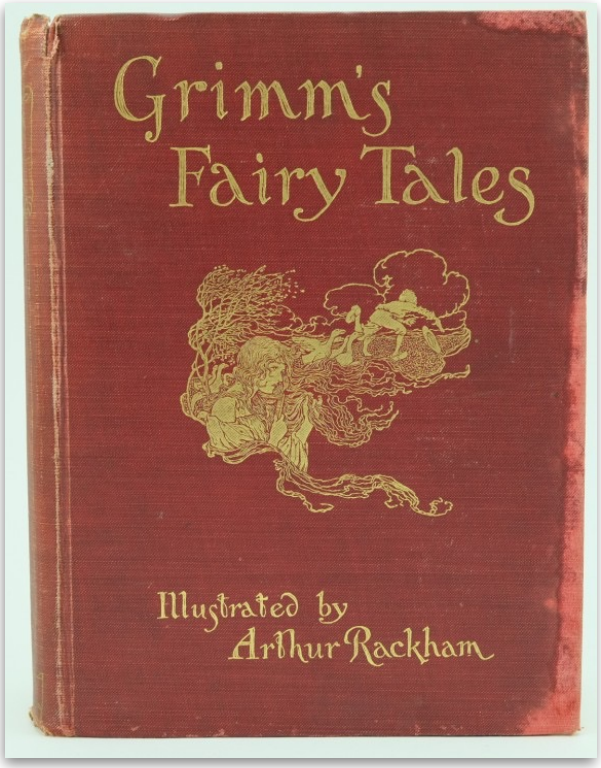
A Fairy Tale Ending

> *"Lastly there are the people who object to fairy stories on the grounds that they are not objectively true, that giants, witches, two-headed dragons, magic carpets, etc., do not exist; and that, instead of indulging his fantasies in fairy tales, the child should be taught how to adopt to reality by studying history and mechanics. I find such people, I must confess, so unsympathetic and peculiar that I do not know how to argue with them."*
>
> — W.H. Auden, *Tales of Grimm and Andersen (1952)*

Stories That Bear Repeating

In the long ago of childhood, when I stayed with my grandmother she made porridge in the morning and read fairy tales to me in the evening. She kept copies of *The Stories of Hans Christian Andersen*, a bright red cover with white birds in a square, and *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, a dark red cover that entangled lines of tree branches, a young woman's hair, geese, and a young boy chasing a wind blown hat. The books were kept on a stacked bookshelf with a shaped top and round feet. Grandma lifted the books from their shelf with a suggestion of ceremony and we sat together on her Davenport sofa. At least that's how I remember it.



I BELIEVE THIS WAS THE EDITION ON MY GRANDMOTHER'S SHELF, BUT CAN'T BE CERTAIN.

In any case, G.K. Chesterton said fairy tales are not true. They are more than true.

Grandma preferred the stories from Andersen. She was first generation Danish-American, so this made sense to me on genealogical grounds. As I think about it now, she must have also preferred parables over folk tales, especially those written in great detail and bright colors — cornflower blue, pink, and rose — and with characters who made good personal choices and valued social connections as they endured "life's trials and tribulations" — a phrase she was fond of and used frequently. Trials and tribulations seemed to be her way of raising the stakes of a life she believed would include an eternally happy ending. Her favorite stories emphasized the relationship of love and selfless acts to salvation.

Often, in her favorite stories, there is the temptation of an outside world of pretty things. It was a temptation to overcome as one of life's trials. These were her deeply held religious expectations. I'm sure she hoped they would become mine as well.

Grandma also read from *Grimm's Fairy Tales* if I requested it. More often, since I was an early reader, I took that book from the shelf and read it myself, in the morning after porridge when I was left to do as I pleased. As I read, I paused over each illustration. They were not like any other drawings I knew. They helped me imagine I was partaking in the precarious moments and heroic acts of the tale. Characters were faced with critical decisions, and I figured out what should be done and not done. I got explanations, like why a bean has a black seam.

In the Grimm tales I was beginning to appreciate the mythic. Events, dangers, and generally happy endings are not so much particular to an individual character as they are universal — this could happen to any of us. I realized that I might be subject to grave dangers in life; abandoned in a forest, eaten by animal, or even cooked in a stew. However, if I was clever, and took the right action at the right time, I could persevere. When a hero is on his journey, I learned to identify with his triumphs and did not withdraw from him in a moment of struggle. Tragic ends are possible but not necessary. Heroic ends are possible but not assured.

There is a shadow at the heart of many tales. I don't think my grandmother (or my parents for that matter) wanted to present me with a world of shadow and doubt. Grandma was delivering moralistic and cautionary parables downward in my direction. Neil Gaiman, a prolific writer of novels, comic books, graphic novels, modern myths, and fairy tales put it this way when it comes to writing for children: "You have to write up, not down."

I am in the *conspicuously aging* part of life, and I still read fairy tales. Many contain a mythological theme of "the down-going and the up-coming," as Joseph Campbell put it, and speak to "specific dangers and techniques of the dark interior." I still consider them to be shared stories that can hold us together and help us move forward.

Have not you and I, once or twice, rudely dismissed the dwarf by the roadside, not realizing he has knowledge we need? By most accounts of a hero's journey, we have failed an important test by doing so, stumbled at an important step, missed our summons. Something essential to a happy life is shut down in our psyche.

"THE WATER OF LIFE"
— GRIMM'S FAIRY TALES

> *"Little shrimp," said the prince, "that is nothing to thee," and rode on without giving him another look.*

What about that frog in the pond? After he retrieves our lost golden ball from beneath the waters, we forgo our promise to take him with us. That was what he asked of us before diving to the bottom, where we are afraid to go (choose the symbolic meaning that suits you). He thought he had stuck an emotional bargain with us (do you doubt him when he says he doesn't care about pearls and jewels?). We reveal ourselves by running away.

"THE HARDY TIN SOLDIER"
— HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN

> *"Stay, princess, and take me with you as you said." But she did not stop to hear a word —"You old Water Plopper!"*

I will admit that I have been a steadfast tin soldier, the one in twenty-five that came up a leg short when the melted silver from the spoon ran out. Feeling profoundly separate from others, I have fallen for the pretty paper dancer and gone on a doomed journey; swallowed by the big fish and fallen into the fires of love to be scorched. And you — don't you appreciate a tale in which things don't end well for someone you hoped would do better?

> *"He looked at the little lady, and she looked at him, and he felt himself melting. But still he stood steadfast, with his musket held trim on his shoulder. Then the door blew open. A puff of wind struck the dancer. She flew like a sylph, straight into the fire with the soldier, blazed up in a flash, and was gone. The tin soldier melted, all in a lump. The next day, when a servant took up the ashes she found him in the shape of a little tin heart. But of the pretty dancer nothing was left except her spangle, and it was burned as black as coal."*

I feel confident these days that in my psyche I can set apart my father from ogres and giants, my mother from evil stepmothers. That endeavor occupied many years of my life. It got easier when, among other practices of mindfulness, I started reading fairy tales again.

What I often hear, especially in the Grimm tales, is an account of the hero's journey. The progression is generally from obscure, uncertain, despised, or even thought to be stupid, toward riches, love, and admiration. Special beings, sometimes in the unlikeliest form, might show up to help the hero master a new skill or gain new knowledge. A calling has been answered and, in the end, a journey completed. So I hope it's going to be with me. My own hero's journey is a more optimistic prospect than the downward spiral of a tragic hero.

W.H. Auden, in his introduction to *Tales of Grimm and Andersen,* described three tests for the three brothers in "The Water of Life. " Each test is a milestone along the heroic journey. Joseph Campbell, in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, told us the frog is our herald. "The herald's summon may be to live, as in the present instance, or, at a later moment of the biography, to die. It may sound the call to some high historical undertaking."

I wonder what, if anything, takes the place of fairy tales in our general understanding of our lives, our community, and our families; of how things can balance out for us personally, where we might at last shine after a beginning that does seem all that promising? A story for how we might redeem ourselves is needed, I think. Do we have other personally told tales that can, as Auden put it, "withstand interruptions to ask questions and bear repeating?"

The Storytellers

The novelist Angela Carter, who wrote stories of magic realism, some based on fairy tales of Europe, cautioned against asking where a fairy tale came from. That, she said, is like asking who invented the meatball.

HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN (PHOTOGRAPH BY THORA HALLAGER)

There are two basic forms of fairy tales. One is consciously literary; parables and fanciful short stories that feature ducks, princesses, tin soldiers, and mermaids. Hans Christian Andersen and Charles Perrault, a French author a century earlier than Anderson, wrote such stories. Perrault in a courtly manner, Andersen in a naïveté of style suitable for the hearthside, and probably for my grandmother. Other than twentieth century adaptations by filmmakers like Disney (still using a self-consciously naïve narrative), Andersen's stories are generally not retold in words other than his own — which leaves out some magic, I think.

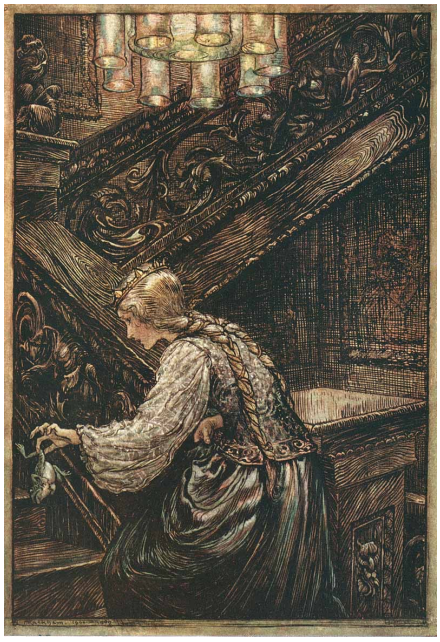
The other kind of fairy tale, source material for the Grimms, is the oral tale. Its origins often precede recoverable history, and are not so much stories as traditions, or "tough and cheerful adventures" as Auden describes them. Told and retold, time and again; the magic of reinvention in each teller's words. Unlike Andersen's stories, details about characters are sparse and written with minimal psychology. They are less like self-consciousness individuals, leading unique lives of choices and consequences, than character types subordinate to what happens or some action taken. That is how they reveal themselves as mythic, offering glimpses into the nature of things both dreadful and rewarding.

JACOB AND WILHELM GRIMM (PAINTING BY ELISABET JERICHAU-BAUMANN)

As I am partial to the mythic, and to *Grimms' Fairly Tales,* let's take a brief look at the Grimm brothers, Jacob and Wilhelm. They were born to a prosperous family in a Hessian village in Germany. In keeping with their father's expectations, even though he died when they were young, the brothers were educated as lawyers. But soon after the lyceum they chose the study of old folk tales over legal matters. They became philologists, and collecting tales became their life's work. They published the first edition of their collected tales in 1812 and 1815 as *Nursery and Household Tales*. They asserted —not accurately — that almost all their material was "collected" from oral traditions of peasants of their region, was "purely German in its origins," and that "no details have been added or embellished." These assurances were meant for adult readers, as was their collection of tales.

But the assurances were myths about the myths. According to biographers, the people who supplied the tales were largely middle class: the brothers' relatives, friends, and friends of friends, and not romanticized German peasants. The brothers claimed that their primary source, Dorothea Viehmann, was a peasant woman from a village near Kassel. She was not a peasant at all. She was the wife of a tailor, and a Huguenot, making her more French than German. She was probably well acquainted with the literary folk tales of Charles Perrault. Her acquaintance with centuries of German folk tales seems less certain.

The brothers revised the tales thoroughly, making them more detailed and elegant. It appears that Jacob was particularly adept that kind of editorial work while Wilhelm was more of a easygoing public relations man. The introduction to the second edition is more forthcoming. They dropped their claim of fidelity to peasant folk sources, insisting only that they had been true to the spirit of the original tales, even if the phrasing was their own.



"THE FROG PRINCE" AND "LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD" (ILLUSTRATIONS BY ARTHUR RACKHAM)

Fairy tales, especially the Grimm tales, were an opportunity for a new caliber of illustration in many countries of the western world. Illustrators from Germany, Britain, Sweden, Austria, the Czech Republic, Switzerland, and the United States were at work between the 1820s and 1950s. Artists had begun to think about making a living illustrating books and they found a solid foundation for work in heroes and princesses, talking animals, dwarfs, and witches. There were technological advances in illustrations and color plates. The best of this early visual iconography still influences artists, art directors, filmmakers, and animators today.

The concept of reading changed. There was more interactivity between text and image, and illustrations became a vital and loved part of the tales. They were treasures in their own right. It was beginning of a changing landscape of reading in the future. Even today, as our modes of reading continue to change with new technologies, the reimagining of fairy tales in books and in films has featured artwork by some of the most celebrated illustrators.

What Else the Troll Might Have Said to the Woodcutter

It is something of a mysterious process by which the essayist, the literary critic, and the psychoanalyst can interrogate a fairy tale nowadays. They demand to know what it thinks it is doing in modern times. We are not about to conflate a mythological past and present realities of religious, intellectual, and artistic experiences without some serious criticism; determining just how much accumulated wisdom has been deposited in the tales. So yes, I suppose those critical and analytical processes, like the beautiful illustrations that have graced collections of the tales

over the years, are intended to help me understand precarious moments, right decisions, and heroic acts of the tales and my life. Does it really matter if the analysis sometimes overlooks the obvious? Probably it does.

More happily —in my view — fairy tales, especially those of the brothers Grimm, have attracted modern reimagining as wide-ranging as those by illustrators David Hockney, *Six Fairy Tales from Brothers Grimm*, and Edward Gorey, *Three Classic Children's Stories*, and retelling by English novelists Philip Pullman, *Fairy Tales from the Brothers Grimm: A New English Version*, and Angela Carter, the stories of *The Bloody Chamber*. Neil Gaiman makes powerful use of the structures and themes of fairy tales —"They are our stories, and they should be retold."

In addition to inspiration for contemporary literature and illustration, fairy tales have provided thematic and structural connections between contemporary narratives and ancient legends for the mass entertainment of movies and television. I think that satisfies a persistent human desire for such connective tissue. Sadly, there seem to be many who feel only the urge to succumb to the mythic appeal of modern products, including politicians and celebrities, as well as thin popular stories associated with love, romance, heroism, and triumph. As I said, I prefer the fairy tales, but then who's to say?

Two hundred years ago, the intention of the Grimm brothers in publishing *Nursery and Household Tales* was to entertain grownups, not children. Grownups had been entertaining themselves with folk tales for a long time. But the oral tale was beginning to disappear in Germany, perhaps due in part to the onset of the industrial age and the simplification of domestic life (women often told each others stories as they did repetitive tasks around house and yard). Intellectuals, especially those who embraced Romanticism, worried about the loss of stories from pre-Enlightenment cultures. Folk tale collections were considered important work.

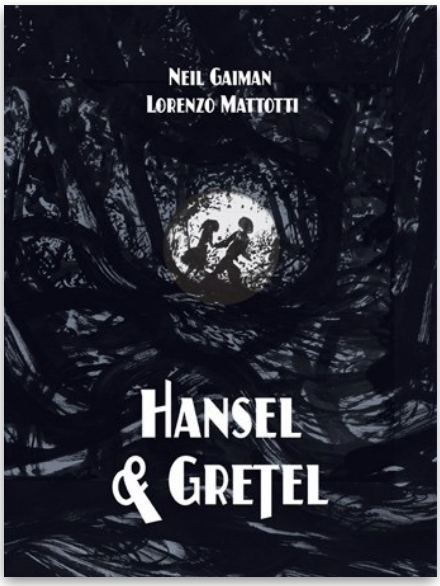
Initial sales of *Household Tales* were disappointing. Collections of tales geared to children were noticeably more successful. Even in the early nineteenth century, poor sales called for editorial adjustments, so the brothers decided to rework their collection as something suitable for children. Rough material — sex, violence, and dismemberment — was a common element of adult tales. Then as now, intimations about sex was particularly regarded as unsuitable for the young. Accordingly, in the next edition, what we might now call "parental guidance advised" content was reconsidered. For instance, Rapunzel's dress no longer grows tight around her pregnant body, causing her maid to exclaim, "What have you done!"

Jacob and Wilhelm themselves had taken the first steps in sanitizing their collected tales, but questions of appropriateness were just beginning.

So much for sex, what about violence? Jacob and Wilhelm were advised by friends that frightening children may not be the best strategy for selling children's books. People were complaining. Changes were made, although violent acts remained throughout subsequent revisions and editions. Toes and fingers are severed, heads are chopped off. The child heroine in "Little Red Riding Hood" appears to meet her end inside a duplicitous wolf — *"The better to eat you with!"* — only to be extracted from his belly by a hunter, who in the earlier version took an ax to the wolf rather than the later, and more demure, snipping of scissors. In earlier versions of "The Frog Prince," the princess hurls the frog against the wall, essentially knocking out his internal organs as the act that sets him free. A king plots the murder of all of his sons in order to clear the path to his kingdom for a daughter, if only he should be granted one. There is cannibalism — *"But don't breathe a word, we'll cook him up in a stew."*

Parenting was also re-examined in revising the tales. Potentially terrifying acts by mothers were shifted onto stepmothers. In the first edition of "Hansel and Gretel" the mother and the father decide together to abandon the children in the woods. In the revised tale, it is a stepmother who makes the suggestion, and the father only reluctantly agrees. Yet there is still a tale in the collection in which a stubborn child may have been buried alive by his mother.

Two hundred years after the Grimms, Neil Gaiman wrote an adaption of the story of Hansel and Gretel (dark illustrations by Lorenzo Mattotti, who also worked with Lou Reed on his musical and lyrical adaptation of Poe's "The Raven"). Gaiman considered the question of frightening children. "I think if you are protected from dark things then you have no protection of, knowledge of, or understanding of dark things when they show up. I think it is really important to show dark things to kids — and, in the showing, to also show that dark things can be beaten, that you have power. Tell them you can fight back, tell them you can win. Because you can — but you have to know that."



Maurice Sendak, author and illustrator of *Where the Wild Things Are*, similarly insisted that we should not shield young minds from the dark. He insisted, "I don't write for children," and dismissed the idea that designating certain types of literature as "children's" is an arbitrary choice made by adults. His convictions in this regard are partly rooted in his early love of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. After a decade of thinking about it, he provided illustrations for a translation of twenty-seven of their tales, *The Juniper Tree: And Other Tales from Grimm*.

W.H. Auden, in his 1952 introduction, had this to say about the possibility of fairy tales frightening the children: "As to fears, there are, I think, well-authenticated cases of children being dangerously terrified by some fairy story. Often, however, this arises from the child having only heard the story once. Familiarity with the story by repetition turns the pain of fear into the pleasure of a fear faced and mastered." He goes further: "Aggressive, destructive, sadistic impulses every child has and, on the whole, their symbolic verbal discharge seems to be rather a safety valve than a incitement to overt action." In this regard, he is in the company of those who believe that the Grimm tales, precisely because of their cruelty and violence, are good for us. As you may have guessed, his company is largely the psychoanalytic critics of the tales.

Bruno Bettelheim, a twentieth century Austrian-born psychoanalyst, suggested that fairy tales allow children to attach repressed desires to the likes of dragons and witches who are then conquered, helping the children to integrate the unsavory desires. As a Freudian (of utmost importance is the Oedipus complex, of course), Bettelheim saw the wicked stepmother as a child's opportunity to hate his potentially malevolent mother (in the form of a stepmother) and still love his real mother (conveniently absent from the tale).

This may be a good place to note that stepmothers are particularly unsympathetic characters in the world of Grimm. Cultural anthropologists and fairy tale scholars tell us that the traditional stepmother in Europe is a psychological euphemism for the mother in a malevolent aspect, and may have some historical grounding in the greater likelihood in pre-industrial days of mothers and children dying, and families becoming either remixed or profoundly distressed. Apparently, the Grimms decided it was best not to have the mothers who bore the children do terrible things to them when those things could be done by stepmothers instead.

After World War II — branded as the "good war," a morally unambiguous fight between good and evil — people on the winning side began to argue that the violence of the Grimm tales was an expression of the German character. They were a celebration of pernicious German nationalism — "obedience, discipline, authoritarianism, militarism, glorification of violence." *Grimms' Fairy Tales* was banned from school curricula in some European and American cities.

True enough, Nazis were grateful for those tales. Hitler's government demanded that every German school teach them. And true enough, the Grimm brothers had hoped to make young readers feel more German, and hoped to see the French booted from Westphalia, making way for a united Germany. But then again, fervent nationalism was a part of nineteenth century intellectual and popular life in most European countries, part of the atmosphere that sustained Romanticism and a fascination with pre-Enlightenment cultures. Nationalism felled empires, and was not missing in the countries —America included — that waged their "good war" against the

Nazis. It seems incorrect to say the rise of a Nazi government was the fault of national pride, however much it may have been exploited to secure power.

W.H. Auden laments nationalism as one of the "many deplorable features of modern life" inherited from Romanticism. But he acknowledges that Romanticism also "made the fairy story part of general education, a deed which few will regret." Auden believed renewed attention to the tales might be a step to "restore to parents the right and the duty to educate their children, which, partly through their own fault, and partly through extraneous circumstances, they are in danger of losing for good." In his view, extraneous circumstances included the encroaching power of the state by way of public education.

Marxists sometimes take their own view of fairy tales and the state. In the simple moral frameworks they see the dubious morality of our modern, capitalist world and find encouragement to reform it. Jack Zipes, a twentieth century fairy tale scholar and Marxist, has asserted that the tales "expose the crazed drive for power that many individual politicians, corporate leaders, governments, church leaders, and petty tyrants evince, and pierce the hypocrisy of their moral stances." Not surprisingly, he argues that in Andersen's "The Ugly Duckling," the young swan who is tormented as an unfit duck does, in spite of protestations to the contrary, envy the swans. In his envy, he shows "a distinct class bias if not racist tendencies."

My grandmother would have been taken aback. When she read the story she counseled me that the ugly duckling kept doing what he thought was right, despite what others said, and for that reason she emphasized "he was too happy, but not proud, for a kind heart can never be proud."

From another point of view (as you are beginning to see, there are many modern views), a friend of mine, a sincere follower of the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, recognizes in "The Ugly Duckling" a universal experience of suffering from abuse and rejection in our own lives. For every kindness shown to us we encounter unkindness. We struggle to find a way out of the cycle of misery. The winter and the cave endured by the outcast "duckling" signify solitude and opportunities for introspection regarding one's own concept of the Self.

Auden, in thinking about the "The Water of Life," reminds us, "There is no joy or success without risk and suffering, and those who try to avoid suffering fail to obtain the joy, but get the suffering anyway." In that same tale, and many other folk tales, he also sees a confirmation that success can never be achieved "by conscious will; it requires the co-operation of grace or luck." Luckily we don't have to go it alone. Special beings are always around to help us if only we "are humble enough to ask for it." In that asking, we discover our true strength, which "rarely lies in the capacities and faculties of which one is proud." Grandma would have agreed, I'm sure.

Feminists have had a go at nineteenth century fairy tales. The authors of the 1979 book *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* expressed disappointment in the heroine of "Snow White." Hunted down by a dirty rotten queen-stepmother, the little girl does almost nothing to save herself, ultimately sinking into passivity in a glass coffin and waiting for her prince to come to her rescue. In the estimation of the authors, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, she is "patriarchy's ideal woman." They do seem to acknowledge some gumption in the wicked stepmothers, who "even while they kill, confer the only measure of power available to a woman in a patriarchal culture."

Criticism has been robust when certain fairy tales are adapted as twentieth century films, particularly the Disney princess films. Some feminists have rebuked them as "embarrassingly retrograde in terms of gender politics." Why, they ask, are characters so obsessed with Snow White's looks? Why doesn't Cinderella have any talents or hobbies? Why is the villain so often a woman doing violence to girls who seldom resist? Heroines are essentially wilting violets. Gender inequality comes up: if the character of a shopkeeper is added, why is it a man? They worry about where little girls will get their ideas about being girls.

Disney's more recent adaptation of Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" (which maladapts the ending of the original tale) drew some positive reviews of Ariel as "a fully realized female character who thinks and acts independently, even rebelliously." But why, others ask, would the young, love-struck mermaid literally give up her voice for a chance to be with a man she barely knows? Speaking of voices, linguists Carmen Fought and Karen Eisenhauer have analyzed all the dialogue from the Disney princess franchise. Their conclusion is that male and female characters talk differently, and that over the years the amount of dialogue has become startlingly male-dominated (they offer precise percentages to support their analysis).

Possible feminist blows have also been dealt to the well-known bronze statue of Hans Christian Andersen's Little Mermaid that sits on a rock in the Copenhagen harbor. Her head has been sawed off and she has been blasted clean off her rock with explosives. One year, on International Women's Day, a dildo was fastened to her hand.

By contrast, Nail Gaiman wrote a modern fairy tale, "The Sleeper and the Spindle," as a story of three women who "don't need princes to save you…I don't have a lot of patience for stories in which women are rescued by men." A beautiful young queen calls off her wedding and sets out to save a neighboring kingdom from its plague of sleep. Sleeping Beauty is changed into aspects of Snow White. Protagonists are the products of their pasts — which include classical fairy tale figures and beasts — and are wiser and stronger for it. Gaiman's Snow White knows evil in another woman's eyes when she sees it and can recognize the smell of magic.

In this hullabaloo of interpretation, criticism, and reimagining I will give some final words to W. H. Auden — for now. Writing early in the 1950's, a decade when America was characterized by the threat of annihilation in a nuclear war, mass consumerism and materialism, and popular culture and social alienation gathering steam like never before, Auden argued that "neither the comic strip nor the radio have succeeded so far in providing a real substitute for the personally told tale which permits interruptions and repeats."

He described sanitizers of the tales of the Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm as "the Society for the Scientific Diet, the Association of Positivist Parents, the League for the Promotion of Worthwhile Leisure, the Cooperative Camp of Prudent Progressives."

> *"For from my early reading of Faery Tales, & Genii &c &c — my mind had been habituated to the Vast — & I never regarded my senses in any way as the criteria of my belief. I regulated all my creeds by my conceptions not by my sight — even at that age. Should children be permitted to read Romances, & Relations of Giants & Magicians, & Genii? — I know all that has been said against it; but I have formed my faith in the affirmative. — I know no other way of giving the mind a love of 'the Great', & 'the Whole'. — Those who have been led to the same truths step by step thro' the constant testimony of their senses, seem to me to want a sense which I possess — They contemplate nothing but parts — and all parts are necessarily little — and the Universe to them is but a mass of little things. — It is true, that the mind may become credulous & prone to superstition by the former method — but are not the Experimentalists credulous even to madness in believing any absurdity, rather than believe the grandest truths, if they have not the testimony of their own senses in their favor?"*
>
> — Samuel T. Coleridge, English poet, literary critic, philosopher and theologian

> *"I listened to academics talk wisely and intelligently about Snow White, and Hansel and Gretel, and Little Red Riding Hood, and found myself becoming increasingly irritated and dissatisfied, on a deep and profound level. My difficulty was not with what was being said, but with the attitude the went along with it — an attitude that implied that these tales no longer had anything to do with us."*
>
> — "Some Reflections on Myth (With Several Digressions onto Gardening, Comics and Fairy Tales)," Neil Gaiman, at the Chicago Humanities Festival in 1998