# **A Fairy Tale Influence**

In conversation with Jack Zipes about the history of fairy tales, their enduring appeal, and influence on the horror genre.

[James Gracey](http://www.exquisiteterror.com/author/james-gracey) on October 22, 2012

Jack Zipes is the author of a staggering array of articles, essays and books on the subject of fairy tales\*, including *The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forests to the Modern World* and *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales.* His latest work, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre*, is available now, published by Princeton University Press. Exquisite Terror had the pleasure of speaking with him about the history and relevance of fairy tales, their enduring appeal, and the influence they have on the likes of the superhero and horror genres.

**Traditionally speaking fairy tales act as a sort of moral compass; instructions on acceptable behaviour within specific societies. What exactly can we learn from fairy tales? And do you think they’re still relevant in modern society?**

The reason we have always been attracted to fairy tales is because of their reassurance. They offer counter worlds to our real world; counter worlds in which there is always justice. The nasty queens and the nasty kings are always punished by the ‘small’ people in fairy tales and folk tales; those who come from the lower classes and generally strive to better their situation, and quite often succeed in doing so. There are some fairy tales that end tragically, but for the most part they end on a note that provides happiness to the people that have been struggling, and they also provide social justice. You can understand why people want to escape into the worlds of fairy tales, because they can see alternatives to the bleak conditions in which we’re living today.

**You’ve produced a sizeable body of work on the subject. What attracts you to fairy tales so much?**

I’m attracted to the hope that fairy tales can offer. There’s always a way out, the chance that maybe there will be a good fairy or creature that will help us. A lot of the better fairy tales involve the cooperation of human beings with one another, or animals who come out of the blue and help human beings who are experiencing a great difficulty. For me, personally, I think that I continue to be awed and inspired by the tales that I read and collect.

**Are there any tales that you find particularly inventive; perhaps ones that subvert the typical structure or themes of what is considered the norm?**

Yes. My favourite Grimms’ fairy tale is “How Six Made Their Way Through The World”, and I think that it has a tremendous bearing on an amazing amount of films and books that have been written about superheroes. “How Six Made Their Way Through The World” is about a soldier who is discharged from serving a king for many years, and he’s given a mere penny for all his trouble. He vows to take revenge on the king, and goes off and meets five other remarkable men, including a huntsman, a strongman and a runner; today we might describe them as superheroes. He invites them to join him on his quest and they go off to the king’s realm, where the king has offered his daughter as a prize in a race. The six men win the race, but the king reneges on his promise so the men then empty his treasury and go off and share it amongst themselves. It has various parallels with what’s happening today, particularly in the way that soldiers are treated by their governments, and how poor people are treated by the rich. They are not given adequate compensation for their hard work and sacrifices. This type of tale actually goes back all the way to the Greco-Roman period and the story of “Jason and the Golden Fleece”. Jason has to gather up these great heroes to aid his search for the Golden Fleece. When we watch superhero films, like *X-Men* and so on, we often don’t realise that these sorts of tales go all the way back to the Ancient Greek period, and stem from fairy tales about similarly extraordinary heroes.

**Is there a common thread that links fairy tales from different cultures throughout the world?**

Yes, I think so. No matter how different our cultures are, what is fantastic is that there are so many similar variants. All of the Grimms’ tales for example, we can find variants of throughout the world in other cultures and other collections of folk and fairy tales. The exact same tales only told in a different way. I think this reflects the fact that human beings, as a species, have the same basic struggles and work through a lot of the same troubles in family life and society. These struggles are reflected in tales told by common people, and not so common people, and they all, to a certain extent, relate to the fact that we as a species have the same problems.

**Traditionally fairy tales appeared in oral form. How did they change when people like the Brothers Grimm began to write them down?**

Great question. These tales really have a deep oral tradition, and that’s one of the reasons the Grimms were attracted to them. When educated people from different social classes began to write them down, they changed them greatly to appeal to audiences with their own interests. The Grimms added a lot of Christian elements and they changed a lot of the plots because, for instance, they didn’t want to offend mothers. A lot of the mothers in the original tales were biological mothers, not stepmothers. They also added a lot of Christian elements to fairy tales that originally would have been very secular. The same thing is true with Hans Christian Andersen and Charles Perrault and the other fine writers of fairy tales; their ideological perspectives were different from, say, the peasant perspectives.

**Do you think perhaps the writers may have inadvertently, or otherwise, diluted the core concept of these tales in the process of adapting them for the written word?**

Yes, one could say that, but at the same time we have to remember that even the oral storytellers change the tales as well. Every author has the privilege, or right, to change the tales according to their own perspectives. Whether they dilute them? That I don’t know, because we don’t know what the original primeval text was, so it’s difficult to talk about dilution.

**How fair do you think it is to say that horror films function in the same way as fairy tales, offering audiences cautionary stories and the experience of manageable fear in a safe setting?**

Yes, I think that’s fair. Every genre, like myths and legends, borrows from one another. They’re all hybrids. At the same time though, they distinguish themselves in certain ways. There’s no such thing as pure fairy tale or a pure horror tale. I think some of the fairy tales that have a great deal of horror in them will generally use the horror in a way that demonstrates we can overcome it. Like the wonderful tale “The Boy Who Set Out From Home To Learn Fear”. In the end he triumphs, and there’s a lesson to be learned in that; one has to take risks, and when one takes risks we can exhibit or show talent that we didn’t know we had in us.

**What would you say to someone who believes fairy tales are just for children?**

That’s ridiculous! They were never told to children or written for children; it wasn’t until the late nineteenth century that the tales were changed and made ‘appropriate’ for children. Edgar Taylor, who was the first to translate into English the Brothers Grimm tales, was actually responsible for transforming the Grimms’ tales into children’s tales. While they didn’t deny that children should hear them or read them, the Grimms didn’t write their tales for children; they were for a wider audience, particularly adults. They even had scholarly notes in the first editions. If one reads the Grimms’ tales carefully, you’ll see that they really were not intended for children.

**What do you think will be the lasting legacy of fairy tales?**

I think that fairy tales will never leave us. When the earth goes under or when it explodes, or is destroyed in some other way, the last thing left will be the cockroach, but on top of that, in terms of cultural artefacts, will be the fairy tale.

### http://0.gravatar.com/avatar/6b6c311119d03c1503ab3f78639c22e6?s=65&d=mm&r=g**Posted by James Gracey**

James is the author of Dario Argento (Kamera Books) and a monograph on The Company of Wolves (Devil’s Advocates). He contributes to Diabolique, and has also written for Paracinema, Film Ireland, Eye for Film, Little White Lies and The Quietus.