



## Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Women Writers Explore Their Favorite Fairy Tales

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**New edition (revised and expanded) available 8/13/02.**

Fairy tales are one of the most enduring forms of literature, their plots retold and characters reimagined for centuries. In this elegant and thought-provoking collection of original essays, Kate Bernheimer brings together twenty-eight leading women writers to discuss how these stories helped shape their imaginations, their craft, and our culture. In poetic narratives, personal histories, and penetrating commentary, the assembled authors bare their soul and challenge received wisdom. Eclectic and wide-ranging, *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall* is essential reading for anyone who has ever been bewitched by the strange and fanciful realm of fairy tales.

Contributors include: Alice Adams, Julia Alvarez, Margaret Atwood, Ann Beattie, Rosellen Brown, A. S. Byatt, Kathryn Davis, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Deborah Eisenberg, Maria Flook, Patricia Foster, Vivian Gornick, Lucy Grealy, bell hooks, Fanny Howe, Fern Kupfer, Ursula K. Le Guin, Carole Maso, Jane Miller, Lydia Millet, Joyce Carol Oates, Connie Porter, Francine Prose, Linda Gray Sexton, Midori Snyder, Fay Weldon, Joy Williams, Terri Windling.

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# From Reader Review Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Women Writers Explore Their Favorite Fairy Tales for online ebook

## Hans says

I picked this up for a few reasons:

1. I wanted to read more from Lucy Grealy. (But eventually realized that her piece from this collection is also included in her book of essays *As Seen on TV*...which you should pick up.)
2. Reading this book adds a +1 count to the books read for Lucy Grealy. (As well as 23 other authors! I don't track sports stats, but I'm just as obsessive about my own book-reading stats.)
3. My friend challenged me to read only books written by female authors for 6 months, so this book was a perfect fit.

What I found:

1. It's embarrassing that this is the first time that I've read many of the authors.
2. Each of the authors approached the topic of fairy tales in different ways, but I enjoyed the essays that focused on the personal stories the most. (Yes, Lucy Grealy's essay is a stand out here, as well as the essay by Linda Gray Sexton.) It was interesting to see which fairy tales the authors chose to focus on, including several stories that continued to pop up through the various essays.

What I need to do now: Add more books to my to-read list.

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## Jill Furedy says

I'm always a fan of fairy tales, so thought this might be interesting. There were a wide variety of approaches...some felt academic and left me bored, some looked at personal stories through a fairy tale lense, which I preferred. Some seemed to be promoting their previous titles. There were two authors I made note of and marked their writing for future reading (Terri Windling and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni), and there were some familiar big names like Margaret Atwood and Ursula LaGuin, plus other names I knew but haven't read...Julia Alvarez, A.S. Byatt, etc. There were a few moments of recognition (Yay, so many of the authors grew up with Lang's fairy books, as I did!), and a few references to fairy tales I thought I should know, but didn't. It does make me want to pick up my Lang books or Grimm collection again. But I didn't come away with any changed viewpoints on the stories or any new insights. It was okay, but lacking the magic of an actual fairy tale.

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## **Chrissa says**

This is a diverse and interesting collection of essays that introduced me to different fairy tales and sent me off in different reading directions, generally a good sign. Rather than being an academic series of essays, each essay is in a different style and the subhead "Explore" is a good hint that this will involve more than a straightforward march through the stories. If you're interested in the way writers and stories interact, this is a good choice.

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## **Sistermagpie says**

This collection concerns one of my favorite topics--people talking about their favorite fairy tales. I've always loved hearing which stories people gravitate towards, though there's one essay where the author points out that when adults answer this question they can't help but talk about it from an adult perspective. In other words, they might have adored a story for months as a kid and now they only remember the one that it seems like they should like now.

This may or may not be the reason that some stories show up again and again. "The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf" and "The Juniper Tree" are not stories that are considered standards, and it made sense that they'd made great impressions on many women, perhaps especially ones that grew up to write. "The Snow Queen" seems to have similar appeals.

No one essay stands out over any others to me, but I enjoyed them all. I do wish there'd been one that really excited me, but that's less about the essays quality and more about my personal issues not always connecting with the authors.

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## **Lora says**

Ok book with several good essays on fairy tales, a larger part with middling quality essays, and a few so lost to true communication they were nearly giggle worthy. A couple of these authors seemed to unwittingly illustrate their own unpleasant character from some story or other. Maybe it was just me...or maybe some people are just too full of themselves. But there were some excellent essays in the book as well, and I love reading stories about stories, books about books, even people about people.

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## **Jean says**

All right...another review it as I go. Various women authors and their takes on fairy tales, how the stories influenced them as women....yeah~!!! How many Cinderella complexes are out there!!!? But what I find really interesting, as I write this I realize...aren't fairy tales historically written by men?? So, we are, as little girls, listening to the tales of men and their perceptions of women and how they are to be treated and/or behave in the world?? Looking at it in a Jungian perspective, isn't this the feminine of the male that we are really seeing?? Anyhow, my favorite essay in here, thus far...the Princess and the Pea....but then, there is the Snow Queen as well. Just get the book. I think I may need to buy this one, I have to return it to the library soon!!!

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## **Sassafras Lowrey says**

I really enjoyed this book - it was smart and interesting and engaging. I found a lot of solidarity and connection to the writers in the book as someone whose creative work often borrows from/utilizes/is in conversation with fairy tales and other classic childrens stories. I really appreciated getting insight in to the lives of women and their relationships to these fairy tales..... I also highlighted a lot as I anticipate this book will be helpful for me with some critical work I will be doing in the next semester of my MFA program!

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## **Melissa says**

As with many essay collections, I read a few, then read something else, then read a few more, and so forth. By doing so, I had the time to reflect on and absorb a few at a time. Be forewarned, these authors do not rely on the Disney version of fairy tales. These essays delve into older, darker versions of the stories and forthrightly face the writers' own stories, some also very dark. I am constitutionally incapable of criticizing a writer's essay on his or her own influences, so long as it is constructed of actual sentences and basic grammatical conventions are followed, but I did find this truly fascinating.

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## **Cheryl says**

For me the biggest problem with this collection was that the essays were really hit and miss. Some of the authors did a great job in analyzing certain fairy tales from their childhood that they enjoyed or related to and examined the impact those stories have had in their adults lives and writing. However, other authors treated it more as a very sterile academic exercise or barely even mentioned the fairy tales at all. I also could very much feel a generation gap here with many of these writers. Their exposure to fairy tales was very different than mine since most of them came from the pre-Disney decidedly un-politically correct time when you could still let children read Grimm's and Anderson. This book did however make me want to actually read the Grimm and Anderson versions.

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## **Cate says**

Added this to my to-read shelf after reading Kate Bernheimer's luminous essay "Other Women" in the anthology *The Friend Who Got Away*. I had this book out at the library for three months -- I had to renew it the maximum number of times online and then finally finished it the night before it was due. (I know that I could have probably walked in and manually checked it out again, but sometimes, you need to just take a deadline.)

My favorite selections were Julia Alvarez's "An Autobiography of Scheherazade," which uses the tale of 1,000 Nights as an allegory for living under a dictatorship; Kathryn Davis's "Why I Don't Like Reading Fairy Tales," an exploration of how the child's slippery imagination in initial discovery of story allows the child to be both writer and reader at once, a feat harder to manage in adulthood; Deborah Eisenberg's "In a Trance of Self," which explores the tenuous but necessary bond between Gerda and Kay in Anderson's Snow Queen, as

well as the curious child's desire to see himself as one apart; Maria Flook's "The Rope Bridge to Sex," which recounts the author's, and her sisters', expulsion from their mother's house once they became sexual competition; Vivian Gornick's "Taking a Long Hard Look at 'The Princess and the Pea,'" which I am going to go scan before I return the volume to the library, because it is expressing a thing that I am also trying to express: "We were in thrall to passive longing, all of us . . . Longing is what attracted us, what compelled our deepest attention"; Ursula K. Le Guin's "The Wilderness Within," a metaphor of Sleeping Beauty's dream state as the dream state that all artists escape into to create; Connie Porter's "Rapunzel Across Time and Space," a defense of her own "baldheaded" heroine's beauty and a restatement of what the Prince loved about Rapunzel was not her beautiful hair or face, but her voice; Francine Prose's "Sleeping Beauty," which I will just quote as to not spoil - "if we want the Prince to come . . . well, forget the makeup, the curlers, the short skirts, the feminine wiles, forget the flirtation, the conversation. The surest route to a man's (or to some men's) heart is to pretend to be unconscious"; Linda Gray Sexton's "Bones and Black Puddings: Revisiting 'The Juniper Tree,'" which gave a behind-closed-doors look at the making of Anne Sexton's "Transformations" and made me add the younger Sexton's memoir to my to-read list; Midori Snyder's "The Monkey Girl," which recounts the fairy tale from the Korfofan people of Sudan about a clever woman-turned-princess who wears a monkey face, initially, but runs the board; and, finally, Terri Windling's "Transformations," which uses the tales "Donkeyskin" and "The Wild Swans" to inform how the narrator could transform her own traumatic childhood into a hero's origin story.

That's a lot of highlights. To be honest, I also skipped or skimmed a handful of essays near the end of the book. Maybe someone could find something in them that I missed -- maybe even a future me. But for now, I'm ready to move on. To more fairy tales.

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## Erika says

I started to read this almost two years ago, lost it, then found it again recently. Instead of starting from the beginning, I picked up where I left off. Most of this review was written about a year ago, but I've wrapped it up and kept it short. If it sounds choppy, that is probably why.

Has anyone read "The Snow Queen"? Everyone contributing here did and apparently it's the only one worth talking about. Halfway through I stopped to see if I had this story so I could read it. I don't.

Aside from having no idea what the hell everyone was talking about (except from the basic plot--but you know what that's like, you *know* what happens, but you don't know *how* it happens--which made the Snow Queen sound exactly like the witch from *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*), most of the essays were insightful, quirky, and blessedly personal. I say this because without that provocative self-revelation how else am I to relate in the way only girl-talk can inspire?

Fairy tales have a one up on any other genre of writing. A lot of kids really do grow separately, simultaneous reading or being read to with fairy tales. In this respect, we're all lucky. There isn't a finite number of fairy tales, but Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm still have a lot of mileage. And everyone, if they haven't seen the movies, has at least heard of the Disney adaptations. We can all remember *something* similar and that's the point. It's an instant bonding tool, a way to spark a conversation between the reader and these women writers who, for the most part, can't help but relate personal stories to their favorite fairy tales. Fairy tales are inherently personal. They're a part of most childhoods, that private imaginative and wondrous collection of years that only we are aware of, only we can share the experience of being us during the magic years. So when we find someone else that shares an experience, someone that read a story and feels the same

way we do about it, it's a relief. And it also makes a secret connection between the two, like making a new friend.

That's part of what made *Mirror, Mirror On The Wall* such a successful read for me. Many of the essays were personal, but some took other approaches: technical, literary, or sociological. Some were longer, some were shorter (a few pages), some were incredibly complex and beyond all hope of my understanding, but all of the essays were enjoyable, engrossing reads. I also found a lot of new favorite authors I want to begin reading, references to books I haven't read yet, but have been interested in and now, must go out and read at some point. There isn't much I can say about each piece individually; I wouldn't want to do that anyway. As a whole, *Mirror, Mirror On The Wall* was a great collection of essays by a great number of female authors. I would recommend this to anyone who likes fairy tales enough to engage in the discussion these authors bring to the table.

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### **Kathleen says**

I really, really enjoyed this collection of essays on fairy tales and women writers. As a woman writer who grew up on fairy tales, the collection really struck some chords with me. I can't say that every essay was good-- there were a few that weren't very good and a few that I couldn't make out at all-- but overall it's a great collection, worthwhile reading for anyone interested in fairy tales.

I want my own copy of this book. I think I would only love it more on rereading.

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### **Ilana says**

My favorite essays in the collection, the ones that are each worth five stars of their own, are "An Autobiography of Scheherazade" by Julie Alvarez, "In a Trance of Self" by Deborah Eisenberg, "Little Red Cap" by Patricia Foster, "Rapunzel Across Time and Space" by Connie Porter, "Sleeping Beauty" by Francine Prose, "Bones and Black Puddings" by Linda Gray Sexton, and "Transformations" by Terri Windling.

Another great essay that comes to mind is "The Wilderness Within" by Ursula Le Guin. I wish I understood that woman. She has some really crazy-awesome/crazy-interesting ideas, but I feel like she speaks an alien language most of the time. (Though, I must say, not as alien as some of the other contributors to this book. Wowza.)

"The Monkey Girl" by Midori Snyder was also really good. Read it.

**Overall rating: 3.5 stars.**

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### **Margaret says**

Some of these essays are excellent--Margaret Atwood's, Julia Alvarez's, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's, Joyce Carol Oates'--but others were only so so. Still, if you're a fan of fairy tales, then this is going to be an enjoyable read. Each author discusses their favorite tales in completely different ways. I tended to like the

ones that combined scholarly examinations with personal experience rather than the purely personal experience essays, but that's just my preference.

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## **Ruby says**

This was a hit or miss collection. Part of the problem is that the approach wasn't consistent. Some of the authors wrote very academic style papers on the theory of social impact of fairy tales, which seemed really dry compared to some of the more personal stories involving favorite tales or how the author's life inadvertently mimicked a tale.

Some of my favorite ones: Lucy Greal, Bell Hooks, Deborah Eisenberg and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. These tended to be on the personal, and in some ways tragic side.

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