



Happy Ever After: an interview with Hilary McKay

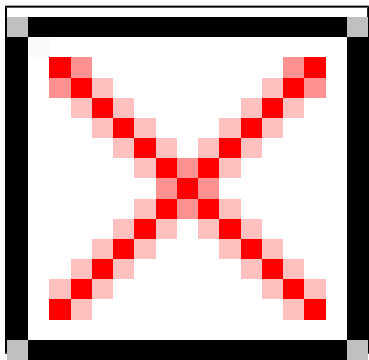
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Hilary McKay on her new collection of fairy tales

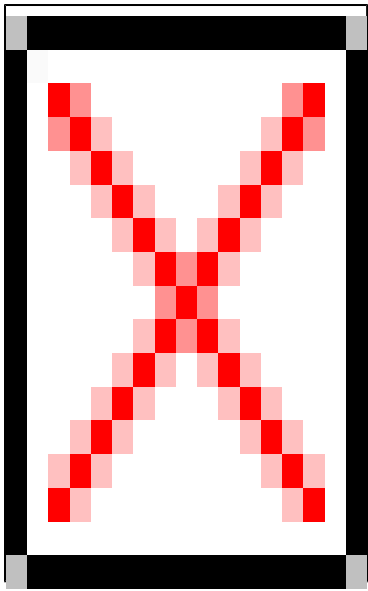


Hilary McKay's new book is a sparkling collection of fairy tales, retold with all her trademark liveliness, insight and compassion. She's already proved her ability to breathe new life into a familiar story with a wonderful sequel to **A Little Princess**, **Wishing for Tomorrow**, and her own novels, from **The Exiles** to the **Casson family saga** and **Binny** series have touches of magic and fairy tale throughout. No wonder then that when Macmillan asked her if she would like to do some fairy tale retellings, it seemed like being invited on holiday. She said yes right away.

'I think I knew fairy tales before I knew books', Hilary says. 'I was the oldest of four children and my father was a great storyteller. As a child it seemed I never saw him without a baby on his knee. He would say 'Once upon a time' and begin a fairy tale. The child would fall asleep after two minutes but he would always wind the story onto the end. So I suppose I had fairy tales from before I could speak, we all did.' These days Hilary lives in Derbyshire, in the heart of what she describes as 'fairy tale landscape'. 'I've got forest all around and I work for the Wildlife Trust so am in ancient woodlands a lot of the time, usually on my own or with the dog. You hear it go quiet in the evening or you hear the alarm calls calling off around you, and you think to yourself 'There's something here!' But what is here is you, you are the scary thing in the wood. It's easy to let your imagination go.'

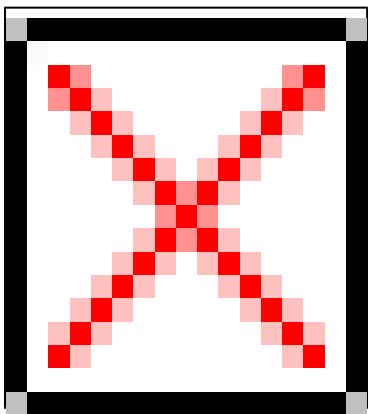
How did she choose the ten fairy tales that are included in the book? 'I found it quite difficult. I didn't want tales by anybody named, Hans Christian Andersen for example, and I wanted to stick to western European fairy tales, to what was familiar. I didn't want anything too 'Disneyfied' if I could help it. And then I asked my friends what they liked too so there are one or two that I would not have chosen for myself: *The Twelve Dancing Princesses*, which I found very hard to do, with all those princesses and the chopping off of heads. I put my own favourites in: I put *Rumpelstiltskin* in and *The Swan Brothers*.'

Readers of Hilary's collection will be struck by the very fresh approach she brings to the stories, telling them from unusual



viewpoints, revisiting the protagonists later in their lives. In her version of *Rumpelstiltskin* for example, we experience the story from Rumpelstiltskin's point of view: she makes him a hob, 'Root dark, reed thin, perhaps half the height of a man, perhaps less. A plain, scuttling hob with a husky, piping voice', and in her version, hob and child are together at the end of the story. 'I always thought he was very badly treated, and that me might not have been evil, and he wasn't in my story. After all the adults in the story aren't very admirable - the king for example, who takes the miller's daughter he's not really a decent character, taking in a young girl like that for money, and she was very naïve. I thought the child would be as well off with the hob as anybody else so I changed it a little bit and I gave him a voice.'

As for *The Pied Piper*: 'I told the story through the true villain' she says: 'The one who caused all the trouble though he always seems to get away with it in every retelling. He got away with it in mine but I hope his conscience pricked him ...'. Her version of *The Swan Brothers* is from the point of view of the youngest brother who was left with the swan wing: 'I thought he would always have a yearning for flight again'. Her *Rapunzel* is extremely moving: Rapunzel now grown up, settled with her prince and mother to two happy children, still feels a prisoner of the tower until a little bird - a yellowhammer - shows her the way to freedom, 'And so then they all lived happily. Ever after.'



Why does she think fairy stories remain so powerful? 'I think because they are such clear structures. A while back my daughter rang up from university and she said 'I've changed my name on Facebook, I'm using grandma's name for a little while. I met a wolf in the forest' - actually she said I met a man in a nightclub - and I should never have told him my name.' I thought well, you did what Red Riding Hood did and Rumpelstiltskin mixed together, you gave your name away and then wished you hadn't and tried to cover your tracks; Wolf was always a two legged wolf even from the beginning. So yes, I think they're very relevant, we still have children who don't have enough to eat even though they're not abandoned in the forest (though I think our government almost would). Hansel and Gretel were taken away because there was not enough food in the house, it was disgraceful; in my version Gretel was still trying to make sense of the shock of it all but I think there are children today who could relate to that.'

'There's a lot of my own pleasure went into these stories I have to say. The thing about fairy tales is that they give you a very clear map, you can retrace the journey and find all sorts of things along the way and that's what I let myself do.' There's a huge amount of pleasure for readers in this collection too, and it deserves a place on every bookshelf.

Hilary McKay's Fairy Tales is published by Macmillan Children's Books, 978 1 4472 9228 9, £12.99. Illustrations throughout by Sarah Gibb.

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