



Classics in Short No. 134 The strange fate of Rip Van Winkle

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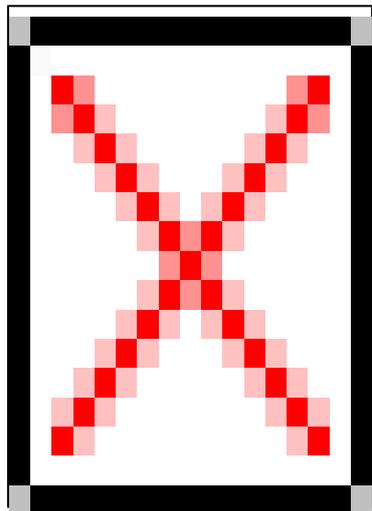
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The fairies

employ several techniques in anaesthetising those so fortunate or unfortunate as to encounter their ministrations. Look at the famous Sleeping Beauty (originally known as *La Belle au Bois Dormant*). Pricked on the finger by a spindle she not only fell asleep for a hundred years but carried the denizens of the castle with her, all of whom were isolated behind a giant hedge of immediate growth. When eventually the spell was lifted everything came to life again. The dinner started cooking (a bit off, I imagine), the kitchen boy caught the clip round the ear that he was due a hundred years before, and the princess was ashamed that her accoutrements were no longer in the height of fashion.

Things were different

with the little girl in the manuscript story from Wilhelm Grimm, converted into **Dear Millie**, the picture book by Maurice Sendak. The fairy is the unlikely figure of St Joseph who looks after the girl, escaping from a war, for three days; when she returns to her mother she is still a girl but thirty years have passed.

And Rip Van Winkle

was in similar case but not quite the same. He was a lackadaisical householder living in a New Amsterdam settlement up in the Catskill Mountains and he was at the mercy of a termagant wife for his undomesticated ways. Rather than manage his farm he liked to gossip with comrades under the rubicund portrait of His Majesty George the Third round the pub,

while to escape 'the enduring and and all-besetting terrors of the woman's tongue', he would wander off with his dog Wolf fishing the local streams or shooting squirrels.

On one such expedition

he found himself in a little known gully where he was surprised to be accosted by name by 'a short, square-built old fellow, with thick bushy hair and a grizzled beard, who was bearing a heavy keg of liquor. Rip, who was a friendly chap, offered help and the two of them ended up in 'a hollow like a small amphitheatre' where there was a group of solemn and similarly clad old gents, playing at ninepins. They refreshed themselves with the contents of the keg, which were also much to the liking of Rip, and before long he could not help it but slumber overtook him.

Thus it was

that when he awoke next day, as he thought, he found himself in somewhat changed circumstances. Wolf had vanished and it seems that the ninepin players had made off with his rifle, replacing it with a rusty and useless matchlock. What was worse, when he made his way home he found himself in a village and among people whom he could not recognise and who regarded with suspicion this decrepit long-bearded stranger who, since it was Election Day, was unwilling to commit himself to being either a democrat or a federalist. Nor was help to be had at the pub which had changed into a new but rickety building, named 'the Union Hotel' with the rubicund King George renamed the General Washington. Unlike Wilhelm Grimm's little girl, both he and the world around him had been transformed through the twenty years of his sleep.

Rip Van Winkle

arrived on the scene in 1819-20 in a two-volume collection of essays by the American author Washington Irving, writing under a pseudonym as **The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent**. The story was twinned by a second one, **The Legend of Sleepy Hollow** and they were in fact written in England where Irving was living at the time. Although first published in America they were quickly followed by a London edition which Irving published to protect his British copyright.

Although his tale

was not written specifically for children, its folktale theme placed it firmly within the canon and it may be seen as the first American work to achieve a classic status in the children's literature of that country. Its comparative brevity allowed for publication as a single, often substantially illustrated volume, one of the earliest notable editions being produced as an artistic 'table book' with etchings by F.O.Darley.

Undoubtedly though

its most famous presentation was as a trend-setting example for the fashionable Edwardian 'gift-books'. As such, it also saw the arrival of Arthur Rackham in full fig as a picture-book artist, exhibiting the failings of 'art' in the role of illustration. To begin with the whole affair was an exercise in the making of a book to be treasured for its fancy rather than its literary qualities, being offered in short-run, large-paper editions, signed by the illustrator and with bindings de luxe. In addition though the multiple colour plates, were printed by the new method of three- or four-colour separations. These required the use of a glossy paper and they were mounted on a thicker paper-stock and divorced from the story in a bundle at the end of the text. There is no denying the brilliance of Rackham's draftsmanship, evident as stunningly in his pen drawing as his over-detailed colour work. But he has lifted poor old Rip out of his unpretentious rural fastness into the drawing rooms of the gentry.

Brian Alderson is founder of the **Children's Books History Society** and a former Children's Books Editor for **The Times**. His book **The Ladybird Story: Children's Books for Everyone**, The British Library, 978-0-7123-5728-9, £25.00 hbk, is out now.

Rip Van Winkle and Other Stories is published by Puffin Classics, 978-0141330921, £6.99 pbk

Rip Van Winkle illustrated by Arthur Rackham is published by Pook Press, 978-1447449553 £17.99 hbk

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