

Victoria University

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The handkerchief of tears

Biographical note:

Sherryl Clark is a children's writer, poet and teacher of creative writing at Victoria University Polytechnic. She has published more than 65 children's and young adult titles, including four verse novels. Her verse novel, *Farm kid*, won the 2005 NSW Premier's Awards Patricia Wrightson Prize for Children's Literature and *Sixth grade style queen (not!)* was an Honour Book in the Younger Reader category of the 2008 Children's Book Council of Australia Awards. She was the supervising editor of *Poetrix* magazine from 1993 to 2013. Her new picture book, *The night tiger*, will be published by Allen & Unwin in 2017.

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Once there was a horrible ogress who was so ugly and mean that tales of her had spread far and wide, and she could not find a single person to serve her. So she stole a little girl away in the night to be her slave. The ogress kept the girl imprisoned in a chain of bones in her tower and threatened her, 'If you try to escape, I'll add your bones to the chain.'

Every morning the girl had to boil water and wash the ogress's putrid feet. Then the ogress would sit by the window and the girl would comb the ogress's long green hair. The hair was full of lice and fleas and spiders and, as the girl combed, they fell to the floor and the ogress ate them.

'Yum yum,' the ogress said. 'Comb harder. I'm hungry.' Each day the little girl combed, and the ogress ate, and the bugs never seemed to be any fewer.

As time went on, the girl became more and more desolate as there seemed no hope of escape. If she wept, the ogress would slap her. Instead each night the girl waited until the ogress was asleep and then she sobbed her heart out. Her tears dripped to the floor and formed puddles that the girl mopped up with her handkerchief. Before she crept to her pallet to fall into an exhausted sleep, she hung the handkerchief out on the window ledge to dry.

Many miles away, past hills and valleys and forests, lived a king who could not cry. He had lost his beloved wife and two children to plague, and his heart was incredibly heavy, so heavy that he could not get out of bed in the mornings, and each day seemed longer than the last.

The only thing that gave him any pleasure was the caged nightingale that had belonged to his wife. The bird would sing so sweetly for him, and his heart would grow ever so slightly lighter, but still he could not cry. One day his grief was so great and heavy that he thought he could no longer go on. He opened the door of the nightingale's cage and said, 'Fly, little bird. You deserve a better life than this.'

The nightingale did not want to leave the king but she knew something had to be done to help him. She flew out of the palace and away on her search, swooping up high and diving down low. She flew east and west, north and south, but she found nothing helpful. Exhausted, she perched high in a fir tree to rest overnight. At dawn she flew on, still searching.

Far to the north, past a dark forest, she spotted a bright white square in the distance. It shone like a daylight star, and she flew towards it. It was the handkerchief, still damp with tears. The nightingale took it in her beak and sped back to the palace. The king was close to death, lying in his bed, barely breathing.

The nightingale dropped the handkerchief by his hand and sang loudly to rouse him. As he struggled to sit up, his hand touched the handkerchief. 'What is this?' he asked, and picked it up. As he held it, he felt the sad, lonely grief of the girl pour out of it. Overcome, he burst into tears, and cried for a whole day and night.

At last, as the sun rose, he felt so light and free of his grief that he was able to get out of bed, dress and go outside to greet his people. They were jubilant to see him recovered,

and crowded around, but he wanted to find out where the handkerchief had come from. He called to the nightingale and asked her.

The bird flew into the air towards the north, then circled back, singing loudly to the king. So the king called for his horse and his sword and set off after the nightingale. She swooped high and low and showed him the way across the hills and valleys and the dark forest to the ogress's tower. As soon as the king saw it, he knew who lived there. He climbed a tree so he could look through the window. He saw the girl in her chains of bone, combing the ogress's green hair. Just a few fleas and lice and spiders jumped out. The ogress slapped the girl hard and shouted, 'Comb faster, comb faster. I'm hungry today!'

The king was so horrified that he almost fell out of the tree. Full of anger, he climbed down and knocked hard on the ogress's door. Because the girl was in chains, the ogress had to answer the door herself. The king was ready with his sword and he cut her head off with one swipe. Then he gently released the girl from her bone chains, one by one, and carried her on his horse to her overjoyed family who had almost given her up for lost.

The king rode back to his palace with the nightingale flying above him. She was never confined in the cage again. He kept the handkerchief close to him, and let his tears fall freely, for the rest of his days.

Research statement

Research background

Fairy tales have been used in therapy with disturbed children for several decades. Studies by psychologists such as Bruno Bettelheim (1976), and more recently Feuerverger (2010) and Hours (2014), among others, indicate that children's unconscious responses to fairy tales can help with recovery and increasing resilience. In the writing of new fairy tales and fantasy, children's writer Susan Cooper (1996) talks about writers opening the 'unbiddable door' (the unconscious) as they create stories that will resonate deeply with readers. Although I am an Australian children's writer, my focus is on Western European fairy tales and their endurance.

Research contribution

This research contributes by taking the use of fairy tales in therapy further and advocating the use of fairy tales with all children, not just those in therapy situations, to encourage the growth of courage and resilience. By writing new tales for contemporary children that incorporate themes currently troubling children in our society, the tales retain their relevance in the 21st century. The writing process I have developed for the creation of new fairy tales helps to access the unconscious of the writer, and could generate a similar response in the reader.

Research significance

'The handkerchief of tears' is one of six fairy tales I have written using a writing process based on accessing unconscious responses to fairy-tale language, symbols and tropes. My process is inspired by Cooper's essay and the principles of free writing. This fairy tale is concerned with the holding-in and expression of grief in our society today, and our inability to deal with mortality. The story follows the structure of traditional tales, and uses similar language and imagery to maintain the feeling of the fantastic and sense of the other world, but one of my aims is to create my own storytelling voice. The first draft came from an exercise using a mother/daughter prompt (Mellon 1992), and I decided in later drafts to keep the female ogress as the villain in order to avoid any suggestion or misreading of paedophilia in the story.

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