Collecting the Inner Child: Illustrated Myths, Fairy Tales, and Folktales

My mother, being one of those people who derives uncanny pleasure from throwing things away, asked me this New Year’s for the umpteenth time if she could finally discard my “picture books”. I confess that I am an avid collector of illustrated mythology and fairy tale books, but I heartily disagree with those who, like my mother, relegate these works to the realm of juvenilia. After all, the original myths and fairy tales were told to adults as well as children. Beneath the fantastic transformations that take place there is almost always a grain of deeper truth. Myths and fairy tales are really like textual manifestations of the interface between the mundane world of everyday life and the magical inner realm of the human psyche. It is no wonder, then, that fairy tales have inspired illustrators and publishers to produce what are some of the finest specimens of printed books in existence. My own collection in particular revolves around cultural and historical elements of myth and fairy tale illustration, and how illustration picks up different flavors as it evolves across generations and cultures.

Now, a quick technical note: fairy tales are generally divided into two types by the German names, volksmärchen or folk tale (myths and oral traditions), and kunstmärchen or literary tale, which are written by an original author (Andersen is the most notable of these). The folk tales have common elements across all cultures and are classified thusly by the Aarne-Thompson (AT) system. Myths also have AT designations but fall within a larger framework, a mythology, which may be religious in nature. The literary tales are more original and might not fall cleanly into AT categories. The real distinction between the two is not altogether clear-cut, however: in collecting and writing down oral traditions, writers will streamline and alter folk tales, and writers of literary fairytales will borrow heavily from old folk tale motifs. So I collect both types of fairy tales. In fact, although denoting something as a volksmärchen would seem to imply some kind of rawness, some rootedness in primitive tradition, in truth (especially in children’s books) these tales have undergone so many retellings and yes, bowdlerization that they are hardly less literary than the kunstmärchen. Indeed, one of the fascinating things about collecting children’s retellings of myths and fairy tales is how these tales are re-interpreted by different authors in different eras and cultures, which reveals much about what was fashionable or valued in society.

My love of myths and fairy tales began in primary school, as is probably the case with many children. We were allowed one hour a day devoted to various leisure activities that were supposed to improve us: art, sports, and my personal favorite, library reading hour. I would go to the library every week and invariably read a chapter out of one of three books: D’Aulaires’ Greek Myths, D’Aulaires’ Norse Myths, and an illustrated retelling of Morte Darthur. The last one in particular was highly scandalous in grade school because there was an illustration of Lancelot lifting a nude Elaine of Carbonek out of the boiling bath in it. While the D’Aulaires’ myths are illustrated with stone lithographs bathed in swathes of bright impressionistic colors (Edgar D’Aulaire was a student of Henri Matisse), the illustrated Morte Darthur was dark and realistic, with a Rembrandt-like use of
chioseuro. Years later in college, when hunting down these fond memories of my childhood, I searched long and hard for this particular book having only the memory of what some of the images looked like, no author or illustrator’s name. I finally narrowed it down to a book called *King Arthur and His Knights*, illustrated by one Julek Heller. It was then that I realized the value of collecting: the book was sadly out of print, after only a decade or so!

Because book illustrations, unless they are considered really “classic” (John Tenniel’s illustrations for *Alice in Wonderland* spring to mind), have a short circulation life, my collection is especially important in preserving editions that would otherwise be lost forever in the byways of printed life, relegated to a few dwindling copies in attics and library discard piles. The old classics – Hans Christian Andersen, Grimm, Greek myths – get re-interpreted every decade or so, and so the most popular illustrated editions of the previous generation are quickly superseded. Some book illustrations, such as the artwork of Arthur Rackham, Edmund Dulac, and Kay Nielsen from the Golden Age of Illustration, and the ever-popular Maxfield Parrish, are often reprinted, out of their original context, as artbooks or calendars. But illustrations are not the same as “highbrow” art and really only come alive when they are paired with the content they are meant to illustrate. Like the tales themselves, the books’ bindings and illustrations are reflective of the societies that produced them: for example, while Orientalist art and tales with questionable morals seemed to have been popular in the 1910’s and 1920’s, the Great Depression and World War II ushered in a taste for simpler art and more virtuous literature. In the last thirty years or so, with the rise of globalization, there have been many more productions of non-European myths and fairy tales, with illustrators trying to imitate various types of world folk art.

To illustrate how little subtleties of bound and illustrated books can come together to make one immensely pleasurable object, let me tell a little bit about the book that first catapulted me into collecting. My college Quiz Bowl team was strolling around New York City and the Strand Bookstore had set up some kind of side-of-the-road clearance sale. There was one table in the back labeled ‘Antiquarian and Collectible’ priced one to ten dollars, and what books they were! Books that were older than my grandparents, with faded gold gilt sides and gilt covers, thick as dictionaries and full of wonderful illustrations. The book that caught my eye was Maurice Maeterlinck’s *The Blue Bird*. It is a play, with the form of a literary fairy tale. Shirley Temple starred in a 1940 film adaptation but today it has gone mostly out of vogue. To my knowledge, the 1911 edition that I own is still the only English translation, although the Japanese seem to have adapted *The Blue Bird* multiple times. There were some delightful elements of the book which I learnt later were common elements of early twentieth century fairy tale “gift books”: an intricate gilt cover, decorated cover page, and Neoclassical illustrations which were printed on glossy paper, pasted on thin cardstock and bound together with the rest of the pages. These are called “tipped-in plates” and still exist today, mostly in books of pure text with non-integrated illustrations, such as pocket-sized books devoted to art, which often have a set of tipped-in plates in the middle. Printing a quality color image requires a special kind of coated paper, so these have to be tipped-in unless the whole book is printed in glossy paper (like a coffee table book). Usually what is done is instead of being glued to a separate page, the entire glossy page is bound into the book. The plates that are glued onto a separate page I have only really seen in antiquarian books, but have evoke a special feel whilst reading when
one considers that somebody had to painstakingly cut and paste each picture by hand. This kind of production seemed to have died out with the Roaring Twenties, though, probably due to the cost of production.

![Image of a book cover and a page with a picture, captioned: Figure 1. Left: gilt cover of *The Blue Bird*. Right: one of the tipped-in plates, apparently influenced by Michelangelo, depicting the neoclassical art style.]

My hope for my collection is to someday share my love of fine illustrated works with others. I am not a scholar of myths: everything I have researched and collected springs from my personal hobby. One inspiring figure to me is Lloyd Cotsen, the former CEO of Neutrogena, who amassed over the course of his lifetime, as a hobby, a truly astounding collection of children’s literature. This now forms the basis of the Cotsen Children’s Library at Princeton University, my alma mater. I would be lucky to end up with a collection half as rich as his, but I do to someday give new public life to the favorites I have curated (perhaps even a quality reprint). Taschen Books has recently produced a very nice series of illustrated omnibuses, edited by Noel Daniel, a woman after my own heart. Ms. Daniel’s editions of Grimms’ and Andersen’s fairy tales include rare reprints from many eras and foreign-language editions with carefully reproduced high-resolution images, many of which are now available to the English-speaking public for the first time. Collecting some of my rare volumes of single tales into a well-made “treasury” book would take me into the realms of book layout and production as well and is one possible direction I see for my collection in the future.

**Partial Annotated Bibliography**

**WORLD FOLK TALES, MYTHS AND LEGENDS**


This is a collected edition of a series of *skazki*, or Russian folk tales, published in the early twentieth century. The tales themselves are not only illustrated but – extra luxury! – illuminated with borders and decorative letters that draw from medieval
Russian art. The clean lines and coloring draw from Art Nouveau. It’s rare enough to find old illustrated books, let alone those that were originally in another language, so the fact that this book exists is extremely fortunate and a labor of love on the part of the translator.

Figure 2. Ivan Bilibin’s folk-inspired border for Vasilisa the Beautiful.


This is a reprint of one of the most famous treasures of the Golden Age of Illustration (real first editions sell at places like Christie’s). Kay Nielsen drew from Norse folk art, Art Nouveau, and *ukiyo-e*, which at the time were new and fashionable in the world of illustration as opposed to the more Romantic older styles. Nielsen however was probably the one artist who was master of synthesizing these styles and making them his own, and he had a keen eye for what made an immediately impressionable composition. Folio has done a good job of reproducing the original production complete with a gilt cover, slipcase, and decorated endpapers, although interestingly enough, the editors have tried to place the illustrations in correspondence to the tales that they depict, whereas in the original they were spaced all throughout the book. That’s how you notice that Nielsen really had one type of tale he really liked to illustrate – the ones where a youth goes on a journey and suffers many hardships – because these are the tales that he packs with illustrations, while other tales get only one or two or maybe only a black-and-white one. I get the impression he was a lonely soul himself – he later worked for Disney, on Fantasia, but was never as successful in a commercial office as he was making illustrations the old way – in his private studio. Illustrators back then would produce paintings that were sold at galleries like other artwork – that was their primary source of revenue, rather than from book sales.

My mother nearly went off her rocker when I brought this veritable brick back from the library discard sale (how can you say no to *five dollars* – and already in a mylar slipcase?) and I have to say the art took a while to grow on me. The pages are fully illuminated, imitating a manuscript of old, but Beardsley's art is unique and somewhat of an acquired taste, especially when one is desiring of something more epic-looking to go with these Arthurian tales. Beardsley's influences were Toulouse-Lautrec and Japanese prints; he was also famous for drawing erotica. These were fairly in vogue at the time with the Aesthetic movement, the most famous product of which was probably Oscar Wilde. I'll admit it's not my taste but after a while, one realizes that Beardsley is quite effective at conveying other aspects of these tales that are often lost in the archaic language – the humor, the subtleties – a true microcosm of human life. I do, you see, collect books that I don't fall in love with at first sight but that I find intriguing.


These books are mentioned in the essay above. The latter is a reprint.


This is the book mentioned in the essay above.


Alan Lee is fairly famous for illustrating *The Lord of the Rings* but I think this is his better work. The edition I have, purchased second-hand, is apparently also hard to find, since it has long gone out of print and Alan Lee's illustrations are currently being printed with a different translation, by another publisher. His work reminds me a lot of the Pre-Raphaelites. One of my favorite tales, Math son of Mathonwy, involves a hilarious episode of pig-stealing and Alan Lee illustrates it brilliantly. He puts his usual touches, the neutral colors, slightly shadowy atmosphere, and
decorative Celtic border, but at the bottom of the page there are – lots of pigs! It never fails to make me laugh.
Norman, Howard. The Girl Who Dreamed Only Geese and Other Tales of the Far North.
Illus. Leo & Diane Dillon.
Leo and Diane Dillon (always a pair) have the uncanny ability to imitate nearly any kind of art – Egyptian relief, medieval illumination, Chinese brush drawings – and still be recognizable as themselves. Here they illustrate a handsome edition of Inuit folk tales, one of the first of its kind. The black and white that breaks up the text, a common decorative element in illustrated books, here serves the dual purpose of telling the story in a style drawn from Inuit stonecuts. The tales themselves are fresh and delightfully gory, and there is a really cool touch on the endpapers, which features glossy white-on-white snowflake prints.
A reprint of an original edition for a mid-century fine book club, the Limited Editions Club. The original edition is extremely hard to find and pricey, but the Easton Press version which occasionally shows up in second-hand shops has a nice leatherbound cover with a gilt arabesque design and moiré endpapers. Arthur Szyk is another illustrator whose art is immediately recognizable – his illustrations of Hans Christian Andersen are often reprinted, but I feel that he’s particularly suited for the Arabian Nights. His art has a vaguely Eastern feel and he is a master of human facial expressions. Here he adds frames and decorative elements here to evoke Persian miniature.
I had the pleasure of meeting Paul Zelinsky at an event so this is a signed edition. It is a Caldecott medal winter, and a slightly controversial one since Zelinsky decided to stick with the original version which involves teenage pregnancy. There is a nice footnote too about the tale’s pre-Grimm incarnation in the Italian Pentamerone. Fittingly for the Italian origin of the story, Zelinsky uses an art style reminiscent of old Italian Renaissance masters.

LITERARY FAIRY TALES
One of the rarer pieces in my collection: a German version of Andersen’s Little Mermaid. Sulamith Wulfing is one of those rare artists who is really one-of-a-kind: she combines dreamy, childlike figures that have almost a Precious Moments-like quality with incredibly detailed compositions are full of symbolic imagery and influences from Gothic, Norse, and Celtic art. Her nickname in her native Germany is “Dürer’s little daughter” due the level of minute detail in her art. This is, in my opinion, her magnum opus.
This one is a bit of a curiosity. It is a Chinese translation of Andersen’s Fairy Tales that my father gave me to practice writing Chinese. It was also, for a long time, my primary source for certain Andersen tales that are difficult to find in English, such as
the Elf of the Rose. I always wonder why some tales are more popular in one culture than another, as there’s nothing that seems particularly more “Chinese” about the Elf of the Rose to me. The production is...quirky, at best, and kitschy at worst, with cartoonish illustrations and a crazy ink printer which prints every few pages in a different monochromatic rainbow color, but I find the whole thing rather unique and charming.

Figure 4. An oddly charming kitschy edition.


This was a birthday gift from a friend who knew I loved fairy tales. Lisbeth Zwerger is a famous fairy tale illustrator in Austria and she won the Hans Christian Andersen Award, which is like the international Caldecott medal. Her art style is spare and dream-like, with oddly-proportioned people, and she has a healthy disregard of gravity which makes for some interesting compositions.


This is one of my favorite illustrated editions from my childhood, another one of those books which circulates for a few years, goes out of print, and is forgotten. The pictures are gorgeous though, especially the double-page spread where the princess swims through the witches forest full of fish-eating trees.


The most extensive set of Andersen tales I own, in four petite volumes and a highly regarded translation. The illustrations are the originals from the tales’ first printings. The books were printed in Andersen’s home town of Odense.


A collection culled from an annual Swedish magazine of literary fairy tales, *Bland Tomtar och Troll*. John Bauer sadly drowned in a ferry accident at the age of 35 but he had a delightfully unique style, cute without being saccharine, and highly
evocative of the nature of the wild north. He’s especially good at drawing lifelike
trolls with a variety of facial expressions, and he influenced many fairy tale
illustrators after him, including Kay Nielsen.
Wilhelm Hauff was an early nineteenth-century German writer who was equal parts
Brothers Grimm and Scheherazade. Boris Pak was a Soviet Kazakh artist whose
style reminds me a bit of Arthur Szyk. The two combined make an interesting,
magical combination, and have been brought to English speakers for the first time
by the nice folks at David R. Godine. I’ve heard that large publishers generally aren’t
as interested in books they aren’t sure will sell tens of thousands of copies, which
leaves it to the small publishers to unearth these little gems.
Straus & Giroux, 1984.
A literary fairy tale by the Scottish writer, George MacDonald, and illustrated by yes,
*that* Maurice Sendak who wrote *Where the Wild Things Are*. George MacDonald
influenced later writers such as C.S. Lewis and Madeleine L'Engle but his works lay
in obscurity for a while although Tori Amos has recently made a musical version of
the *The Light Princess*. It’s a fairly deep tale about growing up that Sendak’s
alternatively humorous, alternatively somber lithograph-like drawings captures
perfectly.
This is the book which I have mentioned in detail in my essay, with a gilt cover,
gilding on one side of the pages and illustrations which apparently borrow heavily
from the Sistine Chapel. F. Cayley Robinson isn’t a famous Golden Age illustrator,
and this isn’t a famous Golden Age book, but I find that the clean artwork and blue
tones (The cover is also blue! The bird in the tale is blue! The whole book is blue!) make it pretty memorable among the early twentieth century illustrated books I’ve
seen.

**COLLECTED EDITIONS**
Mills, Alice, ed. *The Random House Children's Treasury*. Milsons Point NSW: Random
This is a collection of tales I got for one of my childhood birthdays which is notable
because it collects, in high quality, some rare nineteenth century illustrations,
including those by Kate Greenaway, Walter Crane, Heinrich Hoffman’s infamous
*Struwwelpeter*, and E.V. Boyle’s fantastic Andersen illustrations.