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Fascinated or haunted? Why we continue to write and rewrite fairy tales

Abstract:

This paper explores the reasons for writing a fairy-tale-based work, the transformations that happen, and how and why a children's writer might create an original new fairy tale.

It examines three original Australian picture books that can be considered to have key aspects of the fairy tale, and delves into the writers' own childhood readings to ask what generated the story idea. It addresses the central question of what endures in our deepest imagination, and how it is reproduced in fairy tale form. Part of this examination will include an analysis of my own original fairy tale, *The wolf and the boy*, and its genesis.

Biographical note:

Sherryl Clark is currently a creative writing PhD student at Victoria University, undertaking a study of fairy tales. She has published more than 65 children's and YA books, as well as numerous poems and short stories. Her books have won several awards, including the 2005 NSW Premier's Award for Children's Books. She has been teaching creative writing for more than 25 years.

Keywords:

Fairy tales – signals – storytelling – children

Fairy tales, in the form most familiar to Western readers, have been part of our literary tradition for over 500 years. Early books, such as Giambattista Basile's *The tale of tales* and Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's *Kinder- und hausmärchen* were collections of oral stories, but the urge to write original tales began as early as the 1690s, when Charles Perrault published his book of stories *Histoires ou contes du temps passé*, best known now by its subtitle, *Tales of Mother Goose*. Since then we have seen original fairy tales by luminaries such as George MacDonald, Oscar Wilde and Hans Christian Andersen, and adaptations, fracturings and revisionings galore.

Those who write original fairy tales, rather than adaptations, endeavour to create new stories that are fantastical yet also meaningful on a much deeper level. This is also my intention – to write original fairy tales – and to investigate, as a significant part of both my research and my own creative process, what endures in the tales and why. This investigation goes beyond easy analysis of common symbols and tropes, into psychological resonances and archetypes reaching down to the unconscious.

Susan Cooper, best known for *The dark is rising* (1976), suggests a writer of fantasy has to go further inside themselves than a writer of realistic fiction. 'You have to make so close a connection with the unconscious¹ that the unbiddable door will open and the images fly out, like birds' (1996: 115).

In her collection of essays, *Dreams and wishes* (1996), Cooper focuses on the role of the unconscious and the way an unspoken and unacknowledged recognition of meanings is shared between writer and reader:

The writer takes the images, themes, characters which come bubbling up from his – or her – unconscious mind (the ultimate world apart) and puts them into his story. There they stay, part of the fabric, and like radioactive elements they give off signals about the meaning of the story, the nature of its metaphor. But because they come from the unconscious, the writer himself generally doesn't know what these signals are. He may not even know they are there (1996: 113).

However, she adds, the reader receives the signals in the same way and 'takes them in, without ... having consciously recognized them at all' (1996: 113).

Fairytales are full of Cooper's signals and, even if children are not capable of recognising them as such, many adults become aware of their power, framing them in terms of theme and symbolism and allegory. While for adults this comprehension may be more sophisticated, writer Jane Yolen says, 'Symbolic language is something that a young child seems to understand almost viscerally; metaphoric speech is the child's own speech, though it is without analytic thought' (1981: 18).

Many such signals can be discerned in one of the most enduring bodies of fairy tales – the collection by the Brothers Grimm. Freudian psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim, in *The uses of enchantment*, published in 1976, focused on this collection when he wrote about the importance of fairy tales to children, and said his purpose was to discover why

children ‘find folk fairy tales more satisfying than all other children’s stories’. Although his work has attracted criticism,² some aspects of it provide a useful starting point.

Bettelheim believed a story’s main motifs are what the child unconsciously relates to and learns from, but adds ‘the fairy tale’s deepest meaning will be different for each person, and different for the same person at various moments in his (sic) life’ (1976: 12). He emphasised the usefulness of fairy tales in therapeutic work with traumatised children, including the ways in which the tales can provide empowerment and teach courage and resilience, and although I am interested in this as part of my research, it is not the focus of this paper.

Bettelheim and Cooper, from very different perspectives, suggest ways in which the unconscious operates in the writing and reading of fairy tales, while folklore taxonomists Antii Aarne and Stith Thompson spent years classifying tales, showing which elements of the tales appear over and over, and in what order. Aarne’s 1910 classification system (later revised by Thompson in 1928 and 1961, and again by Hans-Jörg Uther in 2004) identified recurring plot patterns and motif structures, and was designed to be of use to folklorists. In his 1928 book, *Morphology of the folktale*, literary formalist Vladimir Propp analysed Russian folktales, breaking down their components and listing 31 common narrative units. These resources are useful to scholars, and identify some of the necessary elements, but they don’t answer my central question of why the tales endure.

Author and pop culture intellectual, Neil Gaiman, in his lecture ‘How Stories Last’ (quoted in *Brain Pickings*, Popova 2015), describes stories as necessary to humans, and believes humans are necessary to stories – ‘We are the media in which they reproduce; we are their petri dishes’. The relationship is symbiotic, and stories can last longer than trees, if humans keep ‘growing’ them. However, in the reproduction of different versions of a story, what is it that survives from one telling to the next?

Fairy tale scholar Jack Zipes’s theory in his recent book, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale*, suggests that fairy tales have become memes. Zipes quotes meme-theory researcher Michael Drout’s definition of a meme as ‘the simplest unit of cultural replication; it is whatever is transmitted when one person imitates, consciously or unconsciously, another’ (Zipes 2012). Thus, Zipes says, memes form oral and literary traditions through imitation and repetition, using processes of overshadowing, transformation and remaking. He adds:

The memetic crystallization of certain fairy tales as classical does not make them static for they are constantly re-created and reformed, and yet remain memetic because of their relevant articulation of problematic issues in our lives. Fairy tales, like our own lives, were born out of conflict. Fairy tales were not created or intended for children. Yet they resonate with them, and children recall them as they grow to confront the injustices and contradictions of so-called real worlds (2012).

Thus we have a collection of theories that ranges from classification systems and formalist approaches to those that draw on petri dishes, poetic resonance and the work of

the unconscious, yet none provide a complete and satisfactory answer to my question of what endures in fairy tales and why.

As a creative writer, I am not convinced that writers who create successful new fairy tales are operating as transmitters of memes, or even simply experimenting with adaptations. For me, Susan Cooper's 'unbiddable door' and the recognition of signals come closest to interpreting the writer's process. To narrow the focus, I'm suggesting that there are certain elements of fairy tales that reside in a writer's unconscious, elements which have taken on personal psychological meanings, hauntings and/or fascinations, and that these emerge when the writer has a story concept that springs open Cooper's door.

In respect of her identification of the unbiddable door, I turn to three original contemporary fairy tales in picture book format and how an examination of these works, and insights from their authors about the genesis of their stories, are central to answering my question. I have chosen picture books because their readership is generally four to six-year old children. According to child psychologist Maria Vallasekova, at this age, they are able to engage most deeply with fairy tales and can 'attribute human experiences to animals and objects' (1974). I interviewed two of the story writers, Margaret Wild and Libby Gleeson, and drew on articles and published interviews where the three writers discussed the genesis of their stories.

As a creative writer practitioner, part of my research methodology is to interview writers who have written original fairy tales and ask them a set of questions focused on the deeper meanings of the tales and where the origin of the tales might lie. One question is about which tales were read in childhood; another is about current events which might have influenced or filtered into the tale. I intend to interview Shaun Tan at a later date and have relied here on material he provides on his website. This approach accords with that detailed by Graeme Harper, Professor of Creative Writing at Bangor University, where he calls for 'evidence relating to the acts and actions of creative writers' (2008: 165) as a form of methodology in practice-led research in creative writing.

In order to classify these texts as fairy tales, I am using definitions provided by Andrew Teverson in his book *Fairy tale* (2012). Teverson acknowledges the problems with the term 'fairy tale' and suggests instead the use of *Volksmärchen* (people's tales), *Buchmärchen* (book tales) and *Kunstmärchen* (art tales) (31). It is *Kunstmärchen* that opens up the genre more to modern tales because, according to Teverson, they are:

fictions in which an author has either (a) used a *märchen* and/or *volksmärchen* as a basis for literary invention ..., (b) invented a narrative that is designed to resemble a traditional tale in some respects but that is in fact entirely original, or (c) created an original tale but made substantial use of 'motifs' common in traditional tales (2012: 31).

I note also that in the course of my interviews with the authors, they use the terms fairy tale, myth and folk tale interchangeably, and Teverson himself suggests that the boundaries between categories are 'fluid' (15).

The first tale I have chosen is *Fox*, by Margaret Wild (2000), illustrated by Ron Brooks. It aligns with Teverson's categories (b) and (c) in that it has animal characters which talk, and uses motifs such as fire, blindness, the forest and the cave (Zipes 1998: 4-5). It is the story of Dog and Magpie who live in the charred forest. Dog has only one eye and Magpie's wing is burned so that she cannot fly. Dog takes Magpie to the river and tells her to look into the water. 'Reflected in the water are clouds and sky and trees – and something else. "I see a strange new creature!" she says. "That is us," says Dog. "Now hold on tight!"'. He races as fast as he can to give Magpie the sensation of flying again.

Then Fox arrives 'with his haunted eyes and rich red coat'. He watches Magpie all the time, 'And at night his smell seems to fill the cave – a smell of rage and envy and loneliness'. Fox tries to convince Magpie to go with him, promising to run so fast that it would be like really flying, but Magpie says, 'I will never leave Dog. I am his missing eye and he is my wings'. Finally Fox prevails and takes Magpie out into the desert, so fast she does feel the sensation of flight again. There he leaves her to die, saying 'Now you and Dog will know what it is like to be truly alone'.

Magpie is on the verge of giving up, 'But then she thinks of Dog waking to find her gone' and begins the long, painful journey home.

This is an extremely powerful story on several levels. The text itself uses spare, evocative language, which is enhanced by the illustrator's decision to write the text with his left hand to make it look raw and jagged (Anderson 2000).

Fox is the quintessential trickster, only out for himself, but in this story, his motivations are not greed, as is seen, for example, in many of Aesop's Fables, but 'rage and envy and loneliness'. He is so much more than merely sly and cunning that we weep for him as much as for Dog and Magpie. As with many fairy tales, we can see ourselves in every character, even if we might not wish to.

Bettelheim identifies the elements of love, abandonment and separation in the story 'The Goose Girl' and says: 'To become himself, the child must face the trials of life on his own; he cannot depend upon the parent to rescue him from the consequences of his own weakness' (1976: 139). Thus Magpie must make her own way home, rescue herself and grow stronger as a consequence. A reader might imagine that Magpie would die, but the last line of the story suggests a positive ending, 'Slowly, jiggety-hop, she begins the long journey home'.

Animals are an important recurring element in fairy tales, and Margaret Wild said:

Dog was originally a dingo. But the publisher asked me to change this ... I was very happy to change it to Dog because of all the positive qualities a dog has, such as loyalty and faithfulness. I chose a magpie because the name sounds simple and homely, whereas something like 'cockatoo' sounds a bit too fancy or frivolous – to my mind, anyway. And 'crow' has its own particular connotations (Email interview, 28 March 2012).

Picture book writers usually have restricted word lengths, but Wild is conscious of the deeper meaning of every element, including her characters. I would argue that ‘connotation’ can be substituted for ‘signal’.

Wild went on:

In one respect Dog’s missing eye and Magpie’s damaged wing is a plot device so that the two of them will join forces to make one complete animal. But the missing eye is also symbolic of Dog’s blindness to the true nature of others, whereas Magpie is acutely aware right from the start that Fox represents danger. The damaged wing keeps Magpie earthbound which is why Fox is able to tempt her to go away with him.

Wild said she didn’t consciously set out to write a myth, but was aware of the folktale ‘three pattern’ and used that. The publisher described the story as archetypal, but Wild was ‘astonished to realize that it had so many themes – friendship, loyalty, temptation, envy, betrayal, love, loss, cruelty and possible redemption’ (2012). It is interesting that it was her publisher who identified the deeper meanings of the story, as if it took an ‘outsider’ to recognise what had emerged from behind Wild’s ‘unbiddable door’ (Cooper’s term). This is not an uncommon experience for a writer, for others to see meanings the writer is unaware of, and can lead to self-questioning about where such ‘signals’ might have emerged from.

When I asked Wild about her reading in childhood, she said:

As a child I loved myths, folktales and fairy tales. *The snow queen*, *The little mermaid*, *The selfish giant* and *Beauty and the beast* still haunt me – they are such powerful stories that engage the reader at a deep emotional level. Who can forget the glass in the boy’s eye, the mermaid walking as if on knives? We go on a journey with these characters, identify with them and their situations, and find out about ourselves at the same time (2012).

Here, Wild is clearly identifying the elements of fairy tales that continued to haunt her, and inadvertently describing the signals in her own work, *Fox*, that children respond to. Friendship, loyalty and betrayal are depicted darkly and unflinchingly, as are blindness and pain, just as acute pain is a central element of *The little mermaid* and *The snow queen*. It seems that physical pain in these stories signals, or stands in for, emotional pain, and thereby reaches down to deeper levels in the reader.

The second work I have chosen is *The great bear* by Libby Gleeson (2010), illustrated by Armin Greder. Like *Fox*, it fits in with Teverson’s categories of *Kunstmärchen*, resembling a traditional tale with an animal character. It is the story of a bear forced by her owner to dance for humans, and again this is an animal in pain and despair. While some of the crowd clapped and cheered to the music as she danced, ‘others poked her with sticks and threw stones at her ragged coat.’ This continues for years until one night she is led into the square of a village high in the mountains. The crowd calls to her to dance but she stands very still. The more they shout, the more she refuses:

Sticks poke. Sticks prod. Chains yank. Stones strike, strike, strike.

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[page turn]

ROAR!

From here on, there are no more words. The illustrator shows the bear's vast shadow, the villagers running, and then the bear climbing the pole, higher and higher, until at last she escapes up into a sky full of stars. Gleeson describes how the story emerged:

One morning in 1995 I woke with a series of images from my dream strong in my memory. So strong that I wrote them down, pondering their meaning. The sequence was a huge dancing bear in a medieval village, somewhere in mountainous Central Europe. The bear was tormented and tormented and finally broke free. She ran to the centre of the village square, climbed the flag pole and balanced on the top. I knew she could never climb down but I was unafraid for her. Then she launched herself into the stars and I thought of Ursa Major, the Great Bear constellation. It felt very satisfying. I knew there was a story there and so wrote out the sequence of events. This was an aid to memory - not even a first draft (2000: 1).

In Gleeson's dream, the torment suffered by the bear leads to escape and a happy ending, a key feature of a fairy tale. Gleeson describes the process of working with illustrator Armin Greder: 'I wanted the levels of psychological and mythological insight to be available to very young readers. I talked at length with Armin and then went back to my desk and struggled with the ideas, with the structure of the story, with the language - every word, every nuance of meaning' (2000: 1).

Greder worked on the illustrations and then came back to her, asking that her text finish with the ROAR! and the rest of the book be only the illustrations, to which she immediately agreed. Having seen much of the work he had already done, she knew that he was trying to achieve the deeper meanings through his dark and perspective-shifting illustrations. As a result, readers 'cannot read this work without feeling as the bear feels, identifying with her suffering, celebrating her liberation' (2000: 2).

Gleeson's intention is clear - having the dream was a stirring starting point, but it was in revision and in working with the illustrator that the story grew more resonant and symbolic.

In an email interview, Gleeson added:

People kept saying to us it was a story about the bad treatment of bears and all I could think of was how narrow that reading was. He and I discussed the writing at every stage and a few times he got back to me saying it needed to be more poetic but more than that it needed a psychological depth. I think that is the mythological element (25 March 2012).

Both author and illustrator are connecting mythological resonance to psychological depth - together these two elements, emerging from the creators' need to tell this story in this way, create stronger signals for the reader.

When I asked Gleeson if she remembered reading or hearing about anything in the week before the dream that might have sparked it, she said:

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I was reading around the invasion of East Timor for research for my novel *Refuge*. The Green Left weekly in particular was full of stories of murder/rape/imprisonment. I believe *The great bear* is about man's inhumanity to man and I think my dream was a response i.e. setting oneself free (2012).

In 'The power of literature', she states 'the best of our literature is stories that help us to understand ourselves' (2008: 5). She added in the interview, when I asked how children responded to the story, 'I know that *The great bear* invokes in children long conversations about the way one ought to treat others' (2012).

My third picture book is *The red tree* by Shaun Tan. Of the three I have chosen, this one is perhaps controversial but I consider this to be a fairy tale because it fits most closely with Teverson's *Kunstmärchen* (c): the tale is entirely original but uses motifs such as clocks, dead leaves, water and the colour red. This book is also used in many classrooms to invoke long conversations with its child readers. It uses sparse, unpunctuated text and many strange and mysterious illustrations, featuring a red-haired girl. It begins with 'Sometimes the day begins with nothing to look forward to' and continues through 'the world is a deaf machine' and 'sometimes you just don't know what you are supposed to do' to the last line 'just as you imagined it would be' (2001).

While Tan says on his website, '*The red tree* is a story without any particular narrative; a series of distinct imaginary worlds as self-contained images which invite readers to draw their own meaning in the absence of any written explanation' (Tan n.d: 1), in other places he refers to the story as a journey and a narrative, and sees the text as a 'minimal connection' for the images. The girl is the main visual connection, and we follow her from waking to returning to her room. Tan states that his focus is on metaphor, and 'Each image remains open to various interpretations in the absence of any accompanying description. What minimal "story" there is seeks to remind us that just as bad feelings are inevitable, they are always tempered by hope' (5).

There are many symbolic objects throughout the illustrations: leaves, aeroplanes and wings; a spiral shell; a cave; red birds and the red tree in her bedroom on the last page. As with all of Tan's artwork, each illustration contains many elements that the reader/viewer can interpret in different ways.

The signals in *The red tree* are mostly visual, the most powerful being the dead, brown-black leaves that re-emerge as red and alive at the end. Tan does not prescribe – his aim is that the book 'not only endures variable interpretations, it almost demands them. This seems appropriate, given everyone's experience of "suffering" or "hope" is unique and personal' (8).

Each of these books has in some way come from its writer's heart and mind and unconscious. Cooper makes it clear that she believes the process of signals works at an unconscious level for both writer and reader. Jane Yolen says, 'the best new stories have something serious to say about the writer and his or her particular world. All writers write

about themselves ... The world of which they write is like a mirror that reflects the inside of their hearts, often more truly than they know' (1981: 26).

Yet most writers would not wish to look at this mirror. It is common fear that close scrutiny of creativity might kill it off. Although we might identify what generated the central idea, as in Gleeson's mention of a dream, it is by definition impossible to enter into our own unconscious and deliberately pick out long-forgotten images, fairy tales and themes. As I write and then explore my own work, I stay constantly aware of the vital need not to disrupt my own creative processes or block the opening of my 'unbiddable door'.

However, it is a central question for creative writing as an academic discipline – how to explore, let alone explain, the unconscious processes in writing. It is this question that sits at the core of my attempts to write original fairy tales of my own: the obligation to pinpoint the genesis of a story. As Graeme Harper says, practice-led research requires the investigation of a number of things: what is known/what is not known; acts and actions; and 'the *making* that is core to creative writing research' (2008: 168). Therefore, while my research begins with other writers of fairy tales, it leads into the investigation of my own processes. Carrying out this investigation, via a journal, with a distance of time and location, helps minimise creative disruption. I have also deliberately engaged in 'feeding' my unconscious with fairy tale material, as well as related images, films, artworks, music and sculptures.

Part of the creative component of my thesis is the writing of four original fairy tales. Several times, I have found sparks of ideas in the research reading; for example, a mention of a magic tablecloth in Marina Warner's book, *Once upon a time*, led to me writing my own magic tablecloth story. To retain the link with my own unconscious, my process has been to leap upon such sparks (or signals?) and simply write, without further research or reading similar fairy tales. As with Libby Gleeson, I have found I can later recognise current world issues that are disturbing me and how they 'leak into' the story draft I have written. In the case of the magic tablecloth story, it was corporate fraud and greed, and the plight of people living in poverty. I do not attempt any analysis of this kind while writing.

One tale, *The wolf and the boy*, came directly from an experience at the Brisbane Gallery Of Modern Art in May 2014. The installation was by Chinese artist, Cai Guo-Qiang, and the exhibit 'Falling back to earth' had a deep effect on me. The realistic 99 wolves leaping into the air and hitting the glass wall resonated with me in a way that even now I cannot truly describe.

Immediately on leaving the exhibition, I went to a far corner of the gallery, found a seat and began writing in my notebook. The story came out in one complete draft while I sat there. Later in my journal, I wrote:

It wasn't planned, I had no idea what the story would be or what it might mean. I just wrote, and I kept writing until I had finished. I certainly sensed that if I stopped and

went away somewhere else, the outside world would dilute or destroy the connection, the impulse and the flow.

When it came to thinking about what the story might have drawn from my unconscious, I wrote:

I love wolves and am interested in them as animals in nature and in their symbolism; I was perhaps drawing unconsciously on Wild's story, *Fox*, although it would be the loyal Dog that was the influence; the wolves in the installation that seemed to touch something in me, especially their dedication to the leap and their persistence. Yet none of these things really explain how the story emerged. It just did.

Now, more than a year later, and after having revised the story (which is about a boy deliberately left in the forest by his mother and cared for by a wolf), I see themes of abandonment and trust, two things important to me. My mother died when I was fourteen, and it took many years before I realised abandonment was a recurring theme in my work. As with Wild, it took an outside reader, another writer, to point it out to me. I was surprised to see this theme is still arising, and it possibly will for the whole of my writing life. Perhaps this is the sliver of glass in my own eye.

My research so far reconfirms the power of myths, fairy tales, their motifs, signals and the importance of the unconscious, and that creative writers can and do make use of the hauntings and fascinations that spring out from behind the unbiddable door. At this point, the research is leading me into explorations of powerlessness and pain, the need to act against passivity, the possibilities of utopia, and the necessity of hope in human lives. These are all elements played out in fairy tales in numerous ways, transcending context and enduring in various reincarnations over centuries of storytelling as the signals that Cooper describes.

The challenge for me as a creative writer is how to allow my unconscious to apply fairy tales in my own work, how to revise and increase their resonance, and how to keep my own unbiddable door at least partly ajar.

Endnotes

¹ I will continue to use Cooper's term 'unconscious' rather than subconscious, and note that writers such as George MacDonald were using this word in connection with writing fairy tales long before Freud used it in his writings about psychoanalysis – See Gray, W 2009: 29.

² Jack Zipes (1978) and Alan Dundes (1991).

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