Few books have enjoyed the extraordinary popular success of the Grimms’ nursery and Household Tales. With the Bible and Shakespeare, this collection ranks among the best-selling books of the Western world. Not long after the Grimms published their tales, the legendary soldier, adventurer, and raconteur Baron von Münchhausen asserted that the two volumes published by the brothers occupied a position “right in between the cookbook and the hymnal.” If the hymnal has been replaced by the latest self-help manual, the stories themselves continue to combine the practical magic of a good recipe with the spiritual uplift of a devotional song. Since their publication in two volumes in 1812 and 1815, the Grimms’ tales have entertained, inspired, influenced, and instructed. Even when the Allies were locked in combat with Germany, the British poet W. H. Auden decreed the nursery and Household Tales to be “among the few indispensable, common-property books upon which Western culture can be founded.”

The rise to canonical status for the Grimms’ fairy tales was not at all rapid. While it is tempting to imagine that the collection found its way effortlessly into German households because of innate aesthetic, ethical, or spiritual merits, the history of its reception was marked by disapproval, hostility, and contempt. It took the Grimms, who were active in government and diplomatic service while they carried out their scholarly ventures, several years to realize that the reception of their work had taken a surprising turn. The two volumes—published as the first installments in a scholarly resource designed to preserve the “poetry of the people”—were being appropriated by parents as bedtime reading for children. While parents appreciated the narrative hiss and crackle of the stories in the collection, they were less enthusiastic about the Grimms’ efforts to capture the authentic language of the German Volk, a roughhewn idiom that often took a vulgar, burlesque turn. As John Updike reminds us,
folktales served as the “television and pornography of their day, the life-lightening trash of preliterate peoples,” and they went a long way toward relieving the tedium of household chores. The Hard Facts of the Grimms’ Fairy Tales documents some of the massive editing and rewriting it took to turn the “poetry” of the people—the banter, gossip, and chat—into literary fare suitable for children.

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm may not have collected their tales from the lips of untutored peasants, as they occasionally claimed, but they did transform the fables, yarns, and anecdotes of an oral storytelling tradition into literary texts destined to have a powerful influence on cultures the world over. No one has ever traced the exact paths along which the Nursery and Household Tales migrated from Kassel, where the Brothers Grimm lived for many years, to take up residence in England and then to cross the Atlantic to the United States, but it is clear that the German stories quickly unseated native lore and tradition. In England, the renowned folklorist Joseph Jacobs complained that the Frenchman Charles Perrault had “captivated” English and Scottish children with his Tales of Mother Goose. “What Perrault began,” Jacobs added with some annoyance, “the Grims completed. Tom Tit Tot gave way to Rumpelstiltskin, the three Sillies to Hansel and Gretel, and the English Fairy Tale became a mélange confus of Perrault and the Grims.” In the United States, as in Great Britain, the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm have become our cultural stories, the sacred stories of childhood that we imbibe, as one German commentator put it, “like mother’s milk.”

Fairy tales are up close and personal, mixing fact with fantasy to tell us about our deepest anxieties and desires. They offer roadmaps pointing the way to romance and riches, power and privilege, and most importantly to a way out of the woods, back to the safety and security of home. Bringing myths down to earth and inflecting them in human rather than heroic terms, fairy tales put a familiar spin on the stories in the archive of our collective imagination. What is Tom Thumb or Jack if not a secular David or a diminutive Odysseus, and what is Bluebeard’s wife if not a cousin of Psyche and a daughter of Eve? Fairy tales take us into a reality that is familiar in the double sense of the term—deeply personal and at the same time centered
on the family and its conflicts rather than on what is at stake in the
world at large.

Today, adults and children the world over read the Grimms’ tales
in nearly every shape and form: illustrated and annotated, bowdler-
ized and abridged, faithful to the original or fractured. Considered
timeless in content and universal in appeal, the *Nursery and House-
hold Tales* have found their way into a variety of media, ranging from
opera and ballet to film and advertising. Perpetually appropriated,
adapred, revised, and rescripted, they have become a powerful form
of cultural currency, widely recognized and constantly circulating in
ways that are sometimes obvious, sometimes obscure. Cutting across
the borderlines between high art and low, oral traditions and print
culture, the visual and the verbal, they function as robust nomadic
carriers of social practices and cultural values.

At the opera we commiserate with Hansel and Gretel as they ago-
nize over the witch’s plans to turn them into a gingerbread treat in
Engelbert Humperdinck’s adaptation of the Grimms’ story. At the
movies we watch Julia Roberts play a latter-day Cinderella who moves
from rags to Rodeo Drive riches in *Pretty Woman*. In Anne Sexton’s
poetic transformations of the Grimms’ stories, we observe Snow
White, that “lovely virgin” and “dumb bunny,” fall into her comatose
state. And television actress Kim Cattrall makes her way through the
cobblestone streets of Prague, wearing a red dress, red hooded cape,
and red heels in search of a man with a taste for Pepsi.

Even if we have not read the Grimms’ versions of each of these
tales, we instantly recognize the cultural reference and connect it to
the story in our head. That story, of course, varies from one person
to the next, but in most cases it is a construct based on all the differ-
ent versions of, say, “Little Red Riding Hood” that we have encoun-
tered. Each of us has different associations, but most who have grown
up in an Anglo-American culture will think—when we see Kim Cattrall
on the television screen—of a girl, a wolf, a meeting in the
woods; a grandmother, a disguise, a litany of questions, and a tear-
ing of flesh; and finally a hunter, a musket, and a rescue and resur-
rection from the belly of the beast. And that is how the Grimms told
the tale.
Reading the Grimms’ *Nursery and Household Tales* not only returns us to the earliest printed sources of stories that engage our attention in powerful ways but also reminds us that there is no sacred original version of “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Beauty and the Beast,” “Cinderella,” or “Hansel and Gretel.” What we have are imperfect, often fragmented variants, and sometimes just bits and pieces that we cobble together to form a story that we keep in our heads, sometimes translating it from cultural memory into social and aesthetic practices so that it becomes part of a conversation, a film, a work of fiction, a painting, or an advertisement.

If we look at the Grimms’ version of “Little Red Riding Hood,” we quickly discover that there is not even a standard early-nineteenth-century German version of the tale. When the Grimms recorded “Rothkäppchen” in 1812, they provided an alternate ending to the one in which a hunter cuts open the belly of the wolf and rescues Red Riding Hood and her grandmother. In that second ending, they describe how the wolf is unable to enter the locked house and crawls to the rooftop, from where he is lured to his death by Red Riding Hood, who places on the ground a trough of water in which Grandma has boiled sausages. Here, grandmother and granddaughter do not have to rely on the intervention of a hunter: the two outwit “Old Greybeard” on their own.

A third version of “Little Red Riding Hood,” included in the commentary to the *Nursery and Household Tales*, deviates even more powerfully from the story that we know. That version, drawn from a Swedish folksong, tells of a girl who enters a dark wood and meets a wolf.

“Oh, dear Mr. Wolf,” she said. “If you don’t bite me, I’ll give you my shirt sewn with silk.”

“I don’t want your shirt sewn with silk. I want your young body and blood.”

The girl first offered him her silver shoes, then her golden crown, but it was no use. In desperation, she climbed up a tall oak tree, but the wolf started digging up the roots. The terrified girl let out a piercing scream. Her beloved hears the scream, jumps into the saddle and rides off as fast as a bird, but when he gets to where she was, he finds
the trunk of the oak on the ground, and nothing but the bloody arm of the girl.

While this version of “Little Red Riding Hood” must have made for exciting nighttime entertainment, it obviously was not particularly appealing to two scholarly gentlemen who were hoping to preserve the natural beauty of native lore and local tradition. Hence, it was placed in a footnote, where it has since languished.

Over the past two centuries, the character of Little Red Riding Hood has morphed into a variety of new forms, some more like the alluring Swedish girl in the woods than the German innocent. As one recent critic points out, the folktale heroine has undergone “a series of changes and disguises.” Starting out as a feisty French girl who outwits the wolf by telling him she has to go outside to “make a load,” and modulating into a sweet and innocent, if mildly disobedient, German girl, she has grown up in our culture to become a sexy stripper in Tex Avery’s wartime cartoon *Little Hot Riding Hood*, a seductive femme fatale who sells lipstick for Max Factor, and even a cinematic dominatrix who becomes the target of deserved punishment.

Still, the old story has not lost its hold. The Grimms’ “Little Red Riding Hood” is the tale we continue to anthologize for children today, even if we take liberties with its words by eliminating the stones sewn into the wolf’s belly or by removing the bottle of wine in Red Riding Hood’s basket for fear of condoning the use of alcohol (as was the case in two California school districts). The German tale has become, for better or for worse, our canonical story, and we ceaselessly use it as a cultural reference point for our retellings and re-scriptings, even when we have never looked between the covers of the *Nursery and Household Tales*.

The power of the Grimms’ cultural legacy—the role of their book as a storytelling archive the world over—makes it all the more important to interrogate and take the measure of their project. The stories in the collection are both foundational and formative. They are the narratives that address the anxieties and fantasies of the childhood years. “Little Red Riding Hood was my first love. I felt that if I could have married Little Red Riding Hood, I should have
known perfect bliss,” Charles Dickens reported. His childhood infatuation was an affair of both the head and the heart. Smitten by the story as much as by its heroine, he went on to create the great fairy-tale melodramas of Victorian England.

“What could I ever get nowadays from reading to equal the excitement and the revelation in those first fourteen years?” the British novelist Graham Greene once asked. In the imaginative world opened up by fairy tales, children escape the drab realities of everyday life and indulge in the cathartic pleasures of defeating those giants, stepmothers, ogres, monsters, and trolls also known as the grown-ups. There, they encounter and explore the great existential mysteries and profound enigmas of the adult world. What better tool, as the child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim has suggested, for learning how to navigate reality and for figuring out how to survive in a world ruled by adults?

Long before Bettelheim analyzed the therapeutic value of the family conflicts in fairy tales, the German philosopher Walter Benjamin endorsed the way in which fairy tales teach children “to meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning and with high spirits.” If Bettelheim valued the “moral education” provided by the protagonists of fairy tales, Benjamin intuitively recognized that the moral calculus of folklore is not without its complications and complexities. Do we applaud when Gretel shoves the witch into the oven? How do we respond to the doves that peck out the eyes of Cinderella’s evil stepsisters? Should we cheer on Snow White’s wicked stepmother as she dances to her death in red-hot iron shoes? Parents may believe in promoting high spirits, but they will not be keen about giving their approval to stories in which characters thrive even when they lie, cheat, or steal, or in which “happily ever after” means witnessing the bodily torture of villains.

The parent who expects to find role models for children in fairy tales will be deeply disappointed. Jack raids the castle of a giant and murders him; Aladdin is described as an “incorrigible good-for-nothing”; and Snow White breaks into the cottage of the dwarfs and makes herself at home. Parents will also look in vain for so-called family values in stories that show us widower fathers wooing their
daughters, women lacing up and suffocating their stepdaughters; fathers turning over their daughters to greedy kings; and peasants who wish for nothing more from life than the prospect of a good meal. But the stories that have survived from the Grimms’ collection meet one requirement of a good children’s book: they show the triumph of the small and meek over the tall and powerful.

Much as the Grimms claimed that the *Nursery and Household Tales* could serve as a manual of manners, they were also surely aware that the values embedded in the stories did not square with what they heralded as the purity and innocence of folklore. And they also recognized that the German term for fairy tale (*Märchen*) implied not only a good yarn but also a convincing lie.

Today we recognize that fairy tales are as much about family conflicts and violence as about enchanting rescues and romances. When we read “Rumpelstiltskin,” we are more fascinated by the grotesque gnome who dances around a fire than by the wedding of the miller’s daughter to a king with an appetite for gold. Snow White’s encounter with the hunter is far more riveting than her meeting with the prince. And the perfect fit between the glass slipper and Cinderella’s foot is hardly as stirring as the efforts of the stepsisters to make the slipper fit by cutting off their toes and their heels.

Through the medium of these traditional tales, even when they fail to meet today’s standards of political correctness, we can reflect on what matters in our lives, about issues ranging from fear of abandonment and death to fantasies of revenge and retaliation that lead to happily-ever-after. Even if stories were told “once upon a time,” in another time and place, they can provide opportunities for reflecting on cultural differences, on what was once at stake in our life decisions and what is at stake today. While turning the pages of the Grimms’ *Nursery and Household Tales* or the updated versions available in countless volumes today, we can meditate on the effects of the stories and reflect on our own cultural values, engaging in a reading that can take at times a playful turn, at times a philosophical turn.

But are these German tales—these stories that are so much more cruel, violent, and gory than Disney—really still worth studying and
reading? The Grimms, after all, believed that “Hansel and Gretel,” “Cinderella,” and “The Juniper Tree” were both culturally symptomatic and culturally normative, reflecting German national identity and modeling it for the next generation. Do we really want to pass on stories with characters who were hailed by German commentators as models of “folkish virtues?” Do we want to resurrect a collection that included the anti-Semitic story “The Jew in the Thorn Bush”? That the Nazis saw in the Grimms’ cultural ideals an antidote to the evils of modernism is not surprising. In the folklore they collected and the ideas they promoted, the Grimms displayed reverence for the home, the family, and the simple pleasures of peasant life in a patriarchal order. Nonetheless there remains a fundamental and powerful disjunction between the sentimental nationalism expressed in the Grimms’ philosophical reflections and the imperialist politics and eliminationist policies of the Nazi era.

If the Grimms’ volume was denounced, in the aftermath of the Second World War, as a book that promoted “bloodletting and violence” and that endorsed “cruelty, violence, and atrocity, fear and hatred for the outsider, and virulent anti-Semitism,” it has, in an odd twist of fate, also become a book whose stories have been used, both in German-speaking countries and in the Anglo-American world, to work through the horrors of the Holocaust.

In a volume of poetry entitled Transformations (1971), the American poet Anne Sexton produced a sinister verse adaptation of “Hansel and Gretel” that shows the parents cooking the family dog, then resolving to adopt a “final solution,” one that leaves the children to starve in the forest. When Gretel shoves the witch (addressed as Fräulein) into the oven, she has a “moment in history” that most readers will unfailingly connect with the crematoria of Nazi Germany. Inspired by her daughter to rescript the Grimms’ fairy tales, Sexton was among the first to mingle fantasy with horror, producing a haunting poem that mingles the personal with the political in powerful ways and that unsettles our notion of fairy tales as culturally innocent.

The Italian author and illustrator Roberto Innocenti took a different approach in his conflation of fairy tale with historical fact. The
title vignette of Innocenti’s *Rose Blanche*, a picture book for children about the Holocaust, alerts us to the presence of the subtext used to construct the story of the courageous protagonist. At the end of a long, muddy road, a young girl can be seen running into the woods with a bag of provisions and a red ribbon adorning her hair. The allusion to Little Red Riding Hood, on the road to grandmother’s house with her basket of bread and wine, is unmistakable. But Rose Blanche has a different mission. She is rushing into the woods to bring food to the young inmates of a concentration camp that she stumbled upon in the woods.¹¹

The very fairy tale from the *Nursery and Household Tales* mobilized by Innocenti also guided an American author of children’s books in her account of a youthful resistance fighter in Denmark during the German occupation. Lois Lowry’s *Number the Stars*, a story that has enjoyed widespread popularity in the United States, tells the tale of a young Danish girl who travels through the woods, eluding her Nazi pursuers and their dogs to carry out a mission that allows Jewish refugees to escape by boat to Sweden. Young Annemarie manages to conceal the secret weapon needed for a safe escape in a basket packed with a “lunch” for her uncle. With a deft touch of irony, Innocenti and Lowry use the plot of a quintessentially German fairy tale to model the behavior of their heroines in defeating German villains.¹²

Maurice Sendak’s illustrations for Wilhelm Grimm’s fairy tale about a girl lost in the woods also take us on a descent into the horrors of concentration camps. In the woods, the young Mili discovers the towers of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the skeletal remains of its victims, and a Jewish cemetery with a choir of children. The choir in Sendak’s *Dear Mili* has been identified as standing in for the forty-four children of Izieu in southern France who perished in a concentration camp after Klaus Barbie ordered their transport. Two of the girls in the choir bear a distinct resemblance to well-known photographs of Anne Frank.¹³

From Jane Yolen’s novel *Briar Rose* to Roberto Benigni’s film *Life is Beautiful*, we find the same eerie combination of fairy tale text and Holocaust memoir to chart the harrowing events marking the lives
of Holocaust victims and survivors. What these narratives tell us has something to do with the way in which the fairy tale is powerfully associated with the cultural notion of Germany. But they also remind us of the way in which the stories capture human drama and emotion in its most extreme forms and conditions and thus provide the appropriate narrative vehicle for capturing the melodrama of historical events that defy intellectual comprehension.

The stories in the Grimms’ *Nursery and Household Tales* are anything but culturally innocent. Once told around the fireside to lighten the labors of men and women, they continue to engage and entertain, not only through the high drama of their plots, but also through the rich histories that have attached themselves to those plots. My own study of the Grimms’ fairy tales began with the seemingly innocent pleasures of the stories as bedtime reading and rapidly moved to a critical engagement that launched an inquiry into the archaeology of folklore. *The Hard Facts of the Grimms’ Fairy Tales* represents the first phase of a project that continues to reward curiosity in fresh and exciting ways. Its publication date also coincided with a revival of scholarly interest in the Grimms and in fairy tales. The writings of Ruth B. Bottigheimer, Don Haase, Marina Warner, Jack Zipes, and others have promoted the study of fairy tales in powerful ways over the past decade even as they have led us to the salutary conclusion that what the Grimms published was not just for children.

New technologies have done much to promote correspondence between authors and their audiences. Over the years, I have had the good fortune to receive a range of communications from readers of *The Hard Facts of the Grimms’ Fairy Tales*, many of whom wondered why I had not included translations of the best-known tales in the collection. They longed to hear more about “Snow White,” “Cinderella,” and “Little Red Riding Hood.” For them, I include, in Appendix A, six stories from the final edition of the Grimms’ *Nursery and Household Tales*, along with a commentary that maps the interpretive history and cultural dissemination of the stories.

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NOTES


