



Classics in Short No. 95

Article Author:

[Brian Alderson](#) [1]

[196](#) [2]

Article Category:

Classics in Short

Byline:

Brian Alderson on **The Juniper Tree** by the Brothers Grimm.

Jacob, Wilhelm and Maurice in thrall to **The Juniper Tree**

Two hundred years ago come Christmas

an insignificant book was published by a modest educational firm in Berlin. Doubts were felt as to its likely success for nothing quite like it had ever appeared on the market before and only some eight hundred copies were printed. Who was to know that it and its successor volumes would become one of the most widely disseminated and influential books in the world?

Kinder- und Haus-Märchen,

gesammelt durch die Brüder Grimm was its title and one whose meaning takes a bit of probing. *Märchen* for its first readers, probably had the flavour of 'fantastic little tales' rather than what are often designated in English 'fairy tales' (fairies are notably absent from the book, but not witches, magical animals and spooks) and these *Märchen* not just for children but (*Haus*) for the whole family. Furthermore, they are not *by* the Brothers Grimm, but *gathered by* them, a very different matter, concealing multiple sources and sometimes unanswerable questions about editorial control.

What matters though

is that for the first time ever a book set before its public no fewer than eighty-six stories whose origins lay not in any fixed authorial impulse but in all manner of circumstances where people told stories to each other: at the fireside, round the fields, in the pub, alongside the office water-fountain if such things existed in 1812. The Grimms were then just the main collaborators in a venture to preserve the stories in print so that the world might know more of these secret narratives. The two hundred or so stories that they eventually ended up with would form the raw materials for tangles of studies in literature, sociology, psychology, politics, and all the delights of Theory.

Customers were not slow

to grasp the importance of this novelty. Within a year or two the Grimms put out a further seventy stories, and within another year or two more translations began to appear, of which the most significant was the first of the two volumes of **German Popular Stories**, translated into English by one Edgar Taylor. Although he recognised the scholarship that lay behind the Grimms' intentions and included their notes on many of the stories, he clearly designated the publication for a child readership, in earnest of which the books included a couple of dozen full-page etchings by the eminent George Cruikshank. (The Grimms, who had not done such a thing, were most impressed and straightway prepared a delicious small, select edition for children illustrated by a third brother, Ludwig Emil.)

Already, in all this,

may be found the source for both an extension and a pollution of the great *Märch* project. Other nations followed the German example, but popular stories were not always conformable to what people felt to be the dignity of print, so abridgments and adaptation took place, taking away the native energy of the storyteller's language, and as the tales were, by their nature, outside any sort of copyright control they were massively exploited by publishers for whom 'Grimms' Fairy Tales' became a commodity saleable on its title alone without any tiresome recourse to authenticity. Pictures anyway could drown out whatever might remain of the once essential vernacular character of the texts.

That vernacular quality

was, in fact, one of the great spurs to the Grimms' original collecting impulse. Very early on when their ideas were just taking shape they were given the manuscript of two stories that had been noted down by a German painter, Philipp Otto Runge: 'The Fisherman and his Wife' and 'The Juniper Tree'. These among the greatest of all the *Märchen* were not in standard German however but in the dialect of their original telling and they brought home to the Grimms how powerful the spoken voice could be. In some ways they form a measuring-rod for the authenticity of a publisher's response to the tales and it is not altogether surprising that one of the finest of the English-language versions of Grimm translated by Lore Segal and illustrated by the late Maurice Sendak in 1973 should carry as its title **The Juniper Tree and Other Tales from Grimm**.

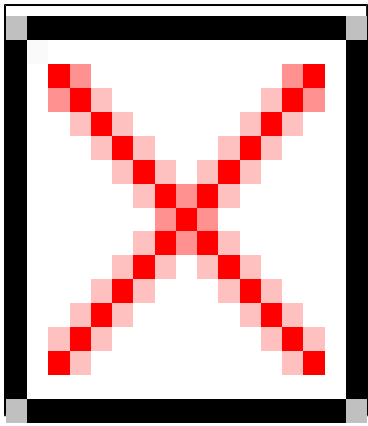
Twenty-seven tales

would hardly seem to make up the substance of a great edition, but this was the product of some of the most intelligent Grimm editing ever. Translator and illustrator worked intensively to select a group of stories that would show the weirdness as well as the power of the popular imagination manifesting itself through what the Grimms had gathered and the results were conveyed in two volumes designed to enhance that power the square format and the packed illustrations.

'Packed'

here means not 'crammed', for Sendak has confined himself to a single illustration for each story, but his pen-drawings consume their area on the page with an intensity of focus and detail. He said himself that his aim for each drawing was to 'catch that moment when the tension between story-line and emotion is at its greatest' death, for instance, showing his godson the last flickerings of his life's candle, the fisherman's wife in a wild hat (borrowed from a Fuseli courtesan) seeking to rule the universe while her husband cowers between the sheets. The work was perhaps the most intense and the most achieved of all Sendak's interpretive illustration. It followed an early encounter with German tales in his three books done with Doris Orgel: **Dwarf Long-Nose, Gockel, Hinkel and Gackeliah**, and the sublime **Schoolmaster Whackwell's Wonderful Sons**; he travelled through Germany, absorbing architecture, landscape, paintings, and although he does not show any awareness of Runge's crucial involvement in the *Märche*, it is a joy to discover that he admired the artist's work to a degree that brought him later to quote from it in his own *Märche* **Outside Over There**.

Brian Alderson is founder of the Children's Books History Society and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**. His own translation of Grimm tales, illustrated by Michael Foreman, will be published by Templar in October.



Page Number:

32

Source URL (retrieved on Jul '20): <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/196/childrens-books/articles/classics-in-short/classics-in-short-no-95>

Links:

[1] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/brian-alderson>

[2] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/196>