

Federation University

Kirstyn McDermott

There is always a next witch: Creative intuition and collaborative female relationships in fairy tales

Abstract:

The antagonism that exists between girls/women in fairy tales has been the subject of much discussion over recent decades. Significantly less attention, however, has been paid to the absence of collaborative female relationships in both traditional fairy tales and their retellings. This paper argues that the cognitive sciences, and schema theories in particular, may offer insights as to why these types of relationships receive such scant representation in contemporary re-visioned fairy tales, which commonly continue to replicate the common narrative dynamic of female acrimony. Following a brief overview of schemas and their operation, the paper examines how story schemas and person schemas might intersect in the unconscious of the creative writer to influence the intuitions that accompany story creation and development. Finally, it is suggested that the adoption of new frameworks through which to critically and reflexively interrogate our tacit storytelling knowledge can result in real cognitive change and subsequent advancements in our creative practice. A case study of the writing of 'Burnt sugar', a novelette the author produced as part of her ongoing PhD research, is presented as an 'in practice' demonstration of the possible effects of schemas upon narrative creation.

Biographical note:

Kirstyn McDermott is a Ballarat-based author of two novels, *Madigan mine* and *perfections*, and a collection of short fiction, *Caution: Contains small parts*. For the past five years she has also been the producer and co-host of a literary critique podcast, *The Writer and the Critic*. Kirstyn is currently undertaking a PhD at Federation University with a focus on collaborative female relationships in re-visioned fairy tales. She can be found online at www.kirstynmcdermott.com.

Keywords:

Creative writing – Fairy tales – Female collaboration – Schema theory

If asked to think about female characters in fairy tales, a number of popular classics spring immediately to mind: Snow White and the Wicked Queen who attempts to murder her; Cinderella, who endures the bullying of her stepmother and stepsisters and is rewarded for her patience; Gretel, who saves her brother by pushing a child-eating witch into an oven. The antagonism among girls and women in fairy tales has been the subject of much discussion, particularly among feminist researchers and theorists, in recent decades. However, significantly less attention has been paid to the critical absence of collaborative female relationships in well-known fairy tales and their retellings – an absence that is reflected in wider cultural narratives. This paper posits that the cognitive sciences, and schema theories in particular, may offer insights as to why these types of positive female relationships receive such scant representation in contemporary re-visioned fairy tales, and why such tales often – though by no means always – continue to replicate the common narrative dynamic of acrimony among girls and women. Following a brief overview of schemas and their operation, I consider how ‘story schemas’ and ‘person schemas’ might intersect in the unconscious mind of the creative writer to influence her intuitions – or feelings of ‘rightness’ – as they accompany story creation and development. Finally, I suggest that the adoption of new frameworks through which to critically and reflexively¹ interrogate our tacit storytelling knowledge can result in real cognitive change and subsequent advancements in our creative practice – in this case, a portrayal of collaborative female relationships that maintain a necessary narrative drive and verisimilitude.

My own relationship with fairy tales is an ambivalent one, a relationship complicated by what I recognise as its ‘feminised’ nature and the simultaneous attraction and repulsion that accompanies such a designation in my mind, perhaps right down to the level of schemas themselves. While they were among my favourite childhood entertainments, I drifted away from stories of self-sacrificing maidens and put-upon princesses as I grew older. But our first loves never quite relinquish their grip on our psyches and I came to recognise the unconscious influence of fairy tales in my own fiction over the years – a recognition that spurred me into pursuing a creative PhD. One of the works produced as part of this ongoing research is ‘Burnt sugar’, a novelette based on ‘Hansel and Gretel’. In the final third of this paper, I will use the writing of this story to provide an ‘in practice’ demonstration of schemas in action upon narrative creation.

Fairy tales and female isolation

Although Max Luthi identifies isolation in both physical and psychological terms as ‘one of the governing principles in the fairytale’ (1984: 42), Michael Mendelson nevertheless finds, for example, ‘a remarkably high incidence of collaborative effort’ (1997: 111) in the tales collected by the brothers Grimm – at least among men and/or boys, or between male and female characters. Indeed, after a close survey of the Grimm corpus, Mendelson concludes that ‘unlike their male counterparts ... women are – in most cases – operating without the benefit of female companionship, support, understanding, or even contact’ (112). This dynamic is replicated within the greater tradition of western European fairy tales, with young girls often placed in adversarial relationships to other female characters: the dead or ineffectual mother; the jealous stepsisters and/or stepmother; the wicked queen. While there is a wealth of critical discourse concerning the antagonistic, combative and destructive relationships among girls and women

in fairy tales (Warner 1994, Tatar 1987, Zipes 1996, 2006, Bottigheimer 1987, Bacchilega 1997, Haase 2004) as well as redemptive analysis that argues for the resourcefulness and resilience of oppressed female characters (Warner 1994; Tatar 1985), there has been little analysis of the recurring *absence* of female collaboration and friendship that often results in the isolation of a girl or young woman within her own story. Girls in fairy tales are, as Mendelson succinctly phrases it, ‘forever acting alone’ (1997: 111). If representations of girls and women cooperating with each other are rare, it is even more troubling to note that when such interactions do appear they often depict female characters working together towards evil ends, as with the collaborative bullying of Cinderella by her stepsisters and stepmother and their combined attempts to deceive the prince. In this way ‘collaboration is tantamount to corruption’ (Mendelson 1997: 118) and such relationships among girls and women are framed as dangerous or destructive rather than empowering.

It is important to stress, however, that this situation is not unique to fairy-tale narratives. As part of her ongoing doctoral research, Tara Moss has consolidated a mass of data and research on the representation of women in broader cultural narratives – both fictional and ‘real life’ media portrayals – to argue that relationships between women are often constructed as and/or perceived to be aggressive, duplicitous, toxically competitive and lacking in ‘normal portrayals of female friendship’ (2014: 88). Similarly, preliminary research into the gender of protagonists in award-winning novels indicates that they are overwhelmingly male – regardless of the gender of a book’s author (Griffith 2015 ‘Books about women’) – with the same holding for film (Griffith 2016 ‘Film and TV’). If accolades such as the Man Booker, the Pulitzer Prize and the Academy Awards are measures of perceived cultural worth, then such findings suggest that stories about women are not valued very highly. By extension, if there are precious few culturally significant stories that feature women protagonists, it is not difficult to surmise that an even smaller number would be likely to portray female friendships or positive collaboration among girls/women.

While fairy-tale re-visions have grown in popularity and number since the 1970s, it is both intriguing and disconcerting to note that the ways in which girls/women collaborate or, more commonly, fail to collaborate, appears to have changed little – especially considering the rich vein of feminist perspective that runs through the genre (Sexton 1971, Carter 1979, Donoghue 1997, Block 2000, Slatter 2014, Valente 2010, 2015). Contemporary re-visited fairy tales, though able to embrace with enthusiasm changes in geography, time, setting, gender, sexuality, and so on, are still too often ensnared by ‘sororophobia’ – a term coined by Helena Michie who, in her study of otherness between and among women, uses it to describe the negotiation of sameness and difference, identity and separation, and to encompass ‘both the desire for and the recoil from identification with other women’ (1992: 9). But perhaps this should not come as a surprise. The relationship between fairy-tale fiction and the wider scholarship concerning folklore and fairy tales has been described by Stephen Benson as having ‘extraordinary synchronicity’ and being ‘fascinatingly close’ (2008: 5), while Jack Zipes argues that recent decades have witnessed ‘an inextricable, dialectical development of mutual influence of all writers of fairy tales and fairy-tale criticism’ (2009: 122). In her own examination of such creative and critical interactions, Vanessa Joosen contends that ‘retellings and criticism participate in a continuous and dynamic dialogue about the traditional fairy tale’ (2011: 3) and identifies a *metacritical impulse* in feminist revisionist authors who use literature as a ‘self-reflexive critical tool’ (36) rather than follow the path of literary criticism. A lack of critical

attention paid to the absence of collaborative relationships among female characters in fairy tales might then contribute to the lack of representation of such relationships in re-visioned stories, particularly those by authors who are themselves familiar with the scholarship and who thus find themselves drawn to the slaying of more prominent anti-feminist dragons.

This is not to say, however, that *all* relationships between girls/women in contemporary fairy-tale re-visions are portrayed as negative or destructive in nature. In *Kissing the witch* (1997), Emma Donoghue critiques the ingrained heteronormativity of fairy tales to create a series of nested stories that explore romance and eroticism from a queer perspective. Here we are shown women finding themselves in each other, and in each other finding strength, joy and the chance to escape from oppressive social strictures and personal confinements – representations common to stories that seek to re-vision fairy tales by focusing upon non-heterosexual characters (Lo 2009; Valente 2010; Block 2000; among others). Angela Carter, by contrast, finds a different focus in restoring the primacy and protective nature of mother/daughter relationships in *The bloody chamber and other Stories* (1979), particularly and most spectacularly with the titular tale of her collection. Indeed, Veronica Schanoes points out that relationships between mothers and daughters became ‘a primary site of attention for both 1970s and 1990s writers of fairy-tale and myth revisions’ (2014: 18), citing as examples the work of Carter and other contemporary authors such as Tanith Lee, Robin McKinley, Terry Pratchett and Kelly Link. The reclamation of the mother/daughter bond is seen by Adrienne Rich as being integral to any feminist project, breaking as it does a deeply entrenched patriarchal prohibition: ‘Women are made taboo to women – not just sexually, but as *comrades, cocreators, conspirators*’ (1976: 255; emphasis mine). While the continued positive representation of both queer relationships between women and mother/daughter bonds are of great importance, these dynamics do often elide the narrative possibilities of loving *platonic* relationships between women, regardless of their sexuality or genetic ties. In this respect, the taboo of which Rich speaks still seems to underpin many of the narratives, fictional and otherwise, to which we are exposed and from which we arguably learn to navigate the world. The next section of this paper will examine the cognitive structures and mechanisms that enable the internalisation of narrative data and may in turn influence the creative process.

Creativity, cognitive science and schema theories

Representations of relationships between women, both fictional and real, are often framed by gendered touchstones of cultural ‘wisdom’. Women are our own worst enemies, prone to bitching, gossiping and backstabbing; secretly we all hate each other (Moss 2014, Piper 2015, Raymond 1986: 3-6). Men are ‘mates’ while women are ‘mean girls’ or ‘frenemies’; our rivalry is natural, innate and unhealthy (Dyrenfurth 2015, Piper 2016). The psychological concept of ‘schemas’ provides a useful way to understand the persistence of such framings and the manner by which they may influence how creative writers craft fictional narratives and, in particular, the representations of relationships between female characters within them. In drawing on research from the cognitive sciences, this paper follows an interdisciplinary approach, which has been advocated by an increasing number of creative writing researchers in recent years as a means to provide a fresh and enlightening perspective from which to view creativity, its processes and outcomes (Brophy 2009, Takolander 2014, Freiman 2015).

Schemas have been theorised in various ways but can be broadly defined as unconscious cognitive structural units and processes that underlie aspects of human knowledge (Brewer and Nakamura 1984: 140) and which are dynamic, interactive and interdependent in nature (Dowd and Pace 1989: 215-17). Schemas serve to process, categorise, organise, assimilate and retrieve information, and have both interpretive and predictive uses when it comes to encountering new knowledge and situations. Schema theory proposes that ‘people are active constructors of their own cognitive-behavioural experience’ – an experience that is inherently subjective in that schemas ‘actively bias perception and memory processes’ as well as the ‘encoding, storage and retrieval of information’ (Dowd and Pace 1989: 216). Current research in neuroscience situates schemas as ‘more specifically physiological, neutrally organised patterns created by neural connections made in the brain’ (Freiman 2015: 133) which, it is important to again emphasise, remain entirely unconscious and so beyond our direct experience or control.

In the fields of linguistics and cognitive psychology, the more specific concept of a *story schema* or *narrative schema* has been defined as ‘a mental structure derived from sensitivity to structural regularities in stories’ (Mandler 1982: 433). The research around story schemas in regards to written narratives has focused largely on reader encounters and on the characteristics that best facilitate comprehension, remembering, retrieval and reconstruction (Mar and Oatley 200, De Beaugrande 1982, Rice 1980, among others) with limited empirical research to date on the influence that story schemas bring to bear on the creative processes of writerly minds. We should not forget, however, that writers were readers *first* and indeed remain so throughout their creative careers, making these reader-based studies highly relevant. As writers, we are the sum product of the narratives – fictional, anecdotal, mythical – that we have encountered throughout our lives, and what we do when we create our own stories can be considered a type of reverse engineering.

While in the literature concerning story schemas and narrativity the consistent definition of *narrative* remains commonly ‘a series of causally linked events that unfold over time’ (Mar and Oatley 2008: 174), I would argue that the concept of *story schema* can be usefully expanded and applied to other elements that constitute a fictional narrative rather than simply referring to its structure and/or plot. Events happening over time might provide a workable description of the bare-bones nature of story structure, but it does little to hint at the visceral and emotional attraction that storytelling, and fictional storytelling in particular, holds for human beings. We do not read fiction (or write it) simply to find out what happens next; if that were the case we might happily read synopsis accounts of novels on Wikipedia and rejoice in the time saved. Rather, as Raymond A. Mar and Keith Oatley suggest, it is perhaps ‘not how a text is structured that really defines narrative, but its content and our responses to this content’ (2008: 174). In this approach, the emphasis shifts to what many creative writers (and readers) would regard as the beating heart of narrative fiction: *characters* or, as Mar and Oatley would have it, ‘autonomous intentional agents and their interactions’ (174). The characters we encounter in fiction, the ways in which they interact with each other as well as their psychological and physical representations, contribute to the construction and recalibration of cognitive schemas, which in turn impact the way we process, interpret and remember narratives and their constituent elements. The operation of such feedback loops will be elaborated upon further during the discussion of my novelette, ‘Burnt sugar’, later in this paper.

When considering how fictional characters are both encountered and created, the concept of a *person schema*, which ‘represents a *generic* knowledge structure about a type of person’ (Woll

2002: 62), bears consideration. After all, readers regularly speak of falling in love with characters, hating them with a passion, or indeed any number of emotions and experiences of intimacy that might seem more appropriate to relationships formed with flesh-and-blood counterparts. Likewise, writers often feel that characters speak up during the creative process, make their own decisions and influence the nature and direction of narrative in unexpected ways. While these reports may be viewed as metaphorical descriptions of experience, recent research suggests that comprehending characters in fiction parallels the comprehension of actual people in the real world, and that fiction may increase empathy and sociability in frequent readers (Mar, Oatley et al. 2006). Fiction also affects processes related to Theory of Mind – the ability to recognise and understand the mental states of others – via the ongoing character construction, perspective-taking, and literal ‘mind-reading’ (especially in the case of first-person narration) that reading requires (Kidd and Castano 2013). Indeed, Mar and Oatley go so far as to claim that such stories are ‘simulations of selves in the social world’, the function of which is to ‘abstract social information so that it can be better understood, generalized to other circumstances, and acted upon’ (2008: 173). Through frequent exposure to fictional narratives we are likely to ‘meet’ many more people, and many more types of people in many different situations, than we otherwise would in real life – and often, or so we perceive, with a greater degree of intimacy. It would seem likely then that these encounters with fictional characters would result in the construction and modification of *person schemas* in much the same way as they are constructed when we meet living people in the real world.

In the writing of fiction the concept of *story schema* – what a narrative is like – and *person schema* – what people are like – intersect. The creative writer draws on both their knowledge of stories and their knowledge of the world in order to produce fiction that engages readers, communicates effectively, and has the required measure of verisimilitude when it comes to the characters they present. The latter holds true even in the speculative genres in which the setting may be an alternative, futuristic or fantastical world where the psychological realism of characters and the believability of their motivations and interactions provide an anchor point for readers travelling in strange waters. Creative writing requires a constant negotiation between our perception of reality and the demands of narrative. Although writers endeavour to avoid stereotypes and one-dimensionality, we nevertheless condense, exaggerate, sketch and shortcut, coaxing characters into being whom we hope will both ring true as people *and* fulfil the needs of the story in which they find themselves.

The concept of ‘narrative necessity’ is alluded to by Jerome Bruner who argues that, unlike logical and scientific constructions that can be empirically falsified, the acceptability of a narrative (fictional or otherwise) is governed by convention, and determined by verisimilitude (1991: 4-5). If we judge a story both by how it conforms to the reality that it represents as well as by how it fits into our schema of what stories are like, how then do we disentangle our understanding of reality *from* our expectation of narrative? Based on current findings in cognitive science, Ellen Spolsky proposes that narratives ‘teach us by managing our neuronal/brain/body responses’ in similar ways to direct experience and that ‘[c]ontinuous encounters with narrative ... recursively reorganize an individual brain/mind into a connected set of schemata that represent the self and the situation of that self in its environment’ (2010: 40). Narratives help us to make sense of the world and of ourselves and others moving within it – indeed, it has been asserted that stories are the *primary* tool by which we acquire and process knowledge (Bruner 1991, Herman 2003, Schank and Abelson 1995) – as well as

feeding back into our perceptions of how the world works. It is a commonplace view that creative writers conduct a close (and often continuous) study of the world around them and that the stories we create reflect reality to varying degrees. However, as much of our knowledge of the world is gained and understood via our exposure to and interaction with narratives (Bruner 1991, Spolsky 2010, Herman 2003, Damasio 1999), the stories we create might more accurately be said to reflect *storied* realities. The disentanglement of reality from narrative, then, requires a high degree of reflection and reflexivity on the part of the creative writer. Not only should we be aware of the underlying cognitive processes that govern our acquisition of knowledge and development of expertise, but we should be prepared to question our own instincts and intuitions as writers, as the following case study will demonstrate.

Case study: Burnt sugar

The creative core of my PhD project is *Never afters*, a suite of novelettes that re-visions a selection of well-known European fairy tales under the influence of the contemporary genres of dark fantasy and horror. Each novelette begins at some point after the fairy tale ends and explores subsequent acts in the lives of the fairy-tale girls as they become women. The limited positive representation of collaborative female relationships in fictional narrative forms is a situation that demands redress. As we find more varied, textured and multi-faceted portrayals of what it means to be a woman, in diverse relationships with other women, we can better imagine our own selves inhabiting such roles – and, perhaps more importantly, other women inhabiting them. This is not to say, of course, that all representations of female relationships need to be of a utopian stripe, and it must be acknowledged that fractious, combative, manipulative and other toxic dynamics between women also reflect aspects of reality. They are not, however, the *whole* of reality and we should demand that our fictional narratives provide a better balance. The evil stepmothers, jealous sisters and two-faced friends in fairy tales would not be so problematic if there were equivalent depictions of supportive, caring and inspiring counterparts. For this reason, one of my central research goals in writing *Never afters* is to explore the ways in which productive female collaboration, rather than conflict and competition, may thrive and become a potent force of narrative power.

The process of writing my novelette ‘Burnt sugar’ (based on the well-known fairy tale ‘Hansel and Gretel’) illustrates schemas in action upon narration creation, highlighting the unconscious cognitive obstacles that may exist for a creative writer seeking to represent such positive female collaboration in her storytelling. ‘Hansel and Gretel’ was one of my favourite fairy tales as a young girl, as well as the one I found most disturbing. Two children are terrorised by a cannibalistic witch, with Gretel forced to commit a grisly murder in order to save both herself and her brother, following which they are both expected to go back to live with the father who abandoned them in the forest in the first place – and everyone seems happy about this! In my original *Little Golden Book* edition, which remains my most vividly recollected version of the tale, both the anonymous author and the illustrator, Eloise Wilkin, have gone to great pains to lessen the trauma of the ending. Here, the children return to find that their now repentant father has been searching the forest for them during their absence and that the cruel stepmother has simply ‘gone away forever’ (1977: n.p). This demonization of the stepmother figure, contrasted with a more positive or at least ameliorating portrayal of the father, is common to many well-known versions of this tale. The brothers Grimm revised their original 1812 version (‘Little

brother and little sister’) so that by the publication of the fourth edition of their collection in 1840, the biological mother had been replaced by a step-mother who hen-pecks a passive and reluctant father into abandoning the children in the woods (Grimm and Grimm 2012: 72-85). Common psychoanalytical readings tend to conflate the witch in her gingerbread house with either the wicked stepmother or the dead mother, prompting Sylvia Henneberg to observe that the tale ‘enacts two literary matricides as a means to create a space in which the cultural script of the old woman as despicable threatening influence can be rehearsed and reified before she, in turn, must die’ (2008: 129). It is precisely such ‘cultural scripts’ – or schemas – that I seek to interrogate and disrupt with the stories in *Never afters*.

In writing ‘Burnt sugar’, I set out to examine cycles of gendered violence and oppression, family dysfunction and the long-reaching effects of trauma, and how collaborative female relationships might result from and contribute to personal healing and self-validation. While the novelette does indeed speak to such themes, during the process of both pre-writing and actual writing I began to consider the nature of narrative itself and the forces that are wielded by tradition. The stories that are told to us in childhood – that we in turn tell to our own children – are the stories that shape us most intimately, that shape from an early age the way we see the world and its workings. There is both a comfort and a danger in this well-worn familiarity and I found myself pondering just what cultural and personal consequences there might be in telling ourselves the same stories over and over again. Fairy tales have been described by Cristina Bacchilega as ‘ideologically variable desire machines’ (1997: 7) that possess an almost endless capacity for reworking in a near infinite variety of ways, and Elizabeth Wanning Harries notes that stories in the form of sequels or prequels are of particular interest to the feminist revisionary project as they give their characters ‘a life beyond the usual contours of the fairy-tale romance’ and allow authors to ‘pry the old stories open, revealing their inadequacies and their silences’ (2001: 110). But what did *I* truly desire in reworking the once-beloved, much-maligned fairy tales of my youth? Did I want to pry feminist secrets from their innards or strip them naked and point out their flaws? What happens when love wrestles with scorn, when ambivalence squats froglike in the mind, awaiting a kiss to resolve it one way or the other? These simultaneous feelings of attraction and repulsion, which so complicate my (feminised) relationship to fairy tales, echo the dynamics of sororophobia mentioned earlier. The questions they provoke continue to influence my research and demand regular reflection and interrogation as part of my creative writing praxis.

Set several decades after the events of the traditional fairy tale, ‘Burnt sugar’ centres on Gretel, who now owns a cake and confectionery store – although she has lost her taste for sweets – and looks after the alcoholic Hansel, who has suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder since his imprisonment and torture by the witch in the woods. Gretel’s life is governed by the Book, a grimoire she stole from the witch’s gingerbread house as a child. She remains haunted both by the events of her childhood and by the influence of the Book that, it becomes plain, is orchestrating her transformation into the next witch in the sequence. There is always a next witch.

The ending that I originally conceived felt perfect. It had weight and resonance; it tingled beneath my fingernails. My creative process is very much an embodied one, and I often feel the ‘rightness’ of a story, its rhythms and flow, or conversely its fits and starts, as near-physical sensations. I do not inhabit the characters I am writing about so much as, it feels, they inhabit me – bodily and psychologically, their experiences, emotions and sensations bleed into my

own. It is tempting to think of such phenomena as writerly instincts or intuitions, which of course they are: intuitions honed through a lifetime of exposure to narratives and the subsequent construction and modification of story schemas. As writers, we are what we read to a very real extent. With this in mind, let us return to my ending of ‘Burnt sugar’ or, more accurately, to my story of the ending. Gretel, our Gretel, has become a witch in her own gingerbread house, with a new pair of lost children to deal with. Having found herself moving through too many familiar motions – albeit from an opposite perspective – she is bent over in front of her oven, waiting to feel the press of girlish hands in the small of her back as has happened to so many Gretels before her. This time, she hopes it will be different. This time, she hopes, *this* girl will make a different choice. In her last moments, Gretel reconciles herself to the cyclical nature of her story:

There is a rightness to this moment, I feel it. To the vast, inexorable clockwork turning and grinding and falling at last, again, into place. There is a rightness to me, to all I have done, and will do once more. I cling to such certainty; it’s all that remains. (McDermott 2016: 342)

It is not a happy ending but it was the one I aimed towards, the one that felt so right, so pitch perfect, until I was almost there. Until, lying awake one night and thinking through what I would write the next day, I was struck by an awful realisation: my planned ending was terrible. If it *felt* perfect, if it had that narrative frisson all writers aim for, then that’s simply because it fit within what I now regard as a certain narrative schema. The satisfaction of a cyclical story, the pleasure of patterns, no matter how perverse, the notion that something is inevitable, is *right*, because it has always been that way – this is precisely the narrative that I want to question. And what on earth happened to my collaborative women? As the writer of their story, it felt as though these two characters, these two Gretels, were refusing to put aside their distrust and suspicion of one another. The most I could coax from Gretel the witch was a grim hope for change, albeit a change that she herself felt unable to effect. This dynamic between the two primary female characters, I need to stress, was not something I had previously questioned; it was in fact the *point* of the ending as I originally conceived it. Moreover, when I speak here of characters ‘feeling’ and ‘refusing’ and otherwise acting independently of my creative intentions, it is both a metaphor and it is not. It is an impossibility that fictional beings created from my own mind should act (or speak or feel) in any manner that is not also of my own mind, whether or not I feel directly and experientially connected to the process. Recent findings from cognitive science claim that within our minds a ‘vast amount of processes and contents ... remain unconscious, not known in core or extended consciousness’ (Damasio 199: 228) and that, by definition, may never be consciously known or directly experienced (Brophy 38-45). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that we should feel disconnected from the outcomes of such processes or that our conscious selves might seek to express these subjective feelings of disconnection in metaphorical, even quasi-mystical, terms. Flashes of inspiration. Disembodied muses bestowing ideas. Characters speaking with their own voices and acting of their own (unexpected) volition.

Schemas also operate in this unconscious space and may be responsible for a measure of what I feel – though do not always consciously recognise – as an instinctive resistance to creating narratives and characters that do not fit easily into cultural and creative scripts.

I am writing a story, I say. I am writing about women.

This is what a story looks like, my unconscious prompts. This is how female characters behave.

I want my female characters to work together, to collaborate willingly and even joyously. I want them to win.

You're doing it wrong.

It is not as simple as this, clearly. However, schema theories do have the capacity to both explain and validate certain aspects of the creative process. Most significantly, the notion that such cognitive structures are both dynamic and reactive, that they are being constantly modified and recalibrated with exposure to new knowledge inputs (Anderson 2004: 157-163), that they are neither static nor analogous to a prison-house, can be an empowering one for creative writers. Although we are unable to reach into our unconscious to directly alter or reorganise our schemas – how convenient that would be! – we may effect cognitive transformation through purposeful, reflexive action that challenges the tacit knowledge about stories that we often deploy in our writing practice. By evaluating what we think we know from a fresh perspective, or via a different framework, we invite new knowledge that, quite literally, changes our minds. For me, this different framework arose as a result of defining the research goals of my PhD project – an examination of the lack of collaborative female relationships in re-visioned fairy tales and how this might be redressed in my own creative work. It should be emphasised, however, that the mere establishment of a framework is not a solution in itself. Challenging the tacit knowledge about stories and characters that I have acquired over two decades of writing for publication, and consciously developing new narrative strategies that allow for a different representation of women working together, while maintaining narrative drive and sustaining verisimilitude, is an ongoing process. And not necessarily a comfortable one for a writer who has for so long heeded the embodied signals of her storytelling instincts and intuitions.

Having thus become conscious of the problematic character dynamics at work in 'Burnt sugar', I began to construct a different ending – or, rather, to write beyond the ending that I had originally conceived. Gretel the witch is still there in front of her oven, bent beneath the will of the Book, except now she pushes back, rises up, her own hands seared by hot iron because rebellion always comes at a price. She turns around to face Gretel the girl, who is wide-eyed and terrified at the role the Book is making her play, and says, 'Stop. Enough ... Let me make this choice for us both' (McDermott 2016: 342-3). For it is her place, not as witch, but as woman – as elder – to make such decisions, to pave such paths as might never have been trod before and set the girl upon them. 'Burnt sugar' remains somewhat open-ended, as is much of my creative work. I remain wary of neat conclusions and definitive answers. I prefer to keep asking questions, to illuminate new paths – or old paths, long abandoned but once again providing useful ways to travel through dark and dangerous forests.

Conclusion

When I began my PhD, I did not anticipate the extent to which the rigour and reflexive nature of this type of research would transform my stories, let alone how suspicious I would become of my instincts as a writer of fiction. Perhaps suspicious is too strong a word. Let us say, I have become more mindful that what feels intuitively 'right' might actually be more akin to

cognitive pattern-making, or pattern-matching. Susan Sellers envisions the feminist rewriting of fairy tales as ‘new embroideries’ that add ‘fresh images and colours to radically alter the picture’ (2001: 29) and open the old stories from within to allow for different possibilities and perspectives. This process can be either an act of demolition that exposes and detonates the stories that have previously restricted women, or an act of construction that creates ‘enabling alternatives’ (Sellers 2001: 30). The best re-visioned fairy tales, I would contend, are those which accomplish both of these acts – and I like to remind myself, these days, that part of this ongoing demolition and construction work must take place in my own mind, as well as on the page. I am not suggesting that creative writers abandon or ignore the more intuitive aspects of their creative process, but rather that we regard these with a sceptical eye and an awareness of the unconscious cognitive structures, such as schemas, that underpin them. Becoming mindful of the nature and possible origins of the knowledge that our unconscious holds and draws upon, and granting that this knowledge might be insufficient or even run counter to our conscious intentions, is vital reflexive work, especially for writers whose goal is to critique, subvert and/or redress perceived social imbalances. Reflexivity, writes Gillie Bolton, is the ‘near-impossible adventure of making aspects of the self strange’ (2014: 8) and the identification and adoption of new frameworks will enable creative practitioners to interrogate our default assumptions, impulses and personal theories.

While this paper has illustrated how higher degree programs provoke methods by which schemas may be recognised and challenged, more investigation into other – and more accessible – strategies is needed. Kevin Brophy suggests that consciousness may have the potential for the disruption of unconscious processes and sketches an intriguing possibility: that our unconscious is a ‘self or selves we might marvel at or learn from if we can negotiate an existence closer to the tricky border we share with that being’ (2009: 50). Such a negotiation must surely, if tentatively, begin with an increased awareness of how the unconscious works and how we, as creative writers, can better work with it to inform and improve our creative practice.

Notes

1. To clarify an often contentious term, *reflexivity* is employed here in a poststructuralist context to refer to methodologies that incorporate critical reflection strategies (Smith 2011) and which require creative practitioners to not only become self-aware of themselves and their practice but to be able to formulate and communicate new and useful knowledge about creative practice itself (Hecq 2010). Though beyond the scope of this paper to explore, the concept of ‘active consciousness’ as articulated by Dominique Hecq is especially useful, referring as it does to ‘the process of bringing to consciousness what previously lay beneath its surface, namely something pre-conscious or unconscious’ (Hecq 2013: 185).

Works cited

- Anderson, JR 2004 *Cognitive psychology and its implications* New York: Worth Publishers
- Anonymous, 1977 *Hansel and Gretel* Racine, WI: Golden Press-Western Publishing Company Inc
- Bacchilega, C 1997 *Postmodern fairy tales: Gender and narrative strategies* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press
- Benson, S 2008 *Contemporary fiction and the fairy tale* Detroit: Wayne State University Press

- Block, FL 2000 *The rose and the beast: Fairy tales retold* New York: Joanna Cotler Books/ HarperCollins
- Bolton, G 2014 *Reflective Practice: Writing and professional development*, 4th edn, London: SAGE Publications
- Bottigheimer, RB 1987 *Grimms' bad girls & bold boys: The moral & social vision of the tales* New Haven: Yale University Press
- Brewer, WF and GV Nakamura 1984 'The nature and function of schemas' in RS Wyer and TK Srull (eds) *Handbook of social cognition* London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 119-160
- Brophy, K 2009 *Pattern of creativity: Investigations into the sources and methods of creativity* Amsterdam: Rodopi
- Bruner, J 1991 'The narrative construction of reality' *Critical Inquiry* 18, 1: 1-21
- Carter, A 1981 (1979) *The bloody chamber and other stories* London: Penguin Books
- Damasio, A 1999 *The Feeling of what happens: Body and emotion in the making of consciousness* New York: Harcourt Brace & Company
- De Beaugrande, R 1982 'The story of grammars and the grammar of stories' *Journal of Pragmatics* 6, 5: 383-422
- Donoghue, E 1997 *Kissing the witch: Old tales in new skins* New York: Joanna Cotler Books/ HarperCollins
- Dowd, ET and T M Pace 1989 'The relativity of reality: Second-order change in psychotherapy' in A Freeman, KM Simon, LE Beutler and H Arkowitz (eds) *Comprehensive handbook of cognitive therapy* New York: Plenum Press, 213-226
- Dyrenfurth, N 2015 *Mateship: A very Australian history* Brunswick, VIC: Scribe
- Freiman, M 2015 'A 'cognitive turn' in creative writing – Cognition, body and imagination' *New Writing* 12, 2: 127-142
- Griffith, N 2015 'Books about women don't win big awards: Some data', at <https://nicolagriffith.com/2015/05/26/books-about-women-tend-not-to-win-awards> (accessed 24 June 16)
- Griffith, N 2016 'Films and TV about women don't win awards: some data', at <https://nicolagriffith.com/2016/02/02/films-and-tv-about-women-dont-win-awards-some-data> (accessed 24/06/16)
- Grimm, J and W Grimm 2012 *The annotated Brothers Grimm* Maria Tatar (trans, ed), New York: W.W. Norton & Company
- Haase, D 2004 *Fairy tales and feminism: New approaches* Detroit: Wayne State University Press
- Harries, EW 2001 *Twice upon a time: Women writers and the history of the fairy tale* New Jersey: Princeton University Press
- Hecq, D 2010, Review of 'Gillie Bolton – Reflective practice: Writing & professional development' *TEXT Special Issue* 8, at <http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue8/Hecq.pdf> (accessed 24 June 16)
- Hecq, D 2013, 'Creative writing and theory: Theory without credentials' in J. Kroll and G. Harper (eds) *Research methods in creative writing* Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 175-200
- Henneberg, S 2008 'Moms do badly, but grandmas do worse: The nexus of sexism and ageism in children's classics' *Journal of Aging Studies* 24, 2: 125-134
- Herman, D 2003 'Stories as tools for thinking' in D Herman (ed) *Narrative theory and the cognitive sciences* Stanford: CSLI Publications, 163-192
- Joosen, V 2011 *Critical and creative perspectives on fairy tales: An intertextual dialogue between fairy-tale scholarship and postmodern retellings* Detroit: Wayne State University Press
- Kidd, DC and E Castano 2013 'Reading literary fiction improves theory of mind' *Science* 342, 6156: 377-380
- Lo, M 2009 *Ash* New York: Little Brown & Company
- Luthi, M 1984 *The fairytale as art form and portrait of man* Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press

- Mandler, JM 1982 'Another story of grammars: comments on Beaugrande's 'The story of grammars and the grammar of stories' *Journal of Pragmatics* 6, 5: 433-440
- Mar RA and K Oatley 2008 'The function of fiction is the abstraction and simulation of social experience' *Perspectives on Psychological Science: A Journal of the Association for Psychological Science* 3, 3: 173-192
- Mar, RA, K Oatley, J Hirsh, J Dela Paz and JB Peterson 2006 'Bookworms versus nerds: Exposure to fiction versus non-fiction, divergent associations with social ability, and the simulation of fictional social worlds' *Journal of Research in Personality* 40, 5: 694-712
- McDermott, K 2016 'Burnt sugar' in J. Dann (ed) *Dreaming in the dark* Hornsea: PS Publishing Ltd, 319-344
- Mendelson, M 1997 'Forever acting alone: The absence of female collaboration in Grimms' fairy tales' *Children's Literature in Education* 28, 3: 111-125
- Michie, H 1992 *Sororophobia: Differences among women in literature and culture* New York: Oxford University Press
- Moss, T 2014 *The fictional woman* Sydney: HarperCollins Publishers
- Piper, AJ 2015 'The myth that women secretly hate other women has a long history', at <https://theconversation.com/the-myth-that-women-secretly-hate-other-women-has-a-long-history-47919> (accessed 13 July 16)
- Piper, AJ 2016 "'Woman's special enemy": Female enmity in criminal discourse during the long nineteenth century' *Journal of Social History* 49, 3: 672-692
- Raymond, JG 1986 *A passion for friends: Toward a philosophy of female affection* London: Women's Press
- Rice, GE 1980 'On cultural shemata' *American Ethnologist* 7, 1: 152-171
- Rich, A 1976 *Of woman born: Motherhood as experience and institution* New York: WW Norton
- Schank, RC and RP Abelson 1995 'Knowledge and memory: The real story' in RS Wyer Jr (ed) *Knowledge and memory: The real story* Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 1-85
- Schanoes, VL 2014 *Fairy tales, myth, and psychoanalytic theory: Feminism and retelling the tale* Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd
- Sellers, S 2001 *Myth and fairy tale in contemporary women's fiction* New York: Palgrave
- Sexton, A 1971 *Transformations* New York: Houghton Mifflin Company
- Slatter, A 2014 *Black-winged angels* Greenwood WA: Ticonderoga Publications
- Smith, E 2011 'Teaching critical reflection' *Teaching in Higher Education* 16, 2: 211-23
- Spolsky, E 2010 'Narrative as nourishment' in FL Aldama (ed) *Toward a cognitive theory of narrative act* Austin: University of Texas Press, 37-60
- Takolander, M 2014 'After Romanticism, psychoanalysis and postmodernism: New paradigms for theorising creativity' *TEXT* 18, 2 at <http://www.textjournal.com.au/oct14/takolander.htm> (accessed 24 June 16)
- Tatar, M 1985 'Tests, tasks and trials in the Grimms fairy tales' *Children's Literature* 13: 31-48
- Tatar, M 1987 *The hard facts of the Grimms' fairy tales* Princeton: Princeton University Press
- Valente CM 2010 *Ventriloquism* Hornsea: PS Publishing Ltd
- Valente, CM 2015 (2013) *Six-gun Snow White* New York: Saga Press
- Warner, M 1994 *From the beast to the blonde: On fairy tales and their tellers* London: Vintage
- Woll, S 2002 *Everyday thinking: Memory, reasoning, and judgment in the real world* Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc Publishers
- Zipes, J 1994 *Fairy tale as myth – myth as fairy tale* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky
- Zipes, J 2006 *Why fairy tales stick: The evolution and relevance of a genre* New York: Routledge
- Zipes J 2009 *Relentless progress: The reconfiguration of children's literature, fairy tales, and storytelling* New York: Routledge