Bruno Bettelheim: Why Children Need Fairy Tales

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Instructor: Neil Cohn, *neilcohn@visuallanguagelab.com, www.visuallanguagelab.com*

References:

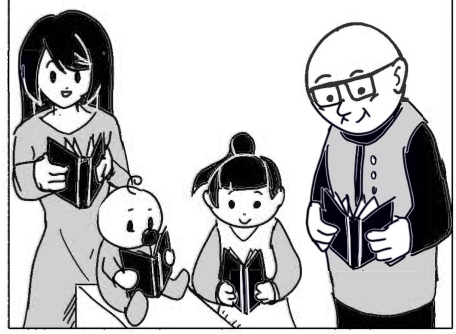
1. Hoeppel, Rotraut (1994). Kinder brauchen Märchen. In Roland Kaufhold (ed.), Annäherung an Bruno Bettelheim (pp. 207-219). Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald
2. Bettelheim, Bruno (1989). The uses of enchantment: the meaning and importance of fairy tales. New York: Vintage Books.
3. ibid., 1989

"Hello there, reader. My name is Bruno Bettelheim. Today, we will talk about why children need fairy tales."

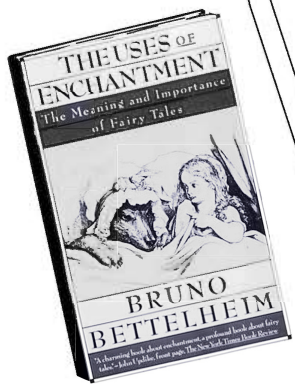
"In 1812, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm published the first volume of their *Kinder und Hausmärchen**."

*="Children's and household tales"

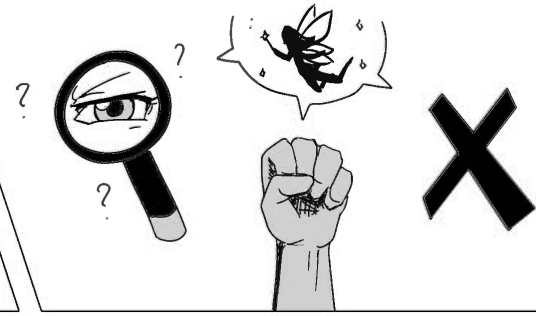
"Generations of children grew up with these timeless stories."



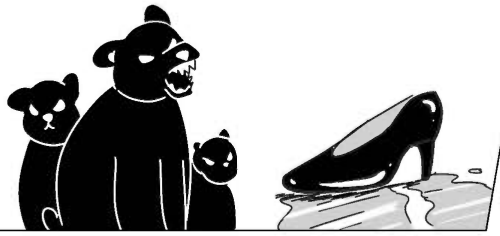
"In my book *The uses of enchantment: the meaning and importance of fairy tales*, I investigated from a psychoanalytical perspective why these stories were so important and enthralling for children, discussing the emotional, symbolic and therapeutic importance of fairy tales from the Brothers Grimm for children."

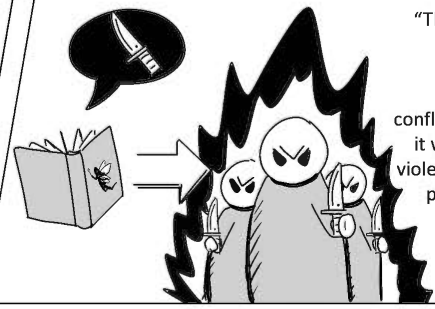


"I published my book at a time in which fairy tales were regarded with suspicion, as instruments of bourgeois oppression used to transmit false ideas and attitudes to young people."



"The representations of violence played an important part in these discussions."

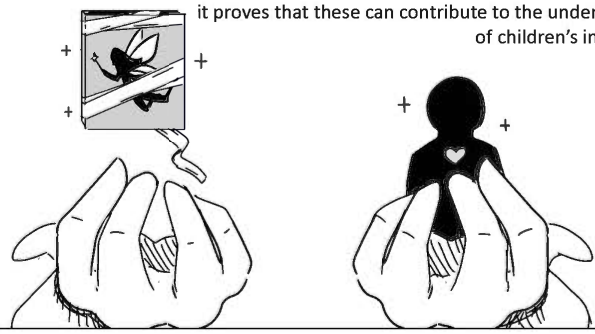




"Thus, it was argued that fairy tales legitimized violence by modelling aggressive modes of conflict resolution, because it was suspected that the violence represented could provoke aggression and fear in children."

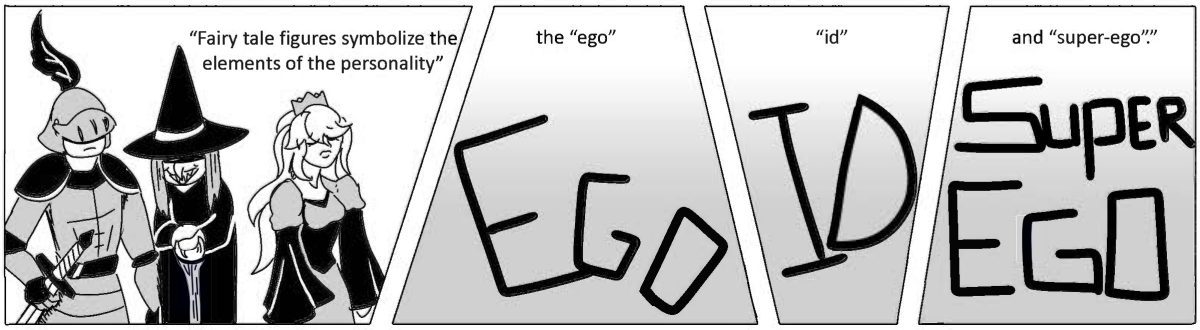
"My book stimulated widespread interest at the time and is still influential today"

"On the one hand because it rehabilitates fairy tales, and on the other hand because it proves that these can contribute to the understanding of children's inner life."



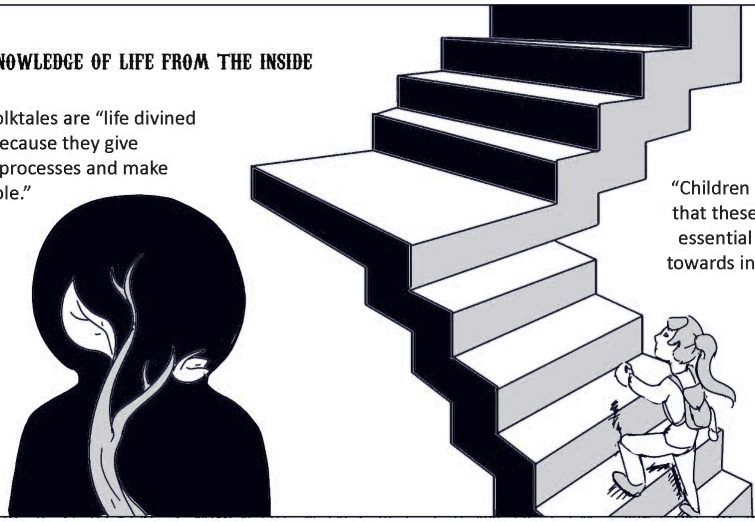
Why do children need fairy tales?

"In *The uses of enchantment*, I demonstrated a correspondence between the fairy tale world and the experience and thinking of children."



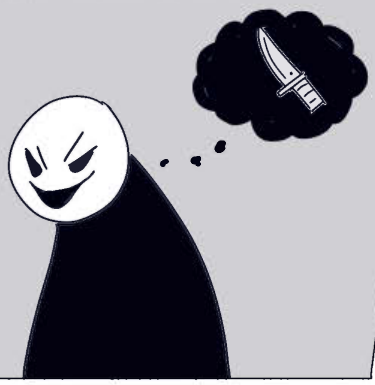
Fairy tales offer knowledge of life from the inside

"The narratives in folktales are "life divined from the inside"[3], because they give expression to inner processes and make these comprehensible."

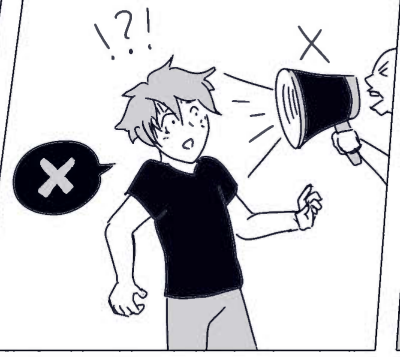


"Children intuitively understand that these stories represent the essential developmental steps towards independent existence."

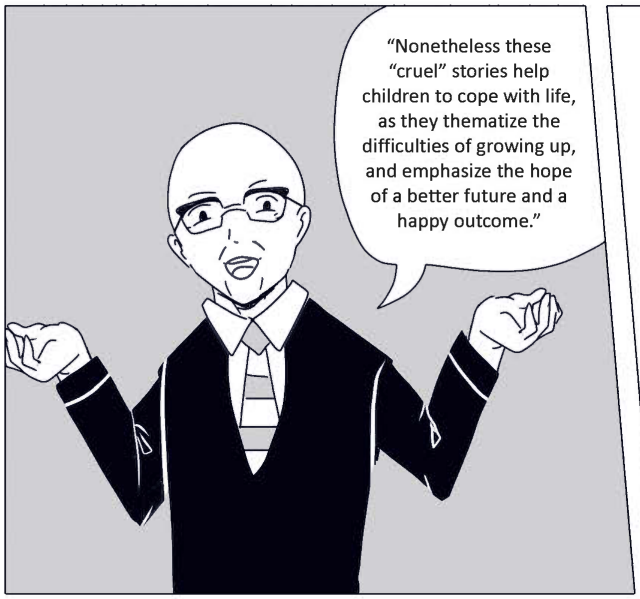
"Many fairy tales deal – in a manner that is "unreal, but not untrue"[3] – with oral and oedipal conflicts, with violent and phallic fantasies...



...with fear of sexuality or castration, with humiliation...



...with self-destruction, and separation anxiety[3]."



"Nonetheless these "cruel" stories help children to cope with life, as they thematize the difficulties of growing up, and emphasize the hope of a better future and a happy outcome."

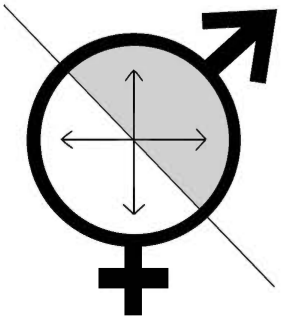
"Even today, young people appreciate that fairy tales usually end positively."

Do you like fairy tales?		
YES 56%		
Because fairy tales		
Are exciting 19%	Have happy endings 12%	Are relaxing 10%
NO 38%		
Because fairy tales		
Are silly 15%	Are boring 15%	Are unrealistic 11%
Only some 6%		

Fairy tales help to dispel fears

"Fairy tales meet both the young audience's desire for the fantastic and its fear of the horrible."

"And although gender roles are conventionally distributed in the stories, this does not matter when it comes to identifying with the hero or heroine...



...because the child sees only character polarities and strategies for action as essential."

"If our fear of being devoured takes the tangible shape of a witch, it can be gotten rid of by burning her in the oven!"[3]

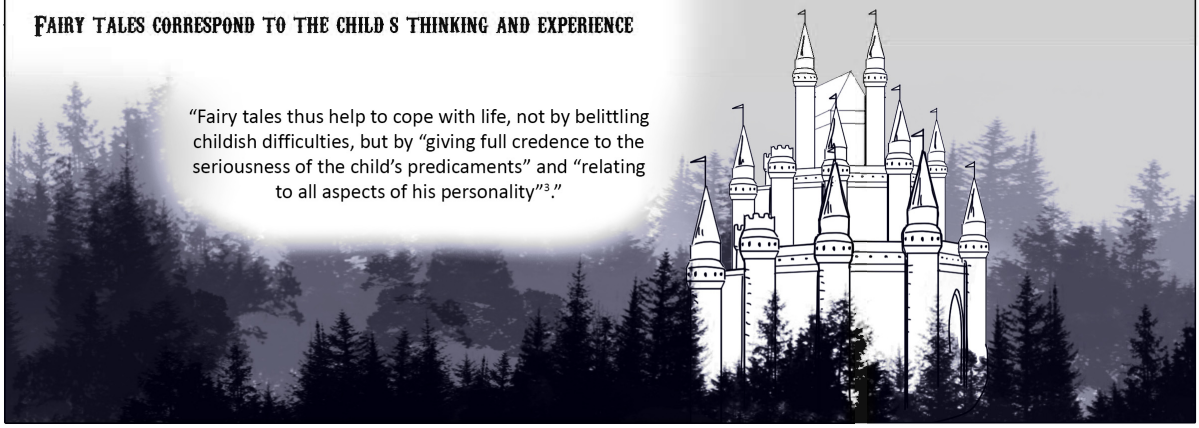
"The child does not care whether Hansel or Gretel carries out this act of liberation."

"Fairy tales are superior to contemporary children's literature precisely because of their elements of menace and cruelty...

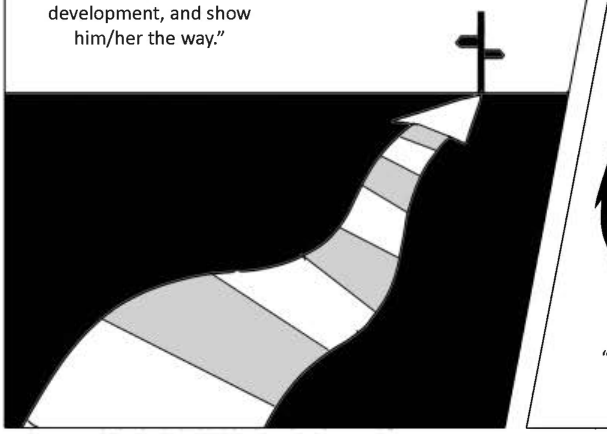
...since they produce neither aggression nor fear, but help children to cope with these feelings."

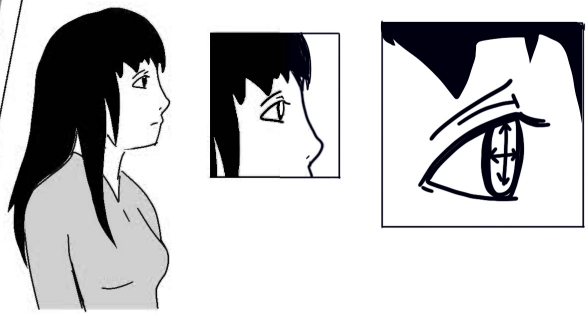
Fairy tales correspond to the child s thinking and experience

"Fairy tales thus help to cope with life, not by belittling childish difficulties, but by "giving full credence to the seriousness of the child's predicaments" and "relating to all aspects of his personality"[3]."



"The stories begin at the child's current stage of development, and show him/her the way."

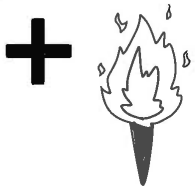




"Just like the black-and white characterization of the fairy tales, so too is the child's view of the world marked by polarization."

"Fairy tales demonstrate that an inner development has to take place, by offering solutions which the child can understand...

...because they correspond to childish, animistic thinking...



...and express, on a symbolic/visual level, the things that motivate the child[1]."

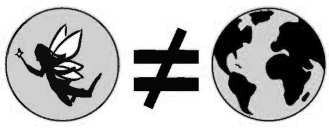
"My research crossed disciplinary boundaries and left a rich academic legacy for pedagogy and related branches of scholarship."

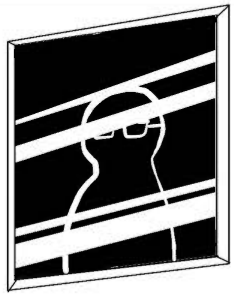
"Evaluations of my book also stress that this is an "important work for pedagogy and child psychology,

and not just because it rehabilitates fairy tales, but because it is important for educational practice."[1]"

"Essentially 2 aspects were identified as "pitfalls" of my psychoanalytical fairy tale interpretation[1]:"

"Firstly, Critics say that I used the fairy tale texts to confirm and illustrate my theory, in which process important aspects of content fell by the wayside."





"Secondly, I am criticized for not having sufficiently reflected on the subjectivity of my interpretation of the fairy tales."

"But this 'weakness' of the second part of the book could also be its 'strength', if it challenges readers to contradict me and to interpret the message of the fairy tales differently...

...and thus also to some extent subjectively.[3]"

Thus, in short, *Fairy Tales*..

"..help children to project, thus fostering their development"

"...correspond to the child's thinking and experience"

"...offer knowledge of life from the inside"

"...help to dispel fears"

"And that concludes my evaluation of why children need fairy tales."