KERLAN Chase Lecture 2014


I have been thinking about this topic nearly my entire life, beginning with my love of the Andrew Lang fairy Colour Fairy Tale books, to the surprising choice of me to be the first woman to give the Andrew Lang lecture at St Andrews University in 2012. The lecture series had been going since 1927! In 1939, the year of my birth, Professor J.R.R. Tolkien gave the talk, which eventually became his famous essay "On Faerie Stories."

Along the way I have written a number of fairy tale related books, short stories, poems, essays. I have retold tales like Sleeping Beauty as a picture book (unsurprisingly called SLEEPING BEAUTY), as an easy reading satire SLEEPING UGLY, in a series of poems as yet unpublished and unsold (called HEDGE/BRIAR/ROSE which is a kind of meditation on the characters in the story) and in a redacted novel from the point of
view of the "wicked fairy" as a thirteen year old, thirteenth child of the union between a fairy and a literate and book-loving elf, a child who stumbles quite literally into the sleep curse. (The book is called CURSE OF THE THIRTEENTH FEY and the original short story that began it was simply called The Thirteenth Fey.)

In other words, my life—at least metaphorically—has been hedged about with fairy tales and yet I’m a true daughter of the 20-21st century, which means I am a left-wing, tree-hugging, politically active American Jew who is also a hardworking writer. All of these things should be antithetical to the often hierarchical, medieval, occasionally anti-Semitic, oftimes misogynistic women-in-their-proper-places, carefully framed narratives I so loved from childhood on.

And that is why I have puzzled over folk and fairy stories for ¾ of a century, and why I continue to find them protean in what they tell me about the human species, about tribal mentality, about creating the Us-Against-Them narratives, about the staying power
of storytelling, about biases/beliefs/and outdated priorities, as well as about my own life.

A.E. Stallings wrote in the *New York Times* in March 2010: “The world from which fairy tales and folk tales emerged has largely vanished, and although it pleases us to think of these stark, simple, fantastic narratives as timeless, they aren’t. Thanks to video games, computer graphics and the general awfulness of everyday life, fantasies of all kinds have had a resurgence in the past few years. But the social realities on which the original fairy tales depend are almost incomprehensibly alien to 21st-century sensibilities; they reek of feudalism. And the lessons they’re supposed to teach our young don’t have much force these days.”

It will come as no surprise to you that I disagree vehemently, even violently, with his thesis. I like to think that you are here today to hear my refutation of this argument, or at least to hear another side of it. At the end, whether you agree or disagree, I think you will have more ammunition on either side.
But since this is a lecture about stories, I feel impelled to tell one: So in the best tradition of storytelling, it behooves me now to tell you a story. In fact, a story about telling the truth.

Now, that story, "The Old Lady in the Cave" has for provenance, a mountaintop in Tennessee (which sounds rather like a bad country western song title). I heard it there from storyteller Carol Birch who got it from another storyteller who had nothing more to say about it.

As an occasional oral storyteller who received this tale from another oral storyteller, I can swear to you that I have changed parts of it to make it a better, more cohesive story, to get to the heart of it faster. And I promise you that I have used more humor and poetry than when it was offered to me. And further, I promise you that I have massaged it to make its last line zing. That last line is probably the only legitimate bit of the tale as it was handed on to me.

That's what storytellers do.
We smooth, change, decorate, shrink or enlarge to engage our various audiences. We bring the stories through us and into our own century, within the moral compass of our own cultures. We are the tellers that Sir Francis James Child warned us about: the blind beggar, the nursery maid, and the clerk. But more about that anon—here is the story.

_The Old Lady and the Cave_

_Once there was a man who wanted to know the truth. He spoke about it so often that at last his wife, who was a very smart woman, said, “Then you must go find Truth. But first put everything in my name.”_

_So he did and went out on the road, a beggar after truth._

_He looked for Truth a long, long time. He looked in the fishing villages where the fisherman spent the daylight hours in their boats and the fisherwoman baited the a thousand hooks each night._
He looked for Truth in the farming towns, where men tended cattle and women milked cows, where the furrows were long and the days even longer.

He looked for Truth in the cities where the cobbled streets hurt his feet and the corbelled windows kept him from the wind, where the preachers spoke of times to come and the professors spoke of times gone by.

He walked and he listened, he asked and took notes, but he could not find Truth.

And then one day, up in the highest mountains, in a small cave, he found her.

Truth.

Truth was an old, old woman, her hair grey and lank and hanging down past her shoulders. Her skin was stretched tight like parchment across prominent bones and her face was lined with the years. But when she signaled him into the cave, with a hand crabbed with time, her voice was low and lyrical and pure and he knew that he had found Truth at last.
So he stayed with her a year and a day, listening to all that she had to teach, and when the year was up, he said to her, “My Lady Truth, it is time for me to go back to my wife and my family. But before I go, is there any last thing I can do for you?”

Truth thought a minute, finger aside her nose, and then looked up, her milky eyes trained on him. “I know you must go now,” she said. “But give me this one promise.”

“Anything,” he said, eager to be away.

“When you speak of me, tell them I am young and beautiful!”

Now, I know you’re smiling at that last line. Some of you even laughed out loud, thinking as I did when I first heard the version of the story on the mountain top in Tennessee: “Well, so much for truth!”

But by the time I got home, and had given the story some thought--as one must when preparing to tell it, to pass it on--I realized how smart and deep and true the story really was. Yes,
that last line makes us laugh. But on reflection it has told us something important.

*It has told us the truth.*

And what is that truth?

That we remake our stories the way we remake our histories. That in order to keep folks interested in the old tales, we re-clothe them, repaint them, and make them beautiful again.

I often hear people new to fairy and folk tales, or studying them for the first time, ask which is the first version of (say) Cinderella, or Sleeping Beauty or other iconic Western canon fairy tales. As if we can saw off a limb of the story and carbon date it. The truth is that much we say about any so-called folk story is a lie.

**First:** We can make educated guesses about fairy tales and folk tales, cite their correspondences and differences, track places where they have been found. We can record the names and dates of the respondents who told the tale to the collector, and where they
had each individually borrowed it, or been gifted the story by, or who they stole it from (if they even remember the circumstances). But in almost all instances, we are counting on memory, which should rather be called re-memory, because most humans are storytellers, another word for liars, and most human memory is faulty. And of course once we tell something that we say is historically accurate, we have changed it—and then we remember the changes as if they are part of the history, ie: the truth.

In fact, there is not one definitive old or oldest take of any specific story. Stories take long voyages to get to you, and like any inveterate traveler, they come home both changed and still somehow come home as themselves. They are made new again by a process of mouth to ear resuscitation.

**Second:** the majority of stories go back into the mists of time, or the miasma that is tribal, or the *mishigas* that is transmission.

In fact in the 1850s, Sir Frances James Child—the Harvard professor who edited the formidable English and Scottish Ballads
in eight small volumes—wrote that the ballads (and by extension the folk tales since they are both transmitted orally for the greater part of their lives) were kept alive by three different kinds of tellers I mentioned before: the blind beggar, the nursery maid, and the clerk.

By that he meant that these three prototypical tellers changed the stories for their own particular reasons.

The blind beggar does it to get a coin for his supper and a roof over his head (even if it’s only a barn or byre). He reshapes the story or ballad to his perceived notion of audience. If they don’t like his rendition, he doesn’t get paid. (And he might get kicked or beaten for a bad performance as well!).

The nursery maid has her own notions of proper tales for her charges, notions that included hierarchies and social standing. So she chooses carefully when telling stories to her master’s children. Besides, she doesn’t want those little charges of hers awake all night with the screaming meemies. Therefore she both chooses and
changes the tales to inculcate the proper moral lessons as well as keep both the children and the master of the house sweet.

As for the clerk, well he writes the tales down and in so doing not only changes them for the audience of one—himself—but also puts them in a finished form from which it is difficult ever to be changed thereafter, the tale on the printed page being more powerful than the whispered (and only half-remembered) tale in the mouth.

I suppose we could add that stories also get changed by college professors who study the bits and pieces and—rather like the blind men and the elephant—try to figure out what they’ve got under their hands. And stories are changed as well by priests/rabbis/ministers/imans, all of whom are trying to set morals for the larger community. And the king or queen or president with their bully pulpits who want to keep the populace firmly under their command. And the school teacher who has her own agenda, the grandmother who invents what she’s long forgotten, the child in the classroom who’s at the end of a rather elongated game of
telephone. And the prophet leading his worshippers into their own kind of heaven or hell.

In other words, everyone has a hand in changing these stories, not just my favorite punching bag, Walt Disney.

And Third (if you’re still counting along with me, and recognize that the rule of three is itself a very deeply ingrained fairy tale trope) I remind you I am not a trained folklorist but a folklorist manqué. In other words, I just play one at the podium.

What I am is a folk tale lover, and have been so from the time I first discovered the Andrew Lang Colour Fairy Books.

Or rather—as I learned only a couple of years ago—it was his wife Mrs. Lang (as she is known as in the books) along with several other women she called upon when a tale was in a language she didn’t speak, who did all the choosing, retelling, translating of the stories in the books that bear her husband’s name. He was the famous writer and folklorist, an early member of the British Folklore Society, and so it was considered better for his
name to be on the book than hers. Considered better by whom? I don’t believe we know that.

And Fourth—(which violates the rule of three, but is itself about the violation of what too many early folklorists considered sacred) not all folktales begin within the folk tradition. Some are invented whole cloth by a single amazing storyteller. A Hans Christian Andersen. A Madam LePrince D’Beaumont. Oscar Wilde. Lawrence Housman. Isak Dinesen.

Stories that sound like, look like, smell like folk tales but are a complete author fabrication. We call these art tales. But there is another name for them, one that rankles.

A number of years ago, California folklorist Alan Dundes mentioned the word “fakelore” witheringly to me on the phone as we were deep in negotiations about an essay of mine he wanted to reprint in his *Cinderella Casebook*, an essay called “America’s Cinderella.”

I took slight umbrage, being one of those very people he was railing against, though he seemed oblivious to the slight. Yet at the
same time, I realized that Dundes was placing me in very good company. Even the Brothers Grimm had doctored their stories to make them more acceptable to their ever-growing audiences. They did revised volumes that sharpened, toned down, rewrote, made changes in the stories. And then a few years ago, it became common knowledge through researchers like Jack Zipes and others that some of the Grimms’ brothers respondents were even German peasants at all, some not even German, but literate French Huguenots who had fled from persecution in their own country, and who for the most part had learned their stories from books.

Dundes wrote about the term “fakelore” in an article called “Nationalistic Inferiority Complexes and the Fabrication of Fakelore: A Reconsideration of Ossian, the Kinder-und Hausmarchen, the Kalevala, and Paul Bunyan,” though really he was following in the footsteps of the great folklorist Richard M. Dorson who coined that oh-so-clever bit of punditry which—as Dundes put it—served Dorson in his “lifelong battle to promote the scientific study of folklore and to attack fake folklore.”
**Fake folklore.**

That battle began with Dorson's barrage called "Fake lore" a piece published in 1950 in the *American Mercury*, a popularizing magazine, and later he wrote a longer work about fakelore published in 1976, a truly nasty part of a debate/critique/review of author James Stevens who had written a book on Paul Bunyan. You may not know it, but Paul Bunyan was—like the Jolly Green Giant years later or Smokey the Bear—not a folklore borrowing at all, but a character created by a marketing department.

Of course, Bunyan later intruded into folklore, but Dorson was having none of it. He wrote dismissively of Paul Bunyan and even more of Stevens' book, as well as taking side swipes at the work of Ben Botkin, basically calling both of them purveyors of fakelore, who were creating "a synthetic product claiming to be authentic oral tradition but were actually tailored for mass edification."

I believe that in the beginning both Dorson and Dundes merely meant the word to mean--in Dorson’s definition--“a
presentation of spurious and synthetic writings under the claim they are genuine folklore.” (My emphasis) And by genuine, Dorson meant folklore “collected in the field.” But eventually that turned into a larger, more complicated argument that was unsustainable because Dorson also railed against “the treasuries, Paul Bunyan books, and children’s story collections,” among others. But the most serious charge, I believe, was where he said that the authors, editors, and publishers had knowingly and willingly “misled and gulled the public.”

I don’t like the Dundes/Dorson dyad, and I’m delighted it’s no longer current among modern folklorists who see the field in larger terms, though every once in a while I come upon vestiges of that kind of thinking.

However, I believe that what Dundes and Dorson were getting at had more to do with the understandable perception that an art tale carries with it an assumption or acknowledgement of personal history. I think we can all agree with that. When I write a story even in the folk mode, it will come from my own history, my
own biography, my own bones. Just like any writing I do, it will mirror my community, where I live, where I work, whom I love. It will be a reflection of my moral stance in the universe. It will tell my readers (and me) of my concerns.

But it's important for us all to understand that even fairy tales that we so often claim are universal and ageless carry the thumbprints of their own time. A few years ago I attended a fairy tale conference at Princeton where one of the speakers, an international lawyer showed us how fairy tale punishments in classic European fairy tales could be explained in terms of the community mores and laws from the era in which each story originated. He cited the witch shoved into the oven in “Hansel and Gretel,” and the wicked queen forced to dance in red hot iron shoes, both of which mirrored prevailing laws about the burning of witches.

That our stories are mirrors of our time, reflecting prevalent prejudices and class hatreds should not surprise us. The tellers, re-tellers, as well as the originators of art tales, do not live in a
vacuum but in specific communities, some small and tribal, some more national in scope. Our stories are part of our tribal mentality, even for those of us who like to think that our tribe is global. We can try to escape small-mindedness, prejudice, hatred, but the verdict of future historians, scholars, and readers will task us for our biases, our judgments, our laws.

Let me give you two fairy tale examples.

Think “Puss in Boots” where the troll/dragon who has lived many year as the king’s neighbor with never a harsh word between them. Or at least none we are made aware of in the story. He is an employer of the local peasantry and none of them seem to curse his name. Indeed, his fields are well tended, his people well looked after as far as we can tell from the story.

Along comes Puss who decides to help his young master to a large slice of the noble pie and, perhaps like Mr. Romney and Bain capital, he disposes of the troll/dragon then takes over the family business. And we all applaud Puss’ ingenuity and his courage, not because the troll/dragon has been demonstrably wicked or evil.
After all, unlike some of his cousins, he hasn’t been devouring the local gentry. However, the troll/dragon is fair game for Puss simply because he is The Other. In fairy tale terms, he is a red shirt; he is disposable. Nobody mourns him, and everyone considers the trickster Puss to be a genius. Us/Them. It never gets old.

Now think “Rumplestiltskin.”

A miller tells the king’s messenger his daughter can spin straw into gold. He lies—and he knows he is lying. His daughter is complicitous in the lie. She knows he is lying and now she is lying, too. The king wants the girl because he wants the gold. If she does not produce the gold, he will kill her. If she does produce the gold, he will marry her. The perfect wife because she would come with an ongoing dowry.

The king locks the girl into a room in a tower. She has till dawn to do the deed, to prove that she is worthy to be married to the king, worthy to live another day, worthy to keep supplying the kingdom with gold.
Do we like any of these folks? Not really. They are liars, greedyguts, narcissists all.

But wait... 

The miller's daughter sits weeping by a spinning wheel in the small room, surrounded by piles and piles of straw, certain that in the morning she will die because she knows that spinning straw into gold is well above her pay grade. And because her father lied.

A little man enters. An odd little man. Not at all like the girl who—after all—is unsurprisingly very beautiful. We are in a fairytale, remember. Heroines are always very beautiful here.

This little man has a big nose and an unpronounceable name, and he lives outside the walls of the city. He tells the miller's daughter that he can save her because he can do what she is incapable of—supplying the king with the gold he desires.

In return, unthinking, desperate, she offers him her mother's wedding ring, on the first night, on the second a locket, and on the third with nothing more to give him, she promises her first-born child though it will be years, a lifetime perhaps, before she can do
what she promises. She began this story complicitous in a lie and
now she has made a promised she has no intention of keeping. To
give her some wriggle room here, I admit that if she is dead in the
morning, the promise of a child will be moot. But note--she
doesn’t ask the little man why he wants the child. For her it’s
simply a good bargaining chip. But I am not liking her more
because of this. I’m liking her less.

Then the little man sits down at the spinning wheel and *he*
does what he promised. *He* did not lie. He can do the miraculous as
if it is an everyday event—and for him it is. It’s his job. The only
one he’s allowed in the kingdom, actually. And he also keeps none
of the gold. Why should he? He knows how to make more.

Now, who does this remind you of—this little man, with his
large nose, his foreign, unpronounceable name. This little ugly
manikin who can supply the kingdom’s gold, though he is not
allowed to live within the kingdom’s walls, but only somewhere
out there, away from the real, true folk, somewhere out of sight.
And why is it the new queen can renege on her promise when she actually gives birth to that child? Could it be because, though we have no evidence of it within the story, because this little man wants her child for some unspeakable blood rites?

It’s certainly not too big a leap to realize that Rumplestiltskin is a stand-in for the Jew who were not welcomed into the royal walled-city but had to live outside in their own small, unprotected communities. Who were allowed to be moneychangers.

Interesting to note that in a variant of Rumplestiltskin in England—called “Tom Tit Tot”—the little man is a little black imp. In a variant in Eastern Europe, he is a gypsy. That trio of perfect medieval victims: Jew, black, gypsy. Still perfect victims one might add, well into the middle of the twentieth century, perhaps beyond. We still tell the story, taking the queen’s side, cheering her on, without looking any deeper into it, and call it just a fairy tale.

And of course, not all our most beloved stories wear well. Think of the ending of Snow White. You remember the happy ever
after when one of the servants carrying the glass coffin stumbles
and the apple stuck in Snow White’s throat gets dislodged and she
wakes up from her poison-induced deathlike sleep.

But wait, let’s back up a minute. What do we really think
about a prince who buys the body of a young woman to take back
to his palace in its glass casket? Yes, careless readers, in earlier
versions, he purchases the girl in the box from the dwarfs. What
does he plan to do with her? Display her on his coffee table as a
conversation piece? Donate her to his church as a miracle to be
admired when she doesn’t corrupt like an ordinary corpse? Take
her into his bedroom to...best not even go there.

And a modern reader will also ask herself, will the prince
love her as much when she’s awake and talking to him, arguing
with him, pointing out where he’s made a mistake, asking him to
take out the trash. Or does he prefer her in her death trance, silently
perfect?

Or what do you do when you discover that in an earlier
version of Sleeping Beauty, the prince falls in love with her, rapes
her as she sleeps, and nine months later she bears twins one of
whom suckling on her finger dislodges the splinter of the spindle
beneath her nail and breaks the enchantment, so she wakes up.

Stories are not just flat objects, not just cultural artifacts, they
are not just beautiful dead women in glass coffins that we purchase
to keep on our bookshelves. They live and breathe and talk back to
us. They comment on their own times, making us re-examine our
own.

Now I want you to take a minute to think about how often the best
of authored fairy/folk aka fakelore stories have already moved
back into the folk corner, some even becoming canon. And there
they hide for any number of years until they emerge again as——
ta!ta!—folk stories. Think Goldilocks, originally called
“Silverlocks” by British poet/author Robert Southey; or The Ugly
Duckling and The Little Mermaid both authored by Hans Christian
Andersen; or Beauty and the Beast by Madame LePrince
D’Beaumont. . Aladdin in the compendium of stories called
*Thousand and One Nights*, which boasts many folk tales but Alladdin was authored by someone unknown but is clearly in the mode of exoticizing the far East. These all began as authored tales, not folk stories.

More recently, several of my own creations—*Greyling*, *Sleeping Ugly*, *Once A Good Man*, *The Girl Who Cried Flowers*—have taken such journeys.

I’ve watched Tomie de Paola’s *Strega Nona* among dozens and dozens of others authored stories make the same trek with thanks to librarians and the new generation of storytellers.

It might also interest you to know that Virginia Haviland, the late grande dame of the American Library of Congress’ children’s section, believed *Strega Nona* was the “lost Italian version of ‘The Mill that Ground Salt at the Bottom of the Sea’” (Arne-Thompson tale type 565). She came tripping across the marble floor of the Library of Congress to embrace dePaola, telling him so with great enthusiasm, though dePaola—who laughingly tells this story on himself—made *Strega Nona* up and set it in Italy only because
he’s is Italian himself and proud of his heritage. Dear Virginia Haviland, she refused to believe him and it was a jolly, half joking, long-running argument between them till the day she died.

That’s what Dorson forgot, or—for the sake of his argument—ignored. And when Dundes picked up that particular torch, he ignored it as well. These stories travel in and out of the oral tradition, in and out of the written tradition, and back again. We find them in hieroglyphs and on parchment scrolls hidden away in caves, in day books and jest books. We find them in the mouths of French Huguenots, rabbinical midrashim, and Christian and Buddhist and Muslim parables. We find them around campfires and hearth fires and on the decks of long sea voyages and in foxholes in the middle of war. We find those same stories going in and out, mouth to ear, finger to page. And now they are in movies and television and in other kinds of phosphor where they are taking on a new and very wild life which seems to multiply the readings—and mis-readings--by the billion-fold.
As the stories are passed along over and over and over again, it becomes less and less clear where they started, or if they shall ever end.

In fact, I had a vision, an old-fashion audial and visual vision about a year ago, soon after Steve Jobs died. Now I am neither crazy nor a martyr nor a Joan of Arc. But what I saw and heard were two men conversing in a heavenly pub. One was Steve Jobs and the other was an older man with a Duck Dynasty beard, a long black gown topped with a stiff white collar, and a funny hat on his head. I recognized him the moment he spoke with his heavy German accent. Johannes Guttenberg. The two men were talking about the delivery of story. Not story itself, because they both understood its importance. Humans are the storytelling animal after all. But how the delivery of story changes, from mouth to ear, from the Guttenberg Bible set in moveable type to the e-books of today, the aps, the high def machines.
All storytelling uses memory. Or re-memory for those of us whose grasp of the past is exceeded by the need to embellish, decorate, deepen, widen, and otherwise change what is actual into the fantastic, the new, and the true. But one can still see the older bones beneath that parchment skin. Behind the newly plumped lips and the scrim of make-up, the scrolling of the e-book, the singing of the aps, the eyes of Truth the storyteller are still old and wise.

“Tell them I am young and beautiful.” That is the storyteller’s creed.

But what happens when the storyteller moves out of the mouth, off the pages, and onto the screen or into apps or songs or advertising campaigns? Is that serving a different audience and a different truth?

Yes and no.

The audience will be larger, wider, cross more boundaries than a single storyteller performing his tale to a tribe. Of course.
But certainly the Grimms stories, the Andersen stories, Beauty and the Beast, had already taken the world by storm. Have left the intimacy of tribes to cross borders and boundaries. We have found variants of those tales in the Iroquois longhouses, in the igloos of the Inuit, in the kraals of South Africa, in the turreted houses of the Middle East. Those stories have followed slave routes, and wars, have traveled to ports frequented by sailors, and doss houses visited by drunks. They have gone with the voyougers and the Vikings, the Huns and the Tatars, the Jewish traders and along the Silk Roads. Where there is a man or a woman, there will be a tale. It is no wonder the end of history is the word story.

But taking the story out of the mouth and onto the page was the first huge change. Putting it down in runes, in hieroglyphs, on the walls of caves, suddenly the stories begin to set, to settle: they become immoveable, historical. Now they have heft. We can revisit the tale in that particular telling again and again without need of the intermediary of the teller. The tale will always be the
same: comfortable, knowable, repeatable. Should we forget part of it, it is there right before us.

Except, of course, when we revisit it at a different age and ask different questions of the story. At which point commentaries, pilpul, midrashim, psychanalytcs, enter the story and stir it about like a soup pot. Folklorists start making variant comparisons and numbering themes and tale types. English teachers stick their two cents in. Comp lit scholars dive in. Even the youngest and smallest of the listeners whine: “That’s not the way I know the story...”

I did that with *Snow White*. As a child living in NYC, where my little brother and I were warned over and over again never to open the apartment door to strangers, but check them out through the peephole. And being a child who colored within the lines for way longer than my contemporaries, and was an early and outspoken moralist, I felt strongly that when--despite the warnings from the dwarfs—those small stand-ins for parental figures--Snow White opened the door to the witch (and who was stranger than that!), *Snow White* got what she deserved! I was even slightly
disappointed when Snow White was rescued since surely she
didn’t deserve to be saved.

Some years later in my early writing life, a proto-feminist, I
recognized the buying-the-dead-girl-in her-coffin business was an
icky, slippery slope which no one else was talking about it. And
when I did—in papers and in classrooms, and in talks, the response
was always (as yours was) “Eeeuuuuu. Now you’ve spoiled that
story for me.”

But even later, when my beautiful teenage daughter was
acting like...well, a beautiful teenage daughter who had a
propensity for bad boys, and I was preparing a lecture on folk and
fairy tales for the children’s literature class I taught at Smith
College, I realized with a shock that there was nothing I would
have liked better than to stick her in a glass casket until the right
college acceptance or the right prince came along.

These stories, so honed by years, by centuries, by millennia
of tongue polishing, carry with them the thoughts, feelings, morals
of all that time and all the cultures through which they have
passed. They are protean. They are rich in meanings. They are our cultural respiration.

But now we have a new(ish) phenomenon: Redaction. In fairy tale terms it means reseeding the old stories from different points of view, different emphasis, pulling out the recognizable tropes and reworking them into retellings in new, different, occasionally surprising ways. This phenomenon was in poetry mostly and occasional storybooks and quite underground but is now so overground we groan when another redaction comes along. The whole thing as a cultural phenomenon is perhaps less than a hundred years old, but with the hunger for “content” that the new purveyors of story have—and I am talking about movies, tv, advertisers, pop culture, video games, all fueled by big money—we are into a ground-swell of redacted retellings.

How many Snow White redactions have we seen on the big screen lately, with the Snow White character hardly visible as a
child and now a less than vital part as an adult, while the top name older actress as the evil queen chews every bit of available scenery.

How many fairy tale tv shows in which characters from various (almost always Grimm) stories interact? Or Castle solving a series of look-alike fairy tale murders. Or video games starring a fairy tale-ish superhero character. Or ads in which the wolf and Little Red or Sleeping Beauty or Rapunzel like characters sell clothing or make up or cars?

Not only Disney is reclothing and retelling fairy tales at an alarming rate, but other animators are as well. (My favorite two are Tangled and Brave, least favorite Beauty and the Beast which—in my daughter’s fabulous analysis is “a handbook for wife-batterers.”)

The question is not why, but why now? The question is not how but how often? The questions is not who but who does not.
All those questions I leave to you. There are probably master thesis and doctoral dissertations to be mined here. My job is almost done.

I want to leave you with one of my own fairy tale redactions, a series of poems about Sleeping Beauty. I have chosen three of them and I chose them for three reasons as well.

First, though some of them have sold individually to magazines, the book itself has not (yet) been sold and may not ever be.

Second, because I think you can see how a single author, obsessed with a fairy tale, can re-see, reinterpret, bring into a specific century of creation a new way to apprehend a particular tale.

And third it leads into a short mention of poetry because I haven’t spoken yet about that genre where—in my own sense of wonder and wondering--I have read some of the most spectacular redactions of fairy tales to date. They aren’t full stories, they don’t have the flash and dash of a large screen, they don’t use computer-
generated graphics or even the sparkle of great fairy tale illustrations by the likes of Kai Neilsen, Arthur Rackham, or Ivan Bilibin, not the knock-your socks off paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites, or the picture book perfect work of Edmund Dulac or Walter Crane or H. J. Ford or Ruth Sanderson or Maxfield Parrish or Charles Robinson or his brother Heath to name a few of my favorites.

But the poems resonate for me in an entirely perfect and personal way, and ring their own changes in my fairy tale life.

My favorite poem on storytelling is this first verse of by Robert Louis Stevenson called “Bright Is the Ring of Words”:

Bright is the ring of words
When the right man rings them,
Fair the fall of songs
When the singer sings them.
Still they are caroled and said—
on wings they are carried—
After the singer is dead

And the maker buried.

Other fairy tale poets I adore include Neil Gaiman, Terri Windling, Delia Sherman, Theodora Goss, Midori Snyder, all of whom also write new and retold old tales, fairy tale novels and fascinating essays on fairy tales. You must also go to Sur La Lune website and Windling’s own Myth and Moor blog to read more. All of these poets swim in the waters of the folkloric sea.

But there are also well-known poets who have used fairy tales as reference, as metaphor, as the shaping mechanism for poems about their own lives: Ann Sexton, Margaret Atwood, Olga Broumas, Louise Gluck, Donald Hall, Randall Jarrell, Carol Ann Duffey, Denise Levertov, Sylvia Plath, Lucille Clifton, and my favorite, Lisel Mueller. I could go on and on and on.
And last because I think these poems—and this whole Chase speech—refutes what A.E. Stallings wrote about how little fairy tales and folk stories have to do with our lives today, so I offer these three poems as the punctuation at the end of my refutation.

Doorway

There is a knob, of oak
or ceramic if you must;
a latch of bronze, never iron
for it would burn a fairy hand;
a golden key hidden behind the ivy
or under the gnome-shaped rock.
Grasp it firmly, or it will bite,
keys hate the sweaty palm,
the half-attempt at poking
through the waiting keyhole,
those heartless and artless tries.

Then the magic words begin:
Once--and the door itself trembles.
Upon--there is a puff of white smoke.
A--take a breath, for you will need it.
Time--which is all time and no time at all.
There is the click of anticipation,
the door sighs open,
and all of the world awaits within.
Riding the Goose, Riding the Swan

Where do you think all those heroes
riding the goose, riding the swan,
in tights, cocked hats, swords in hand
were heading towards, anyway?
If you check happy ending you haven’t a clue.
They’re chasing wonder, knowing the unknown.
Not marriage to king, queen, not making love
to the princess, awake or asleep,
not a cross or a crown or the taking of a town,
but the real ever after the book is closed.
What they seek doesn’t finish
when the clock strikes one,
or end with ball, feast, test, first kiss,
but when they crack open the common world
like a walnut struck with a hammer
first thing on Christmas morning.
The Old Fairy at the Christening

No, I said, no,
but they dragged me out anyway,
all wrinkles and long dugs.
I scared the cats, my nails cracked
as if they were the ends of pork
too long in the fire.
My hair brittle and startled.
Eyes full of rheum
and the beginnings of a second cataract.
Old age, I told them, needs invisibility
but they hauled me to the baby's party
without listening to my complaints.
So of course I gave them
the full organ recital,
what still works, what drips,
what aches, what falls off
at inconvenient moments,
like toenails or clots of hair,
like curses.

Unlikely I will be invited
to the next.