

10-1-2001

Reviews

Marvels & Tales Editors

Recommended Citation

Editors, Marvels & Tales. "Reviews." *Marvels & Tales* 15.2 (2001). Web. <<http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/marvels/vol15/iss2/8>>.

REVIEWS

Primer amor. By Laura Espido Freire. Madrid: Ediciones Temas de hoy, 2000. 215 pp.

Love is arguably the central theme of most fairy tales. We grow up among handsome princes, enchanted princesses, eternal love, good fairies and evil witches. But what influence do fairy tales have on the rest of our lives? Laura Espido Freire is convinced that everything she sees around her is, effectively, a variation on a fairy tale. *Primer amor*, her latest book, explores the different types of first love in terms of those stereotypical fairy-tale characters who reside in the collective imagination, and with special emphasis on the role of the woman in these tales and in our patriarchal society. Fairy tales are one means of expressing dominant social values.

Espido Freire is a Spanish writer who is just twenty-six years old. She is probably one of Spain's best-selling and most published authors of recent times. *Primer amor* is her fifth book to be published in three years (not to mention works published in anthologies). *Hermanita*, her first published work, appeared in 1998, followed by *Irlanda* (1999). Her novel, *Melocotones helados* (*Frozen Melons*), published in the same year, won the forty-eighth Premio Planeta (she is the youngest woman writer to have been awarded this prestigious prize), and her novel *Donde siempre es octubre* appeared in 2000.

Primer amor is explicitly defined by the writer as an essay intended to disseminate her sociological and psychological observations. It deals with first love, the one which is eternal in memory but not in time. She suggests that "No se siente más amor que el primero recordado una y otra vez" ("There is no greater love than the first, which is remembered time after time"). This love is not like the one in fairy tales; it is not happiness but suffering, something close to death: "Extraña esta vida en la que se ansía un momento que recuerda a la muerte, y se busca y se persigue a lo largo de toda la existencia" ("This strange life in which we yearn for a moment which reminds us of death, which we seek

and chase after throughout our lives”). The essay consists of an introduction, seven chapters about different kinds of love (shy, impossible, invisible, sinister, conventional, boy meets girl, and girl meets boy), chapters which in turn are subdivided into briefer sections, and a conclusion.

Espido Freire begins the book in an autobiographical mode, recounting her first disillusionment: the loss of her childhood paradise. The palace where she studied (destroyed by floods in 1983) is a metaphor for the enchanted, lost, longed-for world of childhood. In this chapter, she looks back to her first unattainable and wonderful loves, when love and suffering were not yet synonymous, and she could believe in ever-after. According to Espido Freire’s theories, often reminiscent of Freud, those tales which we read on the first years of our life leave indelible traces on our adult lives. Abandoning her intimate, confidential tone, the author sets out what for her constitute the fundamental elements of fairy-tale narratives: the presence of the supernatural, the irrational, and magic. Death is not important, and the characters are archetypes. Those fairy tales which exerted an influence on her childhood are still part of her in her maturity, and she senses their presence all around. It is at this point that Espido Freire deliberately blurs the frontier between reality and fiction.

In the next seven chapters, taking as her point of departure the different stereotypes that permeate our childhood, she refers to those figures who people our everyday reality—namely the Hamlets, Sleeping Beauties, Snow Whites, and Brunhilds—and re-enact their roles in the twenty-first century. These figures are so well known to us, she maintains, they have practically become part of us: characters from fairy tales or canonical works of literature (Hamlet, Robin Hood), as well as mythological characters (Narcissus, Apollo). Likewise, she refers to historical characters (Princess Diana) and anecdotes that she draws from her own experience or, perhaps, from her imagination. We never know with any certainty whether we are faced with an autobiographical extract or a fictional story when she incorporates fragments from daily life, yet another way of breaking down the boundary between reality and fiction.

The work ends with a discussion of *Ricitos de Oro*, better known to the English reader as Goldilocks. For the author of *Primer amor*, this character represents the seeker, eternally unsatisfied, who flees from the truth because she fears reality. It seems that Espido Freire wants to tell us that human beings derive greater satisfaction from seeking than finding. In the last chapter, the author demands new endings which will reflect the social changes that have taken place. She believes it is crucial not to reproduce stereotypes, an idea that will be addressed below.

Espido Freire’s prose is simple, often youthful, characterized by an abundance of colloquialisms and idiomatic expressions. Through this register of

language, directed very much for mass consumption, she invites readers to identify and criticize the roles and behaviors that persist in our society. Nevertheless, it cannot be said that Espido Freire is exploring social issues in any real depth. Rather, she has written a book to give pleasure and evoke agreeable memories.

Primer amor offers a highly subjective vision of contemporary Spain based on the author's own experience and with no scientific foundation. Her opening assertion, that everything around her is just a version of fairy tales, becomes the leitmotif of the essay, transforming it into a sequence of witty reflections about love affairs and relationships in general, pleasing yet superficial since the world is manifestly more complex than she draws it.

Espido Freire points out how historical developments have placed women and men in different roles. The progress made towards achieving female freedom and independence has shaken these roles, giving rise to a certain perplexity that society has not yet resolved. She considers that fairy tales have distorted reality because they have taught us that love and beauty automatically bring success, whereas solitude signifies failure. Love is a fight against "the other" (the beloved enemy), and the most important thing is to defeat him. (Espido Freire does not ask whether people have failed to read fairy tales in the right way).

In the presence of this kind of discourse we cannot help asking whether this is really what the reader expects to find. It may well be that the book is at least a partial response to the commercial imperatives of the day, privileging the discourse of protest and transgression over passive conformity and repeating those commonplaces that are guaranteed a favorable reception in European, if not world literature.

At the same time that she suggests changing the endings of these stories in order to change our history, the author claims not to undervalue roles, such as the single woman or the woman who is stronger than the man. But she is not opening any new doors. Evidently the aim of this book is to overturn the maxim that woman is always the loser, whether she loves someone or is alone. Espido Freire urges the reader to look for new tales with different happy endings. She proposes to seek out new endings where it would be possible to think of an eternal Sleeping Beauty: "Y tal vez hubiera sido mejor para nosotros no haber escuchado nunca esas historias y haber creado las nuestras propias" ("And, perhaps, it would have been better for us never to have listened to those stories and to have written our own").

In my opinion, it would not. We don't have to find new stories, but new discourses. It is impossible to fight stereotypes with new, fashionable stereotypes. Each of us is a loser and winner. A war is not going to help us to change established roles. Nowadays, only dialectic (not rhetoric, not an empty, weak

discourse) can aspire to change history. We need to understand reality in all of its depth. Fairy tales can help, but they are just a vision.

Evelyn Aixalà
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The Rose and the Beast: Fairy Tales Retold. By Francesca Lia Block. New York: Harper Collins, 2000. 229 pp.

Readers who admire Francesca Lia Block's series of five stunning contemporary fairy-tale novels, beginning with *Weetzie Bat* (1989) and which have been subsequently collected under the cumulative title of *Dangerous Angels* (1998), will probably be disappointed with this most recent collection of short stories. While these nine fairy tales have some of the magic realism and quirky poetic language that have made Block's slender novels so popular with adolescents and adult readers, they are surprisingly flat and much less inspired or innovative than her previous work. The nine tales that Block chooses to revise are the Grimms' "Snow White," "Little Red Riding Hood," and "Snow White and Rose Red"; Andersen's "Thumbelina" and "The Snow Queen"; Perrault's "Cinderella," "Sleeping Beauty," and "Bluebeard"; and de Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast." As she has done with her previous novels, Block blends the landscape and culture of contemporary Los Angeles with fairy-tale motifs. One of the chief problems with this collection is that, while these stories are clearly fairy tales retold, they are the most literal reworkings of fairy tales that Block has published to date. The structure and characters of the original tales tend to overpower Block's attempt to revise them and give them new life and meaning. This sort of thing has been done before and better by Angela Carter in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979), and by Emma Donoghue in *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* (1997).

What is distinctive about Block's retellings is that they are extremely stripped down and, one might suggest, bare-bone revisions of the originals. Block has reduced each fairy tale to one-word titles, generally of only four or five letters. These nine words—"Snow," "Tiny," "Glass," "Charm," "Wolf," "Rose," "Bones," "Beast," and "Ice"—form a mysterious talismanic list that is reproduced on the front of the book. Block must have taken pains with the sequence so that one reads from Snow to Ice, and she provides the mysterious sequence: Tiny Glass Charm. This minimalist approach is replicated in the storytelling as well with barely a hundred words on a page. White space tends to dominate the page design. More bones than text. I suspect these miniature fairy tales reveal the influence of modernist poets that Block admires. But while sometimes less is more, on this occasion, less is simply less. Block is consciously creating what might be considered anorexic versions of the fairy tales in that these thin versions are decidedly contemporary and feminist in their tone, and all of her

female narrators must struggle within a decidedly hostile environment. The fairy-tale world is the same dangerous, sexualized, and media-saturated environment which Mary Pipher in *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (1994) has termed a “girl-poisoning culture.”

Unlike William Thackeray’s *The Rose and the Ring* (1855), the comic literary fairy tale that gently mocks fairy conventions and characters and whose title this collection evokes, Block’s fairy tales have a consistently dark and violent edge. In “Wolf,” the adolescent protagonist has been sexually abused by her stepfather, and after fleeing to the house of her grandmother—who is now a wise woman who runs a junk shop in the desert—she confronts and blows the villain away with a shotgun, thanks to a previous shooting lesson by grandmother. In “Charm,” Sleeping Beauty no longer pricks her finger on a spindle, but nods to sleep by way of a heroin needle.

While the book’s title derives from the two tales “Rose” and “Beast,” both of which reveal the female protagonist’s disappointment with romantic love with a male character, it is the story that comes between these tales, “Bones,” which is Block’s reworking of “Bluebeard,” that significantly provides the key to the collection. Like most of the other stories in the collection, “Bones” makes clear Block’s belief in the power of fairy tales and the need to rewrite them from a female perspective. Derrick Blue is a major band promoter and club owner, while the protagonist narrator is a young woman drawn to Los Angeles in search of fame. Derrick Blue has consciously remade himself in the image of Bluebeard, and the fairy tale has “become a metaphor for his life.” Derrick Blue uses fairy tales to help lure and destroy other young woman, just as he attempts to do with the protagonist. But after hearing the singing of the bones of Blue’s previous victims buried beneath his house, she decides to rewrite the story of “Bluebeard,” just as Block has. Without the help of others, the protagonist slays the villain and flees the house. Block has heard the singing bones of the female victims of the original fairy tales and feels the obligation to write their stories. These revisions of fairy tales reveal the bones and blood of the originals. Block’s fairy tales are carefully revised in order to empower and give their young female protagonists a voice.

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Sticks and Stones: The Troublesome Success of Children’s Literature from Slovenly Peter to Harry Potter. By Jack Zipes. New York: Routledge, 2001. xiv + 213 pp.

The study of children’s literature is often relegated to the margins of English, language, or education departments, and the connection is tenuous between those in the field, their analyses and critiques, and actual children, who

may or may not read the same literature. The paradoxical disconnect between academics and their putative subjects (children) is alarming given the alternative — the complete monopolization of children's literature by market forces— and this phenomenon can, in fact, be read in a much larger social context as encompassing a general, society-wide commodification and regulation of children.

Jack Zipes's new book addresses the general tendency in the US to institutionalize and "homogenize" the experience of childhood through the mechanisms of the culture industry (Zipes is heavily indebted to Adorno). Zipes claims that "[w]e calculate what is best for our children by regarding them as investments and turning them into commodities. Such rationalized practices lead to irrational if not vicious behavior" (xi). Although he eventually focuses on literature, Zipes's claims extend to all areas of children's experience—schools, movies, organized sports, books, and TV. Zipes challenges all of us, particularly those of us engaged in the study of children's literature, not only to revisit our assumptions about children, childhood, and children's literature (xiii), but to actively seek to reverse the trend toward homogenization, and to help "establish a realm in which [children] can explore themselves and the world in imaginative and critical ways" (141). Here Zipes exposes a paradox: both the forces which tend to homogenize children's literature (and culture), and the academics who decry the vulgarization of that literature, represent adult sensibilities and agendas which are imposed onto children in a "somewhat desperate struggle to guard, shield, dominate, control, manipulate, animate, and cultivate young people and to distinguish ourselves" (64).

Zipes, however, is aware of the oxymoronic, paradoxical status of children's literature, and the ways in which children are inscribed by the processes of socialization. The title of the book itself cleverly suggests this: learning "Sticks and Stones . . ." as children, we learned from adults that names would never hurt us. But this bit of "children's folklore" was quickly appropriated and reinterpreted as a defensive taunt on the playground, a bit of adult-initiated moral highgrounding. Thus not only does this adage precisely illustrate the polysemantic power of words, but, in the current media environment of school shootings and the emphasis on "bullies," we find, ironically, that there are new programs being implemented in schools which concentrate on the potential damaging consequences of hurtful names and words, reversing the proverbial "wisdom." Thus Zipes insists that those who are part of the children's culture industry, from parents to educators to authors and publishers, be "sensitive and partial to a social critique that seeks to improve the manner in which we acculturate children" (73). He calls for nothing less than an epistemological shift in the ways we understand childhood, a shift away from the control and management of children and children's psyches—a process which renders them

more and more susceptible to the demands of the market forces (79)—towards the “cultivation of pedagogical, social, and cultural practices that enable children to think for themselves and to develop sensitivities that make them aware of their fellow creatures as humans and not as competitors and consumers” (22). This would entail opening up the canon, rather than shutting it down; diversifying rather than homogenizing; developing critical thinking rather than “teaching values”; and, “[i]n the process, children will learn to discriminate and make value judgements and to contend critically and imaginatively with the socio-economic forces that are acting on them and forming and informing them” (59).

This is the powerful organizing argument of the book, whose clearly written chapters cluster into two logical groups: chapters 1–4, which present the theoretical premises of the book, and chapters 5–9, which illustrate these through detailed, individual case studies. In chapter 1, “The Cultural Homogenization of American Children,” Zipes sets out the enterprise of the book—his exploration of the market-driven cultural practices in contemporary society which tend to homogenize and commodify American children, and which ultimately deny them the semiotic skills necessary to critically read the culture industry’s constant stream of messages. Chapter 2, “Do You Know What We Are Doing To Your Books?,” describes the increasing disconnect between the theorists and analysts of children’s literature, and children’s own cultural sphere, which is increasingly influenced by corporate underwriting (schools, book clubs) and the handful of corporate giants who monopolize the production of children’s products. Chapter 3, “Why Children’s Literature Does Not Exist,” examines the parallel historical development of the institutionalization of childhood and the mass production of children’s books, making the claim that such books are not written primarily for kids but for didactic and commercial motives which benefit adults. Because of this motivation, original works of literature will constantly be appropriated and mediated according to market imperatives and will be homogenized and made into “commonplace phenomenal best-seller[s]” (48). A case study of this process appears in chapter 9, “The Phenomenon of Harry Potter, or Why All the Talk?” By demonstrating the structural conventionality of the first four Harry Potter books, their predictable, although elaborately intricate, formulaic quality, as well as their aggressive seriality, Zipes claims that it is impossible to evaluate the success of these books as literature. Rather, they must be assessed as phenomena driven by commodity consumption. The reception of these books thus is not only a personal experience, it is also “an *induced* experience calculated to conform to a cultural convention of amusement and distraction” (172). It is through Harry Potter that Zipes articulates his “dialectics of the phenomenal” (174): “[i]t is impossible to be phenomenal without conforming to conventionality” (175).

Chapters 5 and 6, “Wanda Gág’s Americanization of the Grimms’ Fairy Tales” and “The Contamination of the Fairy Tale,” develop a singular line of reasoning—that tales are revised and interpreted according to adult concerns, projections and sensibilities, but that they are also deeply dependent on the intertextual layering that emerges in any re-versioning of a tale. Gág set her work apart from contemporary Disney adaptations of the Grimms, arguing for the “authentic” nature and spirit of her work that was consistent with the Grimms’. Zipes shows that Gág and Disney both “Americanized” the Grimms’ tales for “personal and professional purposes” (93). In chapter 6, Zipes discusses the ways in which the Grimms combined versions of particular tale types, seeking deep meanings which had intercultural histories (a refutation of the common claim that the Grimms were chauvinists seeking to uncover an essential German spirit in purely German tales). In “The Wisdom and Folly of Storytelling,” Zipes suggests that “genuine storytelling is not only subversive but magical in that it transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary” (135), which is in juxtaposition to the way in which the commodified “phenomenal best-seller” transforms the extraordinary into the conventional. This is not only a productive analytical treatment of storytelling which avoids the impossible definitional requirements of orality, traditionality, and face-to-face communication. It also presents an alternative mode of cultural production as a salvo to the homogenization and standardization of children’s literature. If the storyteller is one who “uses the story to empower his [sic] auditors and to establish a realm in which the students can explore themselves and the world in imaginative and critical ways” (141), then we need to seek and support those authors and publishers who engage in storytelling (which is not bound to oral performance, but is extended to texts). Finally, in “The Perverse Delight of *Shockhead Peter*” we learn of the nineteenth-century “manual of good sense” written and illustrated by Heinrich Hoffmann for his children as a didactic primer by which they would be socialized according to bourgeois rules of decency. The illustrations and texts are, at first glance, cruel and inappropriate for children, but they are also compelling and humorous, and it is in these ambiguities that the analysis of *Shockhead Peter* or *Struwwelpeter* resonates with the theme of Zipes’s book. Not only is Hoffman’s book paradoxically expressing concern for children’s welfare by graphically depicting rewards and punishments based on socially sanctioned codes of behavior, but it is also simultaneously frightening and appealing to children. My father, raised in Germany in the 1910s and 1920s, had brought a copy of *Struwwelpeter* with him when he immigrated to the US. My very American mother approached the illustrations with her own 1950s sensibilities and kept the book under lock and key. We children took every opportunity to retrieve the hidden treasure and gaze at the illustrations with great interest. There is a final irony in this discussion of the graphic disciplinary

violence in *Shockhead Peter*, however. Its illustrations and messages would never be allowed in commercially available children's literature or texts today, where they would be seen as inappropriate, as they were to my mother. Despite the fact that regulation, monitoring, and rating of books, TV, movies, music, and the internet for age-appropriate content exists as it never has before, we are doing great violence to these "texts" in their censoring. Additionally, although putatively with children's best interests at heart, this constant surveillance and regulation of children's culture itself is an act of violent repression, stripping children of all agency.

Recent school shootings in the United States have initiated a media frenzy that targets an entire generation of children as "problems," prompting the current Secretary of Education to call for the reinstatement of "values" as a subject, while schools themselves are becoming lockdown areas, warehouses of surveillance and control. At the same time schools are highly subsidized by major corporations selling and advertising food, books, and other material, and students are encouraged to buy books in school from Scholastic, Inc., a scheme in which schools profit as they become agents for a single distributor. Given these contradictory impulses, Zipes's book and its radical claims and his proposal are timely and important. However, given the fact that it is self-identified as being about children's literature it will, unfortunately, not reach a wide audience.

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Little Lit: Folklore & Fairy Tale Funnies. Edited by Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly. New York: HarperCollins, 2000. 64 pp.

Well, let's get the negatives out of the way first. "I can't imagine children enjoying this anthology," wrote Claude Lalumière in his November 2000 *January Magazine* review. His point was that "cheap nostalgia [. . .] and a postmodern disdain" get mixed up together in *Little Lit*, so that "you're stupid if you like these stories and you're stupid if you don't." Hence kids supposedly get caught in a nasty double bind.

In one or the other manifestation, this remains a central issue for many people who believe they can easily determine what children (are supposed to) like. We should not confuse the little ones with metafiction, certainly not in fairy tales, and we should not play games with self-referential ingenuities, because this, according to the quoted review, condescendingly sneers at kids. Things ought to be charming, mischievous, and upliftingly enchanting.

Maybe so, for some audiences, in any age group. I don't suggest this with a sneer, and I don't like to work with highbrow-lowbrow distinctions. I only want to emphasize that children are as complex and as sophisticated as grownups in

their reactions and pleasures, and that often enough they handle incongruities that would make their parents snap. Beavis and Butthead's "this is cool—this sucks" became a weapon that drove adults up the wall, and at the same time it mercilessly skewered its intermediate-school mouthpieces. Our kids handled it enthusiastically in stride, and I am sure much better than most adults would handle a similarly helpful double perspective if it came from or at our talking heads on the evening news. About a year and a half ago I prowled through a comics section in a bookstore in Germany, next to a few eight- to ten-year-olds. One of them picked up a German edition of *The Simpsons* and said to his friends, with an absolutely perfect pitch of mock-reverence, "das ist das Buch der Bücher" ("here's Scripture for you!"). Stupid if you like it, and stupid if you don't, and that's the joy of it!

The negative critique I quoted in the beginning has been the exception among the ones I have read. Most reviews have had high praise, if in a frequently potted fashion—as is normally the case, key phrases tend to reappear. But part of the reason is no doubt that the CNN.com.books (19 Dec. 2000) interview with the editors, the husband-wife team Spiegelman/Mouly, has a very authentic ring to it and invites quoting: "This book came out of Francoise and I being parents [. . .]. It's not something that was either market-tested or figured out scientifically. [. . .] Both our kids learned to read because I was willing to sacrifice a really valuable comic book collection to fatherhood [. . .] It was just like, 'Eat them. Go ahead.'"

Little Lit has been rightly praised by everybody whose comments I am familiar with for its beautiful design and its generous layout. It is a joy to look at and to handle. This is especially important for a book that tries to showcase the range of contemporary comics artists—and to lovingly offset, on cream colored pages, a reprint of Pogo-creator Walt Kelly's 1943 *Fairy Tale Parade* rendition of "The Gingerbread Man." The collection demonstrates the wide range of contemporary comics art, colors, and lines that remain all too little known when they don't belong to the familiar Marvel or DC mass market mainstream. Despite the impressive efforts of publishers such as Fantagraphics, Drawn-and-Quarterly, Slave Labor, or Dennis Kitchen's unhappily deceased Kitchen Sink Press, nontraditional comics have always been a marginal enterprise.

And comics themselves—"sequential art" in the terms of Will Eisner, one of the great comics artists and teachers—work in ways that deserve much more attention. Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993) is the best introduction to date; David Carrier's *The Aesthetics of Comics* (2000) offers a suggestive set of philosophical reflections. Recent developments in cognitive science may lead us to a better understanding of how we integrate images and texts and to what extent we differ in "translating" text into images or the reverse. Ellen Esrock's

The Reader's Eye: Visual Imaging as Reader Response (1994) is a good introduction to research and diverse attitudes. Here I can only suggest that it is worthwhile to speculate on fundamental issues and to recall basic experiences. While most of us, I guess, have liked illustrated books when we were young, and a number of us have maintained such likings well into later life, this does not indicate anything about the kinds of favorite illustrations or whether we were happy with or irritated by different kinds of illustration during any particular reading experience. And of course it also says nothing about the integration of text and image that is central to comics. While comics enhance and intensify verbal-visual comprehension for some people, others get frustrated by the linkage and experience it as an ongoing discontinuity, as a displeasing clutter and overload. Different ways of dealing with crossmodal sensory integration, from person to person as well as throughout one's development, probably add to the range of responses.

Within the covers of *Little Lit* the comics make use of the wide range of possibilities available today. Bold and bright—in quite different ways—are Spiegelman's parable of "Prince Rooster," Mattotti's wildly flowing tale of two hunchbacks and three witches, and Kaz's "Hungry Horse." Subtly muted—again, in diverse ways—are Mazzuchelli's blue-brown-greens in the Japanese "Fisherman and the Sea Princess," William Joyce's pastel rescue of Humpty Dumpty, or Joost Warte's Dutch version of the old tale of the poor man who dreams of a treasure in another town, where he meets his incredulous counterpart whose parallel dream leads him back to the treasure in his own backyard. *Little Lit's* varieties of shape, color, penciling styles, and occasionally panel configuration invite all sorts of sensory experiments, as one moves back and forth among the tales. All of the tales (on the average, four oversized pages for each) offer closure, as fairy tales typically do, though not necessarily happy endings. And in each case the comics invent self-contained worlds, even if it is the one of Kaz's anarchically disjointed assemblage in "The Hungry Horse," with its peculiar memories of *Krazy Kat* and *Popeye*.

I commented first on the colors because anyone familiar with folktales will recognize a good number of the tales themselves directly or indirectly—for the most part, there are no particular surprises here. But the collocation of tales, the ways of telling and showing, and the risks of letting it all go and of trusting the young or older readers, is a happy departure from many standard approaches to books for children; and as my introductory references showed well enough, it indeed does carry its risks. Overall the tales themselves do stimulate participation, I think—maybe more so than the various puzzle pages that are interlaced with the tales. Yet even here peculiar and unexpected pleasures appear: Charles Burns's eerie double-spread "Spoonkeyland" triggered memories

to the wonderfully confusing endpapers in one of my childhood favorites, an edition of Wilhelm Hauff's *Märchen*. (Little Lit's website, <www.little-lit.com>, transfers Burns's mystery page successfully to the screen.)

If we wanted to categorize the twelve tales, we might propose that four of them are parables or moralities; five are tales that proceed as direct narratives; and three tales develop distinctly ironic, or metanarrative edges. We can arrange differently, of course. If I go by my own patterns of recognition, seven tales are familiar or variants of familiar tales ("Sleeping Beauty," "The Leafless Tree," "The Fisherman and the Sea Princess," "The Gingerbread Man," "The Owl Who Was the Baker's Daughter," "Jack and the Beanstalk," "The Princess and the Pea"); three tales are unfamiliarly familiar, in that I easily follow the pattern though I don't know the tale ("Prince Rooster," "The Two Hunchbacks," "The Hungry Horse"); and two are estranged, or riffs on familiar ones ("Humpty [Dumpty] Trouble," "Once Upon a Time" [frog, princess, banjo and rival suitor]).

Familiarly unfamiliar tales are my favorite ones. This is a typical response, I would guess, from a reader who has liked folktales throughout a lifetime. It does not mean, of course, that one relies on basic identifying connections along the recognition lines of a cultural-literacy program. The connecting highways and byways in our reading and viewing are complexly metaphoric and diverse. It is not a matter of certain tags, as with some classical allusions that frustrate us, but a vibrant web of things.

Spiegelman's "Prince Rooster," for instance, is a tale I did not remember to have heard or read before. He calls it a Hasidic tale, and it certainly fit my associations and forms links and patches to some of the tales in Martin Buber's collection, or, for that matter, with the ways in which such tales are reflected in S. Y. Agnon's short stories or in Ernst Bloch's reflections. Only when I began writing this review and looked curiously through the table of content of Pinah Sadeh's wonderful *Jewish Folktales* (1989) I found it as "The Prince Who Went Out of His Mind," a tale from an early-nineteenth-century *Life of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav*. So maybe I had read the tale after all during the last ten years, or even earlier in another collection of Rabbi Nachman's teaching stories. This always happens with folktales, of course—we read variations of what we already know along with what is new to us. Yet in this instance, what struck the first familiar chord was the edgy wisdom of so many traditional Jewish tales.

But something else happened, and this became immediately part of my first reading of "Prince Rooster." The old man who transforms the prince's obsessive belief into a healthy double vision is a wonderful homage to one of Robert Crumb's greatest comics creations, his anarchic sage Mr. Natural. As the long-bearded, bald old man comes to cure the prince, the prince turns into a younger royal relative of Crumb's everyman Flakey Foont, with all of his neurotic obsessions, anxieties and doubts. Now, if I pursue the comics links

further, both “origins” are mellowed by Spiegelman’s royal father, a relative of Otto Seglow’s comic strip ruler in *The Little King*. In Crumb’s Mr. Natural sequences it’s always a matter of learning a double perspective, though in ways that often make us cringe most uncomfortably—and which we would not want to offer in a *Little Lit* format! Spiegelman’s sage does teach by example what we all do need, and what anyone can accept without moral outrage. It is appropriate to both young and old, but it doesn’t dumb down and it doesn’t rip off.

Now, I am not suggesting that it’s necessary to make such connections, but rather, that they may happen, and if so, that they may get compounded when stories appear as comics. I believe this is as true for children as it is for adults. More of such associations happen when text and image are equally strong. As I have already suggested, this may mean joy, vibrancy, enrichment, or—if the sensory crossings don’t work—irritation and slowdown. Good comics are risky, just as good fairy tales are.

I remember an exchange, a few months ago in a cluttered little bookstore. A mother came in, apparently with her young daughter and her friend. The girls began to rummage around, and after a while the daughter asked her mother, “Please, mommy, can I get one of the books?—Only if you find one that improves your mind.—What does *that* mean?!” When all three were ready to leave, the little girl brought something up to her mother for approval. “I told you to get something to improve your mind. This is a comic book.” It remains an uphill struggle for lovers of America’s most original art form.

The best comment about *Little Lit* appeared in a *Montreal Mirror* review (14 Dec. 2000) by Juliet Walters. She concludes her brief review, “*Little Lit* [. . .] cracks open the old stories, teaches children the art of story making, story re-writing and story re-inventing. Plus, the book is so big that it will make any grown up feel little again.” I especially like her last suggestion!

Spiegelman and Mouly did great things for adult comics as they edited their RAW anthologies. I hope their plans work out and *Little Lit: Folklore and Fairy Tale Funnies* is only the beginning of *Raw Junior*. It would be a good thing for comics and for fairy tales.

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The People of the Sea: A Journey in Search of the Seal Legend. By David Thomson. Washington, DC.: Counterpoint, 2000. xxix + 210 pp.

It was a felicitous coincidence that, when I began to read *The People of the Sea* for this review, a train journey from Inverness to Aberdeen was taking me through Nairn where David Thomson (1914–88) spent much of his boyhood. In fact, the train stopped at Nairn at the very time when I was reading the book’s

first chapter, which is largely set there. I was unable to replicate this experience at the other locations punctuating his “journey,” but having been to some of them at earlier dates, I regarded the Nairn connection as a good omen.

The “journey” on which the author expects us to accompany him is not a continuous one, nor is it accomplished without repeated visits to some of its destinations. The book under review is therefore not a travelogue; nor is it, strictly, a field-work report. Searching for an appropriate way of describing it, I cannot do better than borrow Seamus Heaney’s definition of it in his very sympathetic introduction: “notation of the author’s different tours of Scotland (and of Ireland) [. . .] re-imagined and re-presented” (15). (Nobel Prize-winning Irish poets have a word for it.) His phrase also does justice to the author’s own admission that “in one form or another I have myself heard every story in the book but when the story told me was incomplete I have borrowed from or substituted the best version I can find in printed or manuscript collection of oral tradition” (210). While sticklers for verbatim transcriptions of folk narrative are therefore likely to be disappointed, it would be unfair to dismiss the book as unauthentic. In fact, anybody who has ever done fieldwork in the Northern and Western Isles of Scotland or in the west of Ireland will recognize without difficulty many genuine aspects of storytelling performances and of the people participating, both as narrators and as listeners. In this respect, it is uncanny how closely Thomson’s version of a storyteller’s fraudulent “acquisition” or theft of a tale by hiding in the loft of the house in which the jealously guarded story was told resembles Seamus Delargy’s account of the same event in his famous British Academy lecture on “The Irish Storyteller.” The explanation for this similarity lies only partially in the fact that Thomson had Delargy as his travel companion and guide on his first trip to Kerry in western Ireland. As an added bonus, Thomson gives us a full version of the tale which is supposed to have been told that evening: “King Cormac and King Conn” (50–64).

The stages of Thomson’s journey are Nairn on the Moray Firth in northeastern Scotland, the island of South Uist in the Hebrides, County Kerry and the north coast of Mayo in Ireland, Shetland, Orkney, South Uist and Kerry (again), and the Aran Islands. In each of these locales, the author creates or re-creates opportunities for conveying information about seals by placing himself and others in specific “houses” which provide stimulating settings for interactive storytelling, and one cannot but admire the skill with which he assembles his personnel and orchestrates their reactions, in anticipation of the craftsmanship of his novels still to come, and as a reflection of his professional composition of documentaries for the BBC. Venues, i.e., potent narration spaces, include the family home, *Tigh na Rosan*, and a salmon fisherman’s hut in Nairn; a modern council house in South Uist; the house of a seal killer in Kerry; a public house and a Ferry House in Mayo; a crofter’s house in the Shetland

island of Papa Stour and the Orcadian island of North Ronaldsay; and a public house in the Aran Islands. In all of them, the tales about seals, though sometimes gently prompted or more boldly requested, seem to emerge from the general conversation. The assembled groups—different generations of the same family, neighbors, visitors, public house cronies—form and reform themselves into teller and participating listeners, with a wide variety of commentaries by members of the attentive audience during the telling: encouraging, doubting, questioning, supporting, criticizing, interrupting, comparing, contradicting, praising, skeptical, appreciative, over and over arguing about the veracity of the stories and wondering about the changed standards of believability.

Thomson thus avoids presenting *in vacuo* the various kinds of information which he has gathered about seals during his travels, and although some of the narrators and their audiences may be as fictitious as their narratives, the overall impression is one of persuasive reality in an atmosphere that is convincingly enhanced by the inclusion of other facets of traditional culture and beliefs: second sight, Gaelic songs, the Black House, “hedge schools,” lazybeds, talking animals, waking the dead, fairs, the “little people,” good luck charms, prayers for the smooing of fires, knowledge of the tides, tradition about mermaids, traveling folk, and the like.

It is thus against this backdrop, or rather in this environment, that the “people of the sea” make their appearance in story, belief, and practical assessment, almost always in their contact or relationship with humans. The scene on which these relationships are acted out is, above all, the ambiguous beach or strand, which is at times part of the land and at others part of the sea, and consequently a convenient, unavoidable meeting place for land and sea creatures, in peaceful encounters or challenging competitions. In addition to this shared locale, what links humans and seals is the firm belief or vague suspicion that they have much in common with each other, so much that under special circumstances—St. John’s Eve, for example—one can turn into the other, especially seals into human beings. All a seal has to do is shed her skin and she will turn into a beautiful woman and will remain so as long as somebody hides her skin. In North Uist, a whole clan, the MacCodrums, is said to have its origins in the marriage between a human male and a seal woman. Elsewhere, too, such liaisons occur, mostly with tragic outcomes for the children since ultimately, despite her love for her children, the woman must return to her own kin in the sea. In the frequent debates alluded to by Thomson concerning the origins of the seals themselves, they are variously said to be kind of a fairy, Norway-Finns, fallen angels, children of the King of Lochlann, some Coneelys under a spell. Their eyes in particular are compared with human eyes, and human women can mate with male seals and bear their children, just as female seals can suckle human babes to keep them alive; cows, too, can have seal calves.

In Orkney, “it was aye a joke wi’ the women [. . .] that if their men neglected them, they’d away to the selchie folk for comfort, or if a husband was unfaithful they’d do the same” (140).

In cultures in which seals are killed for their oil, their skins, their meat, or simply because they are a threat to human livelihood, many personal experience stories nevertheless stress their beneficial presence and acts while alive, not only in stories of rescues or warnings at sea by seals or of their willingness to serve as transport for humans, but also in very practical terms. There are therefore some people in those cultures who will not interfere with them, even keep them as pets. In many respects, the seal world under water mirrors the human world on land. Humans can be taken below the surface of the sea by seal-men to remedy a past wrong, and seal-men can appear in human form and dress to drink rum at a fair. The disturbing or puzzling encounter between humans and seals can therefore never be ignored in the ambiguity of its setting.

In spite of his self-confessed “seal mania,” Thomson astonishingly manages to stay almost neutral in the various debates, never judging contradictory claims or taking a personal stance regarding the narrative accounts, which are often told in the first person. He leaves such discussions to the groups of people whom he places in his several venues. The closest he comes to acknowledging in his own right that seals are not just seals but have a great affinity with humans is in the coda to his book, in which he presents “The Music of the Seals,” consisting not only of two versions of that great tragic ballad “The Grey Selchie of Sule Skerrie” (“I am a man upon the land, I am a selchie in the sea”) and of “The Fisherman’s Song for Attracting the Seals,” but also of songs said to have been sung by the seals themselves, like “The Seal-Woman’s Croon” and “The Seal-Woman’s Sea-Joy.”

This is a remarkable book combining almost seamlessly fiction and non-fiction. Though first published in 1954 and revised in 1965 and 1980, with a 1996 edition subtitled “Celtic Tales of the Sea Folk,” *The People of the Sea* still has not lost its seductive appeal in its latest, very attractive incarnation in the year 2000. No review can adequately convey its amazing luminosity or the quality which Seamus Heaney calls Thomson’s “credible voice.” I will certainly think of seals the next time the train stops at Nairn.

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A Motif-Index of Luis Rosado Vega’s Mayan Legends. By Jim C. Tatum. *Folklore Fellows Communications* 271. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2000. 117 pp.

Luis Rosado Vega (1876–1958) was a Mexican poet, novelist, political activist, and archaeologist, among other things. As founder and director of the

State Museum of Archaeology in Mérida from 1923 onward, he made many journeys into the Yucatan interior where, while searching for ancient sites, he also recorded oral narrative from the Maya. Jim C. Tatum has now provided a motif-index to Vega's two books of Maya stories: *El alma misteriosa del Mayab* (1934) and *Amerindmaya* (1938). Vega divided the narratives into those he considered pre-Columbian (first volume) and post-Conquest (second volume). Tatum notes the inherent difficulty of disentangling these influences in what are likely to be hybrid narratives. The task, should it even be attempted, is further complicated by the thought that Vega, as a writer, may have fictionalized or stylized the legends, if indeed that is what they were. Citing Stanley Robe's characterization of legend as telling how "some manifestation of the supernatural suddenly intrudes" upon an ordinary human engaged in a routine activity, Tatum finds the majority of narratives in the two books to be legends by this test, but there are also motifs in the collection which parallel European fairy tales and animal fables. To this I would add that there seem to be a number of stories from the "Bible of the Folk."

The question of story origins still seems a natural one, despite the decline of the historic-geographic method. Tatum is properly cautious in what he says about presences and absences of motifs in Vega's legends as compared with Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, which is taken as the international standard work. He finds "an extraordinarily large percentage of motif variations not previously recorded" and suggests that this indicates "a rather large percentage of folk tales which tend toward American origin as opposed to European." Tatum places an asterisk before the category letter of the motif if it does not appear in Thompson, and adds a citation if the motif appears in another post-Thompson motif index, of which he uses eight, though without saying why these particular ones were chosen.

A further question raised by motif-indexes is whether or not they might serve as a guide to the preoccupations of a culture. The answer ought to be in the negative, especially when, as in the case of Vega, we do not know what questions he asked and what he may have suppressed. Tatum calls him an "emotional champion" for the Maya, and this is a motif-index of a writer's selection of the narratives he was told, rather than an objective sampling of what stories were extant, should such a thing even be possible. Nevertheless it is impossible to miss the prominence of water sources in the narratives. *Cenotes*, sink holes or open pools of water, are guarded by serpents, who trade water for a child to be devoured; *cenotes* can be contaminated by broken sexual tabus, or magically recede or fill. Other cultural centers include the seed corn, saved from a burning field by the red-eyed cowbird, as the ringdove saved Jesus and Mary from their enemies. The influence of the Conquerors' religion is seen in the dominance of the Devil in "Ogres" (section G), and the fallibility

of its representatives is seen in the motifs of priests as sexual aggressors. The Conquest is foreseen in prophetic motifs: *M341.2.28 (Death by strange, cloth-covered men who will come riding huge fish on sea). Most poignant is the series of motifs relating to smallpox: *F405.19 (Burning herbs and hanging wreaths on doors drive away smallpox demons).

Without having read Vegas's two books (I regret that I cannot read Spanish), I cannot judge the completeness of Tatum's motif-indexing. From the evidence on the page, however, it seems remarkably detailed. Many motifs appear in multiple versions with only the slightest variation in the title, though separated according to Thompson's categories. This offers the possibility of very precise degrees of classification, or the perception of fine shades of meaning. Fortunately Tatum has been massively complete in his cross-referencing, offering lists of cognate motifs following many entries. This feature may be felt to compensate for the lack of an alphabetical topical index. This is a slender volume as motif-indexes go, and it does not take long to find what one is looking for. I found only one typographical error (a transposition in the title of M218) and can only marvel at the labor involved in proofreading a work of this kind.

Do we still need motif-indexes? I think so, and the more the better. They map territories and as such are preparatory to many different kinds of cultural research that can be carried out there. Jim C. Tatum is to be commended for having given us this painstaking and useful guide into another part of the forest of narrative.

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