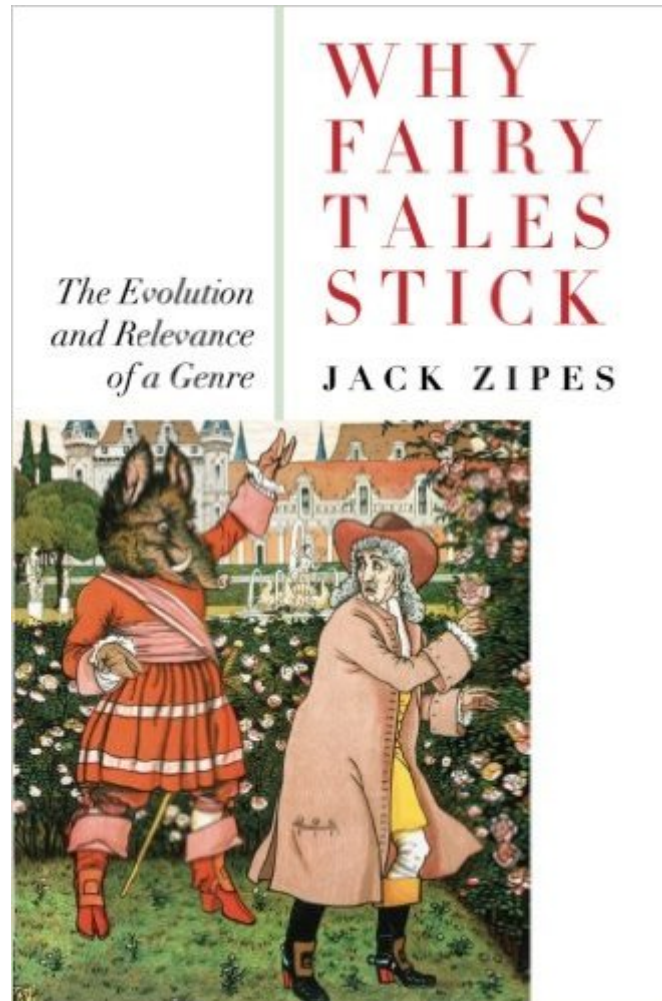


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Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution And Relevance Of A Genre



Synopsis

In his latest book, fairy tales expert Jack Zipes explores the question of why some fairy tales "work" and others don't, why the fairy tale is uniquely capable of getting under the skin of culture and staying there. Why, in other words, fairy tales "stick." Long an advocate of the fairy tale as a serious genre with wide social and cultural ramifications, Jack Zipes here makes his strongest case for the idea of the fairy tale not just as a collection of stories for children but a profoundly important genre. Why Fairy Tales Stick contains two chapters on the history and theory of the genre, followed by case studies of famous tales (including Cinderella, Snow White, and Bluebeard), followed by a summary chapter on the problematic nature of traditional storytelling in the twenty-first century.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book was assigned reading for a children's literature course. It is extremely dense, highly theoretical, and somewhat inaccessible. Unless fairy tales are your life and love, this is not your book. I don't know what the previous reviewer was thinking, but there is no 10 year old I know who would EVER be able to comprehend or indeed care about what Zipes argues in this book. This book would be excellent reading for a Fairy Tales Ph.D. candidate. (BTW, I am a college graduate in English and teacher of English for 13 years, so it's not that I am a disinterested or incapable reader).

Why fairy tales stick is a fascinating question that -- properly probed -- explains much about human cognition. Unfortunately, and this is despite his vast volume of work in the studying fairy tales

themselves, Zipes largely fails in his mission because of his unwillingness to access other areas of study to unlock the fairy mystery. It turns out that science and evolutionary psychology have been brought to bear in helping solve this problem. And what they tell us is that there are many contributing factors to why fairy tales stick with people and why they tend to mythically ideate. One factor is superstition. By reading the works of Stuart Vyse, one can find that superstition is invoked where logical explanations are wanting. For example, at the betting table most people tend to make various pleas to lady luck or their favorite deity. Another factor sort of follows naturally from the first. Once a superstition has been personified it becomes an easy step to attribute to that superstition a "theory of mind." In other words, just as we speculate on the motives of those we know, we attribute motives to our illusionary personified force and act in ways to placate those motives. According to Pascal Boyer, who has studied why people religiously ideate, a religious component can be added when our personified force is attributed omniscience and omnipotence. Or alternatively, if denied of omniscience or omnipotence, our personified force can merely be something unique...like a cat that can turn invisible or a person who survives death. In each case, the characters are memorable because they defy our usual expectations of cat and human behavior. To the extent that fairy tales often involve these characters we have a partial explanation for why they "stick." However, they are also memorable for the situations they create. Like watching a good movie can take one to another place and time and tease out expectations of human relations, the same occurs in fairy tales. Far from being a mere diversion these case studies give us the vital opportunity to imagine what would happen if we were to be in the same situation. In other words, we do not need to actually go there to know what being there is like. But honestly, the story is still being filled in and thanks to psychologists like Steven Pinker and V.S. Ramachandran we are still learning much about the fascinating ways our minds cognate and why not only fairy tales but other things stick as well. So in short, you can read this book but your time would probably be better spent reading the other authors mentioned in this review.

My older classroom kids love this one as they find out where their favorite fairy tales come from. This should be read under adult supervision for those under the age of 10.

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