

VIEWPOINT

Why fairy tales are still relevant to today's children

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Are fairy tales outdated to a modernised 21st century society? In 1976, clinical psychologist Professor Bruno Bettelheim wrote a book examining the power and utility of fairy tales in childhood development.¹ Forty years later, his work maintains its importance. Through a Freudian lens, Bettelheim examines the emotional and symbolic facets of traditional children's fairy tales alongside contemporary developmental child psychology. Bettelheim believes that when children find meaning within these socially evolved stories, they engage in emotional growth and transcend their self-centred natures. This would allow them to attain a greater sense of meaning and purpose to their own lives, which would prepare them better for their own futures to be in a position to contribute significantly to others. Through the fairy tale narrative, the child makes sense of life's bewilderment. The imagery in fairy tales (such as personified animals, adults represented as giants and allegorical magic vegetables) allows the child to explore their fears in remote and symbolic terms (Fig. 1). The child is able to sort through their inner pressures and moral obligations in an environment that is not belittling to them.

Should parents still recount these tales of make believe to the children of today or are they passé?² Unlike myths, which tend to be detailed historical tragedies inaccessible to a child's mind, fairy tales are a screenplay of adversity, quest, struggle and acceptance – with a happy ending. They tend to be universally translatable and are edited and embellished with every generation. The emphasis is on choice of action rather than the title of the characters themselves. Hansel and Gretel were so named because these were the prevailing children's names at the time.

Fables demand the reader to choose a moral outcome. Fairy tales allow the reader to explore each virtue and path of action through the different characters' fates. The child decides their own personal stance after deliberating each consequence. Through the telling, the child is exposed to ethical reasoning without being preached at. The little pig who worked hard building his house out of bricks was safe, while the pigs that used the easier straw and sticks and went off to play got gobbled up. Without being explicitly told so, the child learns that hard work pays off and that sometimes delayed gratification is necessary. Fairy tales provide answers to what the world is *really* like and the child's place within it.

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Fig. 1 Little Red Riding Hood at the crossroad by Jessie Wilcox-Smith.

Numbers play an important part in the world³ and fairy tales are no exception. Here, the magical number is three: three bears, three little pigs, three wishes, etc. Apart from religious connotations to the Holy Trinity, the child sees their place in the mother, father and child triad. As in the fairy tale, the child usually chooses the *third* path from the other two characters: their own.

Many fairy tales follow a set pattern similar to 'rite of passage' stories. A poor vulnerable child loses a parent, and then must set off on an arduous journey testing their courage and outwitting their foes, before realising their true place in the world, usually by bonding with another ('Prince Charming'). This simplistically echoes the process of adolescence, whereby a child emancipates from their parents, forms a self-identity and vocation, and begins to enter into mutually exclusive adult relationships. *Cinderella* typifies this with the glass slipper fitting only the right person. The child realises that their potential spouse must suit them wholly and not just be wealthy, attractive or popular. Goldilocks tries out the porridge and the beds to find the right one. Teenagers traverse many phases of fashion, music, friends and hairstyles before finding their 'home'.

As they listen, children interweave their own worries and thoughts into the crossroads of the fairy tale. They conceive and construct an internal image of the 'monster', which is unique to each child's mind. Physical malformation represents psychological maladjustment. Ineffectual fathers are usually projected as protective, aristocratic hunters. Running away, while easy to do, is far from satisfying. Sleep represents introspection and the process of maturation. The child experiences lessons in sibling rivalry and encounters motifs of deliverance. Cinderella rises from her literal and metaphorical ashes like a phoenix. The child *mustn't* know the psychological meaning of the fairy tale imagery or it loses its power and joy. The utility of fairy tales lies at the preconscious level, rather than laying Little Red Riding down on the psychoanalyst's couch (Fig. 2).

Fairy tales conclude where they 'all lived happily ever after', countering a child's separation anxiety. Happiness is attained through a satisfactory relationship with others, achieving identity and contentment within oneself from the path to selfhood. Attractiveness was hidden all along. This remains a pertinent lesson for avaricious children and so fairy tales may be a primer for adolescence. The fairy tale of the *Ugly Duckling* is wondrous to nurture self-esteem and counter negative body image. Rapunzel's unique bodily attribute is seen as strength, not curse.

With many broken families, disrupted lives and unhappy children in today's society, it would be imprudent to abandon a tool which has been used for centuries to aid parent-child discourse, impart morals and foster self-development. They are also fun. I challenge you to revisit your childhood with your children by re-examining your relationship with fairy tales as I have done.



Fig. 2 Modern reinterpretation of Little Red Riding Hood by Henry Kilham.

Dr Anthony Zehetner runs the Teenlink health service for children and young people aged 8–16 years with a substance-using parent undergoing rehabilitation treatment. He is also a General Paediatrician at Gosford and a Clinical Lecturer for the University of Sydney.

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