

RED BALLAD



RED BALLAD

Fairy tales, wonder tales, and old stories have always felt red to me. Perhaps because they are so full of blood. Perhaps because of their age. Linguists Brent Berlin and Paul Kay say that all languages contain words for black and white. If any language contains three words, the third word is red. Or, perhaps these tales are red because of their fire and sex. Someone is always kissing or glowing or cutting open the stomach of a horse. There are teeth and claws and high stakes. You can die. You can come back to life.

Red is a color of chance. It's a color of risk.

Jack Zipes, a fairy tale academic, says that fairy tales are stories of humans adapting to their world or adapting their world to suit their needs with the help of magic. They are stories of innovation and risk.

So, I've begun to wonder: what are the uses of fairy tales now?

Why do we continue to retell them during a time of environmental catastrophe and social crisis? Do they have relevance when our solutions are not magic in any classic sense? Do they have relevance when they rely upon people changing their surroundings as often as changing themselves? Hasn't our whole mistake been the reckless changing of our surroundings? We've mined. We've manufactured. We've conjured packages straight to our doorsteps without thinking—or with the crushing awareness of—the factories, planes, trucks, and boats that make instant gratification possible.

And we keep retelling stories.

So, what follows is a sampling of red in shades and hues and hums. I'm interested in how these stories have changed over time and what we can learn about how our society has changed with them. What magic is here? And what will we do with it?

SNOW - WHITE - FIRE - **R**ED

"Snow-white-fire-red" was first published by American folklorist Thomas Frederick Crane in Italian Popular Tales in 1885. In it, the hero prince is cursed by an ogress to live a marriage-less life until he finds "Snow-white-fire-red." Snow-white-fire-red is a woman trapped in a tower by a different ogress who climbs up her hair every day. The prince and Snow concoct an escape plan involving balls of yarn. They hurl the yarn behind them as they run away. One becomes a mountain, the other "a plain covered with razors and knives," the third a river, and the fourth "a fountain of vipers." Before dying in the fountain of vipers, the ogress curses the prince to forget Snow as soon as his mother kisses him.

That very night, the prince's mother sneaks into his room and plants her wet lips on his doomed cheek. He forgets Snow instantly. Snow stays in town, though. After thinking for several weeks, she decides to dress up two doves and send them to the palace to reenact the story of her escape with the prince. The royal family is charmed by the production—particularly the costuming. They follow the doves back to Snow's house, where the lovers are reunited, and everything ends happily.

This story prompts questions about the nature of morality in fairy tales. "The Little Red Hen," also published around this time, has a clear moral. "Snow-white-fire-red" doesn't. But it does have a sense of morality, of who should win and who should be punished. And, in it, the landscape is magically changed to the advantage of the heroes.

Jack Zipes says that fairy tales were not originally told for children but that they play a role in shaping children's cognition and teaching them "how language and narratives provide access to power or deny access to it." What does "Snow-white-fire-red" teach about what power is accessible or denied?

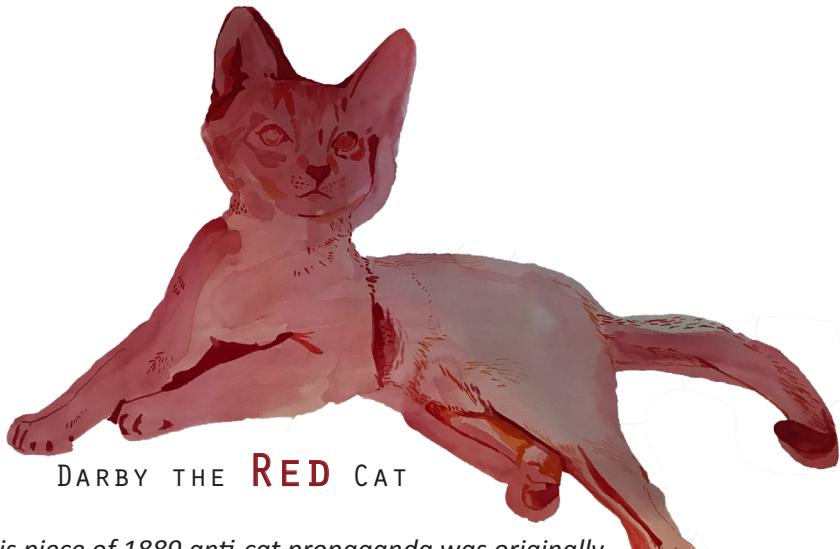


ROSE RED



Roses appear in numerous fairy tales, from "Briar Rose" to "Little Wildrose" to "Snow White and Rose Red." In these stories, roses are wild and threatening. In "Briar Rose" (1812), thorny roses surround a sleeping princess. In "Little Wildrose" (1903), eagles raise a feral human girl. In "Snow White and Rose Red" (1818), Snow White is the quiet, shy sister, while Rose Red loves to run, shout, and play with the local bears. These early tropes continue into contemporary eco-feminist narratives, where unruly environments and unruly femmes are keys to changing the status quo. See also: *Supervillain* *Poison Ivy*.

Fairytale scholar Jack Zipes says, "Fairy tales are preoccupied with removing listeners and readers from the world of reality to provide an alternative world of naïve morality," adding that they "create counterworlds and gain distance from our world of reality so that we can know it as well as ourselves."



This piece of 1889 anti-cat propaganda was originally published in Folk-Lore and Legends: Ireland. It tells the gruesome tale of a cat who wants some boots. Darby the Red Cat's family finds him repugnant and untameable. So, the father arranges his murder on the way to get him fitted for said boots. As the cat lies dying, he screams "twas I that intended to-night to cut the throats of yourself, and your wife, and all your young childer, for the bating you gave me for running away with the Drishahawns!"

Zipes notes that in tales with cats or foxes as heroes, like "Puss in Boots" and its variations, the "active cat/fox exposes the contradictions and pretensions of the upper-class figures." In "Darby the Red Cat," we find a different narrative. Like Puss, Darby is sly, but unlike Puss, his slyness costs him his life. Folklorist Dan Ben-Amos discusses the history of the cat in oral tradition:

"In ancient Egypt, cats were an object of religious belief and ritual... In European countries, cats were stripped from their position as objects of worship in religious cults and rituals, but they retained their supernatural powers. Often they were considered the tangible representation of witches and fairies" (Straparola: The Revolution That Was Not, 2010).

The treatment of sly cats within stories has implications for the treatment of fairies, witches, and women—both inside stories and in daily life. The treatment of cats also has implications for our relationship with the natural world. Are we in competition with other species for scarce resources? Or can we imagine a world of abundant drishahawns?

RED Fox

In magical tales, the fox is a notoriously tricky creature, often characterized as greedy, cunning, and wicked—but also helpful, quick, clever, and kind. Everyone has something to say about the fox. In Aesop's Fables (620 BCE), there are at least fifteen stories featuring foxes. The Jewish author Berechiah ha-Nakdan wrote a collection of 103 "Fox Fables" in Hebrew rhymed prose in the 1200s. In St. Nicholas Magazine's 1875 story "The Gingerbread Boy," a fox eats a cookie who is running away from the woman who baked him. Joseph Jacobs's English Fairy Tales (1890) tells of Mr. Fox, who cuts off a woman's hand to steal her diamond ring.

Folklorist Hans-Jörg Uther in "The Fox in World Literature" compares the fox to other animal tricksters: "the jackal (Africa and Indian subcontinent), the coyote (America), the rabbit/hare (Sub-Saharan Africa, North and Central America), and the red-footed tortoise or jabuti (Brazil)." He calls the fox an ambivalent creature, similar to other animals in this ambivalence. However, Uther also notes that in magic tales, the fox is almost universally grateful and helpful. What is it about the magical tale that makes the fox different? In a time of climate crisis, what role does magic play, and what does it mean to have a grateful fox on our side?





RED APPLE

In fairy tales, apples tempt the heroes into precarious situations that often result in death or all humankind's damnation. (See also: Snow White, Eve, every golden apple ever mentioned.) "Apple" may have referred to many types of fruit, but today, the red apple looms large in our imagining of sin and salvation.

Zipes believes that "storytellers strive to make themselves and their stories relevant." He says that the success of a story is measured by how well it sticks in listeners' minds and if listeners choose to retell it.

Food transgressions occur across old stories as readers see the dangers of eating the wrong thing at the wrong time. In the original Little Red Riding Hood, the girl eats her grandmother, who the wolf has cooked. Tantalus cooks his own son to feed the Greek gods. Only Demeter eats some of the boy, too distraught about losing her own daughter to notice.

What is the nature of food transgressions today? What's dangerous about our food? What's alluring? How might the apple's meaning change in a time of ecological crisis, corporate farms, and rising nationalism? Certain ears and mouths bend towards transgression. Fairy tales communicate alternative social practices. What practices does the apple teach?

THE RED SHOES

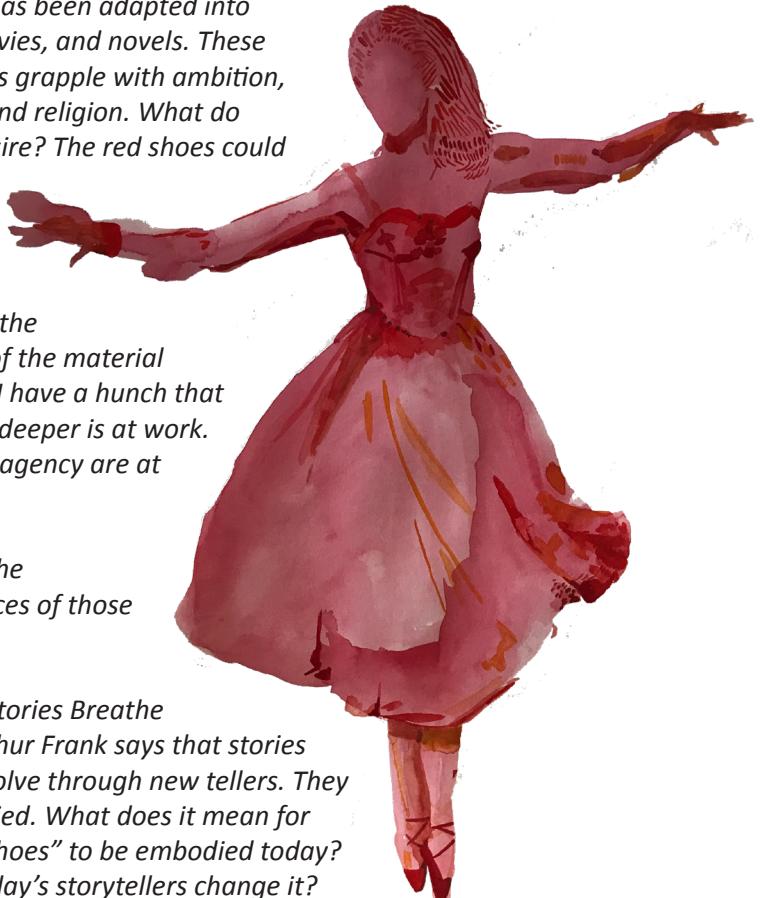
Originally published by Hans Christian Andersen in New Fairy Tales in 1845, “The Red Shoes” deals primarily with the sin of vanity – aka thinking you’re better than God. A peasant girl is adopted by a rich woman and given a beautiful pair of red shoes. Unfortunately, the girl wears the shoes to Church – a vain decision. Church is a place invented to showcase your most unbecoming garments. A mysterious soldier appears and curses the girl. The shoes will remain on her feet for eternity while she dances to her death. Then, to add insult to injury, an angel condemns her to dance even after she dies. The resourceful but regrettably unholy girl finds an executioner to chop off her feet. Even with the shoes gone, she discovers that she still cannot re-enter Church. She prays, finally asking forgiveness for her insubordinate fashion sense, and an angel appears with a bouquet of roses to take her to heaven.

This story has been adapted into ballets, movies, and novels. These adaptations grapple with ambition, sexuality, and religion. What do women desire? The red shoes could

be written off as symbols of the seduction of the material world. But I have a hunch that something deeper is at work. Power and agency are at stake too.

What are the consequences of those desires?

In Letting Stories Breathe (2010), Arthur Frank says that stories live and evolve through new tellers. They are embodied. What does it mean for “The Red Shoes” to be embodied today? How do today’s storytellers change it?

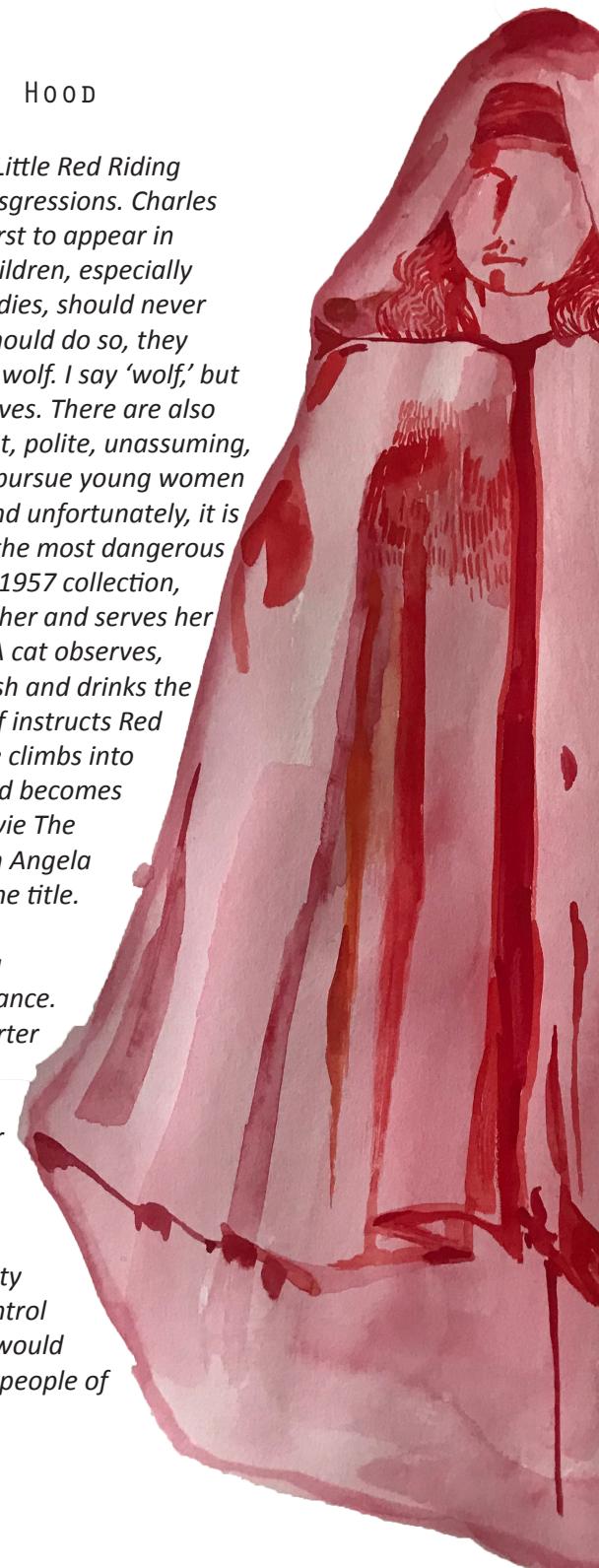


LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD

*From its earliest oral forms, “Little Red Riding Hood” confronted sexual transgressions. Charles Perrault’s 1697 version—the first to appear in print—included the moral: “Children, especially attractive, well-bred young ladies, should never talk to strangers, for if they should do so, they may well provide dinner for a wolf. I say ‘wolf,’ but there are various kinds of wolves. There are also those who are charming, quiet, polite, unassuming, complacent, and sweet, who pursue young women at home and in the streets. And unfortunately, it is these gentle wolves who are the most dangerous ones of all.” In Paul Delarue’s 1957 collection, the wolf sautés the grandmother and serves her steaming meat to Little Red. A cat observes, “A slut is she who eats the flesh and drinks the blood of her granny.” The wolf instructs Red to burn her clothes before she climbs into bed with him. Red Riding Hood becomes a wolf herself in the 1984 movie *The Company of Wolves*, based on Angela Carter’s short story of the same title.*

“Red Riding Hood” might be a manifesto in subversive resistance. As it’s been reimagined by Carter and others, we find ourselves rooting for both Red Riding Hood and the wolves—in other words, for the rebellion of the landscape and the nude.

Is the desire to control sexuality connected to our desire to control our landscape? What stories would wolves and vulnerable young people of all genders tell today?





BLUEBEARD

First published by Charles Perrault in 1697 in Histoires ou contes du temps passé, “Bluebeard” tells the story of a woman whose investigative pugnacity would inspire future legions of girl detectives. While her husband is out of town, she unlocks the door he told her never to unlock and ventures into his psychotic man cave, where he stores his beheaded former wives. Stunned, the woman stumbles back, but not before her dress and the key are permanently stained by blood. For months now, she’s been living with these corpses mere doors away, but now that she knows they exist, she knows that she’ll die.

Is this a red story because of the blood on the key? Or, is this a red story because it is a living story?

She lives, after all. Her siblings rescue her. She inherits the immense wealth of her husband’s castle, wealth that we can only assume has been supplemented by the dead wives’ fortunes.

What does Bluebeard mean in the era of true crime podcasts and police procedurals? In the midst of a pandemic, when staying home might mean being trapped with an abuser?



THE CHAMPION OF THE RED BELT

William Larminie published “The Champion of the Red Belt” in *West Irish Folk-tales and Romances* in 1893. This dismal tale involves a king tucking his two sons in a barrel filled with swords then dropping the barrel in the sea. What can you expect? The sons attach to violence as their primary means of navigating the world. Adopted by another king in another land, they begin their search for their own heritage in the midst of their first killing spree. The deaths in this tale are brutal, and the body count is in the hundreds. At one point, the two heroes start killing people just to get invited to a party. In the end, everyone gets a wife, a kingdom, and a notable belt color.

“The Champion of the Red Belt” is about rich, powerful people continuing to be rich and powerful. Every conflict orbits around heritage. Sons are threats to fathers. Sisters become wives. Alliances are forged and abandoned as characters learn their own history.

It is equally true that everyone in the story is—as fairy tale historian Jack Zipes says—“misfit for the world” and tries to resolve this with various strategies, the most common of which is brute force.

In what ways are we fit or unfit for the world? What strategies do we use?

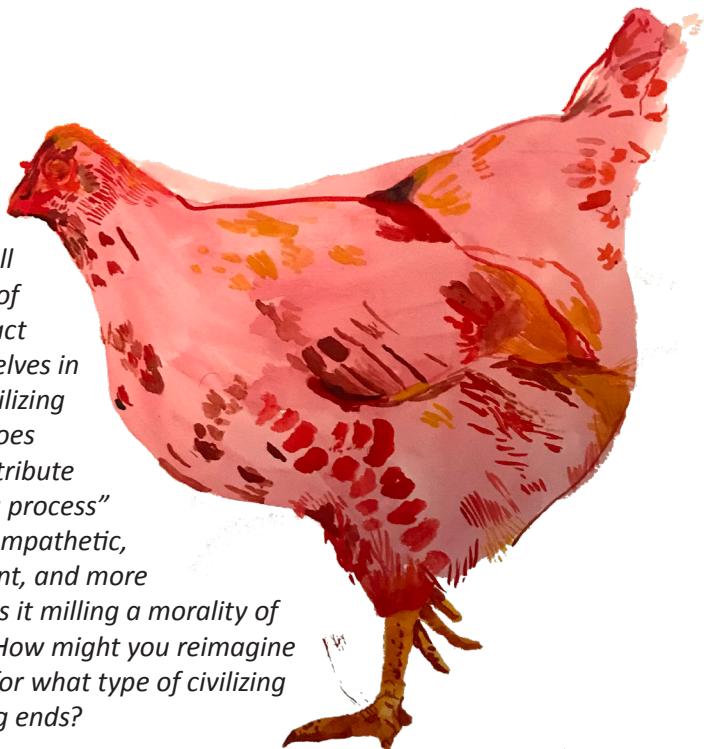
THE LITTLE RED HEN

An industrious little red hen asks for assistance planting wheat. The other animals refuse. She politely asks them for help harvesting, threshing, and milling the wheat. They refuse. She asks for help baking the wheat flour into a single, glutinous monument to labor, and they refuse once more. While the bread is still warm from the oven, she enacts her revenge.

"Who will help me eat this?" she asks, and all of the animals volunteer. Cackling into her sourdough starter, she reminds them of their own laziness and announces that this bread is for her and her chicks alone. With saintly generosity, she notes that next time, if they help, she will bake enough bread for everyone.

Mary Mapes Dodge originally published this fable in St. Nicholas Magazine in 1874. Intended to instill a particular work ethic, it was part of a moralistic trend that would dominate children's literature for decades. Pro-capitalist-anti-welfare versions of the tale exist as well as socialist reconstructions.

Jack Zipes,
a scholar
of magic
tales, says, "All
simple forms of
narrative in fact
weave themselves in
and out of civilizing
processes." Does
this story contribute
to a "civilizing process"
that is more empathetic,
more abundant, and more
generous, or is it milling a morality of
resentment? How might you reimagine
this tale and for what type of civilizing
or un-civilizing ends?



THE SNAKE'S RED BITE

Oh, the slithering viper, the wiggling wyrm, the danger noodle.

It is the snake's bite—its mouth like a purse lined in scarlet satin—that makes these stories undeniably red to me.

In the fable "The Snake and the Eel," an eel notices how similar the two are and asks why eels get hunted while humans avoid snakes. The snake points out that he suffers from a chronic need to survive and a congenital case of sharp teeth, which means anyone who tries to hunt him gets bit.





LITTLE RED BIRD

In this Manx lullaby, a little red bird sings about places she has slept: briars, bushes, and roofs. With a stiff neck and baggy eyes, she wakes each day to a grim and austere world where the vulnerable suffer and you whisper your darkest secrets aloud in your half-slumber. But like the children that might listen to her winsome tune, the bird's optimism is encouraged. Her search ends on a jubilant note. She tells about her last night of sleep, swaddled between two perfect leaves.

Published in Manx Fairy Tales by Sophia Morrison in 1911, this song demonstrates fairy tales' hybrid nature.

Zipes notes that the fairy tale genre continues to survive because of its "hybrid nature and how it continues to borrow from, exploit, and thrive on storytelling innovations based on other simple genres." Fairy tales are the good neighbors of all genres, borrowing sugar from ballads, legends, fables, jokes, rumors, and lullabies.

Can we learn from the hybrid nature of magic tales? Could hybrid magic tales mimic or inspire a resourceful life, a shifting life, a queer life? In the apocalypse, what does a hybrid future look like?

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AND THANKS

*This zine emerged from the collaborative performance project, Red Ballad. It owes a debt of gratitude to the artists involved: Rae Red, Rain, Kim Le, Theresa Columbus, and Maura Dwyer. Jack Zipes' work has also been crucial—particularly *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre* from which all these quotes are taken. My appreciation also extends to the online archives of Project Gutenberg and Google Books. All mistakes are my own.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Grothaus lit her hair on fire with her own birthday candles when she was five years old. She's been smoldering ever since.

