

**FAIRY TALE IS FORM, FORM IS
FAIRY TALE***

KATE BERNHEIMER

“The fairy tale, which to this day is the first tutor of children because it was once the first tutor of mankind, secretly lives on in the story. The first true storyteller is, and will continue to be, the teller of fairy tales.”

—WALTER BENJAMIN

“If during a certain period of my career as a writer I was attracted by folktales and fairy tales, this was not the result of loyalty to an ethnic tradition . . . nor the result of nostalgia for things I read as a child . . . It was rather because of my interest in style and structure, in the economy, rhythm, and hard logic with which they are told.”

—ITALO CALVINO

“Ours is a highly individualized culture, with a great faith in the work of art as a unique one-off, and the artist as an original,

*This title is an homage to Jack Zipes’s influential study *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994).

a godlike and inspired creator of unique one-offs. But fairy tales are not like that, nor are their makers. Who first invented meatballs? In what country? Is there a definitive recipe for potato soup? Think in terms of the domestic arts. 'This is how I make potato soup.'"

—ANGELA CARTER

Oh, how I love fairy tales.

With this essay, I'd like to convey what fairy tales mean to me as an artist, which is everything. (Ever since I was a child I have been happiest living in the sphere of a story. That in itself is a fairy tale.)

I'd also like to demystify the idea that fairy tales are of use only to writers of fantasy or fabulism. I'd like to celebrate their lucid form. And I'd like to reveal how specific techniques in fairy tales cross stylistic boundaries. For while the interpretation of fairy tales is a well-traveled path among writers, fairy-tale techniques remain little identified and appreciated.

"The pleasure of fairy tales," writes Swiss scholar Max Lüthi, "resides in their form." I find myself more and more devoted to the pleasure derived from form generally, and from the form of fairy tales specifically, and so I am eager to share what fairy-tale techniques have done for my writing and what they can do for yours. Fairy tales offer a path to rapture—the rapture of form—where the reader or writer finds a blissful and terrible home.

Fairy tale. This term brings to mind a unique form we still recognize and use even after many centuries of manipulation to its discrete techniques. The form survives mutation. It is also

adaptable to a diverse range of narrative styles and shapes. Fairy tales magnetize writers who identify themselves as realists, along with surrealists and dadaists and modernists and existentialists and science fictionists and fabulists (not to mention romance novelists and greeting card authors and tabloid headline writers). Yet, in writerly conversations, discussion of their very classical form is often sublimated to an appreciation of their obvious wild and strange moments. That many writers do celebrate the dark, fantastic cosmos of fairy tales is wonderful, but I would also like to see an increased recognition of their artistic dexterity.

You need not even have any conscious interest in fairy tales to appreciate their effect on you. Fairy tales work on all of us; they're so ubiquitous. Writers I speak with are frequently surprised to discover that what they are doing has formal lineage in fairy tales. Sometimes our conversations lead them to incorporate new motifs in their work, or to intensify others, in direct homage to fairy tales. Yet a critical underappreciation of the art of fairy tales sometimes leads to the misinterpretation of these beautifully deliberate gestures as rather unfortunate accidents or diminishments to the verisimilitude of the work at hand. (There are many reasons for this underappreciation, of course, and they are strange reasons and sad. Part of the problem is that many interpretations of fairy tales are burdened with clichés. But that's a topic for a different essay. For now, let's simply say that their association with women and children, with the nursery story, has perhaps played a part. Also, wolf-girls simply alarm.)

So: instead of looking at how fairy tales have been disparaged, let's celebrate their form.

To do this I'd like to focus on four elements of traditional fairy tales: flatness, abstraction, intuitive logic, and normalized magic. I believe that these formal components (though there are others) comprise the *hard logic* of tales that Italo Calvino refers to in one of the epigraphs to this essay. Many authors who love fairy tales refer to this hardness as contributing to their love of the form—but I'd like to go one step further and examine these four components as they relate specifically to the reductive spectrum of mainstream and avant-garde writing. That is, these four technical components from traditional fairy tales may be found to varying degrees in most commonly named styles of writing and therefore an increased understanding of fairy-tale techniques may help resolve the unfortunate schisms that sometimes arise between so-called mainstream and avant-garde writers and critics.¹ (And, despite an emerging affection for fabulism, I think we all know who has the most obvious power in this schism—fairy tales, with their fondness for the underdog, could help disrupt this damaging hierarchy.)

Another premise of this essay is that just as Sylvia Plath's poems (and, actually, she was a poet much interested in fairy tales) have been analyzed far more for their meaning than for their form, so too with fairy tales. I study the interpretation of meaning in fairy tales—there is a pile of scholarly books on my desk in which are buried my worn-out fairy-tale books—and I apply what I've learned to my editing, teaching, and writing in intricate ways. To learn the history of fairy tales is to learn the history of myth, printing, childhood, literacy, violence, loss, psychology, class, illustration, authorship, ecology, gender, and more. My first three novels—scarce of word though they may

be (a friend jokes that my novels contain about the same number of words as any chapter in one of her novels)—try to be about all of these, using fairy-tale techniques.

Furthermore, my study of fairy-tale techniques offers a different, very intimate pleasure to me as I work on my novels: the pleasure of language as it shapes story. The tales live inside of me, it seems, and this feels lovely. Fairy tales are the skeletons of story, perhaps. Reading them often provides an uneasy sensation—a gnawing familiarity—that comforting yet supernatural awareness of living inside a story.

Readers of fairy-tale collections, like readers of, well, books, know through these techniques that they are inside of stories, lost or imagined or invented in there.

I assume that nearly everyone remembers a fairy tale from childhood, but just in case, here is one called “The Rosebud” (a German tale as translated by Ralph Manheim) to help us get us into the form:

There was once a poor woman who had two little girls. The youngest was sent to the forest every day to gather wood. Once when she had gone a long way before finding any, a beautiful little child appeared who helped her to pick up the wood and carried it home for her. Then in a twinkling he vanished. The little girl told her mother, but the mother wouldn't believe her. Then one day she brought home a rosebud and told her mother the beautiful child had given it to her and said he would come again when the rosebud opened. The mother put the rosebud in water. One morning the little girl didn't get up out of bed. The mother went and found the child dead, but looking very lovely.

The rosebud had opened that same morning.

Of course, we all know the first gesture—“There was once”—the first thing you always know about a fairy tale is that you are in it. Immediately it announces that it is a form and that you are inside the form.

Apart from the fact that I think this is one of the most perfect stories in the world, it works well to introduce the four fairy-tale techniques I mentioned earlier. These techniques have shown up in some way in nearly every literary fairy tale over hundreds of years from the seventeenth century to the present, across the globe and across styles. We can find these in a postmodern, fragmented narrative by Donald Barthelme (“The Glass Mountain”); in a suspenseful, linear narrative by A. S. Byatt (“The Thing in the Forest”); in a psychological, subversive poem by Rita Dove (“Beauty and the Beast”); and in a minimal, sentient poem by Fanny Howe (“Forty Days”). We could name hundreds of diverse works by hundreds of diverse writers in which we can easily find basic fairy-tale tropes and techniques.

So let’s start with *flatness*. Characters in a fairy tale are always flat (whether Little Red Riding Hood, Stepmother, Hedgehog, or Beast.) In “The Rosebud,” we have a mother and two children, one identified only as “the youngest” and one discarded after the first sentence. Fairy-tale characters are silhouettes, mentioned simply because they are there. They are not given many emotions—perhaps one, such as happy or sad—and they are not in psychological conflict. In a traditional fairy tale, a child who has escaped an incestuous advance does not become a grown-up neurotic. This absence of depth, this flatness, violates a technical rule writers are often taught in beginning writing classes: that

a character's psychological depth is crucial to a story. In a fairy tale, however, this flatness functions beautifully; it allows depth of response in the reader. (I have been writing for a few years about how fairy-tale techniques are also prominent in much contemporary visual art. A good example of fairy-tale flatness in visual art is Kara Walker's work. Walker uses enlarged Victorian cutouts, incorporating folkloric imagery into her harrowing and moving narratives of selfhood, gender, and race.)

Flatness, of course, dovetails with the technique of *abstraction*. Fairy tales rely on abstraction for their effect. Not many particular, illustrative details are given. The things in fairy tales are described with open language: Lovely. Dead. Beautiful. In "The Rosebud," there is no explanation of *how* the children are lovely or beautiful. Here we have another very exciting violation: this time of ye olde "show don't tell" rule. Fairy tales tell; they do not often show. I, very naturally as a writer, am inclined toward this absence.

Interestingly, if you look back at traditional fairy tales you will also find a very limited use of color and a heavy reliance on things that are metallic or glass.² In many literary versions of "Little Red Riding Hood," you will find the color of her cloak described and the wolf's teeth often are white. Red and white. (See also the German story "Snow-White and Rose-Red" and the slender, gentle use of that tale as a motif in Kathryn Davis's complex contemporary novel *The Walking Tour*.) But there are not many other colors. The wolf is not described as brown; the forest is not described as richly green. The images in a fairy tale are very isolated, very specific. So precise. So deceptively simple.

To cobble the story together, fairy tales use what I call *intuitive logic*, a sort of nonsensical sense. The language of traditional fairy

tales tells us that first this happened, and then that happened. There is never an explanation of why. In fact the question why does not often arise. Things usually happen in a fairy tale when they need to happen, but other things happen that have no relevance apart from the effect of language. *This* is not logically connected to *that*, except by syntax, by narrative proximity. In “The Rosebud,” there is no reason to think that the child in the forest has anything to do with the younger girl’s death. Likewise the flower opening upon her death. And that elder daughter—what has happened to her? Can you imagine submitting a story to a writing workshop in which the first paragraph introduces two brothers, but one of the brothers is never mentioned again?

In a fairy tale, inside that lyrical disconnect, resides a story that enters and haunts you deeply, I think. You do not doubt that a fairy tale happened just as it was written. This may explain the moniker of fairy tales as “just-so stories” (sometimes used to praise them, sometimes used to disparage them).

In what is considered to be the earliest literary version of “Little Red Riding Hood,” called “The Story of Grandmother,” the little girl enters the grandmother’s hut and a cat on a shelf sees her and says, “You’re a slut if you drink the blood of grandmother!”³ The girl is hardly astonished by the name-calling cat, not to mention its bawdy language, nor is she fazed that the blood of her grandmother might be in play. Like the girl, the reader easily moves to the next sentence, when the little girl approaches the wolf in the grandmother’s bed and proceeds to do a striptease. Shocking, perhaps, but when you read the story the poetry is remarkable, and gorgeous.

Despite their reputation as plot-driven narratives, fairy tales are actually extremely associative when you begin to unstitch them. They use intuitive logic.

In “The Rosebud,” the older daughter is simply a noun; and yet she exists in the story, has existed in there, for so very long. She is rendered with such syntactic assurance so as to seem fated; the narrative never raises the question of her disappearance. The details in a fairy tale exist in isolation from what is commonly called “plot,” yet this has the effect of making everything seem unavoidable, correct. In a way, this is very postmodern—and not unlike what happens syntactically in some poetry that is called “language poetry.” Yet the story also feels mimetic, doesn’t it? (The stylistic spectrum happily collapses for me—and reveals that wrongly labeled “nonrealism” is one of our oldest forms.)

And of course, this associative quality is also a sort of violation, a violation of the rule that things must make sense. Many fairy tales rely on the sensed relationship of words to story—the art of putting words together in a strange yet marvelous order that simply feels right, no matter how difficult it is to take it apart and try to put it back together again with everyday logic. A fairy tale is a Humpty Dumpty.

The final technique I’ll discuss here is *normalized magic*. The natural world in a fairy tale is a magical world. The day to day is collapsed with the wondrous. In a traditional fairy tale there is no need for a portal. Enchantment is not astounding. Magic is normal.

In “The Rosebud,” our dear and soon-to-be-dead little girl is not alarmed by the appearance of a child who then vanishes. The

mother disbelieves her daughter but is not alarmed. In the fairy tale the magical and the real coexist—this is a technical element. This is craft.

In Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice is not worried that a baby she is carrying transforms into a pig: in fact, she simply sets "the little creature down, and felt quite relieved to see it trot away quietly into the wood."⁴

Likewise, in Jean Cocteau's 1946 film *La Belle et La Bête*, Belle is not afraid because the beast is a beast—and not, say, a human—she is afraid because his appearance startles her. It is the shock of his image that scares her, not his nonhuman-ness, that is—not the magic. Lüthi calls this effect "the beauty shock" in fairy tales. Consider how in most versions of "Little Red Riding Hood" the little girl is unafraid that a wolf speaks to her in the woods. Normalized magic. You can call this "suspension of disbelief" if you want, but I prefer the idea that fairy tales require no suspension on the part of the reader; they are already suspended, expanded, enraptured with normalized magic. In fairy tales there is not much ado about fantastic occurrences.

With their flatness, abstraction, intuitive logic, and normalized magic, fairy tales hold a key to the door fiercely locked between so-called realism and nonrealism, convention and experimentalism, psychology and abstraction. A key for those who see these as binaries, that is. Seen through the lens of fairy tales, many works of literature can be understood as literary forms sharing techniques.

Contemporary authors as seemingly texturally disparate as Robert Coover and A. S. Byatt, Haruki Murakami and Stacey Levine,

Rikki Ducornet and Alice Hoffman, Ben Marcus and Donna Tartt, Gregory Maguire and Joy Williams use forms and techniques that have their root in fairy tales—whether consciously on the part of the authors or not—and are on the path of needles and pins in the forest together. In the work of all of these writers one can identify the patterns of flatness, abstraction, intuitive logic, and normalized magic. How each author expands and contracts from that formal template makes him or her an artist. Every writer is like a topsy-turvy doll that on one side is Red Riding Hood and on the other side the Wolf, or on the one side is a Boy and on the other, a Raven and Coffin. The traditional techniques of fairy tales—identifiable, named—are reborn in the different ways we all tell stories.

Perhaps if we recognize the pleasure in form that can be derived from fairy tales, we might be able to move beyond a discussion of who has more of a claim to the “realistic” or the classical in contemporary letters. An increased appreciation of the techniques in fairy tales not only forges a mutual appreciation between writers from so-called mainstream and avant-garde traditions but also, I would argue, connects all of us in the act of living. I am a true believer.

However, a continued underestimation of the techniques of fairy tales and their influence on hundreds of years of writing will lead, instead, to their disappearance. Also, it will lead to some wonderful books being disparaged by some influential critics as difficult or obscure or unreal-seeming. (Here I offer the suggestion that you look back on some books you dismissed on these grounds, if ever you have done such a thing, and consider them again through a fairy-tale lens. Or, if you are writing this sort of book, then take courage here.)

Too often when a fairy-tale motif is recognized in a story or a book, that work is casually referred to as a retelling or an adaptation, in only broad strokes seen as a fairy tale, and sometimes even called “merely a fairy tale.” I dislike the hierarchy of “this is more realistic than that, and therefore this is more valuable than that.” But many of these so-called nonrealist or fantastic books owe a tremendous amount to classical form—and one of the most classical forms in the world is that of fairy tales.

Finally, and most sadly, along with a dismissal of fairy tales, we sometimes find a dismissal of form.

Emily Dickinson, who also loved fairy tales, knew about form and its importance:

*After great pain, a formal feeling comes—
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs—
The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,
And Yesterday, or Centuries before?*

*The Feet, mechanical, go round—
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought—
A Wooden way
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone—*

*This is the Hour of Lead
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow—
First—Chill—then Stupor—then the letting go—*

Hundreds of years, wood, lead, stone, recollection, stupor, let-

ting go. The pattern is topsy turvy in Dickinson's hands, but we recognize the motifs, and she sews them into a shape that shines, sensational and familiar at once.

Fairy tale is form, form is fairy tale.

Long live fairy tales.

Long live form.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of traditional European folkloric formal elements, I point any interested reader to Lüthi's amazing, repetitive, poetic books. His formal studies of European folktales provide a point of embarkation for not only my critical work but also my fiction.

2. A. S. Byatt wrote a wonderful essay about this called "Ice, Snow, Glass" for *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Women Writers Explore Their Favorite Fairy Tales* (New York: Anchor/Vintage, 1998), which also appears in her collection *On History and Stories: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

3. See an excellent translation by Maria Tatar in *The Classic Fairy Tales: A Norton Critical Edition* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998).

4. And yes, *this* famous fairy-tale novel does employ portals—that is how Carroll makes potato soup. Writers amplify and minimize, hurtle and hoard, those fairy-tale techniques that appeal intuitively to them.