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Once Upon A Time: A Short History Of Fairy Tale



Synopsis

From wicked queens, beautiful princesses, elves, monsters, and goblins to giants, glass slippers, poisoned apples, magic keys, and mirrors, the characters and images of fairy tales have cast a spell over readers and audiences, both adults and children, for centuries. These fantastic stories have travelled across cultural borders, and been passed on from generation to generation, ever-changing, renewed with each re-telling. Few forms of literature have greater power to enchant us and rekindle our imagination than a fairy tale. But what is a fairy tale? Where do they come from and what do they mean? What do they try and communicate to us about morality, sexuality, and society? The range of fairy tales stretches across great distances and time; their history is entangled with folklore and myth, and their inspiration draws on ideas about nature and the supernatural, imagination and fantasy, psychoanalysis, and feminism. Marina Warner has loved fairy tales over a long writing life, and she explores here a multitude of tales through the ages, their different manifestations on the page, the stage, and the screen. From the phenomenal rise of Victorian and Edwardian literature to contemporary children's stories, Warner unfolds a glittering array of examples, from classics such as Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, and The Sleeping Beauty, the Grimm Brothers' Hansel and Gretel, and Hans Andersen's The Little Mermaid, to modern-day realizations including Walt Disney's Snow White and gothic interpretations such as Pan's Labyrinth. In ten succinct chapters, Marina Warner digs into a rich hoard of fairy tales in their brilliant and fantastical variations, in order to define a genre and evaluate a literary form that keeps shifting through time and history. Her book makes a persuasive case for fairy tale as a crucial repository of human understanding and culture.

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Customer Reviews

Compact and concise, *ONCE UPON A TIME* is a literate and knowledgeable overview of the fairy tale, broadly construed. Author Marina Warner is a renowned scholar of mythology and fairy tales with numerous other books in the field. Here, she synthesizes and condenses her scholarship in a lively book of less than two hundred pages. Much of the first part of the book is devoted to matters of definition. What are the defining characteristics of a fairy tale? In exploring this, Warner discusses the brotherhood with folk tales and the kinship with fantasy. She suggests that the German term "Wundermärchen" ("wonder tale") better captures the quality of the genre than does "fairy tale" or "folk tale", as it "recognizes the ubiquity of magic in the stories." Later in the book, she also discusses more recent variations such as the literature of magical realism. She notes that for many fairy tales there are multiple variations, and goes on to address briefly why that is so: is it because they all are products of a collective unconscious or, instead, because they are local, individualized renditions of tales that have, over time, travelled from place to place and generation to generation? (Warner tends towards the latter view.) In her overview of the history of the fairy tale, Warner goes back to the "Arabian Nights" and "faerie" elements in Shakespeare's plays, such as Queen Mab and Puck. Due attention is given to the major figures primarily responsible for outlining the traditional fairy tale in the western world, people like Marie-Catherine D'Aulnoy, Charles Perrault ("Mother Goose"), and the Brothers Grimm.

I must confess that I finished Warner's book in a less happy state than when I started it. I expected something a little different. For example, I thought that there might be more historical analysis of fairy tales, or even, perhaps a more detailed exploration of how the same tale might have varied across times and geographies. Instead, there were times when her approach became a bit piecemeal, so that whilst she was certainly citing a lot of varying research, I was not altogether sure what points she was really making. And in fact, there were also times when I felt her points were

generalised, partial, or even - wrong - there was quite a lot of application of twenty-first century analysis applied backwards, implying that the vision WE might have, today, of the meaning of a story, was the same as the meaning of the story back in the mists of 400-600 years earlier. The most glaring example of this, to my mind, was her interpretation of the Rapunzel story, at the end of which Rapunzel is thrown out by the witch because she has been hauling up a prince into the tower on her magical rope of hair, and is now pregnant with twins. Warner asserts that one of the 'hidden meanings' of this story is 'an unapologetic call for sex education for the young' I'm afraid I snorted in derision at that one. It might well be so, if it were written today, but, at the time? She also rather sweepingly categorises the differences between 'myth' and 'fairy tale' thus - classical mythology is all about the doings of gods and goddesses - a link therefore to religion, whereas 'fairy-tales' are about ordinary people coming into contact with 'magic'.

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