

# Fairy Tale Characters Breathe New Life

## A Fantasy Book Club Approach for Tweens

Rita Soltan

**T**raditional fairy tales hold a nostalgic place in many a tween's literary experience. From the numerous picture book versions of the Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault, to the more popular, less literarily faithful Disney films, these stories, more often than not, are an introduction to the realm of fantasy literature for children.

Based on numerous sociological and psychological studies, children between the ages of five and ten are the prime audience of literary fairy tales, concludes well-known fairy tale expert Jack Zipes.<sup>1</sup> Children at this stage of development enjoy these stories for their magical elements, sense of justice, triumphs of good over evil, easily defined characters and plot, and clear-cut themes relatable to their own experiences.

In the elementary years, "the child becomes an intensely moral creature, quite interested in figuring out the reasons of this world," said child psychiatrist Robert Coles.<sup>2</sup> Fairy tales and their motifs of transformation, magical objects and powers, trickery, and wishes help children identify with their sense of poetic justice and provide a straightforward understanding of right and wrong. Coles asserts that the stories children have heard and read about featuring characters who struggle for the good while contending with the bad—in both adventurous and perilous situations—encourage them to wonder even more about ethical issues.<sup>3</sup> As children enter the tween and early teen years, their imaginative consciousness is overcome by their need to socialize, strive for independence, and cope in a realistic world. However, the fantasy in traditional literature serves as a vehicle for young people's growing awareness and a way to communicate some of life's deepest truths.<sup>4</sup> And for children with limited knowledge of classic fairy tale stories, exposure to this form of literature is all the more important for their overall development.

Over the last few years, the traditional fairy tale has been redefined and retold into a more detailed, more developed fantasy children's and young adult novel. Such authors as Robin McKinley and Donna Jo Napoli have taken the basic flat, stock fairy tale character and constructed complete personalities dealing with both psychological and sociological issues. These

books are set within historical and realistic frameworks, and they maintain a minimal element of the original fantasy.

Making the transition from fairy tale to fantasy requires the development of characters faced with particular situations or concerns who ultimately must rely on their initiatives to solve or work through a conflict. The traditional flat fairy tale protagonist challenged with a problem usually prevails through some sort of magical intervention, whereas the round, well-developed character in a novel displays a level of growth or understanding through the actions, consequences, and progress of the story. These fairy tale-based novels portray dynamic characters whose relationships, thoughts, feelings, endeavors, and behaviors provide the reader a certain amount of intrigue and realism in an unreal world.

Engaging upper elementary and middle school readers in the discussion of themes developed around the basic framework of the classic stories through character analysis and comparison of versions is not only a way to revisit the stories within a new context, but a venue for encouraging critical thinking and interpretive thought. While most will bring their own recollection and prior knowledge of the tales to the club, it is a good idea to begin by reading the version from a time-honored collection, such as that of Joseph Jacobs, the Brothers Grimm, or Charles Perrault.

Choosing a picture book or illustrated conventional retelling also will reintroduce children to the basic story outline, characters, and overall theme. In addition, the attention to the artwork



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will incorporate a visual and aesthetic component to the program. Working with these versions first will give these budding adolescents the opportunity to explore the various characters, points of view, way things turned out for the characters, and why they thought the events happened as they did.

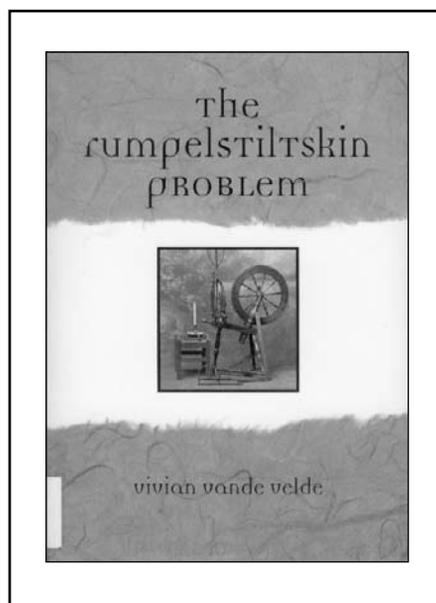
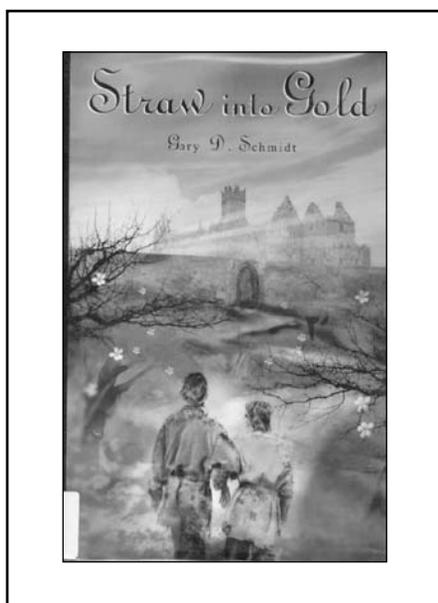
Experiencing the concept of character analysis and the ability to make connections between the various texts are other positive parallel possibilities through discussion. Spreading the discussion sessions for the fairy tale and fantasy novel chosen over a series of two or three meetings will allow for a complete review, appraisal, and interpretive study of all the books chosen for each basic tale.

While schools and after-school centers have built-in audiences for a series of meetings, public libraries can adjust this format in a regular monthly book club program by meeting two or three

ample time (several days or a week to read alone) before returning for the second meeting.

### Meeting #2:

1. Discussion might include original language, story outline, and characterization.
2. Comparison with earlier read picture book versions. What do illustrations add to the original story?
3. Introduction of the novel chosen by booktalking the protagonist's concerns, themes presented, setting, or time period author has chosen.
4. Distributing copies of the novel and allowing three to four weeks for reading before reconvening for a third meeting.



times within a six- to eight-week period. Successful fantasy discussion groups can be offered three to four times per year or seasonally with separate registration and publicity.

A typical book club outline for three related meetings might include:

### Meeting #1:

1. Reading aloud of one or two picture book or illustrated versions of the traditional fairy tale.
2. Comparing illustration style, language, and author's or illustrator's retelling and interpretation.
3. Introducing information from an annotated collection of classic tales that may offer insight to the originator's telling.
4. Offering the traditional, original telling by presenting copies from an authoritative collection, allowing participants

### Meeting #3:

1. The group should be ready to discuss the novel chosen through interpretive questions you have prepared. These should be designed around ideas presented in the novel that lend themselves to analysis rather than evaluation or factual content. You may work from one prevalent question, issue, or concept and then cluster several related questions surrounding the main one. This will allow for varied opinions, none being right or wrong.
2. An evaluation of the novel and its author's development of theme and characters, as well as conflict and resolution, might be included.
3. Comparisons of all versions chosen and authors' and illustrators' renditions.
4. Finally, a new fairy tale may be chosen and introduced for a new round of meetings.

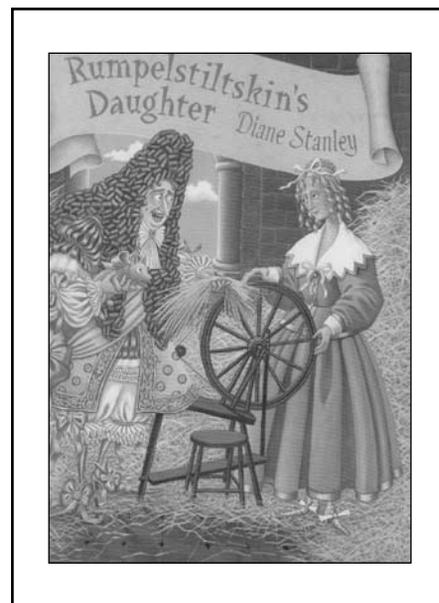
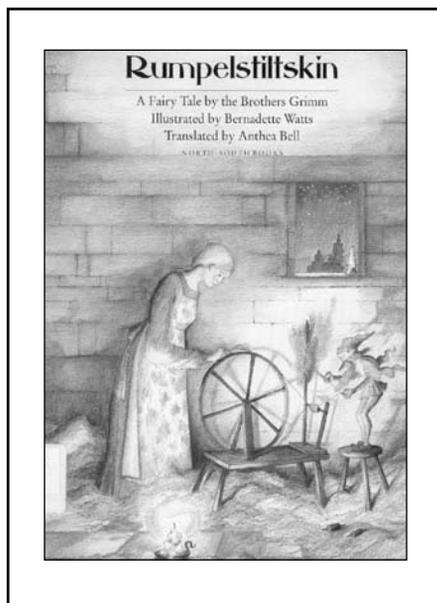
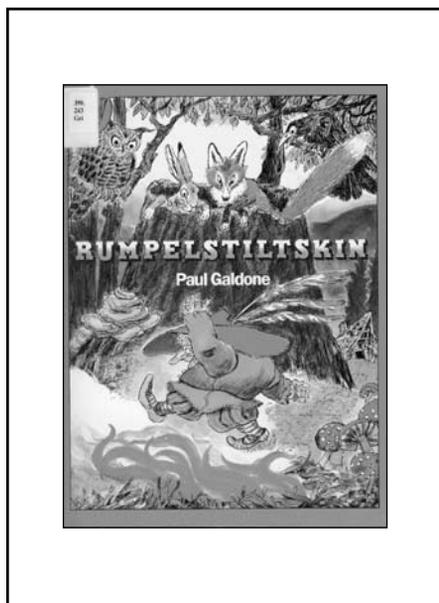
Emerging tweens may be introduced to a fantasy book club with Napoli's novelizations of the traditional *Jack and the Beanstalk* and *The Frog Prince* in her easily read *Crazy Jack* (Delacorte, 1999) and *The Prince of the Pond* (Dutton, 1992). Two excellent versions of the *Jack and the Beanstalk* traditional story to begin with are Steven Kellogg's 1991 rendition (Morrow) or the 1983 depiction by Lorinda Bryan Cauley (G. P. Putnam's Sons). Kellogg's comically expressive paintings delineate and extend the original story told by Jacobs, while, as he asserts in his author's note, keeping the retelling "faithful to the spirit of Joseph Jacobs's language."<sup>5</sup>

Cauley, with her fanciful, more old-fashioned grainy paintings of an English village, maintains the classic storyline within a more modern parlance. Matt Tavares's newly illustrated ver-

Interestingly, Napoli's Jack behaves in much the same way as the Jack recorded by Benjamin Tabart in *The History of Jack and the Bean-Stalk* (1807), destined to avenge his father's death by the swindling and murderous giant, noted in Tatar's *The Annotated Classic Fairy Tales*.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, discussion focusing on *The Prince of the Pond* may begin with two illustrated versions. *The Frog Prince or Iron Henry*, illustrated by Binette Schroeder and translated by Naomi Lewis (North-South Books, 1989), with its evocative, full-page dramatic paintings, is a faithful rendition to the Grimms' original that appeared in *Children's and Household Tales* (1812).

A more comically portrayed, albeit content-accurate, retelling is Edith Tarcov's version illustrated with the signature-style



sion of Edith Nesbit's 1908 retelling of *Jack and the Beanstalk* (Candlewick, 2006) offers expressive language mirrored by the animated faces of a gleefully adventurous Jack and a dangerously enraged giant drawn in soft, dark shades of green and brown pencil and watercolors.

A read aloud of one of these versions as an introduction before allowing participants a chance to read over the original story in a Jacobs collection, such as in the 1967 Dover Publications edition *English Fairy Tales*, will help acquaint children to the original narration more easily before moving to Napoli's novel. Here, Jack is portrayed as a son whose obsessive love for a father following his mysterious disappearance into the clouds torments him with guilt. Unable to accept his father's death, and determined to rescue him from an unknown fate, this Jack climbs his beanstalk and discovers a world filled with treasures that turn to normal eggs, beans, stones for building, and an ordinary lyre once he returns to his barren farm. *Crazy Jack*, as he is viewed by his worried mother and his lifelong love, Flora, works through his emotional issues to develop a new existence filled with continued sustenance and sweet companionship.

cartoons of James Marshall (Four Winds, 1974). From these, translations in two excellent collections by either Ralph Manheim or the classically illustrated one by Arthur Rackham, translated by Mrs. Edgar Lucas, can be added to the second meeting of the discussion program.

Finally, Napoli's complete creation of the prince's predicament following his transformation from man to frog brings a totally different perspective to the story, told through amphibious logic. Yet the human aspects of family, love, and loyalty play against the natural behaviors of the frogs and tadpoles that the prince must now interact with in the pond. And, as Tatar also points out, the additional element of transformation and how it is used within the context of how one's feelings can be changed coupled with the symbolic use of animal metamorphosis may also be considered in the discussion.<sup>7</sup>

*Rumpelstiltskin*, a fairy tale told in many different countries, has been puzzling in terms of the unexplained reasons for the troll's paradoxical actions that both help and threaten the Queen's predicament before and after the birth of her child.

The choices are plentiful for adaptations and recreations of the sprite Rumpelstiltskin, portrayed within a plethora of scenarios, from an evil, wizardly, dwarf-like figure to a caring father figure. The sex of the king and queen's first child is unspecified by the Brothers Grimm, leaving modern-day authors the liberty of building their novels around a chosen gender for the much-coveted offspring.

An adventurous quest well-suited to middle school readers, *Straw into Gold* by Gary D. Schmidt (Clarion, 2001) is played out by two boys—blind and abused Innes and Tousle—who are mystified by the challenge the king has imposed. Tousle is ordered to solve a certain riddle within seven days and either save the lives of a group of rebellious peasant citizens or lose his own. Schmidt adds intrigue and suspenseful excitement with a fatherly, gnome-like character, a banished queen, a persistently perilous chase by the king's henchmen, and the possibility that one of these boys may be the kidnapped prince from a decade ago.

Both novel and tale are developed from a basic question requiring a reasonable explanation for Rumpelstiltskin's interest in becoming involved with the future queen's predicament. Why would he want a baby at all, and why provide chances to end his threat? Both carve out different paths, but maintain the prominent themes of deception, greed, love, and betrayal.

Diane Stanley adds a fresh dimension to the fairy tale with her feminist picture book version, *Rumpelstiltskin's Daughter* (Morrow, 1997). She creates a very clever circumstance by allowing her main character, who eventually becomes the greedy king's prime minister, to subversively influence him into providing a means for a sustainable livelihood for his poor subjects. Any of these editions will pair well with traditional retellings, such as those by Paul Galdone (Clarion, 1985), Bernadette Watts (North-South, 1993) or the Caldecott honor-winning Paul O. Zelinsky (Dutton, 1986). Rounding out the discussion for any of the above books with Vivian Vande Velde's *The Rumpelstiltskin Problem* (Houghton Mifflin, 2000) will generate dialogue on character motivation, plot development, and variations of themes explored. Vande Velde's six stories revolve around a sardonic and somewhat disbelieving inquisitive venture into the entire premise behind the original tale.

Novels also have been developed from two familiar legends housed in the folklore section. The recent Newbery Honor book *Whittington* by Alan Armstrong (Random, 2005) is based on the British legend found in the Jacobs collection. Discussion leaders may use the classic adaptation *Whittington and His Cat* (Scribner, 1950) with Marcia Brown's Caldecott Honor linoleum cuts, or the newest rendering, *Dick Whittington and His Cat*, by the late Margaret Hodges (Holiday House, 2006) illustrated with whimsical paintings by Melisande Potter, as an introduction to the legend. Armstrong's novel will serve tween boys and girls equally well as a mixed genre fantasy told within the context of two intertwining realistic subplots, one historical, the other contemporary. Armstrong blends themes, settings, and characters to a richly deep fusion of simple animal and farm life with the wondrous adventures of a medieval heroic benefactor.

The German legend *The Children of Hamelin*, recorded by the Brothers Grimm and popularized in the 1842 Robert Browning poem as *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, has been simply retold by two authors and illustrators. Michele Lemieux (Morrow, 1993) tells a simple version with her brightly colored oil paintings of medieval Germany. The dramatic paintings in Mercer Mayer's more involved edition (Macmillan, 1987) show gruesome scenes of oversized anthropomorphized rats.

Authors Napoli in *Breath* (Atheneum, 2003) and Skurzynski in *What Happened in Hamelin* (Four Winds, 1979) merge plausible science knowledge with the legend's mysterious outcome, creating exciting and adventurous historical fiction. At the center of the story is Napoli's protagonist, Salz, a sickly boy in a world immersed in the superstitious beliefs of witchcraft. Skurzynski creates an orphan named Gast, whose need to escape his serf-like existence fuels his relationship with the powerful piper named Geist.

Skurzynski raises a question of moral and humane behavior as the rats are brutally and viciously killed by the town's children. In both sets of books, an explanation of the difference between fairy tale and legend should be offered, perhaps highlighting a fairy tale's lyrical imaginative style over a legend's historical basis. The subsequent discussion might include the concept of how and why certain events in history are embellished and retold to create legendary figures portrayed as good or evil living under positive or negative circumstances.

Proficient tween fantasy readers of both genders have a choice between two intricately told novel versions of the classic *Beauty and the Beast* tale. McKinley's narrative *Beauty* (HarperCollins, 1978) focuses on the heroine of the story, with two names—Honour, her given name, and Beauty, her nickname. Each name bears certain significance other than the obvious meaning. However, ample opportunity for character analysis is presented through McKinley's first-person narrative describing her heroine's emotional come-around from a homely, plain, fearful girl to one who not only learns to love her Beast for his inner goodness, but also matures into a self-confident young woman.

Correspondingly, an intense, psychological drama is played out in Napoli's *Beast* (Atheneum, 2000), set in ancient Persia. The hero of this story is the ill-fated Prince Orasmyn, transformed by a fairy's punishment and forced to carry out her curse in the body of a lion with the soul and mind of a religious Muslim man. Both novels reflect characterization with attributes of sensitivity, courage, perseverance, and resolve.

Contrasting, comparing, and making text-to-text connections with various versions written originally by Marie LePrince de Beaumont with Hilary Knight's illustrations (Simon & Schuster, 1990), by Charles Perrault in *Perrault's Complete Fairy Tales* (Dodd Mead, 1961), and by Marianna Mayer (Four Winds, 1978) can reflect on how Napoli and McKinley expand the basic theme of the meaning of a person's true beauty through the development of complex, multidimensional personalities.

Comparing artwork of the illustrated editions mentioned above also might indicate interpretations of such beastly visions as Mayer's bear-like rendition versus Knight's almost demonic and devil-like depiction or W. Heath Robinson's earlier pen-and-ink drawings.

The universally portrayed character of Cinderella has been explored throughout the years within a wide variety of cultures. However, two recent novels with the basic thread of the Cinderella theme will bring out a thought-provoking, if not provocative, opportunity for discussion for good readers.

Tatar traces the origin of this tale back to China to a written version from the T'ang Dynasty recorded around 850 A.D. with the principal character named Yeh-hsien.<sup>8</sup> Introducing this discussion unit with the now classic rendition *Yeh-Shen* by Ai-Ling Louie with Ed Young's exquisitely elegant illustrations (Philomel, 1982) will provide tweens with a literary framework for a story they are most familiar with.

Next, the familiar aspects of the story's text may be connected with that of a European traditional retelling, such as the Ruth Sanders edition (Little, Brown, 2002), which incorporates elements of both the Perrault and Brothers Grimm versions.

A second meeting for this widely read and known story should include the reading and discussing of Tatar's annotated printing found in her edited *The Annotated Classic Fairy Tales*. Here, information on the interpretation of various magical elements and the printing of a poetic moral following the story will bring out ideas for discussion and analysis. Readers will be able to make numerous connections between versions, including Disney versions.

With such background information, moving into Napoli's historical novel *Bound* (Atheneum, 2004), based on the Chinese story, will bring this group full circle with a strongly developed novel placing the Cinderella protagonist, Xing Xing, in a situation of virtual slavery. Themes of greed, abuse, human rights, freedom, and the meaning of inner beauty through self-worth will surely be issues of interest.

Shifting to a more European rendition, the latest publication by Diane Stanley, *Bella at Midnight* (HarperCollins, 2006), is an intriguing, medieval-set mystery and adventure involving a peasant-raised girl named Bella, her childhood relationship with Prince Julian, and the subsequent discovery of her true lineage. Strong values demonstrating good character traits of honor, loyalty, and responsibility are intricately woven into this richly told historical novel loosely maintaining the magical qualities of the fairy tale.

With the continual reinterpretation of classic fairy tales, upper elementary or middle school readers can glean new insight into traditional literature and develop an appreciation for literature-based book discussion as they watch their old familiar characters come to life in new, innovative, and provocative portrayals. So bring out those fairy tales and start your fantasy book club for tweens. ☺

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