

# Tell me a story

paul biegel



“Tell me a story” refers to my two children, who used to order a story every night at bedtime, a bed-time story and not just a story. They would propose two items that it should be about. Each child would offer one – say, a cork and ... a door handle; and they would rush upstairs to undress quickly, wash and get into bed. The advantage was of course to get them into bed quickly – the disadvantage was my having very little time to invent something.

But as it is: stories lie about everywhere; just shut your eyes and you see them, so climbing the stairs my mind’s eyes saw the cork, flying though the air. Off a champagne-bottle, of course!

Champagne means a party, a rich party, a gathering of very rich people drinking nothing but champagne, corks flying everywhere, one landing on the windowsill, behind the curtains, where ... ah outside, their noses pressed flat against the window-pane are two thieves peeping through a gap between the curtains goggling at the smart people inside wearing the most expensive jewellery.

So there, already a story was developing, and I sat down on the bed and started telling. Describing the party, the firing off of the champagne corks flying here and there along the ceiling, and the one landing behind the curtains, where outside these two highwaymen stood spying.

Well, how to get at the glistening jewellery inside?

Says one thief to the other: "Hey mate, you are such a skilled pickpocket. Why don't you rush home, get into some smart outfit and walk in through the front door as though you were one of the guests? Just dance with them smart ladies, pick off their earrings and bracelets and rings and before anybody misses anything you have left again. How about it?"

The other thief doesn't even reply, he is already on his way home, changes into his old wedding-suit, takes a taxi, enters the house with an attitude as though he were an invitee and starts dancing. Everything goes to perfection: he dances and waltzes with the ladies, telling them how beautiful they are, how attractive, how sweet, he kisses their hands meanwhile pocketing their rings, their necklaces, the lot. His mate watching through the window grows anxious. Come on now, come on now, that's enough, don't play it too far! But our hero inside wants one more dance, a lovely waltz, and oh! he's had a few glasses of the superb champagne too, so round and round and round he waltzes, faster and faster, the ladies' skirts are blossoming out ... but so do the tails of our friend's old wedding-suit, the pocket of which is heavy with jewellery ... and alas, there comes the door-handle, prescribed item of the story, as a fateful object, sticking out as a hook, catching the tail-pocket like a fish and tearing it open, so the diamonds, necklaces, rings, bracelets are spilled out onto the floor.

And now the cork! Our thief of course is spotted, he tries to escape but the door is blocked, so he rushes to the window where his mate is witnessing the disaster, he climbs onto the windowsill, but as he tries to open the window his knee skids on the champagne-cork. He falls back and is caught.

End of the story.

But this was just to get us in the mood for what I really want to tell you. A story once more, also commissioned by the same two, and this time they wanted something about a giant – an enormous giant; they both wanted a giant, I said: “two giants perhaps?” But no no no, just one. So I said OK, one giant, and I made it enormous – that is to say: *I* didn’t make it, it came from where all stories come from, some unknown realm of the human mind, and this creature rose up before my eyes, like the one in that famous painting by Goya, but bigger still. Up and up and up he grew, so much so that even his legs disappeared in the clouds, his belly must have been in the stratosphere, his head near the moon. Goodness what a giant! And it was not just standing there, it was striding along, at a steady pace, taking enormous footsteps, I mean like one foot just here in Pretoria and the other somewhere in the Kalahari. (But of course in telling about him to my children his one foot was in Amsterdam and the other in London. One step across the North Sea.)

Where was it heading, my children wanted to know?

West! I promptly answered. It was going West, it had to go West, this giant creature, as though it were pushed, it could not stop or be stopped, and meanwhile he kept asking in a thunderous voice “Where is the West. I have got to reach the West. Where do I find the West?” And the answer he got was always: “That direction, mister Giant. There!” Pointing with trembling arm. “Please don’t eat me, there it lies!”

And the giant strode on and on and on. He must have gone around the world a hundred times, a thousand times, round and round and round, Japan, Asia, Russia, Europe, the Atlantic, America, the Pacific, splash, splash, splash, wading

through the Pacific, down to Australia, around to Madagascar, South Africa, Brazil ... all the time in his thundering voice asking the way to the West.

I can still picture my children's bright eyes listening, whereas I myself had no idea where and how this story would end.

But then something unexpected happened: the striding giant skidded. He had come to a vast and very slippery moor and putting down his right leg it slid forward while his left foot was still on firm ground, and not being able to put a halt to his foremost leg, it slid on and on, as if of its own accord, so the Giant began to sink, sprawling most uncomfortably, with one leg stretching out before him in the mud and the other staying behind. And he sank and sank and sank, lower and lower, unable, with all his might, to get both legs in their right position again ...

Poor giant, what was to become of him? I did not know. I never ended this story.

I still do not know. I have come here to put this question before you all, not expecting an answer right away, but in the hope that you may agree to the direction in which I am trying to find it. I shall explain it to you in this way:

On my journey here from Amsterdam I am accompanied by my 84-year-old sister Elisabeth. She is a very brave little woman, nicknamed Owl, and she copes most wonderfully with modern life. Her only trouble is electronic payment. All these gadgets like credit cards and pin-codes are too complicated for her taste.

“Ah!” she says, “but what do you expect? As a child I have seen the horse-drawn trams!”

Indeed, the development in the Western world in one lifetime is incredible, and one cannot deny that the speed of it is only increasing. The things we can do nowadays! Flying to the moon will soon be surpassed by flying to Mars. That one small step Neil Armstrong took to set foot on the moon meant an enormous leap ahead for mankind, he said. But did it? Was not this step rather like the Giant’s skidding, his forward leg being the physical achievement of mankind, his “lagging behind” leg the status of our psychological insight? Because: what enormous step forward since the horse-drawn tram has mankind made in the field of the human mind? Are we not like this poor Giant being driven forward continuously by we know not what force, and are we not now skidding like him and sagging down most uncomfortably, if not to say in horrible pain? Do we not all feel the pain of being able to fly to the moon and construct the most intricate electronic chips and not being able to stop the Yugoslavian war?

Already in the fifties someone foresaw this gap: the German-Italian Jesuit Romano Guardini on receiving the Erasmus Prize pointed out the enormous difference in speed between the development of the material world and the world of the mind. And whereas he thought it was up to Europe, battered by age-long quarreling and fighting and now old and wise, to set to the task of filling in the gap, I personally think the task is worldwide and up to the next generation. And the next generation is the very subject of this conference.

I prefer the word *next generation* to the word *child*. A child is woman or man, and a member of the human race of tomorrow. It needs a surrounding in which it can grow up and develop into maturity.

And do we provide it?

As a writer of books for children I am often asked whether I am a child myself. "You understand the world of children, you must still live in it," people say. "Or at least," they add, "there is something of the child left in you."

Growing tired of these questions I decided to look within myself to be sure it was all nonsense. But it was not. It took quite some effort and disappointment and pain to admit to myself that deep inside I perceived a frightened little boy continuously keeping himself hidden away. It was not a very nice experience, I must say. But far worse was when later on, when I looked up again and glanced around me, I perceived in almost everybody else a child too! With subsequent behaviour of yelling, fighting, insulting and throwing stones which in their case means firing bullets that kill. Since then my answer to the people wondering about the childish nature of the writer for children is: "and how grown-up are you yourself?" Is reaching the moon perhaps just a childish achievement?

Is our behaviour in respect of war, torture, drugs, racial discrimination only just very childish?

So I wonder: Are our systems of education, focused as they are on factual knowledge, at the same time a barrier to insight? Do they keep the human race away from developing into maturity, into finding out what drives that giant creature on and on westward? In short: does our system of education contribute to knowing ourselves?

I do not know the solution to all this, but I think we should be aware of the specific influence that children's literature has on the human race of tomorrow. So let us surround the next generation with as much insight into themselves as possible, and as little hypocrisy towards others.

Stories can do that. And there are thousands of them all over the world; every culture has them in great quantities; they only need to be told – it is my humble suggestion as a help to solve the problem of the skidding giant.

So I shall end with one more story, a very short one. I came across it only recently and it struck me in its deeply sensed truth, in its breaking though hypocrisy. It is about the scorpion and the frog, and it goes like this:

Once upon a time there was a scorpion who wanted to get across the river and as he saw a frog sitting on the bank he asked this good swimmer to ferry him over.

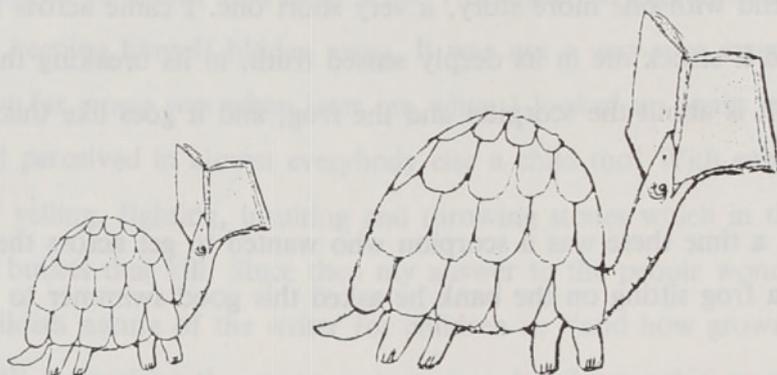
“Why,” said the frog, “do you think I am mad? You, a scorpion, if I carry you on my back you'll sting me to death!”

“Oh no!” replied the scorpion, “I'm not that stupid. If I'd sting you to death you'd sink to the bottom and I'd sink with you and get drowned.”

The frog took some time thinking this over and came to the conclusion it sounded absolutely right. No scorpion would be that foolish ever! So: “Alright,” he said. “Climb onto my back.”

They set off, the frog swimming for all he was worth, the scorpion just sitting. But halfway it happened. The frog suddenly felt a horrible sting in his back, and the pain surging through his body was laming him. He has been stung and he is dying. But he is still able to breath the question: “But why ... why did you do it?”

And the scorpion, already sinking to his death, replied: “Because it is in my nature ...”



# Information about "other worlds"

in children's book illustrations

mare müürsepp

This paper is based on experimental research done on children's reception of illustrations. The problems with this experimental approach have been:

- what kind of details and qualities of illustration denote the belonging of the story to OUR or to the OTHER world;
- how children can recognise the time and the place of the story's action;
- how the information obtained from the illustration helps to identify the genre of the book?

## About the theoretical background

Mikhail Bakhtin's interpretation of chronotope will be discussed. The term "chronotope" is used as the essential and formal category in literature theory. It means a unity of time and space. The chronotope specifies the genre of literary work. A certain form of chronotope is typical of a certain genre. Time is the leading component in the literary unity of time and space (Bakhtin 1987).

The child's understanding of history and of time is relatively poor. There is only an understanding of the concrete unit of the time of the day even in seven to

eight year-olds. The past is – “when I was little” and “long, long ago”. For that reason it was interesting to test how the children would perceive the time of a story’s activity. Do they imagine themselves in the same situation as pictured in the illustration – as if they were acting in this story and living at the time of the story’s happening?

So on the one hand the problem has been: the our and OTHER world in time and on the other hand – the our and OTHER world in space.

The work of Virginia Lowe (1993) about the possibilities of literature helping children to become aware of cultural differences through literature has also influenced this research. Virginia Lowe analysed the literary experience of her own two children. She has shown that the response to the domestic tale and to fantasy can be different. The domestic tale inspired an interest in people living in other countries. The fantasy tends to be seen as placeless. Those stories happen “in the land where rabbits talk”, not in the child’s actual world.

At the same time Virginia Lowe pointed to the child’s confusion and difficulties in comparing the people of other cultures in books with reality. The child starts from his or her own limited but concrete experience and his or her ability to generalise is insufficient. The people in picture books who looked different would be called, for example, “Chinese” or “Aborigine” because the child does not know other words for foreign or different looking people.

### **The process of the experiment**

The problem investigated in this work has been the information in children’s book illustrations. The illustrations of fairy tale books and of realistic books, describing every-day life, have been used.

1. The picture in the Hungarian fairy tale “The Fairy of flowers” depicts a boy in national costume that is similar to Estonian national dress. The boy has met a fairy – a young man dressed in flowers. Their meeting place is a forest.
2. The picture in the book *The Son of Warrior* by Tshingiz Ajtmatov, the Kirghizian writer, presents a boy together with his mother. The boy is wearing a national cap and the mother a kerchief, though they are not wearing clothes for the outdoors – so the headgear must be traditional and obligatory. The characters are walking in the mountains. This story is about the boy whose father is lost in the war.
3. The illustration in the French fairy tale presents a youngster in medieval clothes. He is kneeling in the bushes and watching big white birds. They are fairies, an enchanter’s three daughters.
4. The picture from the book by the Komi writer, Jegor Rotchev, *The Little Mitruk and the big tundra* depicts a boy, kneeling in the snow and playing with or speaking to his dog. The reindeer is painted in the background. The book is about this boy helping his parents with the rearing of reindeer and discovering the secrets of the tundra – his home.

All these pictures have been done by Estonian illustrators.

The four pictures described above were shown to children of seven to eight years that had not read these books and for whom the information in these illustrations constituted their entire knowledge about these stories. The illustrations were used in pairs that were formed by analogy to the composition of the pictures: two pictures about boys communicating with another human; two pictures with kneeling boys depicted in the centre.

There were 44 children, both girls and boys, who took part in this experiment.

The following questions about every picture were answered during individual interviews:

1. Does the activity of this story happen here in our land or in another land, abroad? Which details are strange and which familiar?
2. Does the story happen in the present (nowadays) or in the past?
3. Could you get into the same situation as the hero in the picture?
4. Is the story a fairy tale or a realistic story – story of every-day life?

The children's answers have been analysed and generalised in Table 1.

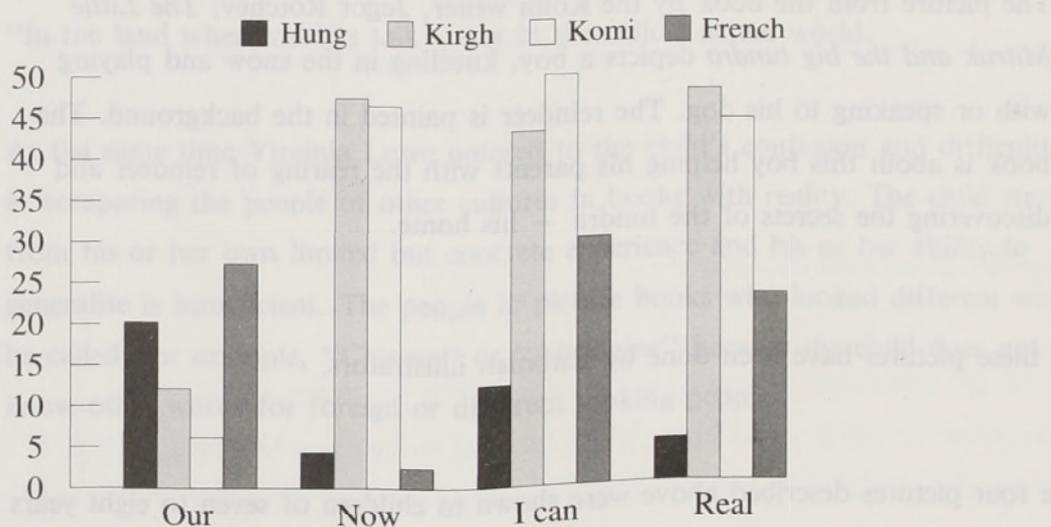


Table 1. Children's answers to the question about 4 illustrations

Hung - Hungarian fairy tale

Kirgh - Ajtmatov's "Son of the Warrior"

Komi - Rochev's "The Little Mitruk and the big tundra"

French - French fairy tale

## Results and conclusions

The tendencies reflected in children's answers will be analysed below.

### Recognition of *place*

All these books are about the OTHER world for the Estonian child. Hungary is in Europe, only 2 000 km from our land. Kirghizia is in Central Asia, at a distance 12 000 km from us. France is twice as far as Hungary. Komi is the nearest country in this selection but it is situated in North Siberia which has other climatic conditions.

Children's answers showed that more "our" lands – the places more similar to Estonia – were France and Hungary. The similarity perceived has been influenced by their belonging to the European landscape with big trees which are reminiscent of our broad-leaved trees.

The picture about Komi depicts a snowy expanse. This place led children to recall stories about Santa Claus' life in the North. The Estonian winter is also snowy: we usually have snow for four months. Unhappily the winter has been warmer in recent years and our children are having less experience of snow – they have seen it for a few weeks only; they have even forgotten about playing in the snow. Many of the children have remarked about this picture: "It is not Estonia because it is snowy! Where is our snow? We do not have snow!"

The picture of the North has also seemed stranger because of the character depicted in the illustration. There is a boy in Nordic national costume. The children have noticed his Asiatic appearance – narrow eyes – and this detail is linked to the specification of nations like “Japanese”, “Chinese” or even “Hindu” (which could also have been confused with “Indian”). These nations are really very far away.

Here we must say something about the Komi nation. This nation, situated 1 200 km from us, belongs to the Finno-Ugrian like the Estonian. We have cultural and everyday contacts. People with features similar to this boy are seen in our streets. Also we can find a lot of people who have Asiatic features among Estonians – prominent cheekbones, narrow eyes, dark hair. Our people are very varied in their appearance. Why has the boy in this book illustration been perceived as a stranger?

The conception of Virginia Lowe given above will be recalled here: children are either unaware or uninterested in the differences in ethnicity and culture that they encounter every day. The example about the boy living in Komi shows that the reception of this picture has been influenced by the stereotypical view: people with narrow eyes are Chinese or other Asians living far from us.

Many children have said that this land is in the North because it reminded them of Santa Claus. Our children have heard in children’s broadcasts and read in children’s magazines that Santa Claus is really living in Finland and even his address has been given. None the less only one boy noticed that the country depicted in the illustration could be Finland. Maybe children imagine that only

magic characters like dwarfs are living in Santa Claus' land. It cannot be a place where a real boy raises reindeer.

There are details perceived differently – for example the fairy birds from the French tale. Some children said that this is an Estonian story because the birds are Estonian. Other children mentioned that it cannot be Estonia because our big birds do not fly so close by. The faint grey drawing in this picture appears to some children to be the sea, to others to be the mountains. The conclusions made about the country are different.

In addition to the concrete objects – clothes, trees, flowers – abstract qualities have also been noticed: “It seems like the people are speaking a foreign language there” (about the Hungarian fairy tale); “they are strangers because they are poor; our people are not so poor” (about Ajtmatov’s book).

Sometimes the child’s remark is influenced by association. One girl said, looking at the illustration of the French tale: “It is not our land because we do not have orange trees”. Why has she mentioned orange trees? The landscape in this book is also without orange trees!

Children’s experience is limited and besides this their perceptions can be different. Looking at the illustration of the Hungarian fairy tale – the picture with a big tree and frog – one seven-year-old boy said: “I cannot say what country this could be because I have never been in the forest”, but another little boy came to the conclusion: “It cannot be Estonia because we do not have a place like it” – as if he could know all the possible places in our land.

Here too the differentiation between younger and older children is remarkable. The children of the first form (7 years) have more often recognised the place in the story as “our land”. The pupils of the second form with their wider geographical knowledge have better understood that the illustrations are of other countries.

### **The *time* of story**

Here the difference between illustrations is very clear.

Both fairy tales are identified as stories that happen in the past (Hungarian fairy tale – 96% and French fairy tale – 98%). The books about the Kirghizian boy and about the boy living in Komi appear as stories happening in the present for 47% and for 46% of the children. In both case there were some answers that these books could as well be about the present as about the past. So approximately half of the children recognised the illustrations in the realistic stories are up-to-date.

### **Children’s arguments:**

The clothes are old-fashioned – this is often said about fairy tales. One boy found that the Nordic clothes of the boy living in Komi are modern – and this is not wrong! Many people now are dressed in coats that are in an ethnic style.

Also the face can be old-fashioned (for example the boy living in Komi) and even the trees can be described as old-fashioned (French fairy tale).

Children's concrete thinking and undeveloped time sense have generated answers like: "It is about the past because I have not seen a boy like this" and "The story is happening in the olden times because it is in the summer but now it is winter".

Some children can draw logical conclusions: "because I know this land, this story can be happening in the present."

The magical details are identified as belonging to the past:

"The story is about olden times because the wolf is not evil". – "Please explain!" – "Nowadays the wolves are evil". (Nordic boy and his dog)

"Nowadays we cannot see birds like these". (French fairy tale)

"This boy is from olden times because he is not usual." (French fairy tale)

We could also encounter more generalised expressions about the picture. The story is "about the olden times because the illustration is so heavy" (Ajtmatov's book is illustrated in black-red tonality that appears unusually dark for a children's book). Some children have expressed that olden times, the past, were of another kind of time than nowadays. They have noticed that the things which seem unreal nowadays could have been real in the past (about French and Hungarian fairy tales).

### **The evaluation of the possibility of being *in the same situation* as the character in the illustration**

This question can seem difficult or even nonsensical but children's answers indicate an interesting tendency.

The readiness "to go into the picture" is the highest in the case of Rotchev's book about the Nordic boy. Fifty percent of the children mentioned that they could be in the same situation. Also the illustration in the book of Ajtmatov presents the situation as real. Nearly half of the children affirmed: "I can be in the same situation".

A fact that is noticeable is that the readiness to be in the same situation (in the place) depicted in the illustration is not connected with the similarity between our land and the place in the book but with the nearness in time.

The finding with regard to the answer – I can or not – is usually very realistic:

"I can be in this situation because I have been in Norway" (Ajtmatov's book from Central Asia);

"I cannot travel so far" (Rotchev's book about the boy living in Komi);

"I can see this place when I will travel. This boy is also travelling: he is from the South, look – he has eyes like the people in the South" (a girl's version about the boy living in Komi).

The French fairy tale has woken the desire to be in the same situation but at the same time many children have recognised that it is impossible in real life. They have often answered: "I can be there but in dreams" or "in the theatre". One boy said: "I don't know the way to this place" but saying this sounds like the way must be secret and unreal. Probably he does not know the way to either Kirghizia or to Siberia but he has not mentioned this.

The most unreal situation is depicted in the Hungarian fairy tale's illustration – maybe because there is an anthropomorphic fairy in this one only. It seems unreal to have contact with this world.

Of course this problem is not just one of the book's illustration but also the problem of the child's possibilities and need to identify with the character.

### **The genre of story belonging to the illustration**

The genre of stories is identified relatively adequately. Nearly half the children identified the books of Ajtmatov and Rotchev as the realistic stories. Some children said that they could be either realistic stories or fairy tales.

The French fairy tale is identified as a realistic story by 22 percent of the children. In this experiment it seems to be the Hungarian fairy tale which is most often identified as a "fairy" tale.

These results show that the recognition of the genre of the stories is in accordance with the specification of the time of the stories.

- The illustrations depicting the situations of the present are identified as belonging to the realistic style – both by 50 percent of the children.
- The illustrations depicting the situations of the past are identified as belonging to the fairy tales.

So Bakhtin's idea about the unity between the chronotope and the genre will be affirmed by the reception of one illustration only.

Those results show that even one picture can include so much information about a book's content, that half of the children could relatively closely identify the

genre of the book and the time of the story's happening. This first impression can be very powerful. Some children identified the boy living in Komi as a girl and the Hungarian fairy as a woman. Later the researcher used the right word – “the boy” or “the man” but there were children who clung to their first impression and could not change their interpretation.

We encountered a lot of examples of children's lively imagination that generates original versions about these stories and also the conclusions they come to. Why does this story (about the boy living in Komi) seem to be a fairy tale? – “Because the boy is without a cap”.

Many children have told their own stories about these illustrations. For example, their ideas about the Nordic boy:

- This is a girl. She travels around the world. She has been to different countries already.
- This girl is like the sorceress. She can be friends with the wolves.
- This boy must tramp because his parents are drinkers and they have forsaken him. Now the animals are this boy's best friends.
- The wolf has an owner, a man, but they have lost each other. Now the wolf is living together with the boy but later the owner will find his animal.
- This boy has travelled to the North and because he found the dog there he will stay in the North.
- It is a didactic story about how the winter comes; about whether Santa Claus' reindeer become wet in the snow or not; about how the snow could be blue ...

A problem is raised by children's versions like these: how can the reading of text influence those first ideas?

Some children consciously articulated the technical qualities of the illustration and the book generally:

- “The story is from an other land because the illustrator is a foreigner, not our man.”
- “The picture is about olden times because the paper is brown” or “the pictures do not shine, grey things were made in olden times” – about the illustration in the French fairy tale where there are delicate details in grey.

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# Weave me a story:

multiple input in the creation of children's stories

sue hepker

The creation of a children's picture book usually follows a set procedure: first there is the concept, created by either the writer or the illustrator. Then the text gets generated, followed by the artwork under the guidance of the editor, then the material is proofed. And finally the camera-ready product is taken to the printer. Although this scenario may vary, the process is in essence linear and fairly straightforward.

The books in the Little Library had a more complex genesis. They were not created in a straightforward linear process: they are more like a fabric which has been woven with a variety of different threads.

In order to understand how the books in the Little Library were "woven", one has first to understand the necessity for their creation. Young black children had no access to picture books of quality in the years of apartheid and before.

Without appropriate reading material they could not easily develop reading skills, nor the kind of motivation essential to the development of a culture of literacy.

It was generally accepted by publishers that the only buyers of books for black children would be the institutions, such as libraries or education departments.

Publishing for a retail black market place was a high risk venture, and few

publishers could take the risk. It was a widely held belief that black parents could not or would not buy books for their children. So the kinds of books that might have appealed were never published and the prediction became self-fulfilling. Children's books for black children were not easily accessible, as no bookshops existed in areas accessible to the majority of black parents. Commercial realities meant that publishers targeted their publishing for the white, middle income group.

While there was a steady supply of South African children's books for the English and Afrikaans groups, only a negligible number were published for black children, and these were mostly commissioned by educational publishing houses, specifically for use in black schools. The literary and aesthetic quality of the books ranges from fair to dubious. The quality of the translations has been generally condemned as inferior by many of the teachers who had to use them. Frequently, schools received books in a language which was not spoken in their schools.

In 1989, a study by Dr Carol Macdonald, entitled *The Threshold report*, clearly demonstrated the dangers of not developing reading skills before the age of 10. In the study, Dr Macdonald indicated the need for the development of quality picture books for young black children in particular.

The report was taken seriously by the Liberty Life Foundation, which decided to invest a substantial amount of money in the creation of books for disadvantaged children. They decided that I would lead the development of a project to create the books which were so badly needed.

As READ's book selector, I had been frustrated for several years by the difficulties of finding appropriate reading material for young children in the first years of

school, and I welcomed the opportunity of generating some original books. But I realised that I was faced by an enormous challenge. For there was no way that I was going to “tailor make” books for any one community. I firmly believe that if a story is good enough it will overcome all cultural barriers. I wanted to create story books that would appeal to ALL South African children, not to just those who were black or disadvantaged.

I set the criteria from the outset: the stories not only had to be universal, child-centred and entertaining, they had to be so good that they could be used as didactic tools in the classroom. They had to carry the weight of the “curriculum” and the “syllabus”, for many teachers, specially those conditioned by an overwhelming authoritarian education system, would not use them in the classrooms unless it could be proved they were part of the curriculum.

Yet their didacticism had to be so deeply embedded that it was invisible. Most importantly, the books had to provide children with a distinctly pleasurable and meaningful experience. The greatest challenge was to create stories that would link all the different population groups in South Africa: stories that would bridge barriers of race, language and culture. Apartheid had created deep chasms between cultures and people, and I had to devise some way to bridge those gaps by creating stories that would touch all South African adults and children alike.

In August 1990 I had run a workshop to create picture books, in which I created teams of individuals who were given the task of creating a dummy book in two days. This had been phenomenally successful, and in fact seven of the twelve books created in that workshop have subsequently been formally published by a variety of publishers.

This positive experience proved to me that it was in fact possible to “weave” a story, using the creative inputs of several individuals as the basic “threads”.

In 1991, I ran six workshops in different parts of South Africa: Magaliesberg, KaNgwane, Pietermaritzburg, Cape Town and Port Elizabeth and Magoebaskloof. The workshops were residential and in each workshop I created a microcosm of the population mix in that area. There were other mixes too: individuals from the art world like writers and illustrators were mixed with teachers and children. There were singers and musicians and dancers, and psychologists and linguists and inspectors of education.

I began the workshop by setting the parameters, and showing the delegates what motivates children to read by having a teacher demonstrate with a class of children.

The workshops were fun, and this was an important element in the creation of the stories. At any hint of didacticism, I would sabotage the story! There was an enormous pressure on the teams in the creation of the stories, for they had to negotiate ideas with people whom they hardly knew, who came from backgrounds very different from their own. Sometimes this was an effective challenge to the creativity of the group. Sometimes it ended in disaster, as there was no way of knowing in advance which delegates would work well together.

Each team had to present its story to the group at the end of the workshop, and the delegates were invited to make constructive criticisms.

But this was only the start of the creative process. In fact, it served as a very basic “pattern”. For the stories were then tested with groups of children in the area, and I tried to identify which stories had potential and which did not.

I had been given just the rough design of the “fabric”, and now I had to pick up “threads” from a much wider audience: the teachers and children in the schools where the stories were tested.

The story *One dark dark night*, was very different in its initial form. In the original story, a snake gets into the *kaia* or house of the family and causes all the household animals to be disturbed. The women hunt all over for the intruder, but in vain. The end of the story showed the snake curled around the baby in its basket. Both snake and baby were fast asleep, unaware of the furore around them.

The teacher responsible for the snake element came from a tribe whose totem was the snake. They believed that it was great fortune if a snake came into one’s home. But in the testing environment, children and teachers responded very negatively to the idea of the snake in the story, and it was clear that the snake had to go. At the same time, there were elements in the story that evoked an extremely positive response: the sound effects connected with the characters and the animals, and the idea of something that created a disturbance in the night.

It was clear from the response to the story that we had touched on a raw and vitally important issue. For most children, the theme of night fears is extremely common. For **these** children, who had just experienced the horrors of vigilante attacks in the townships by groups of thugs, it was not just an ephemeral fear. It

was a harsh reality. This story provided many of them with the opportunity to talk about their experiences in a safe and unthreatening environment.

At a further workshop with some of the editors from other publishing houses, other writers and illustrators, a new story was created around the elements of the sound effects and the noises in the night. This became the story *One dark, dark night*.

The six workshops generated about 73 stories in all, and from these, 23 were selected to be made up into full colour dummies, which were translated into nine languages. I needed to test the illustrative styles with the children, and I knew that visual literacy was poorly developed in many communities in South Africa.

The dummy books and the translations together with many other posters of the books went on an exhibition in July 1991 to four centres in South Africa: Cape Town, Johannesburg, Pietermaritzburg and Port Elizabeth. Audiences voted for the stories they liked best on specially designed voting cards. These opinions enabled me to select the final 12 stories.

I still had to decide on the 10 best stories, so they were tested again in a workshop for preschool educators and linguists, who were asked to comment on which stories would be most valuable to them. Two stories were cut in that workshop because the educators proved that they were too threatening for the very young child.

One story which was very "Dahlist" was called *Mama Sizwe and the bad monkey*. This was about a bad monkey that stole food from the communal

cooking pot. In the end the monkey got its “come uppance” by being pushed into the pot while it was stealing. It was then eaten with great relish. Older children were very entertained by the story, but I accepted that younger children who might empathise with the monkey, might find it threatening.

The other story which had equally dark humour, was a variation of the Henny-Penny story with a “Dr Cat”, instead of the Fox. *Dr Cat* had as the central character a sleazy character posturing as a doctor who was said to cure almost anything. The story and illustrations appealed to the humour of older children who could easily spot the deception. But the threatening subplot might have undermined children’s confidence in their doctors. And so it was cut from the selection.

Even when I finally had 10 stories that I knew were accessible to all children, I had to ensure they were going to work in the classroom as didactic tools. Another workshop was held with psychologists and it was at this late stage that it became apparent that one of the stories, *Dorothy’s visit*, was in fact seriously flawed. The story was the only fantasy in the series, and originally it involved the visit of an elephant called Dorothy to a little girl who lived in town. The elephant caused all sorts of problems and in the end had to be sent back to the Game Reserve. It was pointed out that rural children, identifying with the elephant might read from this that they could not transfer to an urban environment as they were too conspicuous and clumsy. I agreed with the validity of this perception, and was appalled, specially as we had virtually completed the art work for the book.

Thanks to the ingenuity of the art director and illustrator, Marjorie van Heerden, we shifted the fantasy in the story in order to retain those elements that worked,

and eliminate those that did not. In the final version, the little girl misinterprets the information on a postcard. She *thinks* that an elephant is coming to visit, but in fact, when the visitor arrives, it is not an elephant after all, but a little girl just like her.

What is significant in the book is that the two little girls are clearly from distinctly different cultural groups. But the story stresses their commonality and as such has become an enormously valuable teaching tool.

However, I must admit that the fantasy in the story is not clearly understood by many children, who still believe when they have heard the story or seen the marvellously vivid illustrations, that an elephant **did** come to visit. This is not really important though: what is important is that we removed the dangerous subtext before it could do any damage. Because the elephant had not actually come from anywhere, it did not matter how the complications of having an elephant come to visit were resolved.

But the weaving process was still far from over. Children use different learning modes or styles in their acquisition of knowledge, and learning to read is no exception. For this reason, I wanted to incorporate a multimedia approach in the development of the series. Posters would stimulate visual literacy skills and provide opportunities for developing literate thinking. The audiotapes would assist children whose learning styles depended on aural and kinaesthetic skills. In addition, the audiotapes would ensure that learning other languages would be strongly related to play.

Poster workshops were held to focus on how visual literacy skills could be developed. These workshops heightened our awareness of the design of the book

and which important visual elements to include in the illustrations and posters. Each poster was carefully planned to tie in with curriculum needs and children's needs as emergent literates. Most of the 10 illustrators were involved in the educational workshops too, and so were fully aware of all the issues that were involved in the creation of the stories.

At the same time, both the music for the stories and the translations of the stories were being developed. I had no idea what a hornet's nest I had opened by insisting that all the translations be properly tested and proofed before publishing.

Firstly I discovered that at least 17 different dialects of Xhosa existed in the country, and that at least three different styles of Zulu. I also discovered that only one computer in the country contained software for publishing in Pedi, and so every proofing error meant that the entire story had to be filmed again. Very expensive mistakes they were!

In reaching consensus on which words or phrases to use, the translators and myself also became involved with the notorious Language Board. The Language Board had been established by the apartheid government to keep the different languages "pure". I fiercely resisted the notion of language purity, and demonstrated my determination to allow "mixing" of languages in principle by including sound effects in different languages in as many stories as possible. This is particularly evident in *Eddie Ndlovu*, which provides English-speaking teachers with unpronounceable clicks – delighting the non-English speakers who proudly help their teachers over some of their difficulties!

In the end, a translation workshop was held which was attended by 28 translators, working simultaneously in nine languages. Each translator had to present his or her version of a story and justify the interpretation.

At this workshop, I was faced by a “strike”. Some of the translators refused to translate the most popular story, *Does your father snore*. They claimed that the story was untranslatable for a variety of reasons: one could not be so impolite as to tell an adult male that he snores; one could not enter his room uninvited; one certainly could not carry him outside and one could not add insult to injury by not allowing the father to beat the children when a spider fell into his mouth! All these elements were culturally unacceptable, despite the fact that the story itself is based on a **real** anecdote that happened to a Zulu father in kwaZulu!

Much negotiation followed before a compromise was reached: if the father was white, none of the cultural restrictions would apply. And as for the beating that they believed should be built into the text ... we left the ending unresolved. The text reads: “You can guess what happens next ...” Each child is left to decide what appropriate action should follow the incident.

The story is currently used by the National Children’s Rights Commission as a way to introduce the subject of parent-child relationships and discipline.

During the testing of the translations, translators had to tape the way in which stories were read aloud by teachers in order to check the fluency and rhythm of the translations. They also had to collect musical improvisations of the refrains that were written into the stories.

These were eventually incorporated in the music workshop, in which linguists, translators and musicians participated. The music workshop was in essence a “jam” session where we played with musical extensions to the stories. Original songs had also been specially written to accompany the stories, but in addition to these songs were the musical games which formed an extension of each story. The games ensured the playfulness in the project which is essential in any material intended to be used at this level.

By the time the two years of development were over, at least 700 individuals had actively participated in creating, shaping and embellishing the stories and the supporting teaching material.

It seemed miraculous when we finished: the books looked ordinary enough, but they were “tapestries” of incredible complexity and density. The wonder of the Little Library is what happens in classrooms and homes when children hear the tapes and see the posters; when the possibilities hidden in the stories are opened to them, when they become participants in the creative process of reading and thinking and writing and drawing and playing and singing.

The value of the Little Library is simply this: the books work. They provide both pleasure and learning. They are accessible and stimulating and relevant. And they are all these things because of the time-consuming, painstaking, complex “weaving” of the ideas of all those who offered up their creativity and skills in the formulating of the Little Library.

Multiple input is not for the faint hearted. It is not for those who have strong and definite ideas of how things should be. Weaving a story with others means

that one has to trust and respect the thoughts and feelings of those who enter into intimate relationships with books. It means that one has to trust and respect one's own judgment too: there are sometimes difficult choices to make, and plenty of critics who would delight in finding fault.

But for those with energy and a spirit of adventure it is a craft well worth learning and immensely satisfying to complete.



# Can fairy tales help?

cicely van straten



Fairy tales have been enjoyed by young and old for millennia. Like the rock art that graces our caves and kranses, the fairy tale has its roots in the myths and rituals of the earliest dawning of consciousness, or as the Australian Aborigines call it, the Dream Time. Yet, just as our Bushman rock art not only depicts the myths of long ago but also the coming of men riding horses, so the fairy tale not only embraces elements that are ancient but it can also reflect cultural developments of the last hundred years.

But what are fairy tales? For the purposes of this paper, I shall use the term just as everybody uses it. The name "fairy tale" in the English language covers a wide range of rather different kinds of stories. As JRR Tolkien pointed out in his essay "On Fairy-stories" (1938) fairy tales have nothing to do with fairies of the small garden variety at all. They have to do with that other dimension in which the marvellous, the impossible, the fantastic happen. The land of Faerie is a perilous and wonderful country where the human protagonist adventures among the mythic and fabulous beings of a magic realm.

Northrop Frye makes some useful distinctions between the realms of myth and fairy tale:

First, there is undisplaced myth, generally concerned with gods or demons ... Second we have the general tendency we have called romantic, the tendency to suggest mythical patterns in a world more closely associated with human experience (Frye 1957:139).

The hero of romance, as opposed to the hero of myth:

moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended: prodigies of courage and endurance, unnatural to us, are natural to him – terrifying ogres and witches, and talismans of miraculous power violate no rule of probability once the postulates of romance have been established (Frye 1957:33).

What distinguishes fairy tale from myth then, is not necessarily subject matter (we meet maidens, heroes and dragons in both) but the way in which this subject matter is handled. Myth, worldwide, was implicitly believed. Mythic stories explain how the world was made and why things are as they are. Myths were articles of faith, they were the great stories that mankind lived and died by. Fairy tales, on the other hand, are not implicitly believed. Our relationship with the fairy tale is more subtle, more changeable, more flexible. We do not believe in fairy tales as factual truths, yet somehow they live in our hearts and often we live by them, consciously or unconsciously.

Two of the most common characteristics of the fairy tale are conflict and the quest. “Agon, or conflict is the basis of the archetypal theme of romance, the radical of romance being a sequence of marvellous adventures”, as Frye maintains.

A very striking contrast between the realm of myth as opposed to the realm of the fairy tale is recorded by Geza Roheim:

I have collected myths and folktales in many areas, and if I just make a hasty mental survey of my own collections I find that in some areas a clear line of distinction runs between the two, while in others matters seem to be more confused ... I will consider the situation only in central Australia. Here we have a very clear distinction between a folktale and mythological narrative. Before I went out into the field very little was

known about folktales in central Australia. The narratives recorded by Spencer and Strehlow were pure myths and more than that they were esoteric myths, that is, they were known only to initiated. I wondered whether women and children had no narratives of their own: it did not seem probable to me that this type of sublimation would be absent. I never found it by looking for it: I found it by pure chance. One of the old women who used to come and tell me her dreams launched out into a long narrative that did not sound like a dream at all. "Did you really dream this?" I asked her. No, this is not something she dreamt last night, it is an old *altjira* (dream). Then I found out that the Aranda word *Altjira* meant both dream and folktale (Roheim in *Myth and literature* 1966:26).

Now both Freud and Jung were also struck by how much the content of fairy tales resembles the content of dreams. And as everyone knows, Freud called dreams "the royal road to the unconscious". It is not surprising, then, that a psychotherapist, such as Marie Louise von Franz, the colleague of Jung who spent many years of research on fairy tales in psychotherapy was to write:

Fairy tales are the purest and simplest expression of collective unconscious psychic processes ... They represent the archetypes in their simplest, barest and most concise form ... In myths or legends, or any other more elaborate mythological material, we get at the basic patterns of the human psyche through an overlay of cultural material (Von Franz 1970:1).

Another characteristic that Roheim noted of the hundreds of oral folktales he collected was that the folktale, as opposed to the myth, has a happy ending, a positive outcome. There is always conflict, struggle and quest, but the end of the tale brings resolution of conflict. In Northrop Frye's words, "the ethos of optimism" reigns in the fairy tale, as opposed to the often stark or tragic ethos of the myth. Speaking of the aboriginal tales he garnered Roheim writes: "The ogre is always burnt at the end and the human beings are always victorious. Besides cannibalism, the other outstanding feature of these narratives is the happy end."

This happy ending is what Bruno Bettelheim considers one of the most important gifts of the fairy tale to the child:

The message that fairy tales get across to the child in manifold form is that a struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable, is an intrinsic part of human existence – but that if one does not shy away, but steadfastly meets unexpected and often unjust hardship one masters all obstacles and at the end emerges victorious (Bettelheim 1978:8).

The figures and events of fairy tales also personify and illustrate inner conflicts, but they suggest ever so subtly how these conflicts may be solved, and what the next steps in the development towards a higher humanity might be. The fairy tale is presented in a simple, homely way ... even the smallest child is never made to feel inferior. Far from making demands, the fairy tale reassures, gives hope for the future and holds out the promise of a happy ending. That is why Lewis Carroll called it a 'love-gift' (Bettelheim 1978:26).

The folktales I have been describing here could be called fairy folktales – an important subgenre of the general fairy tale species. But there are other kinds of stories that come under the heading of fairy tale. There are the very old, boisterous and untamed Trickster tales which are the same the world over and are represented in Africa by the tales of the tricky little hare, or by the Zulu Uhlakanyane (who was described to the folktale collector Henry Callaway as being just the sort of person the little mongoose is!) who does the most appalling things to everybody – particularly those in high or venerable positions – and gets away with them. There are also fables which are very simple stories that point a clear moral, such as Aesop's fables. Then we have the fabulous world of the hero legends, the world of Beowulf, the Arthurian cycles, the deeds of Herakles, the Homeric cycles, Russia's Prince Igor, the epic of Gilgamesh, Maui the Stealer of Fire, the Norse legends and sagas (a saga lays emphasis mostly on the deeds and histories of family and clan whereas the heroic legends focus on the life and doings of the hero). We have the incredible deeds, and the boasting thereof, of Irish Cuchulain

and a great host of other marvellous and valorous heroes, as well as the stories of encounters between mortals and the denizens of another world such as nixies and kobolds and other nature spirits. These are the true fairies, the remnants of the old gods who were banished by Christianity. Growing smaller, they fled beyond human civilisation to the wild reaches of the world, from whence they still exercise their enchantment and fascination upon mortals.

Just as the young child needs the gift of the happy ending that the fairy folktale offers, so adolescents need the hero-quest during the phase of life when they start out to transcend the bonds of the nuclear family and see themselves as members of a wider community which will make its demands on them. And Joseph Campbell has this to say about the inner journey as depicted in legends and in many hero myths as well:

It has always been the prime function of mythology and rite to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those other constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back. In fact, it may well be that the very high incidence of neuroticism among ourselves follows from the decline among us of such effective spiritual aid. We remain fixated to the unexorcised images of our infancy, and hence disinclined to the necessary passages of our adulthood (Campbell 1986:11).

We would do well to consider his words in the light of so many young lives shorn of meaningful ritual in the huge amorphous cities of today's technological civilisation.

There are basically two kinds of fairy tale text in the world today: the written and the oral. The oral tale is very much alive in preliterate societies all over the world and is, thank goodness, coming back into favour in literate societies as well! One of the characteristics of the oral tale is that it always exists in a great

number of variations and we look in vain for a single “original” or “authentic” text. Each tale type consists of multiple renderings and the vitality of the tale depends entirely on the performance of the individual teller. Like music or drama, the oral performance is a recreation anew each time of old themes woven together in new combinations and the voice and gestures of the performer create a unique artistic occasion. For instance in my research on Southern African tales, I have come across as many as ten different variations of the Milk Bird stories, (very like our Hansel and Gretel and Tom Thumb (Perrault’s Poucet), of the Mbulu tales (close to our Goose Girl and True and False Bride tales), and the Sikhulume and Nanabulele stories. Some of these tales are more meaningfully and completely expressed than others, but there is no one text that can be considered to be more “genuine”, or correct or authentic than any other.

In the literate societies of East and West we have proof of a delight in fairy tales that goes back for millenia. The story of the lost slipper of Rhodopis passed from ancient Egypt into the lore of Greece and Homer’s *Odyssey* is full of fairy tales while purporting to be legend and saga! In the 5th century AD the first great collection of fairy tales, the *Panchatantra* (The Five Books) appeared in Hindu. It was followed 400 hundred years later by:

The vast assemblage of Indian folk tales set down nine hundred years ago by Somaveda, a Kashmir Brahmin, entitled *Katha Sarit Sagara* (Oceans of Streams of Story), contained stories with elements that, happily, are still familiar to the young today: helpful animals, invincible swords, shoes of swiftness, and vessels which continuously provide good things to eat no matter how much is taken from them. In particular the collection contained a splendid version of Hans Andersen’s ‘The Princess on the pea’ ... (Opie & Opie 1984:22).

The 9th century saw the Persian collection “The Book of Sindibad” and the “Thousand and one nights” can be traced to the 10th century. In Europe the

“Delightful nights” (or “Le Piacevoli notti”) of Straparola appeared in 1550–1553 in Italy and was followed in 1634 by Basile’s “Lo Cunto de li Cunti” or “Tale of tales”. None of these ancient collections were made for the benefit of children. They were all (strictly one would think) for adult delectation and were, it seems, particularly enjoyed by women during the long hours of spinning, weaving, sewing and other tasks that could be carried out in company. The dire warnings of medieval sermons against women who indulged too freely and credulously in fairy tales attest to the popularity of the ubiquitous stories.

However, it was Charles Perrault, amongst the many writers of fairy tales in 17th century France, who first insisted on retelling the tales in written form for children. Perrault excised from the old “nurse’s” tales what was not considered proper for the ears of children and at the end of each story he added his own little “moralité” in verse in which he pointed out the moral lesson of the tale with both praise for virtue and warnings against transgression.

Today we smile at Perrault’s moralités for we know that there is a great deal more to the fairy tale than the moral message of the fable or cautionary tale. Yet, the purveyor of these ancient stories to children always has a problem, for the originals were not for children and in our reshaping of them for childish ears we always have to leave out what the society of the day would not have children hear. In spite of the Grimm brothers’ protestations that as collectors of folklore they must respect the integrity of the oral stories they collected, Wilhelm proceeded to change both plot and style of the tales they assembled. Ruth Bottigheimer, for example, has pointed out how he altered women’s speech from direct to indirect in Märchen dialogue, portraying a shift from active to passive, until the stylistic rendering of the later editions of “Kinder- und Hausmärchen” was attuned to German morality of the 19th century that disallowed the ribald or burlesque or the power, initiative and free speech of women.

Maria Tatar documents a more sinister result of the “refining” of oral stories in the Grimms’ collection. She traces back to its roots the tale of “Little Red Riding Hood” which was originally popular as a tale told by and to adults, particularly women’s working groups:

Folk versions of ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ are less concerned with presenting lessons than with entertaining an audience by rehearsing a sequence of racy events. Red Riding Hood begins by unwittingly eating the flesh of her grandmother; she then performs a striptease for the wolf, gets into bed with him, and engages in a dialogue that leads up to a terrifying threat; in the end she escapes by pleading with the wolf for a chance to go outdoors and relieve herself. For centuries, adult audiences depended on the telling of such tales as ‘The Story of Grandmother’ (one is reminded here of the story of Hlakanyane and Grandmother in the pot) to shorten the hours devoted to repetitive house chores or harvesting tasks. Is it any wonder that they demanded fast-paced adventure stories filled with bawdy episodes, violent scenes, and scatological humor? (Tatar 1992:37) (My parenthesis).

So far so good, Little Red Riding Hood is a witty and courageous heroine who sums things up pretty quickly and gets herself out of trouble with ingenuity. A typical peasant lass who knows what’s who and who’s what. But what happens when moralising pedagogues get hold of tales like this and reshape them in order to be edifying to children? We get a tale in which the violence is preserved (the threat of being eaten by a wolf) but is turned into a didactic instrument:

But the pretty flowers that in the wood  
Bloomed gay and bright on either hand,  
So lured the maiden to gaze and pluck  
That she quite forgot the strict command

To her mother’s words, ever after this,  
Red Riding Hood gave better heed;  
For she saw the dreadful end to which  
A disobedient act may lead  
(Tatar 1992:39).

Here we have a great discrepancy between the action of a little girl stopping to pick a flower or two and the ghastly punishment of nearly getting eaten for it.

In a survey of the origins and earlier versions of tales such as "Frau Trude" (Grimm) Tatar traces the conversion of a tale about women's involvement with witchcraft into a story in which a young girl is gruesomely punished for simple childlike curiosity. As Ruth Bottigheimer has pointed out in her study of gender-related punishments in Grimms' tales, "*Bad girls and bold boys: the moral and social vision of Grimm's tales*", curiosity or a sense of initiative in girls is heavily punished whereas the same qualities in boys is rewarded.

As Tatar has pointed out:

That variants of the 'The Household of the Witch' (Later called 'Mother Trude') moved out of the melodramatic and comic modes to take a turn in the direction of moral edification is unfortunate, for they thereby instituted a death penalty for such character traits as curiosity and audacity. Once the household of the witch ceased to function as a source of entertainment for adults it began to deteriorate into a frightening story about the way in which the deviant behaviour of children is punished with death (Tatar 1992:40).

The Italian 'Caterinella' also offers a striking example of the way in which a folktale once full of earthy humour could be converted into a heavy-handed text with a pedagogical agenda. In the process, the surreal violence of the original was converted into a frightening punishment for a relatively minor transgression (Tatar 1992:40).

Scholars such as Torborg Lundell<sup>1</sup> have pointed out the gender-related biases in the very wording of the famous Aarne and Thompson Folktale Index and feminist studies such as those of Kay F Stone and Ruth Bottigheimer highlight the manner in which the dialectic of the tales endorses female passivity, self-negation, obedience and silent impotence in the face of brutal treatment by male

protagonists, or the shifting of villainy onto female protagonists to cover up male transgressions, particularly in the case of fathers' incestuous advances towards daughters in the Catskin type stories such as "The Maiden without hands". Sadly, we have to admit that the collecting and transcribing of ancient tales is not without hazards, especially when we fashion tales for children that were certainly not originally intended for them.

But there is another side to this coin. Once we admit that adults have altered folktale texts in order to control children, to impregnate them with certain beliefs and codes, we can also allow ourselves to do this in more positive ways. We can use fairy tales to challenge and to change. We can allow our young readers to turn things upside down and to question what the solemn grown-ups have taught them. We can use fairy tales for the delightful task of subversion.

On the face of it, one can hardly think of two men more dissimilar than the Scots writer George MacDonald and Oscar Wilde. And yet they had something in common. They were among the first authors writing in English (one a Scot and one Irish!) to write subversive fairy tales in the last 30 years of the previous century. In stories such as *The Light princess*, *At the back of the north wind*, *The Princess and the goblin*, *The Lost princess* and *The Princess and Curdie*, *The Golden key* and *The Day boy and the night girl* MacDonald turned upside down not only the class distinctions of Victorian England but also the traditional gender roles encoded in the fairy tales of the previous 200 years. Moreover he reinstated quite explicitly, in the teeth of current Protestant theological thinking, the divine value of the imagination as a means of apprehending spiritual truth.

In his very different way with *The Happy prince and other stories* Oscar Wilde made new fairy tales to undermine the messages of many old ones. He used the

genre to subvert and question itself and its messages. Cut from the same mould as MacDonald and Wilde, also owing much to the thinking of Ruskin and Morris, was L Frank Baum, the author of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* and its much-loved sequels. The experimentation with the fairy-tale discourse, that ongoing dialectic between the fairy tale and its thinking reader, that these three authors initiated has been followed by “counter-cultural” fairy tales that challenge gender roles and class distinctions still operative in today’s society. Authors such as Tomi Ungerer, The Merseyside Women’s Liberation Movement, Catherine Storr, Iring Fetscher, P Dumas and B Moissard, Jay Williams, Jane Yolen and HJ Gelberg, the Italian writers Turin, Cantarellis, Bosnia, Soccaro and Selig as well as the well-known German writer Michael Ende, creator of *Momo* and *The Endless story* all contribute towards a truly living fairy-tale tradition. In their work lies the future of the genre of the literary fairy tale, for without a genuine dialectic between the exigencies and challenges of now and the ancient mythic core, the tales will eventually be found wanting and will be abandoned.

Where does all this leave us in South Africa? Happily, although a written tradition of tales has come into being from translations made by collectors such as Theal, Callaway, Junod, Jacottet, Bleek, Postma, Doke, Stuart and Scheub, the great majority of folktales and fairy tales in Southern Africa exist in their oral form. This means that no one version is considered “correct” or authentic above others and each tale type exists in several variations. And the richness and vitality of oral performance still gives the tales the warmth and immediacy that is the special beauty of the folktale:

Expressiveness of tone, gesture, facial expression, dramatic use of pause and rhythm, the interplay of passion, dignity or humour, receptivity to the reactions of the audience etc ... Such devices are not mere embellishments superadded to the already existent literary work – as we think of them in regard to written literature – but an integral as well as flexible part of its full realization as a work of art (Finnegan 1970:3).

How fortunate our children would be if they could all participate in what the Nigerian writer Mabel Segun has termed “a childhood of delightful nights spent listening to folktales or telling riddles under the silvery light of the moon.”

Where the European child will have the story of “Hansel and Gretel”, which according to the psychologists, depicts the progress of the young child away from complete dependence upon parents towards autonomy – the African child has a rich variety of milkbird stories. There is the “Umuntu Nenyoni” in Zulu, and there are different versions in Ndebele, Sotho, Tswana and Venda, each with its own intriguing variations.

There is the powerful group of Mbulu stories, widespread among the language groups of Southern Africa, that seems to be very close to the European “Goose girl” or “True and false bride” tales. These stories – “Ukcombekantsini” in Zulu, Mbulumakhasane in Xhosa and Polomakhsane in North Sotho – comprise elements that are strongly reminiscent of the European tales but they also have a haunting quality of suffering through rejection and humiliation that perhaps harkens back to the experience of a young bride in a culture that turned her virtually into a nonperson and certainly the homestead drudge, as typified by the hlonipa customs, until she had borne a son and heir for her husband’s family.

Interestingly, the well-known Indo-European story of Cinderella, is seldom found in Africa. In my comparative study of European and Southern African folktales, I have come across only one indigenous version. It is a very fascinating one. It is the story of a girl, Nondwe, whose own mother dies and she falls victim to bitter persecution by her father’s second wife. While her half-sister is spoiled, she is stripped of her pretty clothes, starved and sent out to do the work of herding

(which is usually given to young boys). While she is in the veld tending the cattle she is befriended by a fish in the river who gives her all the food she needs and she becomes strong and beautiful again in spite of all her stepmother can do. The mother is incensed, pretends to be ill and sends her husband to kill the fish in the river, insisting that only the flesh of a fish will make her well. Nondwe weeps bitterly when she knows the fish will die. But the fish acceptingly foretells its own death, and tells the girl to collect up its bones when they are thrown away.

But the chief's son comes upon the fish bones lying discarded in the veld and tries to lift them up. He cannot and nor can anyone else. He declares that the girl who can lift up the bones shall be his bride. Needless to say it is only Nondwe who can do so and "as she came in her tattered rags and skins, the people stood aside to let her pass between them to where her chief was waiting."

This story interests me greatly for the only other story of the Cinderella type which involves a fish and its bones is the story of Yeh Hsien from China in the 9th century. If anyone can suggest to me how this story might have made its way into the Xhosa tradition from China, I would be delighted to know. Cinderella tales as such are rare in Africa. There is a delightful Hausa adaptation of the European Cinderella from Nigeria, "The Maiden, the frog and the chief's son" in which the mother-tree, or fairy godmother is replaced by a wonderful frog in the river. But this is known to be an adapted importation, whereas the Xhosa tale "The Magic fishbones" is a unique and mystifying phenomenon.

There is a male Cinderella tale in the Tswana tradition called "Matong and the big black ox". This is so like the Bracket Bull stories of Europe that it may well have come into the Tswana tradition during the last century. However, the fact

that it was adapted and turned into a thoroughly African tale suggests that it spoke to the hearts and minds of its first African hearers and was retold so often that it became thoroughly incorporated into the Tswana tale tradition. It may well be an example in our own times of the age-old way in which tales have gradually spread across the world over millennia and have been refashioned into the new forms that are meaningful in their adoptive cultures. It attests to the protean beauty of fairy tales that they can be used and changed and live on in new ways, to serve old as well as new meanings.

One of the most widely known fairy tale motifs in the world is the Animal Groom tale, best known in Western tradition as “Beauty and the beast”. In these tales a human bride is betrothed (often in an arranged marriage) to an animal bridegroom. In most instances she is revolted by her future husband. But only by overcoming her revulsion and by showing affection and respect for her groom, can she break the spell that binds him to an animal body.

This story which entered the Western written tradition in the story of “Cupid and Psyche” is found in Apuleius’s “The Golden ass” (1st century AD). In it the beautiful Psyche is married to a monster groom in the form of a snake although he is the god of love in disguise. Tales of this type appear in European forms where the groom can be a pig, or a bear or even a frog. But in Africa the commonest form of the story has a bridegroom snake (sometimes a crocodile) just as the Greek tale did. What is fascinating about the African snake-groom stories that I have studied is that they range from being myth proper, such as the Venda tale of the bride of the python god who angers him and can only appease him by giving up her life, right through tale forms that contain elements of both myth and folktale (as “Cupid and Psyche” does) and then to some that are pure

folktale. It is as if we are given a privileged glimpse into the process whereby a myth is turned into a folk fairy tale.

There is another interesting motif that is ubiquitous in Southern African tales (and also found elsewhere: ie the Nigerian tale "The Two wives") but rare in the European tradition. It is the motif of the loathly lady, or the decrepit hag. She appears as the Hag at the Well in an Irish tale and she figures in the story of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell in the Arthurian romances and in Chaucer's popular "Wife of Bath's tale". She is a repulsive figure, deformed, hideous and often covered in sores and a young man is forced to accept her as his bride. If he accepts her with kindness and respect she becomes a beautiful young wife.

In the African version, however, it is usually a young woman who encounters the old hag, on her way to her bridegroom's kraal, or in the river depths where the old woman is the prisoner/wife of a dimo, or cannibal ogre. She can even be the keeper of the legendary nanaboleles in the depths of a river. If the young girl hears the old woman's pleas for help and kindness (often to the extent of licking her sores) then she is richly rewarded. If she scorns the old one she becomes the prey of the dimo or snake bridegroom.

When one looks at the richness and variety of the oral tradition in Africa today one is struck by the fact that in Africa the teller of tales feels free to tell a story in her own way. She can change or adapt the stories she knows for new purposes and new messages. Those of us who have grown up with the written texts of fairy tales tend to regard them as holy writ, or as stories carved in stone. We need to learn from the African oral tradition which treats the stories not as inscribed in stone but rather as clay in the hands of sensitive and skilful workers.

Our fairy tales can be retold to suit the needs of our children today in a changed and changing society.

Alas the hundreds of thousands who live in the great urban sprawls of our cities do not always have the privilege of hearing fairy tales these days, although the work of highly gifted storytellers such as Gcina Mhlophe is beginning to change this. But perhaps publishers, teachers, lecturers, community and educational centres, creches and preschool care centres and organisations promoting literacy at grass-root levels can all share in bringing to life the rich and fabulous fairy tale tradition of Africa.

Let our children have their fairy tales. Let them be tales full of mirth and of heroines and heroes, those who go forth to meet the challenges of life with hope and high spirits. Let us not be too severely didactic or moralising, remembering that: "We are utilitarian, we are executive, we are didactic, we are earth-tied, we are hopelessly adult!" in the words of Lucy Sprague Mitchel.

Rather, let us grant our children the joy of their youth with the gift of a good story, whether it be the tale of Hlakanyane cooking grandmother, or Mosimane going in search of a feather from the wing of Tloding Pela the Lightning Bird, or Thakane, the brave sister of Masilo in search of the hide of the nanabolele. It is my hope that before long our white children shall know them all as well as they know Red Riding Hood, Snow White and Cinderella.

Maria Tatar who knows a great deal about fairy tales and how they mould our thinking, has recommended that we cast off our Western tendency to regard the written word as sacred and unalterable

Despite the stabilizing power of print, fairy tales can still be told and retold so that they challenge and resist, rather than simply reproduce, the constructs of a culture. Through playful disruptions, it is possible to begin transforming canonical texts into tales that empower and entertain children (Tatar 1992:237).

Stories [can] point the way to a folklore that is reinvented by each new generation of storytellers and reinvested with a powerfully creative social energy (Tatar 1992:238).

If we can keep our fairy tales supple and alive, if we grant our children the freedom to tell, re-form and retell them, then indeed fairy tales can and will help us.

## Note

- 1 See essay: "Gender related biases in the Aarne-Thompson Indexes", in *Fairy tales & society*. Ed. R. Bottigheimer, p. 149.

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