

## Toontoony, Trolls, and Other Tall Tales: Folk and Fairy Stories from Around the World

Though the stories in this collection are frequently well written and sometimes even stunningly illustrated, they are not meant to be read. Or rather, they must be read, perhaps once or twice, but that is not their ultimate end: these stories are meant to be learned, so they can be told.

Once upon a time, a ten year old girl sat in her fourth grade classroom as her teacher began to tell the story of “The Day It Snowed Tortillas.” “The Day It Snowed Tortillas,” though undeniably quirky, follows in many folktale traditions: it features a humble woodcutter and a clever wife, who ultimately prevail over a trio of greedy robbers through good luck and a quick wit. And for me, that ten year old girl, this was one of my first experience with being told a story. I was not a child deprived from literature – on the contrary, my parents supported my love of reading and started reading aloud to me at an early age, with great frequency. But this experience of hearing a story told from memory, and later, the assignment to tell one to the class myself, was new.

I chose “The Little Sparrow,” a story from Japan from the only folk tale book I owned at the time: Usborne’s *Stories from around the World*. The story is simple and classic: a kind husband and a bad tempered wife have a pet sparrow, but the wife, jealously, throws it out of the house. Later, the sparrow returns and offers the old man a present – a choice between a big and small basket. The man chooses the small basket, and finds it to be full of gold and jewels. The wife is furious that he passed up the chance for the big basket and goes to the sparrow to demand it – only to find that it is full of snakes and spiders! I retold this story to my class, complete with props: a small basket filled with gold plastic jewelry and a large one filled with the scariest of my stuffed animals. And once my storytelling presentation went well, I was inspired to tell this story to my younger siblings, who weren’t yet strong readers, and to my younger cousins. And once they got tired of the two stories that I knew, I was inspired to learn more.

Most of this collection was acquired as gifts, from my family who listened to my stories and encouraged me to learn more. It began with the picture books, with stories told in simple words, and beautiful illustrations, like *Fantastic Beasts* and *Irish Myths & Legends*, and expanded to the collections of country-specific stories as I grew more interested in finding stories unique from the standard fairy tales famous through Disney movies and children’s books. As I got older, collections of fairy tales still drew me, and I continued to gather them myself, up until my most recent purchase: *Andersen’s Fairy Tales*, from the Greenfield Library Book Sale this past fall.

As I’ve gotten older and spent less time in the company of children, my storytelling habits have begun to fade away. It is simply not a frequently used skill in the modern world, this type of communication that is not simply reciting what others have written, nor inventing something new yourself. Oral tradition is a medium between the two, a way of finding your own place in a story that has been told for hundreds of years before you were born.

And though my habits have waned, my interest has not. Folk and fairy tales reveal remarkable things about human nature. There is comfort in their universality. Stories from one part of the world travel with their tellers, transforming as they make their way through the ages, beloved by people all over the world. Often, stories do not even have to travel: they pop up in different cultures, at different times, of their own accord. They are refreshingly optimistic – the heroes are frequently the underdogs, the unexpected, those who have been underestimated by society. They are the youngest sons, the simple but virtuous, the clever wives and daughters, the peasant who gets to marry royalty. The morals these stories champion are the simple ones, the easily forgettable: be practical, be kind, be generous, be humble. Be good.

Amery, Heather. *Usborne Stories from Around the World*. London: Usborne Publishing Ltd., 2001.

The Usborne collection stories may be told in simple, childish language, but the gorgeous pictures on every page more than make up for it. It contains stories from twenty two different countries, including a clever little tale called The Magic Fish Hook, which tells of how the island of New Zealand was fished up one day by a brave youngest son.

Andersen, Hans Christian. *Andersen's Fairy Tales*. Translated by E. V. Lucas and H. B. Paull. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, Inc.

Hans Christian Andersen is well known for fairy tale classics like The Ugly Duckling, The Emperor's New Clothes, and The Princess and The Pea. My favorite, however, is called The Tinder Box, which features a cunning witch, a clever soldier, and a dog with eyes the size of the Round Tower of Copenhagen.

Appiah, Peggy. *Tales of an Ashanti Father*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989.

Kwaku Ananse, a clever but greedy trickster of a spider, is a famous character in Ghanaian stories; so much so that stories of this kind are known as *anansesem*, or spider tales. In the best, called "How Kwaku Ananse Caught the Python," he tricks a python terrorizing the village into allowing himself to be tied to a tree by claiming that it is necessary in order to measure him.

Asbjørnsen, Peter Christen, and Jørgen Moe. *Norwegian Folk Tales*. Dreyer.

Norwegian folk tales are earthy and irreverent – little tribute is paid to either king or Church. But justice is still present, often in the *askeladden*, or Ash Lad: a boy Cinderella, the kind and honest younger son, who, though underestimated, always prevails. Fearsome Trolls can be defeated through wit and cleverness, such as by the Ash Lad who frightens a Troll by squeezing water out of a rock – or, rather, a ball of cheese.

Asbjørnsen, Peter Christen, and Jørgen Engebretsen Moe. *A Time for Trolls; Fairy Tales from Norway*. Translated by Joan Roll-Hansen. Oslo: Tanum Forlag, 1969.

This second collection of Norwegian tales features more adventures from Askelad, the ash boy, but also includes a favorite: "The Goose Girl," which features a confident peasant girl who is certain she will marry the prince and, through a combination of cleverness, virtue, and a magical talking stone, does indeed.

Bloch, Marie Halun, Ivan Rudchenko, and Maria Lukiyanenko. *Ukrainian Folk Tales*. New York: Hippocrene Books, Inc, 1999.

Translator Marie Halun writes, "Between the reader and the teller of each of these Ukrainian folk tales only two people intervene: the person who recorded the story from a narrator and a translator." These stories are not meant for their moral value, like Aesop's fables – instead, they are simply meant for amusement. The best? "Pán Kotsky": a story about a tiny cat who, entirely

by accident, manages to convince the entire forest that he is the most fearsome animal among them.

Daly, Ita. *Irish Myths & Legends*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

The oldest stories of Ireland come from a set of tales copied by monks in the eleventh and twelfth centuries called the Mythological Cycle. This book contains legends from those early times, as well as stories from three other such cycles. These Irish myths are rich and colorful tales of fairy worlds and famous warriors, but do not shrink away from tragedy: in “The Children of Lir,” a jealous stepmother turns her stepchildren to swans, and though they live in happiness with their father for many years, he dies before they can be turned back.

Djurklou, Baron G. *Swedish Fairy Tales*. Translated by H. L. Braekstad. New York: Hippocrene Books, 1998.

These Swedish stories are straightforward and simple, and often delightfully comic. The most unique is certainly “The Sausage”: a peasant woman who has been granted three wishes asks first for a sausage, but when her husband thinks she has wasted her wish, uses the second to cause the sausage to stick to her nose. But all is not lost, for in a surprisingly sweet ending, he wishes his wife to be rid of the sausage, wasting the three wishes, but finding joy in their now sausage-less existence anyway.

Ford, Nancy K. *Baba Yaga and the Enchanted Ring*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1960.

Baba Yaga, a Russian witch who lives in a hut that stands on two chicken legs and travels in a magic mortar and pestle, is a famous figure who appears in many Russian tales. Sometimes a help, sometimes a hindrance to those who cross her path, she is always a memorable enigma. Though this is only a single tale of a prince who receives help from the fearsome witch, Baba Yaga’s legacy secures its place in my collection.

Grimm, Jacob, and Wilhelm Grimm. *The Complete Brothers Grimm Fairy Tales*. Edited by Lily Owens. New York: Gramercy Books, 1981.

Many of the most famous fairy tales – “The Frog Prince,” “Hansel and Gretel,” “Rapunzel,” “Cinderella” – come from the collection of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. Rejected by critics for being shocking and coarse, these stories have nevertheless remained beloved even to this day. The stories are as varied as can be imagined – the rich, the poor, the good, the evil, human beings, talking animals, even usually inanimate objects (a strange little story called “The Straw, the Coal, and the Bean” feature all three as personified creatures) all appear as characters.

Joynes, Andrew. *Medieval Ghost Stories: An Anthology of Miracles, Marvels, and Prodigies*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2001.

Author Andrew Joynes tells us that medieval ghost stories were different in function from modern ones – told in a time of unquestioning religious faith, these stories were not meant to

instill horror in the listener, or “chill the blood. Rather, they were told to inspire wonder in the mysteries of God and Heaven. Characters in these stories rarely seem to find their ghostly visitors out of the ordinary – though glimpses of divine punishment still strike fear in their hearts!

Lang, Andrew. *The Yellow Fairy Book*. New York: Dover Publications, 1966.

The Yellow Fairy Book is one of a collection of six – each a compilation of fairy tales by authors such as the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen, as well as lesser known tellers. Among the more unknown is “The Donkey Cabbage,” where midway through his adventure, the hero of the story eats a cabbage which has the peculiar effect of turning him into a donkey.

Lurie, Alison. *Fabulous Beasts*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999.

This collection gives almost encyclopedic accounts of various magical animals as though they are as real as pigs and elephants, accompanied by stunning color pictures of each. The classic unicorn, dragon, and Pegasus are featured, as well as more unusual animals, such as the vegetable lamb: called “one of the oddest creatures ever discovered,” the vegetable lamb resembles a sheep, yet grows from the ground on a stem.

Olliver, Jane. *A Treasury of Animal Stories*. New York: Kingfisher Books, 1992.

Jane Olliver’s collection contains stories from Aesop’s “The Hare and the Tortoise” to Rudyard Kipling’s famous explanation of how the elephant got its trunk, “The Elephant’s Child.” Many of these stories endeavor to explain natural phenomena in this way – my favorite is simply titled “How the Polar Bear Became,” and tells of how the beautiful but vain polar bear moves to the North Pole so she’ll never get another speck of dust on her lovely coat.

Phelps, Ethel Johnston. *The Maid of the North: Feminist Folk Tales from Around the World*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1981.

Author Ethel Phelps objects to the predominance of courageous heroes and beautiful damsels too frequently found in traditional stories. So, this collection features stories of heroic and spirited women – women who fight for their children, who choose their husbands, who use their cleverness to escape from those who are trying to hold them, who demonstrate that, as the story “*Gawain and the Lady Ragnell*” says, “what a woman desires above all else is the power of sovereignty – the right to exercise her own will.”

Reeves, James. *Fables from Aesop*. New York: Henry Z Walck, Inc., 1962.

Aesop’s fables are well known among children for their simple animal characters and wise lessons, which praise the humble virtues of practicality, patience, and honesty over heroics. The story goes that they were told by a slave in Greece with the name Aesop, though this will likely never be known for sure. Famous tales include “The Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing,” “Hare and Tortoise,” and “Ant and Grasshopper.”

Robinson, Herbert Spencer., and Knox Wilson. *Myths and Legends of All Nations*. New York: Bantam Books, 1950.

This collection contains an impressive number and variation of tales – featuring tales of the gods of cultures from Greece to India, of the heroes and warriors of the Celts, even of legendary characters from American folklore, such as Paul Bunyan and Johnny Appleseed.

Siddiqui, Ashraf, and Marilyn Lerch. *Pakistani Folk Tales: Toontoony Pie and Other Stories*. New York: Hippocrene Books, 1998.

It is believed by many scholars of folklore, including Jakob Grimm, that many European folktales originated from Indo-Pakistani stories. Many tales in this collection feature the toontoony bird – a clever and resourceful character who is often able to outwit those who stand in his way, such as in “Toontoony and the Barber,” where Toontoony successfully gets a thorn removed from his foot after extracting a long and complicated chain of promises from nearly every person, animal, and inanimate object in the village.