



Off with Their Heads! Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood

By Maria Tatar

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Editorial Review

From Kirkus Reviews

Provocative observations on the uses (and misuses) of "classic" fairy tales are overwhelmed by academic jargon in this oddly disjointed and disappointing study from Tatar (German Literature/Harvard). Expanding on her *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales* (1987), Tatar examines the transformation of often ribald adult folk-tale prototypes into sometimes horrifyingly violent children's stories rooted in the assumptions and realities of a particular social context. At the time when such well-known collectors as the Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault, and Hans Christian Andersen were combining folk legends with the children's literary conventions of "cautionary" and "exemplary" stories, Tatar says, infant death, abandonment by parents, and starvation were not uncommon. Today, Tatar advises, these "cruel" and "sadistic" tales, anachronistic at best, with heroines earning redemption through "a servile attitude" and obedience, should yield to "a creative folklore...reinvented by each generation of storytellers and reinvested with creative social energy." The author fails to elaborate on this point, however, with more than sketchy suggestions about discussing stories with children. Tatar does provide a neat common-sensical corrective to the interpretive inversions of Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976), in which child victims become psychologically muddled villains (the starving Hansel and Gretel, Tatar points out, have reasons to devour the witch's house far more compelling than Bettelheim's "uncontrolled cravings"). The author also offers an interesting dissection of the pervasive sexism of many fairy tales (why all the female villains?). The dreary monograph form of much of the book never quite gels, unfortunately, with Tatar's practical, if undeveloped, popular exhortations. (Thirty illustrations--some seen.) -- *Copyright ©1992, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Review

Winner of the 1992 Book Prize in Literature, German Studies Association

"As provocative and stimulating as her *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*, this book should give a salutary shock to everyone who brings children and tales together, convincing them that "every interpretation is a rewriting" and encouraging them "to identify what is transmitted in the stories we tell children." --*Library Journal*

From the Back Cover

When fairy tales moved from workrooms, taverns, and the fireside into the nursery, they not only lost much of their irreverent, earthy humor but were also deprived of their contestatory stance to official culture. Children's literature, Maria Tatar maintains, has always been more intent on producing docile minds than playful bodies. From its inception, it has openly endorsed a productive discipline that condemns idleness and disobedience along with most forms of social resistance.

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