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From The Beast To The Blonde: On Fairy Tales And Their Tellers



Synopsis

In this landmark study of the history and meaning of fairy tales, the celebrated cultural critic Marina Warner looks at storytelling in art and legend--from the prophesying enchantress who lures men to a false paradise, to jolly Mother Goose with her masqueraders in the real world. Why are storytellers so often women, and how does that affect the status of fairy tales? Are they a source of wisdom or a misleading temptation to indulge in romancing?

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Customer Reviews

There are many books about fairy tales-- from tomes specializing in psychoanalysis to texts focusing on the changing meaning of the tales we all know and love (or hate), fairy tales provide rich fodder for psychoanalysts, Freudians, folklorists, feminists, and specialists of all sorts. That said, with *From the Beast to the Blonde*, Marina Warner really does bring something different to this already crowded table. Her book focuses upon fairy tales and myths (or wonder tales, as they are sometimes called) as cultural projections. Warner argues here that the frequently occurring archetypes in fairy tales tell us a great deal about their tellers, which in turn reveal a great deal about the societies from which these tales and their narrators spring. Warner specifically focuses here on stories and storytelling, and how these activities reflect the lives of women in their societies. According to Warner, storytelling is a particularly female art. Though many of the fairy tales that have come down to us today-- the famous Brothers Grimm, Perrault, the tales of Andrew Lang, and others-- Warner notes that the original stories themselves often originated from females. These

stories often sprung from the lips (and the minds) of females; the Brothers Grim et. al. merely committed them to paper. From the wealthy courtier ladies who amused themselves in their ample free time by spinning (or merely repeating) fairy tales to the gnarled old rustic ladies (Juliet's nurse, mother goose, and countless others are, if Warner is to be believed, sprung from this archetype) who maintained their usefulness and societal value by spinning tales in a society that had little use for them, fairy tales were often a female prerogative.

Why do people pass on fairy tales from generation to generation? The tales are violent and seem sexist to modern eyes. Warner's book sets the truth about fairy tales into an historical perspective. This contrasts with Bruno Bettelheim's "The Uses of Enchantment" which suggests that there is an opportunity for psychological exploration within each fairy tale if we identify with the various characters. In other words, there is a wicked stepmother, a forlorn orphan and a powerful prince etc within each of us. I found his ideas enjoyable and useful but I think Warner's historical analysis is more realistic. She tackles such contentious issues as that of the wicked stepmother, pointing out the complex situation that was created for a woman marrying a widow who already had children. The temptation to treat those children badly in favour of her own children was quite real because of her financial dependence on her new husband. Hence the need for tales that warned against women behaving like that. There is a lot of other fascinating material in the book, such as the development of the image of St Anne (reputed to be Jesus' grandmother) into the image of dear Nan, from which we get the name Nana for grandmothers and for nannies as well. I didn't agree with Warner's analysis of the little mermaid and have posted my own one on the site for Hans Anderson's Fairy Stories. Those interested in this kind of book might also like to read A.D. Hope's book "A Midsummer Eve's Dream". It is surprising how few fairies and elves there are in regular fairy stories - a case of art imitating life perhaps! But there are some, and Hope's book helps us to understand how the idea of fairies developed in England.

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