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The Twelve Dancing Princesses

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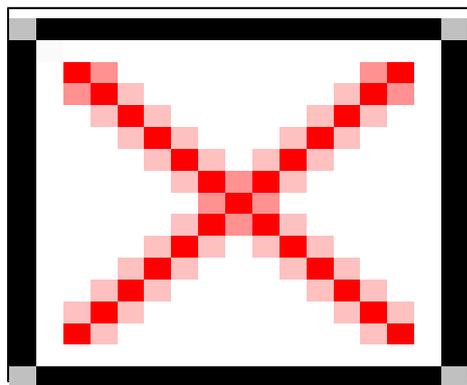
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Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5



One sight of this delicious little volume and I swore myself to adjure nostalgia.

After all, does anyone want any truck these days with one's enthusiasm for the alluring experiments of the late 1940s when Sheila Robinson produced this student exercise while studying under Edward Bawden at the Royal College of Art?

But what an exercise it is. In landscape format, measuring $8\frac{3}{4}$ x 7 inches, cut and folded in a single gathering of 32 pages, it is clearly modelled on the Puffin Picture Books (or even the Perry Colour Books) of the period. It was designed in their style such that, when printed on a single sheet of paper, one side of the sheet would give black and white images alternating with the colour openings printed from the other side of the sheet ? a magic formula that allowed the artist much freedom and scope for diversification, and was here enhanced by Sheila's bold manuscript inscription of the complete text of the Grimm story. (She chose the first ever English translation by Edgar Taylor, which was still frequently found and was indeed used for the first Puffin Grimm in 1948.)

In this most touching reproduction of Sheila's work, the original of which is lodged in the Fry Gallery at Saffron Walden, we are also given a note by Martin Salisbury on its inception, along with some spreads from a working sketchbook which preceded its completion, and these bring home both the craftsmanship and the devotion to the narrative that lay behind Sheila's endeavour. For one thing, it's no mean task merely to preserve the elegance and legibility of so lengthy a manuscript text while at the same time integrating it into the monochrome and coloured drawings that illustrate it. Our twelve princesses, bunking off secretly every night to go dancing in a subterranean kingdom, are a presence throughout the book. Their father, the king, is found at start and finish, first, advertising for help in discovering what's going on (and executing those adventurers who fail), and eventually rewarding the successful

old soldier who wins through, but for page after page Sheila has the tricky job of deploying the dancers at their frolics and sustaining a personality for each (hair-styles, graduations of regality, expressions) which may be sketchy but serve the needed differentiations. The old soldier, with his trim moustache, is given a couple of impressively detailed portraits ? and one rather muddled one in what look like striped pyjamas ? but that stands as the only blemish in the work. Its form, its decorative presentation, and the care taken over its reproduction are a happy reminder of the great days when draftsmanship generated the making of English picture books **Brian Alderson**

Note: *Sheila Robinson worked with Bawden in his famous hideaway at the Brick House in Great Bardfield, Essex in the fifties. Later, now married to Bernard Cheese, she joined the artistic community there and her daughter, the artist Chloë Cheese, contributes an afterword to **The Twelve Dancing Princesses** in which she recalls how the book inspired her to emulate her mother. BA*

The Twelve Dancing Princesses, illustrated by Sheila Robinson is available from

www.anglia.ac.uk/12dancingprincesses [4]

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