

Fairy tales at the British Academy

The biennial British Academy Literature Week ran from 11 to 16 May 2015, bringing together academics, writers, artists, journalists and performers to explore the literary 'Other Worlds' of fairy tales and folk tales. **Dr Claire Pascolini-Campbell**, who works in the British Academy's International Department, ties together some of the threads.

What role do fairy tales and folk tales play in the modern world? How have texts migrated across languages and cultures? And why do we keep coming back to these stories? These questions – and many more – fuelled this year's British Academy Literature Week, as a host of diverse and interesting speakers delved into the twilight world of fairy tales and folk tales. Over the course of a week of talks and panel discussions, workshops and performances, exhibits, literary walks, and movie screenings, this innovative and interactive exploration cast new light on old stories.

For instance, panellists **Nicholas Tucker**, **Peter Brooks**, **Sally Gardner** and **Jack Zipes** engaged their audience in a lively debate, querying whether fairy tales and folk tales still have a place in the developed world.¹ Tucker, a specialist in educational psychology and cultural studies, and former Senior Lecturer at the University of Sussex, opened with the provocative statement that 'traditional fairy tales have had their day'. He linked this decline to industrialisation, and argued that:

Fairy tales are about a rural world: a world of taking your pig to market, getting your water from the well, and all the remnants of an agricultural culture. We are not living like that anymore.

While Tucker acknowledged the presence of 'the same basic patterns' within children's stories today and those of yesteryear, he saw the form of the fairy tale itself as becoming increasingly outdated:

1. An audio recording of this session can be found via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/literatureweek2015

I just think that, to modern children with their video games, the fairy tale is beginning to sound a bit archaic, like madrigals. I love them, but I think their day is going.

Peter Brooks, Sterling Professor Emeritus of Comparative Literature at Yale University and Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy, offered a more optimistic viewpoint, arguing instead that contemporary adaptations – such as those by the Disney Studios, for example – have helped these stories to endure.

Like Tucker, Brooks identified a static element at the centre of the constantly evolving world of the fairy tale, referring to 'underlying plots' that can be transformed many times while nonetheless remaining recognisable. The intrinsic simplicity of the basic fairy tale plot was also remarked upon by Sally Gardner, a children's writer and illustrator, who maintained that 'fairy stories are in one sense, very, very simple'.

And yet, these simple stories may exert lasting and powerful influences on the psyche, and both Brooks and Gardner remarked on the potential for fairy tales to shape our understanding of the world. In reference to the case history of the Wolf Man, the Russian aristocrat best known for having been a patient of Sigmund Freud, Brooks explained that the man's crippling fear of wolves may have been directly linked to the fairy tales he read as a child:

Freud got interested in this – in the case history of the Wolf Man. He spends hours with the patient trying to find the fairy tale that has the right illustration of a wolf standing on its hind legs; and it turns out to be the tale of the tailor and the six little goats. When he finds it, this is part of what the patient is. Is the patient's terror caused by that particular illustration of that book of fairy tales? I think we are made up, in part, of the fictions that we experience as children.

Having begun by questioning the relevance of fairy tales to contemporary audiences, the panel ultimately found that these stories retain their value and their ability to colour our experience of the world. Therefore, in view of



Throughout Literature Week 2015, the British Academy hosted an exhibition entitled 'Telling tales: the art of the illustrator', featuring illustrations that have appeared in volumes of fairy and folk tales published by the Folio Society.

the formative potential of these tales, Jack Zipes, Professor Emeritus of German and Comparative Literature at the University of Minnesota, argued for the importance of adapting certain elements of traditional stories for new generations:

I think we have a responsibility when we work with these tales with children. In the 19th century, tales were used to civilise the manners and the 'mores' that children were supposed to have. There was a type of folk and fairy tale that had a lot to do with sexism and patriarchy, and there are still some remnants of very negative things in a lot of these tales, particularly in the depiction of women.

The manner in which fairy tales are adapted to disparate cultural and temporal contexts formed the topic of a conversation between the author **Marcus Sedgwick** and **Marina Warner**, Professor of English and Creative Writing at Birkbeck and Fellow of the British Academy.² Sedgwick remarked on the astonishing longevity of some old stories, such as that of Theseus in the Minotaur's labyrinth, which was recently adapted for the cinema by Guillermo del Toro in his 2006 film *Pan's Labyrinth*:

This story is 4,000-5,000 years old, and about a year ago it struck me how extraordinary that a story has lasted that length of time. And it struck me that there

must be a process of Darwinian selection with stories: the good ones mean something to us, they attach to us, and we retell them again and again. We adjust them for our own age and we see them through the cultural lens of whatever time we are living in.

Warner, on the other hand, was unwilling to leave this process of retelling to random accident and argued instead for a more curated and responsible approach:

I prefer to use natural selection in a slightly different way, which is to think about it as biodiversity, so that the culture of stories needs to be cared for. We cannot just leave it, because there are lots of forces out there attempting to tell Cinderella's story simply as a girl getting a rich guy. They need to be withstood. For example, in the Cinderella case, there is a story of the ghost of her dead mother returning, sometimes in the form of an animal. There is a beautiful version in Scotland in which she comes back in the form of a cow, and she feeds the Cinderella figure, called Rashin Coatie. ... I think you could think of that as a wild flower that is being stamped out by rapeseed fields.

The conversation shed a fascinating light on the manner in which tales filter down through generations to become canonical. Moreover, the speakers also called on audiences to engage in their own share of 'canon-making' in order to ensure that local variants – such as the Rashin Coatie story, for example – do not become extinct.

2. A video recording of this session can be found via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/literatureweek2015



Dame Marina Warner FBA casts a spell over her audience during the British Academy Literature Week exploration of 'Other Worlds'. More information about all the events held during the week can be found at www.britishacademy.ac.uk/literatureweek2015

The language of evolutionary theory adopted by Sedgwick and Warner was likewise applied to fairy tales and folk tales by **Jamie Tehrani**, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Anthropology at Durham University, who contested that:

Fairy tales are to cultural evolution what fruit flies are to biological evolution – a perfect model system for investigating how processes of mutation and adaptation can give rise to what Darwin poetically described as 'endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful'.

In a paper on the evolution of fairy tales Tehrani expanded on what Tucker referred to as the 'basic patterns' at the heart of familiar stories, explaining how the same storylines and motifs are constantly embroidered and updated:

As they get passed on from individual to individual, from

generation to generation, and from society to society, they gradually mutate into new forms, some of which catch on and flourish, while others quickly vanish into extinction.

For instance, Tehrani offered the intriguing example of the Cinderella story, the earliest written versions of which contain no reference to a slipper made of glass. According to Tehrani, this feature originated in a famous literary version of the tale by Charles Perrault in the 17th century, who may not have intended it at all:

In French, the word for glass, 'verre', is a homophone for the word for fur, 'vair'. One theory holds that Perrault simply misspelt the word, or that it was mistranslated. What is beyond doubt is that, perhaps with a little help from Walt Disney, the glass slipper proved to be an extremely potent motif in retellings of Cinderella over the last couple of hundred years.

These accidents of translation attest to the dynamic nature of folk tales and the manner in which similar stories and motifs are carried across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Using the Chinese tale known as The Tiger Grandmother as a means of illustrating the reach of the Little Red Riding Hood type, Tehrani's paper provided further insight into the influence of disparate cultural contexts on familiar story patterns:

The Tiger Grandmother tells the story of a group of sisters who are left home alone when their mother goes to visit their grandmother. On the way, the poor mother gets attacked and killed by a tiger, who then makes her way to the children's house. The tiger tricks the children into letting it into the house by posing as their granny, and spends the night with them in bed. During the night, the two older children are awoken by the terrifying sound of the tiger crunching the bones of their youngest sibling.

As well as being transplanted across different languages and cultural contexts, Tehrani also alluded to manner in which familiar tales are retold across different mediums – the story of Little Red Riding Hood having been reworked both into a Hitchcockian fairy tale movie, *Hard Candy*, and the recent Hollywood flop, *Red Riding Hood*.

Ian Christie, Professor of Film and Media History at



On 14 May 2015, the British Academy was transformed into a wonderland for 'Other Worlds ... after dark' – a late night of talks, performances and creative activities.

Birkbeck and Fellow of the British Academy, likewise commented on film adaptations of fairy tales in his piece on the British Academy blog.³ Christie's post focuses in particular on *Pan's Labyrinth*, which was shown at a special screening as part of Literature Week.

Like Brooks' allusion to the role of Disney adaptations in renewing interest in fairy tales, Christie explains that old tales often circulate on screen. His blog piece explores how del Toro's fantasy film both draws on and subverts Lewis Carroll's famous story:

Del Toro's tale does have links with one of the most famous of modern fantasy tales. His heroine Ofelia, like Alice before her, does go 'underground'. But the starting point is not an idyllic Victorian Oxford picnic: it is the Spain of 1944, where Ofelia's mother has married a new husband, a brusque captain in the Falangist Spanish army. So Ofelia wants to escape from her present in what turns out to be a bizarre fantasy world that is every bit as grotesque as Lewis Carroll's Wonderland.

The horror and violence implicit in many of the fairy tales discussed over the course of Literature Week is brought to the fore in *Pan's Labyrinth*, as Christie suggests:

Del Toro draws on 'pulp' and horror imagery to create his deeply disturbing nightmare world where fauns, fairies, and creatures from his fertile imagination co-exist with brutal Fascists.

Frightening and disturbing they may be, but this year's Literature Week revealed the extent to which these other worlds of literature, in their various shapes and forms, remain irresistibly appealing to modern audiences. What it is about fairy tales and folk tales that continues to whet our appetites is less certain. Could it be the familiarity of their plots? The recurring magical motifs? Or the lessons that they teach us about the world we live in?

For some commentators like Sedgwick, the answer lies in the macabre itself and in the thrill of reading stories 'that tell you that, perhaps, life is not as nice as your parents are promising you it was going to be'.



The British Academy's Literature Week 2015 concluded on Saturday 16 May with a walking tour in pursuit of 'Tales of London' – taking in the sites of giants, ghosts, lost rivers, lost goddesses, profane shrines and unruly urban legends.

3. Ian Christie's blog piece, posted on 11 May 2015, can be found at <http://blog.britac.ac.uk/fauns-fairies-and-fascists/>