

The Grimms' Catalog, Revisited and Told Anew

By Amanda Katz

Dec. 17, 2012

Philip Pullman, a writer known for his originality and command of suspense, has written a new book almost entirely devoid of either. That hardly sounds like praise — but suspense and originality are not the only literary virtues. Mr. Pullman's "Fairy Tales From the Brothers Grimm" transports us to the opposite pole of storytelling pleasure: the domain of the fixed, the communal and the familiar.

Mr. Pullman's book is a straightforward retelling of 50 stories selected from the "Children's and Household Tales" collected by the philologists and folklore scholars Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in 19th-century Germany. Based on oral and written accounts from numerous storytellers, the first version of the tales was published in 1812; Mr. Pullman's book marks its bicentennial, though his version draws on the more popular 1857 edition.

Today the Grimms' best-known tales — "Cinderella," "Snow White," "Little Red Riding Hood," "Hansel and Gretel," "Rumpelstiltskin," "Rapunzel" — are so central to American popular culture that most of us could retell them ourselves. They exist in dozens of formats, from academic compendia to Golden Books to graphic novels. They have thrived in (or despite) myriad adaptations: a Bugs Bunny "Hansel and Gretel"; a Sondheim musical, "Into the Woods," mashing up multiple tales; a Monty Python "Little Red Riding Hood." As a child I loved the Grimm translations by Lore Segal and Randall Jarrell, illustrated by Maurice Sendak; one of today's most appealing versions is the Harvard scholar Maria Tatar's "Annotated Brothers Grimm," rereleased in a new edition this fall.

There is no shortage of Grimm on the market, in other words. But Mr. Pullman's "Fairy Tales" offers something unique: the chance to watch a master storyteller think through these most foundational of tales.

A British children's author, Mr. Pullman became a worldwide sensation with the 1996 publication of "The Golden Compass," the first in the majestic fantasy trilogy "His Dark Materials." With their magical objects, talking animals and plucky young heroine, these books have roots that extend into fairy-tale tradition. But they are modern novels, rich with personality and motivation. By contrast, as Mr. Pullman notes in a useful introduction to the new volume: "There is no psychology in a fairy tale. The characters have little interior life; their motives are clear and obvious."

"Fairy Tales From the Brothers Grimm," then, is effectively an album in which a gifted

contemporary composer covers classic songs. As Mr. Pullman notes, an enormous relief and pleasure “comes over the writer who realizes that it’s not necessary to invent: the substance of the tale is there already, just as the sequence of chords in a song is there ready for the jazz musician.” And his repertory is undeniably first-rate. These stories, honed through generations of tellers, are the survivors of literary evolution. They are here because they work.



Philip Pullman KT Bruce

Recognizing this, Mr. Pullman keeps his touch light, lending the stories a plain-spoken, casual voice and respecting the strange transformations, reversals of fortune and patterns of three that give them their power. He concludes each tale with a brief analytical note — praising or criticizing the story, pulling out a piquant detail, sometimes suggesting improvements. This is shoptalk, essentially — an expert narrator pointing out the storytelling triumphs or missteps of his forebears — and it is fascinating.

With some of the best-known stories Mr. Pullman’s greatest contribution is simply to rescue the stark original from the sweetening effect of Disney. In his “Cinderella” (as in the Grimms’) there is no fairy godmother. Instead there is a hazel tree, sprouted from Cinderella’s mother’s grave. Cinderella asks the hazel tree for a dress to wear to the ball. “ ‘What color?’ whispered the leaves. ‘Oh! I’d like a dress the color of starlight,’ ” she responds.

Mr. Pullman borrows that detail of different-colored dresses — starlight, moonlight,

sunlight — from one British version of the story. These days “Cinderella” brings to mind pink-clad, princess-obsessed kindergartners more than starlit gowns; stripped of these trappings this tale of a dirty, abused daughter sneaking off to the ball regains its emotional pull.

Other stories don’t need to be told afresh, because they will be new to most readers. One of my favorite of these, “The Girl With No Hands,” is full of almost Gothic detail: a girl’s hands cut off by her father, a romance undone by falsified letters, a reunion confirmed by the unveiling of a pair of silver prosthetics. However, the story also has Christian notes — guardian angels, for instance — that seem at odds with these dark, fantastic twists. Having related this story patiently and well, Mr. Pullman tells us what he really thinks: “The tale itself is disgusting,” and “the tone of never-shaken piety is nauseating.” (Mr. Pullman, who has described himself as an atheist, is highly critical of organized religion.) One is struck by the contrast between his own severe opinion and his fidelity to the tale.

Having a faithful narrator has benefits; it lets us observe how much the tales as originally recorded continue to inform our cultural imagination. Two centuries later the Grimms’ stories teach virtues we still strive for: bravery, resourcefulness, loyalty, kindness, gratitude. Their world, old-fashioned even in the 19th century, is still our communal imaginary landscape, populated by kings and queens, donkeys and geese, millers and tailors and huntsmen, stones and apples and barrels and gold.

Perhaps because we know this far-off world so well — and because he is largely so true to it — Mr. Pullman’s occasional attempts to inject modern notes are jarring. Cinderella’s stepsisters taunt that she is “dressed to kill”; the witch calls Rapunzel’s suitor a “lounge-lizard”; the Devil’s grandmother reads a newspaper.

Fortunately these are anomalies in stories that, for the most part, flow like water. If Mr. Pullman’s Grimm is relatively traditional, that is a gesture of respect not only to these folk tales but to their origins, and to the surety we, like small children, sometimes crave in our stories. He is doing what people have always done with these tales: He is telling them again.

FAIRY TALES FROM THE BROTHERS GRIMM

A New English Version

By Philip Pullman

406 pages. Viking. \$27.95.

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A version of this article appears in print on , Section C, Page 4 of the New York edition with the headline: The Grimms’ Catalog, Revisited and Told Anew