





# The Horror and the Beauty

Maria Tatar explores the dazzle and the “dark side” in fairy tales—and why we read them.

by CRAIG LAMBERT

**A** GLARING anomaly stares out from the curriculum vitae of Maria Tatar, whose 10 scholarly books and scores of articles otherwise display a pleasing consistency. Her works deal with fairy tales and children's literature: the Brothers Grimm, Bluebeard, Hans Christian Andersen. Even her first book, from 1978, on mesmerism and literature, bears an enchanted title: *Spellbound*.

But in 1995, Tatar, who is Loeb professor of Germanic languages and literatures, published a wild exception to this rule, digging into sensational material that is Adult with a capital A. *Lustmord: Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany* explores the vengeful underside of German national character during the 1920s. That *Zeitgeist* manifested itself both in lurid crimes (such as murder-rapes in which the chronology of those acts was not always clear) and in the powerful, disturbing paintings of George Grosz and Otto Dix—who sometimes “signed” his work with a blood-red handprint—as well as in Fritz Lang's films and in plays and novels by Frank Wedekind, Hermann Hesse, and Alfred Döblin. A decade later, similar primal feelings, less examined and controlled, helped fuel the Nazis' organized savagery.

The daughter of Hungarian émigrés, Tatar has been fascinated since childhood by German culture and the Holocaust. “My parents had come from Europe and Europe was a place that signified really deep horror,” she says. “I grew up in the shadow of the Holocaust. In the 1950s, a lot of things like the diary of Anne Frank were appearing, and reports of the Nazi atrocities were coming out in the newspapers.”

The young Tatar also gravitated to the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales—evoking adventure, glamour, and virtue, but also seething with violence, sadism, revenge, and horrific punishments—where the Teutonic “dark side” symbolically expressed itself. She wanted to understand how a culture that produced these enticing stories and the rapturous beauty of Beethoven, Wagner, and Goethe could also erupt in genocidal rage.

“Violence might be the bridge that connects German folklore



and the Holocaust,” Tatar muses. “In fairy tales, you have that same brutality and monstrosity: there's something really primal about what is going on in these stories—and in those Weimar artists. What I admire about the Weimar artists is that they faced up to what's inside. Fairy tales also face up to the facts of life: nothing is sacred or taboo. Meanwhile they glitter with beauty. I work at the weirdly fascinating intersection of beauty and horror.”

Tatar's passions for the Brothers Grimm and Anne Frank stayed with her, but at Princeton in the late 1960s, she discovered that both were *verboten* at the graduate level. “The Grimms were off limits because fairy tales were not deemed worthy of scholarly attention,” she explains, “and studying the Holocaust was taboo because it raised too many anxieties about the sta-

tus of German culture in the academy.”

She redirected her attention to nineteenth- and twentieth-century German literature, studying romanticism and Weimar culture. She earned a doctorate in 1971, writing her dissertation on Gotthilf Heinrich von Schubert (1780-1860), a German Romantic philosopher who dived into the “dark side of nature,” Tatar explains—subjects such as animal magnetism, the unconscious, and dreams. “You could call him a precursor of Freud,” she says. “I didn't want to study just the good, the true, and the beautiful—which was what many of my mentors in graduate school encouraged me to do—but to inquire into human pathologies, and what leads to events like the Holocaust.”

Eventually Tatar found her scholarly calling: since the 1970s, she has focused on fairy tales. Her books include annotated editions of what she calls the “classics” (including “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Beauty and the Beast,” “Hansel and Gretel”) and of tales collected by the Grimms, an exploration of Bluebeard, and a new edition of the stories of Hans Christian Andersen (just published by W. W. Norton, with translations from the Danish in collaboration with Julie K. Allen, Ph.D. '05). “This field has moved from the periphery into the center of things,” Tatar explains. “Like



women's studies, ethnic studies, or film studies, the study of childhood and its literary and material culture has attained academic legitimacy."

Tatar began with archival work that found its way into *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales* (1987), which probes harsh themes like "murder, mutilation, cannibalism, infanticide, and incest." More recently, she has moved into interpretive and empirical scholarship that examines the effects of the narratives. "Her interdisciplinarity has included psychology and psychoanalysis alongside literary history and theory," says Porter professor of medieval Latin Jan Ziolkowski, director of the University's Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, who has worked with Tatar on the committee on degrees in folklore and mythology. "Maria has made an ever-deeper imprint upon the field of fairy tales, which lies at one of those all-too-rare intersections between the general public and scholars. Her elegantly written books meet the highest academic standards while remaining accessible to the endangered species known as the general reader."

During the past academic year, Tatar was a fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, on sabbatical from her faculty duties. (She also served as dean for the humanities in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences from 2003 to 2006.) At Radcliffe, she pursued her newest book project, "Enchanted Hunters: The Transformative Power of Childhood Reading," broadening her focus from folklore to the general subject of children's stories.

"Enchanted hunters" is a phrase from Nabokov," she explains. "It has an edge, for it applies, on one level, to Humbert Humbert and his pursuit of Lolita. But it also defines us as readers of *Lolita*—readers who search and explore as we fall under the spell of Nabokov's language and his recasting of 'Beauty and the Beast.' It's no accident that many children's books begin with bored children, like Alice on the riverbank reading a book and nodding off. How do you move from boredom to curiosity—how do you animate the child? My answer is: by using the shock value of beauty and horror, administering jolts and shimmers that flip a switch in the mind."

FAIRY TALES EMERGE from an oral tradition; they were passed down through generations by retellings long before being inscribed on paper; Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm were early folklorists. "Fairy tales should never be considered sacred texts," Tatar says. "They existed in thousands of versions; there wasn't one 'Little Red Riding Hood.'"

Adults recounted these sto-

ries to a multigenerational audience, and typically the narrator spun out the tales to the rhythms of work. "We have drawings and paintings from seventeenth-century France showing fireside images of someone telling a story while others are minding children, repairing tools, or patching clothes," Tatar says. "You've always got this fire. It's a communal situation, where people are also getting warmth and comfort from the stories. The fire reminds us of the 'ignition power' of fairy tales, their ability to excite the imagination and to provide light in the dark. And with the fire, you also have these shadows, where fearful things might lurk. The tales not only have this magical, glittery sparkle, but also a dark, horrific side that stages our deepest anxieties and fears."

The story itself, Tatar suggests, may be less important than the interchanges it stimulates. "In the telling, there are always inter-

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ruptions—hissing and booing, clapping and cheering," she says, referencing folklorists' reports. "The tale is 'thickened' by the audience until it becomes a kind of collective product. When we read to children, we should bring in that creative dimension and talk about the story as it unfolds. Have a kind of conversational reading, and don't let it end at, 'They lived happily ever after.' You want to let the story become more than a talisman or mantra—it

should continue to shape-shift and resonate in new ways.

"Think about the way you read as a child," she continues. "There are constant epiphanies. It's an intellectual process, but it also involves the body in a way—you read with your spine, you have a somatic response." She quotes Graham Greene: "What do we ever get nowadays from reading to equal the excitement and the revelation in those first fourteen years?" The young hunger for such discoveries. "They are searching for enlightenment," Tatar declares. "They want to know about adult matters. Grown-ups talk about murder, violence, and death in hushed tones, because they want to protect children. But children are wildly curious about what adults keep from them. Adults read with a critical, reflective, detached mind—it's a complex experience—but children just dive right in and



HANSEL AND GRETEL AND OTHER TALES BY THE BROTHERS GRIMM. ILLUSTRATIONS BY ©ARTHUR RACKHAM. LONDON: E.P. DUTTON, 1920/BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY



identify powerfully with the characters. Maybe that's what raises our anxiety level about what we read to them."

Take "Bluebeard," the saga of a serial killer who murders six wives before getting his comeuppance. The story makes readers tremble for the seventh wife while rooting for her somehow to outwit the villain. "'Bluebeard' is a marriage tale, not really a tale for kids," Tatar explains. "Though maybe a cautionary tale for young women entering arranged marriages!"

Yet this European folktale powerfully moved an African-American child, the novelist Richard Wright, who heard a "colored schoolteacher" named Ella read it to him. "I hungered for the sharp, frightening, breath-taking, almost painful excitement that the story had given me," Wright recalled in *Black Boy*, his 1945 autobiography. "He hears this story and he is transformed," Tatar says. "He wanted to read every novel he could get his hands on. 'I burned to know the meaning of every word,' he said, 'because it was a gateway to a forbidden and enchanting land.'"

Indeed. Tatar's *Secrets beyond the Door: The Story of Bluebeard and His Wives* (2004) begins, "Magic happens on the threshold of the forbidden." Recall that Bluebeard gave his seventh wife keys to all the rooms in his mansion, but forbade her to open one remote chamber—which, of course, she does, when he is away, and so discovers the corpses of his former spouses. Fairy tales began as stories for adults, and they dig into precisely those subterranean aspects of adult life (especially family life) that so intrigue children, Tatar says. The tales have become a way to crash the grownups' party. When the stories "migrated from the fireside into the nursery, they lost some of their bawdiness and violence," she believes, but the Grimms worried more about censoring sex than violence, and even thought that the violence might scare children into good behavior. The tales nonetheless grapple with raw, fundamental emotions: "They are like miniature myths."

Discover, for example, echoes of ancient Greece's House of Atreus in "The Juniper Tree," a tale recorded by the Grimms. "It is filled with revolting deeds," says Tatar. "A stepmother chops up her stepson and serves him in a stew to his father, who declares the dish tasty. Touchingly, his sister buries the boy's bones under a juniper tree and waters the tree with her tears. The boy is reborn as a beautiful bird that sings, and then he becomes a boy again."

An abomination like a mother dismembering a child sometimes takes on a surreal or almost humorous dimension in the tales. (In stories such as "Cinderella," the Grimms changed wicked mothers to stepmothers, to protect the image of motherhood: "You can see it in the manuscripts for different versions of a tale," Tatar says.) "You get this kind of preposterous violence," she asserts. At the



end of one story, the hero declares that everyone's head is going to be chopped off. (Indeed, one of Tatar's books is *Off with Their Heads!*) Bluebeard murders not one or two, but six wives. In "Snow White," the stepmother dances to her death in red-hot iron shoes. Another stepmother dies when a millstone falls on her head, and the protagonist of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Red Shoes" has her feet cut off. One version of "Cinderella" has doves peck out the eyes of the evil step-sisters.

These maimings can actually allay childhood fears. "Kids have a lot of anxiety about their bodily integrity," says Tatar. "They worry about loss on so many different levels. Psychologists are right to emphasize the therapeutic value of fairy tales and how they enact and work through fears in symbolic terms. Fairy tales move in the subjunctive: 'Once upon a time' means that it isn't real and that you can laugh about it in a licensed form of release."

In her own childhood, Tatar had deeply affecting experiences as a reader. The third of four children in a Hungarian family that came to the United States in 1952 (her father was an ophthalmologist, her mother a stay-at-home parent), Tatar grew up in Highland Park, outside Chicago, in a trilingual household (her parents also spoke German). She herself reads Latin and Danish, and speaks French in addition to German.

Their home was only two blocks away from an "extraordinary library." Tatar clearly recalls the moment when, at age nine, "I took a deep breath and crossed the threshold into the adult section—there were strict boundaries at that time. I curled up there with this book of Danish fairy tales—from the folklore collection, without illustrations. My older brother came in and told me I wasn't allowed there. The book I treasured most was *Grimms' Fairy Tales*—in German. I couldn't read the words, but my older sister would tell me the stories."

She learned German at Denison University in Ohio, spending her junior year in Munich; she later lived for a year in Berlin. Tatar has spent her entire career at Harvard, having joined the faculty in 1971, fresh from her doctorate at Princeton; she received tenure in 1978. (Her daughter, Lauren, graduated from Harvard in 2006 and her son, Daniel, is a senior at the College.)

TATAR'S CONCEPT OF "IGNITION POWER" speaks to the way these tales can fire a reader's imagination, and, as with Richard Wright, stimulate a child's desire to read. She herself, having grown up with three languages, has a powerful response to the written word, in which she finds both "monumental stability and a thrilling mutability." She recalls the "Bump!" in *The Cat in the Hat*—a signal for manic madness, the "logical insanity" that Dr. Seuss aimed for in that book. "Words have always felt to me like [magic]



wands,” she says, “and they open the door to new worlds in which anything is possible—talking rabbits, phantom tollbooths, flying carpets. I started out as a math major; the prospect of infinite permutations and combinations was always intoxicating.”

She calls reading a highly creative activity: “Words on the page give you instructions for imagining new worlds, not with a barrage of descriptive details but with spare cues that, even in their flimsiness and flimsiness, create complete images.” She recalls Nabokov’s description of how an author constructs a house of cards that, in the reader’s mind, becomes a castle of glass and steel, part of a sturdy and durable world.

Tatar’s researches began by addressing violence and horror, but, as she says, “I discovered beauty.” A turning point came on a book tour, when she was telling library audiences about *The Hard Facts of the Grimms’ Fairy Tales*. “I wanted to talk about the origins of the stories, their evolution, and their cultural meanings,” she recalls. “But people kept coming back to me with descriptions of their enchantment with the stories and how beautiful they were. They wanted to know more about the magic of the stories, the deep melodrama and passion—they were almost operatic about it. That inspired me to go back to reading the stories at a visceral level—it was almost like reconnecting with childhood, the way you read as a child.”

Consider the spell cast by “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” in which Hans Christian Andersen describes the emperor’s magical garments: “as exquisite as cobwebs” in their pattern and design. “The magical clothing takes over,” Tatar says, “even though it cannot be seen.” Fairy tales stay on the surface. “Beauty is always presented in totally abstract terms,” Tatar says. “In a description of a princess, all you get are light and sparkle, dazzle, shine, golden dresses and silver shoes. You never get a description of her face. You have to use the power of your imagination.”

Then comes the Disney animated film of the story, which fills in all the details and renders an exact image of the princess. Most of the students in Tatar’s popular undergraduate courses, like “Fairy Tales, Children’s Literature, and the Construction of Childhood,” know these stories via Disney versions, and so are amazed to learn, for example, that in Andersen’s original, the Little Mermaid dies at the end. Tatar explains, “Disney turns Andersen’s story—literally and figuratively—into a cartoon version of itself.”

Yet a Disney film is simply another version, another retelling, of a narrative that already exists in countless variations. And Tatar is quick to point out that without Disney, we might not have these stories. “Film has an instant way of pulling you in,” she says. “There’s intensity, there’s melodrama, and you identify



closely with the characters. Hollywood has mastered the art of the popular aesthetic, getting us to buy into on-screen fictions in powerful ways. Yes, there’s cause for concern, in that movies are so much easier to get into than books are. But Disney films [have] kept fairy tales alive. And alongside the Disney version, 15 different print editions of ‘Beauty and the Beast’ will be published, for different levels of readers.

“Competition among media isn’t always a bad thing,” she continues, pointing out that the beautiful illustrations that have so often accompanied printed fairy tales amount to a “second text.” “I try not to get too romantic or nostalgic about the book,” she says. “Media feed off each other in interesting ways; the printed

word, oral storytelling, film, and television interact with each other, are embedded in each other, and generate new interest in the old, as well as new versions of old stories.”

And the audience itself has changed. “Our conception of childhood has changed dramatically in the past couple of decades,” Tatar says. She cites the work of French social historian Philippe Ariès on the “invention” of childhood in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: in earlier times, children were immediately conscripted into the labor force when they were physically able to work. In his 1982 book *The Disappearance of Childhood*, media analyst Neil Postman argued that the literacy gap between adults and children formerly allowed adults to control information and so create a two-tiered society; when electronic media broke down adults’ ability to control information, adult and child converged. “Today, you could argue that we’re going back to the older model,” Tatar says. “With exposure to media at early ages, children have access to what was once adult knowledge—they know what we didn’t know until we were teenagers. Kids seem to be savvy about the facts of life. Yet they are still infantilized, and more dependent on their parents than ever.”

In “Enchanted Hunters”—a project that Tatar says has been in the works for 10 years—she examines how children interact with stories and investigates what happens when kids migrate into worlds that have been created by different media. Some of her ideas have emerged from more than 300 interviews with her students about childhood memories of their reading experience—how one student used a purple crayon (less successfully than Crockett Johnson’s Harold) on his bedroom wall, how another (very much a swan, Tatar notes) had read “The Ugly Duckling” hundreds of times during adolescence, how a third tried desperately to develop telekinetic powers after reading Roald Dahl’s *Matilda*. Tatar marvels at the ways in which students approach stories: undergraduates, for example, will “read all the



Harry Potter novels or the entire Chronicles of Narnia over a weekend, becoming effortlessly absorbed by a world they construct from nothing but black marks on a white page."

The seven *Harry Potter* books, having sold 325 million copies in more than 60 languages, of course represent the worldwide megahit of children's literature for the past decade. Tatar draws on her scholarly expertise to account for their vast success. Author J. K. Rowling "writes for children but never down to them," she says. "[Rowling] does not shy away from the great existential mysteries: death and loss, cruelty and compassion, desire and depression. Think of those fiendish Dementors who are experts in making you lose hope—what could be more frightening than that?" Furthermore, "Rowling puts magic into the hands of chil-

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dren—they are the anointed and the appointed," Tatar says. "But there's more to it than that: Rowling declared that the books are not so much about good and evil as about power, and Harry Potter gets the chance to defeat [arch-villain] Voldemort and to seize power. The sorcery of the books involves more than wizardry and magic, for the child has the chance to right wrongs."

In addition to the deep themes and the struggle for justice, "Rowling taps into rich literary traditions," Tatar explains. "She is a master of *bricolage*: recycling stories and stitching them together in vibrant new ways. Rowling is on record as declaring her favorite author to be Jane Austen, but in the *Harry Potter* books there is also much of Dickens and Dahl, with heavy doses of fairy tales and Arthurian legend, British boarding-school books, and murder mysteries. We have all the archetypal themes and characters of children's literature: an abject orphan, toxic stepparents, false heroes, helpers and donors, villainy and revenge."

With its staggering popularity, "*Harry Potter* has created a global cultural story, one that will be shared by multiple generations of literate children and adults," says Tatar. Indeed, one factor in the series' success is that the stories appeal both to adults and to younger readers.

Children's books, of course, are primarily written by adults, and much scholarship on children's literature also embodies adult viewpoints. Psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim ranks among the best-known fairy-tale theorists; his 1976 book *The Uses of Enchantment* is a classic in the field. (Bettelheim analyzed Hansel and

Gretel's attempt to take a bite from the witch's house as "oral greed.") It would take a long while to exhaust the interpretations of Turkish delight, the real-world name C.S. Lewis used for a fictional confection so pleasurable that it completely enslaves Edmund Pevensie in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

But Tatar is trying to escape the adult perspective on children's literature. ("The psychosexual readings have become predictable," she says.) "I'm trying to capture what happens in the child," she explains. That's an ambitious goal, because children themselves are not particularly articulate on such matters, and adult recollections brim with distortions and idealizations. So Tatar also goes directly to the literary texts, mining her insights from words on the page, an admittedly speculative enterprise.

This approach has led her to consider magical thinking and how stories teach children that you don't need wands—just words—to do things. The so-called classics are classics for a reason: they have power-

ful language, and use not just sparkle and shine but also gothic gloom to get children hooked on a story and on reading. The marvels that tumble thick and fast through these narratives lead readers to wonder not just about the world of fiction but also about the world they inhabit.

"The radical view is that it doesn't matter *what* story a kid reads," she continues. "In some ways, children's literature is pulp fiction: it's melodramatic. John Updike called fairy tales 'the television and pornography of their day, the life-lightening trash of preliterate peoples.' Children who read escape not just from reality but into opportunity: they learn how to navigate in the larger world; they become more connected and curious, energized by the propulsive wonders of Narnia, Oz, or Never Land."

And to wrestle with the darker aspects of life as well. Tatar's attraction to what Germans call the "night side" dates to the beginnings of her scholarly work. She recalls, with some amusement, giving a paper on the sexual-murder material that developed into *Lustmord* and hearing a question from a German academic: "Why always the pathological?" She has a ready answer. "It seems so much more interesting than the good, the true, and the beautiful. Trying to understand why things go wrong seems to me more productive than just focusing on what is right." Even so, she is not immune to the charms of Turkish delight, and remains as eager as the rest of us, child and adult alike, to be seduced by the beauty of a well-told story. ▢

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