

Introduction

by Emma Stewart

In this issue of the YA Hotline we are examining the presence of fairy tales in today's young adult literature and media. But before we proceed, there is a crucial question we must address: what, exactly, is a fairy tale?

The definition of a fairy-story—what it is, or what it should be—does not... depend on any definition or historical account of elf or fairy, but upon the nature of Faërie: the Perilous Realm itself, and the air that blows in that country. I will not attempt to define that, nor to describe it directly. It cannot be done. Faërie cannot be caught in a net of words; for it is one of its qualities to be indescribable, though not imperceptible. It has many ingredients, but analysis will not necessarily discover the secret of the whole. (Tolkien, 1947, para.17)

So says J.R.R. Tolkien in his landmark essay "On Fairy-Stories", and far be it from us to define it when he can't. For our purposes here, it is easier to name its definitive qualities. A fairy tale, then, is any fantasy of romance and adventure, generally set in a recognizable but fictional landscape, rooted in mythic archetypes, world folklore and oral tradition. They feature wondrous creatures, princesses and paupers, miracles and magic. While their danger-filled plots often end happily, or at least cathartically, with justice appropriately administered, they do not shy away from themes of sexuality and death. While fairy tales are not necessarily moral fables or parables, there is frequently some critical lesson to be learned between their pages, for many fairy tales act as narratives of

formative experience— a fact which makes them ideal for young adults.

This is despite the fact that fairy tales were, for the most part not primarily intended for a youth audience, at least at their inception. As Zipes (2006) comments, "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" (p. 20).

Many fairy tales present their protagonists at the cusp of adulthood; think of Jack rescuing his household from economic deprivation when he steals a fortune from the giants to make up for his poor bartering skills, or of Snow White usurping her stepmother in beauty as she reaches adolescence. In this light, it is not surprising that young adults find themes and plots that reflect their immediate experience of physical, psychological, and sexual maturation intensely appealing. In his 2002 work, *The Fairy Tale: The Magic Mirror of the Imagination*, Steven Swann Jones explains that "...fairy tales can be seen as telling us about our own feelings and psyches, as instructing us how to conform to society's expectations, and as offering us spiritual guidance about how to see our place in the cosmos" (p. 19). Whatever the specific aesthetic or cultural trappings of any given fairy tale, it is the universality of the genre's core themes that makes it so suited for an audience of young adults who occupy a liminal position between childhood and adulthood.

Fairy tales are deeply embedded in current cultural zeitgeist. Postmodern deconstructions sit on the shelf at Chapters alongside post- postmodern reconstructions, contemporary adaptations right next to straightforward fantasies with damsels and dragons. Television shows like *Once Upon a Time* and *Grimm* air weekly; movies like *Hansel and Gretel: Witch Hunters* and *Snow White and the Huntsman* dominate the silver screen, with many more slated to come out in the next year or two. With such a wealth of material to draw from, this issue provides various tools and recommendations for the librarian selecting fairy tales for young adult collections. Books that cover a breadth of material are emphasized, with bibliographies touching on world fairy tales and multicultural content, collections and anthologies, gender-neutral material, and fairy tales in comics and manga. Multimedia content is recommended in the form of DVDs and video games and electronic resources, and ideas for fairy tale programming are discussed. Our main concern was in finding the widest possible variety of sources and ideas for young adult librarians that touch on the fairy tale genre, for (because Tolkien always says things best):

The realm of fairy-story is wide and deep and high and filled with many things: all manner of beasts and birds are found there; shoreless seas and stars uncounted; beauty that is an enchantment, and an ever-present peril; both joy and sorrow as sharp as swords. (Tolkien, 1947, para.2)

References

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