

American History and Fairytale Structure
in *Illusions: A Collection of American Fairytales*

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SEARCH Competition

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Fairytales encompass compelling themes and bizarre elements, exist primarily as archetypes yet vary widely from culture to culture, and contain very little character development. Still fairytales clutch my imagination and refuse to let go, in part because of the possibility entrenched in the actions and motivations of characters that are never fully explained.

Investigating the differences in tales by the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Anderson, Andrew Lang, Charles Perrault, and others intrigues me, and as this collection of stories grew, I availed myself many times of the Aarne–Thompson Tale Type Index, which, as Alan Dundes has said, is one of the “most valuable tools in the professional folklorist's arsenal of aids for analysis” (195).

In *Illusions*, a collection of stories both long and short, I take fairytales and situate them in different regions and time periods of America to see what the new historical and cultural context adds to the story. Some tales contain fantastic elements, such as magic; some merely follow the fairytale’s plot. Depending on the story, I sometimes remain loyal to the familiar beats of the fairytale, and other times may only borrow themes and loosely attach the tale to my story. After explaining my writing process, I will detail some of the research involved with crafting and compiling this collection.

Every story’s writing process is different, and I love each one because of the great magic of discovery involved. In some stories, it may be more difficult to find the fairytale, which is my hope. The moment of realization in readers’ faces as the last piece of evidence clicks into place makes the writing process worthwhile. The idea of my collection of stories based on fairytales germinated four years ago with an assignment to retell a fairytale. At the time, I was enamored

with black and white movies, especially noir detective films; the color scheme of black and white meshed perfectly with Snow White's traditional description: "skin as white as snow, lips as red as blood, and hair as black as ebony." The fairytale fed off the thirties and forties atmosphere in my mind, and I wrote the first draft of "The Bolt Hole." It progressed through several drafts over the years, and during a rewrite, the idea of Snow White and winter somehow melded with the Greek myth of Persephone, giving new life to the story and the resulting vigor I needed to turn it into what is now the final version of the story.

This has been a consistent pattern for most of my stories. Any film, literature, or time period that I have recently ingested becomes fodder for my work; no one creates in a vacuum. Often it takes a good period of time to finish a story —though there are exceptions, such as "A Way to the Water," for which I wrote a complete first draft in one sitting. When I start writing, I usually have a main character and setting in mind, and the fairytale provides a plot outline that I can either cling to or discard as needed.

Only two stories have given me enough trouble that I have begun them several different ways and later abandon the drafts —those being "Fertile Soil, Barren Ground" and "Allie, Aureoled." "Fertile Soil" was first conceived as a story about a girl who sleepwalks, based on the Sleeping Beauty story. The male love interest, taking on a more anti-hero role, would be a housebreaker that would encounter her during the night, and together they would discover the reason for her sleepwalking, the analogous "curse." I wrote two or three versions of the story this way, but they never went anywhere. The story felt unconvincing, and I couldn't adapt the Sleeping Beauty plot well enough to suit my needs —the princess character from the fairytale didn't have enough agency. After letting the story rest for a good three months, I decided to keep my prologue of two children meeting in a garden and scrap the rest of my preconceived ideas,

hoping that if I understood them well enough, my characters would create their own plot. Sure enough, as soon as I realized that my male character was angry because of the events of that day in the garden, I knew he would use the source of his anger to gain monetary retribution through Rosalind Lee. To accomplish that, he would need to kidnap her from her home. The removal from the house jumpstarted my narrative, and the new setting offered exciting possibilities for Sleeping Beauty themes, if not the plot itself. The rest of the story fell into place magnificently.

“Allie, Aureoled” presented a more difficult challenge to work with, primarily because the story I wanted to adapt, *Alice in Wonderland*, did not have a logical plot structure that I could follow. I was left with themes, characters, and half-formed ideas about four men in a smoky pool hall while a little girl wandered around Las Vegas at night, protected by a shadowy figure. The story remained five pages long for nearly a year until I read *The Things They Carried* for a history class. Right away, I knew several things: first, that my eight-year-old girl was half Native American; second, that her father was in Vietnam; and third, that he was going to die. This gave me a reason for Salem, the protective figure no one else can see. It also gave the hospital setting plausibility, because if she claimed to see and hear invisible people, adults would think something was the matter with her. In doing this, however, I wanted to make it clear that while there are definite spiritual elements to the story, the possibility of possession or the need for practices such as such as exorcism (since I made her mother Catholic) was not an option. Thus, I wrote a scene with Allie, her mother, and a hospital chaplain where they discuss the nature of Salem and rule out any negative spiritual forces, consigning her to purely medical treatment. I was able to bridge my new ideas with the old and create a complete narrative, though many scenes were added as the story grew.

When writing, I focus on the fairytale and the story and research for the setting as I write; I do not consider my stories to be historical fiction in the full sense of the term. My goal is to give a new and different perspective on old familiar tales, and the historical setting allows me to do that. In some stories, it may be more difficult to find the fairytale, which is my hope. The moment of realization in readers' faces as the last piece of evidence clicks into place makes the writing process worthwhile. However, I do delve into the time period and research lesser-known pieces of information for my stories.

A sampling of the kind of historical research I have done for this collection includes consulting maps of Natchez, Mississippi when writing "A Way to the Water," a Little Mermaid retelling with a dash of Princess and the Pea. I looked into articles and accounts of its occupation during the Civil War, particularly "Occupied Natchez, Elite Women, and the Feminization of the Civil War." In addition, I investigated the Native American population in that area, when they had been forced to migrate, and to where.

Before writing "Salt Water Heart," a reversed Little Mermaid story, I took a day trip to Galveston and went to the beach. I also visited the Galveston Pier 21 Theater and watched the documentary *The Great Storm*, which chronicled the 1900 Galveston Hurricane. Interested in learning more, I read *Isaac's Storm* by Erik Larson, the story of Isaac Cline's involvement in the 1900 Hurricane. While writing the story itself, I learned many facts about sharks to incorporate into the narrative.

"Fertile Soil, Barren Ground" is only loosely based on Sleeping Beauty, but I decided to use the themes of being "asleep" and "awake" and flip them on their head in this story. I investigated turn-of-the-century American culture, women's colleges, Southern breakfast food,

and taxonomy for this piece, as well as refreshing my knowledge of biology and Gregor Mendel's influence on heredity and plant hybridization.

"Green Lights over Flooded Waters," a hodgepodge of Rumpelstiltskin and will o' the wisp stories, required me to investigate North Carolina, its geography, and its counties to discover the best place to situate my story. Though I ended up fictionalizing the town, I did decide to house it somewhere within Clay County. I hunted high and low for any references to will o' the wisps and other names for such phenomenon, and I also plumbed my family's knowledge of quilts and quilt patterns to add verisimilitude to the details.

"The Bolt Hole," a Snow White retelling, required a dip into Noir detective fiction, fashion, and Jewish-American culture during 1938, for which a friend of mine provided me with a good deal of history and first-hand experience. I also dipped into the world at large to discover what foreshadowing of World War II would have been visible to Americans willing to see them.

For the story "Thanksgiving," based on multiple incarnations of the fairytale Little Red Riding Hood, I investigated train lines that would have run from New York to Vermont during 1939 and what stops they would have made along the way, as well as pictures of New England in November and period appropriate clothing. I also discovered that FDR moved Thanksgiving one week earlier during that year, which ended up suiting my story fabulously.

For "Allie, Aureoled," an Alice in Wonderland story, I drew on my knowledge of the Vietnam War from my class War in American Memory, HIS 311, and the book *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien. I also pulled from my class The United States in the 1960s, HIS 316, to understand my character's minority status, the turbulent decade she would have just exited prior to the events of the story, and the aesthetic of the sixties and coming seventies. In addition, I searched for pictures of the Las Vegas Strip since I have never been there, delved into Paiute

stories and legends, and made sure that I was not widely breaching any theological ideas concerning angels.

Thus, *Illusions* is a marriage of fairytale archetypes to the American landscape and its history. I have found that one complements the other so well I had not thought it possible. This particular combination fairytale and real history has not been explored at all that I know of, or at least not fleshed out in the style I have described. I believe that this collection is original and unique, bringing the relationship of history and story into a new light.

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