



Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion; Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre

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The fairy tale has been fortunate in recent years in attracting serious attention from major thinkers who have unpacked the manifold meanings of the genre in studies with a broad cultural and intellectual sweep. Prominent among these are Marina Warner and Jack Zipes. Zipes, Professor of German at the University of Minnesota, has produced a string of thought-provoking books, from **Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion** (first published in 1983 and now thoroughly revised for a 2nd edition) to his most recent, **Why Fairy Tales Stick**.

As long ago as 1909, in his essay 'Epic Laws of Folk Narrative', the folklorist Axel Olrik pointed out a peculiar self-correcting mechanism in the fairy tale which maintains the stories' integrity despite the intentions and creativity of individual storytellers. In **Why Fairy Tales Stick**, Jack Zipes applies modern thinking about memes (self-replicating units of cultural transmission) to the question of how and why fairy tales have evolved, survived, and acquired such extraordinary cultural and psychological power.

In both books, Zipes is writing, essentially, about the literary fairy tale, starting with Straparola and Basile in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italy, through Perrault, Grimm, and Andersen, through to writers such as Angela Carter in our own day. His knowledge of the byways of this literary tradition is second to none. He is less comfortable with the orality of the unwritten folk narrative, and makes little reference to important recent studies of oral storytelling by folklorists such as Bengt Holbek, Anna-Leena Siikala, Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj, or Satu Apo.

Neither of these books is an easy read. Zipes has a tendency towards long, convoluted sentences full of academic jargon. But the meaning of those sentences is worth the struggle to understand, for Jack Zipes has a subtle and intricate understanding of the mechanisms and meanings of the fairy tale. He can be irritatingly reductive (as in his misleading view of Hans Christian Andersen as a Christian propagandist), but more often he opens a vista of new insight into over-familiar stories such as 'Snow White' or 'Little Red Riding Hood'.

The application of memetics to fairy tales in **Why Fairy Tales Stick** seems to me a key insight. The depth to which a human mind can be infected by a fairy tale meme may be exemplified by the means of suicide chosen by the pioneer of computing and artificial intelligence, Alan Turing. Turing injected cyanide into a perfect apple and took a bite, re-enacting the coma of Snow White. And that bitten apple can in turn be found on every Apple Mac, including the one on which this review was written.

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