

A Terrible Twist

Kate Bernheimer

Originally published in *Fence Magazine*

Realism is the project of representation. It posits that some world outside is “more” real than other worlds. Its inherent stance is that there is an experience in the world outside the book to make sense of, and so the goal of the author is to make a copy of the world that exists outside the pages. That plot is “believable”; that character seems “real.”

It reflects on possibility. Comments on possibility. Interprets possibility. But it does not add to possibility. It can't, as its goal is mimetic. To hold a mirror unto the world. And essentially its impetus is capitalistic: to package reality (because a more real world exists out there to package artfully), and then to sell that artful package to the reader as a commodity. It's selling you the real world. You consume a good dose of reality. You only want to buy the real goods, the real thing. Why would you want to buy a fake product? A knock off? There is one good reality to buy and sell. There are better or worse imitations.

In contrast to this tradition, this cosmology, there has long been a tradition of non-representational literature. There have long been fairy tales. In fairy tales the author (authors) does not strive to represent a more real world that exists beyond its pages, but strives to create new worlds. To create sense. To create logic, as well as illogic. To create time and space, not to reflect it. To create possibility. To create

life in its becoming. In this tradition, there is no greater or lesser reality, there is as Deleuze explains, a plane of immanence.

In fairy tales, every thought is as real as every rabbit. Every witch as real as every breadcrumb. Every happy reversal of fortune is as real as every disaster. Every wolf—or is that a transvestite grandma?—is as real as every talking bird or chicken-legged house or donkey-skinned girl on the run from a lecherous father.

In fairy tales there is no reality outside the pages but only the one reality, not copies of a purer reality, but one reality in its infinite variations and difference, which flows through all pages and lives and dies everywhere. There is nothing to represent because there is nothing beyond. There is the here and now and there is the becoming. Again, fairy tales create worlds. Fabulism, a type of fairy tale, creates worlds.

More recently, some realists have sensed the luster fading from their project of representation and have attempted to add a little magic to their product. The product is essentially realist, essentially representational, but now comes wrapped with a bow of fabulism. What an interesting bow! How clever! But inside the product is the same: a plot that is “believable” in some way or another, a character you can identify with, an epiphany in which that real character finally connects with his real reality. And the bow or magical element is also representational—a revelation within reality that until now remained unrevealed. The mirror such authors hold up unto the world simply contains some magic, which these realists dutifully reflect back. Some fanciful or terrible twist of the real. And it’s still a good product, a fancier product with a shiny new bow, which still contains the authentic,

real world you always wanted. What a gift. What a surprise. What a real and realist surprise.

I have devoted my career to the celebration and preservation of fairy tales, an art form I consider to be not only alive, but of vital significance—not only an influence, but a life-giving force—for writing across the ages, across the styles. Fairy tales represent hundreds of years of stories based on thousands of years of stories told by hundreds, thousands, perhaps even millions of tellers. Sorry, but no one can own them. The mind reels at their influence, omnipresence, phosphorescence: like a star or a dying planet, they shine, ubiquitous and necessary. Like the sea, threatened now by our changing climate, fairy tales, too, are in danger today—their tropes pirated by people really uninterested in wonder. These writers are really interested in the so-called real—heroicism adapted into an egocentric linearity of self. Adding a little magic, a little neurotic awe, has become, to them, rather appealing.

Now, the literary realists of the last 50 years, some of them are very good writers. But for anyone to lay claim to the real—this is a problem. Critical celebration of Artists Formerly Known as Realists who use fantastic tropes excludes from the celebration any appreciation, whatsoever, of the history and influence of fairy tales. In the late 1950's, Italo Calvino named folklore the “true”. Ursula Le Guin, whose books have been marginalized as genre fiction, has long named science fiction and fantasy our most “plausible” literature. Long associated with women,

children, and nature, however, fairy tales' influence as and on realism is never acknowledged.

But the so-called realists of recent decades are finding their crown is not quite so shiny. Many literary journals are now publishing special “irreal” or “new fabulist” issues these days. Isn't that special!

But realism is not the new fabulism. I'm sorry.

For this new work is still foregrounding stories that sell a represented world tossed just a little askew—ooh! talking horses! eee! strange twists of events! aaah! seeing eyeballs in someone's pocket! These stories assert, what is real is that things are not what they seem. That is their primary insight. Hey, I love some of these stories, and I've been in some of these special issues, but as a person who has devoted her life to fairy tales—long disparaged as folk stories for women and children, for the woods, the salon or the nursery, but not for the canon—I want to warn you who are interested in unreality to be careful. Realists, be bold, but not too bold; to claim to own what belongs to no one has consequences that are very real for us all.

This is not to dismiss anyone's literary contribution, whatever the form. But let's get real about dismissal. Fairy tales have long been dismissed and disparaged for the very qualities these new realist works are being praised for employing: a day-to-day world that is magic, an intuitive logic, flatness, abstraction.

Guidelines for the prestigious National Book Award clearly state that “retellings of folk-tales, myths, and fairy-tales are not eligible.” It's crazy to pretend that capitalism and representation have not enjoyed a long and happy relationship.

So please stop appropriating folkloric motifs in a well-established capitalist fashion of appropriation . . . while at the same time excluding this art form from consideration of greatness and honor. It is hypocritical. It is not sublime.

Learn a little bit about fairy-tales' thousand-year history, and you will appreciate this argument.

Put another way, magic is not a property. Try to own the world and it will collapse.

As Joy Williams—whose harrowing, dystopian novel of 1978, The Changeling, was callously dismissed by critics for its unreal fairy-tale properties—recently said, “With the injustice, the political stupidity, the destruction of the natural world, it is all too tempting to think that things are not what they seem.”

Fairy tales see things as they are. To be real is to know the consequences of becoming. Never to own, and always to die.