

KINDER KLASSIKS PRESENTS

Why Use The Folk Tales With Modern Children?

...an excerpt from *Children and Books*, May Hill Arbuthnot¹, 1957 edition

Poet W. H. Auden on Grimm's Fairy Tales...

“For, among the few indispensable, common-property books upon which Western Culture can be founded—that is, excluding the national genius of specific peoples as exemplified Shakespeare and Dante—it is hardly too much to say that these tales rank next to the bible in importance....it should be, first and foremost, an educational “must” for adults, married or single, for the reader who has once come to know and love these tales will never be able again to endure the insipid rubbish of contemporary entertainment.”*

***New York Times, 11/12/44**

Ethical Truth

Of course, fairy-tale ethics are not always acceptable to the modern moral code. These stories were told by adults to adults in an age when using wits against brute force was often the only means of survival, and therefore admirable. But even today, in wars upon crime—whether crimes against individuals or nations—trickery, ruthlessness, and killing are accepted as necessary. Not a pretty code, but a realistic one. In the fairy tales, then, witches and ogres are destroyed or defeated according to the common-sense code of survival.

But fairy tales are predominantly constructive, not destructive, in their moral lessons. “The humble and good shall be exalted,” say the stories of Snow Drop (Snow White), Aschenputtel (Cinderella), The Bremen Town-Musicians, and dozens of others. “Love suffereth long and is kind,” is the lesson of East of the Sun and One-Eye, Two-Eyes, And Three-Eyes. In The Frog-King, the royal father of the princess enforces a noble code upon his thoughtless daughter. “That which you have promised must you perform,” he says sternly, and again, “He who helped you when you were in trouble ought not afterwards to be despised by you.” Indeed, so roundly and soundly do these old tales stand for morality that they leave an indelible impression of virtue invariably rewarded and evil unflinchingly punished. The wicked witch is fed into the oven prepared for a helpless little boy; and the lovely princess and half the kingdom always rewards the hard-working, kindly lad who has a cheerful way with him. Here, in these fairy tales, is the world as it ought to be—sometimes ruthless of necessity but sound at the core. Can this world and this code hurt a child?

Satisfaction of Needs

Most grow-ups rereading these stories begin to understand Mr. Auden's feeling that they are timeless in their appeal. Plumbing, kitchen gadgets, and modes of transportation may change, but human desires and human emotions continue strong and unchanging. These old fairy tales contain in their “picture language” the symbols of some of the deepest human feelings, and satisfy in fantasy human desires for security, achievement, and love.

Everyone longs for security, the simple physical security of a snug house, warmth, and good food. In the fairy tales, the little hut in the forest is cozy and warm, safe from ravening wolves, and full of the peace of the fireside, with a loaf of bread baking on the hearth and a flavorsome kettle of soup on the hob. And of course there are castles, too; they may be a bit cold and drafty, but Jack or Tattercoats or Espen Cinderlad always seems to settle down very comfortably in the new grandeur. Children identify themselves with both the elegance of the castle and the snug security of the house in the woods. Both are satisfying: the castle speaks of achievement, the little hut of peace and security.

Human beings are always in search of love. There will never be a time when people do not need loving reinforcement against the hostile world and the frightening thought of death. The old tales are full of loving compensations for fears and hardships. Hansel reassures his little sister and protects her as long as he is able, and Gretel comes to his rescue when he is helpless and in peril. Commoners and royalty alike pursue their lost loves and endure every kind of suffering to free them from unhappy enchantments. A competent peasant boy rescues a lonely princess from her glass hill, and a prince gives all his love to Cinderella, the lowly cinder wench who so sadly needs it. There is cruelty in these old tales, and danger too, but they are not exaggerated. The real world, like the fairy world, can be cruel and perilous. Reassuring in these stories are the bright symbols of love, fortifying the weak, the misunderstood, and the oppressed, giving them sanctuary in peril and reinforcement in their weakness, and rewarding their courageous struggles.

People long not only for love and security but for achievement. They are eager to overcome difficulties, to right wrongs, and to stand fast in the face of danger—abilities essential for heroes of any generation. The fairy tales supply unforgettable stories of wicked powers defeated and of gallant souls who in their extremity are granted supernatural strength. Whether children are conscious of it or not, these stories may become sources of moral strength—a strength which is part faith and part courage, and is wholly unshakable.

1. May Hill Arbuthnot is the author of Children and Books, the authoritative work on this subject. Her book is foundational to any understanding of children's literature, and has been updated since her death by Zena Sutherland in recent editions of the same name.