

From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers

By Marina Warner

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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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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

One dare not even call it seminal, yet in this ground-breaking work, English novelist and historian Marina Warner casts herself as the female Joseph Campbell in a fascinating and lively book that opens with the observation that "storytelling makes women thrive -- and not exclusively women," and then lifts the veil on both tellers and tales ranging from Sibyl to the late, great Angela Carter, from Lot's daughters to Disney's "Little Mermaid." She finds a not-so-hidden history of women, sex, power, fear -- and even healing -- lurking therein. An eye-opening reworking of our common myth pool.

From Publishers Weekly

Notwithstanding the prominence of the Grimm Brothers and Charles Perrault, most narrators of fairy tales, asserts Warner, have been women?nannies, grannies, 18th-century literary ladies, sibyls of antiquity. In this richly illustrated, erudite, digressive feminist study, cultural historian Warner (*Alone of All Her Sex*) argues that instead of seeking psychoanalytic meanings in fairy tales, we must first understand them in their social and emotional context. In her analysis, "Bluebeard" and "Beauty and the Beast" reflect girls' realistic fears of marriage in an era when women married young, had multiple children and often died in childbirth. Her delightfully subversive inquiry profiles reluctant brides, silent daughters, crones, witches, fates, muses, sirens, Saint Anne (image of the old wise woman), the biblical Queen of Sheba and Saint Uncumber, who grew a beard to avoid marriage but was crucified for her rebellion. Angela Carter's fiction, surrealist Leonora Carrington's comic fairy tales, Walt Disney movies and French aristocratic fairy tales of veiled protofeminist protest by Marie-Jeanne L'Heritier and Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy provide grist for her mill.

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From Library Journal

In this scholarly, original, and insightful study, Warner (*Alone of Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*, 1983) explores the relationship between fairy tales and their historical and social contexts. She persuasively demonstrates that the teller of the tale--whether a prophesying enchantress luring knights to their doom or the jolly old beldame, Mother Goose--inevitably reflects the prevailing social prejudices for and against women. Warner first traces the "layered character of the traditional narrator" and the interconnections between storytellers and heterodox forms of knowledge. In the second half of the book, Warner takes up a sampling of tales and demonstrates in them such adult themes as the presense of painful rivalry and hatred between women (Cinderella). Finally, she explores the association of bloneness in the heroine with preciousness and desirability. Highly recommended for all readers who wish a deeper understanding of the fairy tales and cultural icons that have shaped us.

Marie L. Lally, Alabama Sch. of Mathematics & Science, Mobile

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Users Review

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