Explorations of Childhood in a Modern Age: A Review of Three Books that Engage with Fairy-Tale Literature
— Katherine Whitehurst


The books I agreed to review for *Jeunesse* engage fairy tales, revise them, and in the case of Pauline Greenhill’s and Sidney Eve Matrix’s *Fairy Tale Films: Visions of Ambiguity*, evaluate film adaptations of fairy-tale texts critically. While each of these books is intended for a specific audience, its engagement with fairy tales enables an exploration of how children and young adults form their moral and social identities. Taken together, these three texts deal with an array of issues, including childhood, gender, race, culture, drugs, identity, and consumerism.

Hyewon Yum’s *There Are No Scary Wolves* adapts the “Little Red Riding Hood” tale to explore stranger danger. Although it uses images to create a *mise-en-scène* that develops the textual content of the narrative further, the warning it conveys is relatively conventional and reflects a twenty- and twenty-first-century fear of strangers. The book is focused on the idea that strangers pose a potential threat to children that can only be alleviated by the presence of a responsible adult figure, in this case the boy’s mother. It is geared toward parents who are concerned
for their children’s safety and toward young children ignorant of the dangers that might lurk within their own communities. Despite the conventional warning of the text, the story deviates from the traditional female Riding Hood in its depiction of a young male Riding Hood. The reversal of the protagonist’s gender, as well as her age (Yum’s protagonist has not yet reached puberty), recasts a tale that often explores the vulnerability of girls approaching puberty to one that considers the vulnerability of a little boy. Yum’s narrative is particularly interesting in the way that the gender of Riding Hood and the public setting of the story—a modern city replaces the forest and a Chinese restaurant replaces Grandmother’s house—allows for the erasure of the sexual undertones commonly attributed to the tale. Upon reading Yum’s tale, I cannot help wondering whether or not the gender reversal within the narrative removes “Perrault’s writing of en-gendered violence[,] which] treat[s] the girl in the tale as a sadomasochistic object” (Zipes, Trials 8). Although one could argue that it is in fact the change in setting that alters the relationship between Riding Hood and the sexual threat she has previously faced, the use of a male character in this text forces us to consider the role gender plays in the tale. I will not seek to answer the questions Yum’s version of “Little Red Riding Hood” raises here, but I do hope to outline the more obvious outcomes of Riding Hood’s changed gender.

For example, the deviations in the text from typical gender representations within the tale influence the symbolic nature of Riding Hood’s cape. While the cape remains red, the image does not possess the same sexual connotations present in previous versions. As Jack Zipes notes in his consideration of Perrault’s depiction of the red cape, “Exactly why Perrault added the red hood is not clear. However, we know that red was generally associated at the time with sin, sensuality, and the devil. As a present from a doting grandmother, it refers directly to the child’s ‘spoiled nature’” (Trials 26). Alternatively, Yum uses the red cape to mirror the image of a super hero. As such, the cape highlights the boy’s imagination, innocence, and youth, as well as his belief in his own empowerment—a courage that stems from the boy’s limited appreciation and understanding of stranger danger.

Although Yum’s text includes many of the common elements associated with the Riding Hood narrative, such as the red cape and the image of the wolf, her alterations to the tale help to reflect twenty-first-century concerns and values and the lifestyle of families living in a modern, multicultural city. As with other iterations of the “Little Red Riding Hood” tale, Yum’s narrative follows the child as he travels from one location of supposed stability to a secondary location of assumed safety, but with several deviations from the standard versions of the tale. In presenting a mother who does not want her child to make the journey alone, Yum’s adaptation alters the symbolically solitary maturation
that Riding Hood’s journey represents by allowing the young boy to explore the path twice, once on his own and once accompanied by his mother. The mother typically provides guidance for Riding Hood at the beginning of most versions of the tale, but the mother in this book extends her parental influence by going with the child to ensure his safety and guide him along the path. This alteration suggests that responsible parenting occurs when parents guide and shape their child’s development directly, encouraging parents to take an active role in their child’s life. The use of a Chinese restaurant is particularly interesting because it both draws our attention to the multicultural nature of the city and places considerable emphasis on community. By replacing Grandmother’s house with an urban establishment, the book presents the city as a tightly knit community in which the child feels safe while also commenting ironically on the child’s false sense of security within that community. Ultimately, the book encourages young readers to question the trust they place in areas that may be all too familiar. The book also veers from our expectations of the Riding Hood tale by altering the characterization of the wolf. Yum’s use of the wolf as an embodiment of danger is reminiscent of earlier versions of the tale, but the child in Yum’s work does not face a singular encounter with a wolf, discovering instead that wolves are everywhere. The child’s bravery deteriorates as the city and its familiar locales are transformed into unfamiliar and scary wolves. The book decentralizes a danger that would otherwise derive from a singular figure and draws our attention to the perception that even those we know within our neighborhood can be dangerous “others.” These changes help to reflect the fear

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that danger does not derive from a singular source, but rather surrounds young children in urban cities.

In addition to altering many of the narrative elements of the tale, the book uses visual images to communicate a didactic, multicultural narrative from a child’s perspective. The images work alongside the text to create a rich and humorous story by filling in details that the text does not communicate verbally. Yum’s artwork is a collage of hand-drawn figures and photographic images that have been cut out and pasted onto a background constructed out of scrap paper and hand-drawn illustrations. The layering of the images adds a material depth to the page, giving the art a three-dimensional appearance. The pairing of the text with these images situates Riding Hood and the tale in a modern city that is both heavily populated and multicultural. The multicultural city, moreover, is represented in the form of a collage that conveys the importance of cultural diversity. While the text does not make verbal judgments on ethnicity, the representations rely on stereotypical images to represent people of various ethnicities. As such, the fashion choices of community members stereotypically reflect their ethnic backgrounds. These characters are also situated in ethnically oriented stores, such as a Chinese restaurant. Because these depictions are not attached to any apparent judgment, however, I believe these representations are simply meant to enable young children to identify cultural differences within a singular community easily. This tale may be redundant in its twenty-first-century moralizing tone and warnings about strangers, but the visual images and the unique manner in which Yum adapts the tale creates a dynamic work that uses gender reversals and visual images to explore the dangers present in a city that has developed its community around a multicultural identity.

Robert Paul Weston’s *Dust City* is a novel that explores “[w]hat the modern world [would] look like if it had evolved directly out of the magical folktales of medieval Europe” (n.pag.). The novel follows the life of Henry Whelp, the son of the wolf who killed Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother. It adapts a variety of the Grimm Brothers’ tales to explore a world fraught with modern racial and interspecific tensions, drug use, and class conflicts.

Much of the text is dedicated to the exploration of the Nixies’ fairydust trade, as Henry enters the Nixies’ midst in search of the fairies he suspects they have kidnapped. The text uses fairydust as a metaphor for the dangers of drug use and the drug trade. The production of fairydust stems from two sources: Nimbus Thaumaturgical, a legitimized and legalized distributor of fairydust, and the Nixies, a group of illegal fairydust dealers. Despite the legalization of some fairy dust, Henry’s distaste for both groups blurs the moral and ethical division between Nimbus Thaumaturgical and the Nixies, bringing the practices
of both groups into question. Although the novel appears to suggest that characters should be wary of all types of fairydust, the actions of characters on fairydust are often justified and excused. For example, when Henry confesses to his love interest, Fiona, that he was responsible for her brother’s near death, she states, “I know they dose you up beforehand. It wasn’t the real you.’ She almost laughs. ‘Anyone can see that’” (247). Because Henry was forced to use fairydust when competing for a job within the Nixies’ operation, Fiona excuses Henry’s violence and even finds humour in his concern. Consequently, the text places greater blame on the distributors of fairydust rather than on the users.

Because the representation in the book of fairydust culture greatly resembles stereotypical depictions of twenty-first-century drug culture and industries, the book appears to criticize both the pharmaceutical industry and the illegal drug trade. It accomplishes this critique by representing Nimbus Thaumaturgical and the Nixies as equally corrupt within the novel, implying that there is no difference between legal and illegal drug use and distribution. In addition, by focusing on the villainy of those who head the distribution of drugs, the text excuses drug addicts by presenting them as individuals who have fallen victim to drug use and drug culture. Although the book criticizes the two distributing groups and questions the use of drugs, the book does not seek to outline a solution to the problem, nor does it call for a complete eradication of all drug use. Alternatively, the author draws our attention to the problematic nature of drug industries, as well as the dangers of normalizing drug use.

In addition to evaluating drug culture symbolically, the text also explores racism and classism. As Zipes notes, social class plays a significant role in classical fairy tales, reflecting the “Christian and middle-class ideology of the collectors and writers” (Enchanted 18). Although lower-class individuals are depicted in tales, “the peasants and lower-class figures learn a certain Habitus, what Pierre Bourdieu describes as a set of manners, customs, normative behavior, and thinking, that enables them to fulfill a social role, rise in social status, and distinguish themselves according to conventional social class and gender expectations” (19). Weston uses the various species presented in the book to represent the race and class divisions present in traditional fairy tales. While no species within Weston’s book is directly assigned a race, the social struggles associated with race divisions are emulated in the interspecific relationships. The book primarily explores racism from Henry’s perspective. Despite his kind nature, Henry’s status as a wolf leads other species to fear him. Although Weston’s depiction of Henry as a lower-class individual creates the expectation that Henry will rise through the class structure once he has the opportunity to prove his mastery of habitus, Henry never truly overcomes his position as a lower-
class individual. He exhibits all the social graces and morality stereotypically expected from a middle-class individual, yet his visible identity as a wolf prevents others from recognizing his value. Weston plays with our expectations of the genre to detail a rigid social system that cannot or will not accommodate those who are perceivably different.

Although the novel uses Henry to explore and criticize classist and racist social structures, the narrative at times also implies that interspecific mixing produces dangerous or toxic results. Upon discovering a creature that is an amalgamation of all the species in the novel, Henry remarks, “Maybe this is what happens when you thrust all of us together. You get something awful” (182). The monstrous description of the creature and Henry’s comment questions whether species should intermingle or perhaps even interbreed. These questions seem to suggest that racism is not something that can be overcome easily but that can be avoided by keeping species separate. While the text uses Henry’s struggle with racial prejudice to suggest that individuals should not be judged by their race, his suggestion that hybridity creates a monstrous outcome does seem to support a desire for purism on some level.

The narrative finds its strength in the development of characters and allusions to narratives from the Grimm Brothers’ texts. At the same time, however, it struggles to define the fairy-tale world and the ordering of significant events in the novel clearly. The clearest example of the undefined timeline of the novel is identifiable in the exploration in the text of the mining of fairydust. Initially, the text suggests that when the fairies disappeared, Thaumaturgical began to mine and to distribute fairydust. The book notes, however, that prior to the disappearance of the fairies, a Nimbus Thaumaturgical delivery truck killed Henry’s mother. Because Nimbus Thaumaturgical was delivering fairydust before the disappearance of the fairies, the novel undermines its initial claim that the mining and distribution of fairydust began in response to the fairy’s disappearance. The novel provides some clarification as to when mining and distribution began when the owners of Nimbus Thaumaturgical explain that they had the fairies killed to gain a monopoly over the miracle industry. Nevertheless, this explanation does not appear until the end of the book.

This novel is an engaging, if dark, read. The book presents a problematic depiction of drug culture and racial tensions and is worth exploring as an adaptation and as a cultural artifact of the twenty-first century. Weston does a wonderful job of adapting some of the more chilling narratives, such as “The Juniper Tree.” His allusions are well constructed and integrated, and his references highlight the darkness inherent in the Grimm Brothers’ tales.

Greenhill and Matrix’s edited volume *Fairy Tale Films* explores the relationship between fairy tales and their twentieth- and twenty-first-century film...
adaptations. The essays in this collection study a variety of topics, including the hybridization of genres, representations of feminism, the commercialization of childhood, the transformation of children into consumers, new forms of magic realism, and fairy-tale genre conventions. As Zipes correctly asserts in his foreword, this book successfully fills a gap in both film and folklore studies. In doing so, it cleverly encourages readers to consider modern film adaptations beyond their value as entertainment and to evaluate the didactic and influential nature of the fairy-tale genre and film medium. The evaluation in the book of the influential nature of film adaptations of fairy-tale narratives reflects Cristina Bacchilega’s contemplation of the ideological nature of fairy tales. As she notes in her book *Postmodern Fairy Tales*, “Belittled, yet pervasive and institutionalized, fairy tales are thus produced and consumed to accomplish a variety of social functions in multiple contexts and in more or less explicitly ideological ways” (3). The social function and ideological nature of fairy tales are neatly explored in this book as the various articles consider the way film adaptations of texts within this genre create a persuasive dialogue that encourages young audiences to partake in Western social norms. Zipes’s foreword and the editors’ introduction neatly frame the contents of the volume by detailing the historical inclusion of fairy tales within the film medium and by clearly outlining the contemplation in the book of how films shape and present new and old socio-cultural content for its audience.

The first article in the collection, Bacchilega and John Rieder’s “Mixing It Up: Generic Complexity and Gender Ideology in Early Twenty-First Century Fairy Tale Films,” considers the relationship...
between hybridized genres and gender ideology. Bacchilega and Rieder suggest that despite the fact that *Enchanted* and *Shrek* function as parodies, the blending of parody and romance simply allows the movies to pay lip service to feminism while actually reinforcing patriarchal values. Because fairy tales “set the socially acceptable boundaries for such scenarios and options, thus serving, more often than not, the civilizing aspirations of adults” (Bacchilega 5), the attention the article pays to how movies such as *Ever After* and *Enchanted* seek to reaffirm patriarchal values highlights the persuasive value of the fairy-tale genre and film medium. Christy Williams’s “The Shoe Still Fits: *Ever After* and the Pursuit of a Feminist Cinderella” and Linda Pershing and Lisa Gablehouse’s “Disney’s *Enchanted*: Patriarchal Backlash and Nostalgia in a Fairy Tale Film” similarly build on Bacchilega and Rieder’s evaluation, drawing our attention to how the film industry distributes Western patriarchal values. These articles reaffirm the earlier assertions of Zipes, Bacchilega, and Sandra Beckett that fairy tales are didactic and further our contemplation of fairy-tale literature by addressing how the film genre and the film industry have used and shaped fairy tales to communicate twentieth- and twenty-first-century ideologies.

In addition to these feminist readings, Naarah Sawers’s article, “Building the Perfect Product: The Commodification in Childhood and Contemporary Fairy Tale Film,” explores how childhood has become a consumable product and how children are encouraged to become consumers. Much of Sawers’s article details the problematic depiction of children and childhood as the epicentre for adult existence when childhood becomes a consumable product and children are transformed into consumers. In Zipes’s contemplation of the representation of childhood in art and its relationship to an adult imagining of a future civilization, he points out that

> [t]he desire to cultivate and honor children has led to an obsession with childhood that continues to take on new contours with every new generation in every society in the world. The future of civilization, so we tend to believe, depends on the “proper” way we educate and acculturate children. Consequently, imagining children in different contexts and creating images of children in film have become a “norm” in all sorts of media . . . . (*Enchanted* 320)

Similarly, Sawers’s article struggles with how film adaptations of fairy tales help to construct “proper” children by highlighting consumerist representations of children and by exploring how the rhetoric underlining these films encourages children to become consumers themselves. Her article considers how the representation in the films of the perfect child reflects the socio-cultural construction of an idealized
childhood, concluding that “the manufacturing of childhood in the contemporary Western world is becoming much more literal than symbolic” (43). By considering how films such as Robots encourage children to become consumers and how those such as AI: Artificial Intelligence outline how childhood has become a consumable product, Sawers persuasively illustrates how adaptations of fairy-tale films can be used to promote a consumer capitalist environment.

Tracie D. Lukasiewicz’s essay, “The Parallelism of the Fantastic and the Real: Guillermo del Toro’s Pan’s Labyrinth/El Laberinto del fauno and Neomagical Realism,” and Ming-Hsun Lin’s essay, “Fitting the Glass Slipper: A Comparative Study of the Princess’s Role in the Harry Potter Novels and Films,” provide interesting insights into fairy-tale genre conventions, motifs, and characterizations. Lukasiewicz’s essay considers the relationship between fantasy and reality within the fairy-tale genre, and Lin’s essay considers the characterization of the princess figure. Both of these chapters provide excellent insight into genre conventions that have previously lacked definition. For example, Lin’s outlining of the characterization of the princess role and the adaptation of this role into modern film builds on the perception that fairy-tale narratives rely on stereotypical characterizations rather than uniquely constructed figures (Zipes, Enchanted 21). Lin’s consideration of these constructed figures enables her to address how film incorporates and alters our expectations of typified character roles in twentieth- and twenty-first-century fairy-tale adaptations. As Zipes details in his consideration of the roles of characters in fairy-tale narratives, “The protagonist is assigned a task, and the task is a sign. That is, his or her character will be stereotyped and marked by the task that is his or her sign. Names are rarely used in a folk or fairy tale. Characters function according to their social class or profession, and they often cross boundaries or transform themselves” (Enchanted 21). Lin’s essay builds on the idea that fairy-tale characters function based on their typified roles to wrestle with how the role of the princess is specifically defined in the fairy-tale genre. By defining a characterization that has otherwise been allusive, her paper reveals how J. K. Rowling complicates our expectations of the princess role in the Harry Potter books. While the outlining of these genre conventions, motifs, and figures is helpful in terms of the texts that both these authors evaluate, their interpretation of fairy-tale genre conventions gives us a new perception on how these conventions appear in classical fairy tales as well as how these conventions have been changed and adapted within film adaptations of fairy-tale literature.

While the book finds its strength in the essays evaluated above, Matrix’s essay, “A Secret Midnight Ball and a Magic Cloak of Invisibility: The Cinematic Folklore of Stanley Kubrick’s Eyes Wide Shut,” does, as she and Greenhill suggest in their introduction, “stretch
the notion of fairy tale film nearly beyond recognition” (17). Matrix notes that her “intention is not to suggest that Eyes Wide Shut is a faithful recreation of [“The Twelve Dancing Princesses”], nor to claim that the film is straightforward fairy tale cinema” (179). Though the essay itself is well constructed and interesting in its evaluation of the representation in Eyes Wide Shut of the institution of marriage, the parallels the essay draws between the tale “The Twelve Dancing Princesses” and the movie are questionable. Matrix does link the two texts thematically through her consideration of fidelity—“The Twelve Dancing Princesses” tests both male and female characters “for their fidelity and fitness for marriage” (185), and Bill tests his authority within his marriage by attempting to explore his sexuality beyond the constraints of marriage. At times, however, the connections feel slightly forced. This being said, the collection as a whole is incredibly strong and I would recommend this book to academics and non-academics alike.

All three books I review here, whether adaptations or evaluations of contemporary fairy-tale literature, explore present-day socio-cultural issues. Each draws on the genre conventions of fairy-tale literature to explore race, gender, childhood, and consumerism. Using fairy tales as a starting point, they confront and explore modern issues of child abuse, failing social systems, and the way the media invade and influence the lives of developing young people. Altogether, they draw on the dark potential of fairy tales to depict characters who face dangers stemming from within their own communities. They ask us, therefore, to rethink our roles within our communities to see the danger in the spaces we call home.

Works Cited


Katherine Whitehurst is beginning her Ph.D. in Film and Media Studies at the University of Stirling. She recently completed the Text/Community/Discourse graduate program in English Literature at Brock University.