

FAIRY TALES OR

SCARY TALES?



And when the Queen asked, "Looking glass on the wall, who in this land is the fairest of all?" It answered: "Thou art fairer, lady queen, than all here who see light, But more beautiful still is Snow White."

The queen was mortified and turned green with envy. From then on, whenever she looked at Snow White, her heart heaved with hate. Envy and pride grew higher and higher in her heart like a weed, so that she had no peace day or night. She called a huntsman, and said, "Take the child away into the forest. Kill her, and bring me back her lung and liver as a token." The huntsman obeyed and took her away. But when he had drawn his knife, and was about to impale Snow White's innocent heart, she began to weep, and said, "Please, dear huntsman, spare my life. I will run away into the wild forest, and never come home again."

While on grandpa's knee or tucked in bed, we relished fairy tales like this old favorite, replete with vivid pictures and captivating action. Often, these fantastic narratives had our heroes facing death, the threat of murder, mutilation, being eaten alive or petrified.

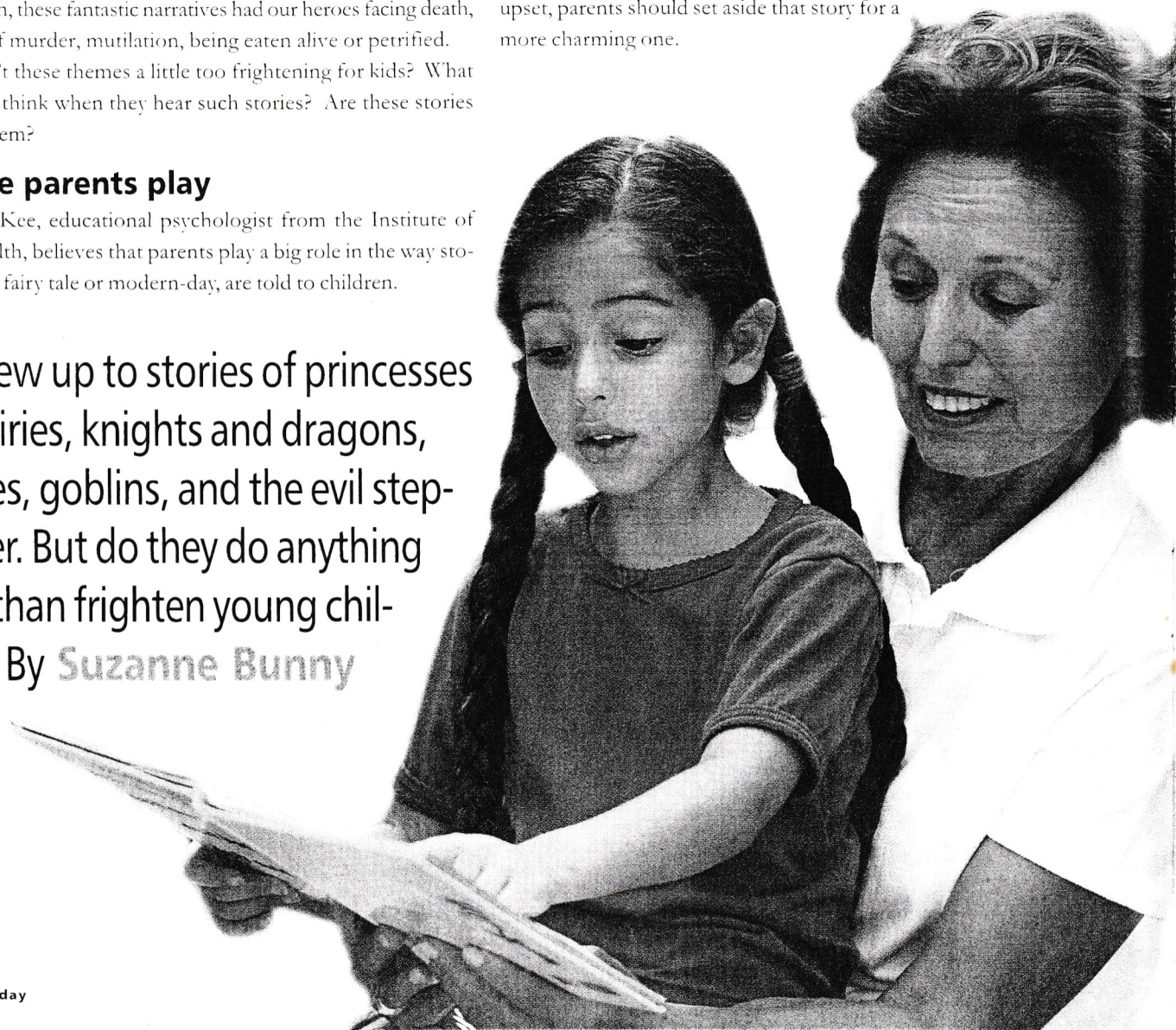
But aren't these themes a little too frightening for kids? What do children think when they hear such stories? Are these stories good for them?

The role parents play

Carolyn Kee, educational psychologist from the Institute of Mental Health, believes that parents play a big role in the way stories, be they fairy tale or modern-day, are told to children.

We grew up to stories of princesses and fairies, knights and dragons, witches, goblins, and the evil step-mother. But do they do anything more than frighten young children? By **Suzanne Bunny**

Parents should play it by ear, she says. Go on reading as long as the child enjoys the story. If, however, he becomes anxious or upset, parents should set aside that story for a more charming one.





"The way a child reacts may be influenced by how the parent reacts. If a parent says something like 'The ogre's going to get you!' then the child may be unduly frightened. If parents can avoid this, storytelling can be much more pleasurable," says Kee.

"I read *Cinderella* and all of the Disney tales," says Alison Leyden, mother of two. Of all the villains in the vast magical kingdom, her daughters fear Rumpelstiltskin, a dwarf with alchemic abilities, the most. Six-year-old Ella says she doesn't like him because he's got a really long beard. "I don't like his appearance, but I like scary stories because I like to get frightened."

Leyden always reassures her kids. "He's not a nice person, but let's finish the story and see what happens," she would say. In the end, Ella and her three-year-old sister Madeleine get to sleep soundly, knowing that good conquers all.

Melody Appleton, an educational psychologist from Appleton, Poon & Associates, believes that explaining that characters in a story are fictitious is also an effective tool.

"Fairy tales can be scary for kids but it really depends on how they are told," she says. "There will always be scary characters, but what the child remembers depends on what is emphasized. What should parents focus on, the wicked witch or the moral of the story?"

"Take *Pinocchio* for example. What could be gleaned from that story? One lesson worth learning from it is that lying is wrong. So, it really depends on how you use the characters and the story. Fairy tales can be frightening but they can also be very enjoyable and useful as learning tools."

The evolving fairy tale

From an educational and social standpoint, fairy tales have a lot to offer. The origins of some of the most popular fairy tales can be traced back several hundred years ago, when oral tradition spread accounts of heroic deeds or exemplary virtues. Storytelling was used as a means to convey information, cultural values, and experiences, before any form of recording, written or otherwise, was developed.



Fairy tales, long the centerpiece of entertainment before the birth of books and television, were told to children as well as adults. Some experts say that fairy tales began as local sagas that evolved as they were retold from village to village, bringing wonderful accounts of mystery, strength, evil, and victory. Today, fairy tales continue to be useful teaching

tools for children to learn about feelings, social skills, and proper behavior.

"Among other things, *Cinderella* teaches children about sibling rivalry," says Kee. "Fairytales, such as this one, help children understand various emotional elements. They realize that other people experience emotional problems as well, and may see the way to resolution through the tale."



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Suzana Sukri grew up adoring fairy tales and reads a variety of them to her two girls before bedtime. Nadiah, her four-year-old, is neither intimidated nor terrified by *Snow White's* evil queen. "She'll only say to me, 'She's naughty Mommy!'" Honestly, my daughters don't find the stories frightening at all. I think it's because the characters are exaggerated."

But can a fairy tale involving make-believe characters really teach a child about life?

"Sometimes, it helps that the story is unreal, perhaps because it gives the child space and allows him to distance himself from his own world," says Kee. "Sometimes, the use of mystical characters helps a child detach himself so his own emotions become less scary."



Fairy tales fuel the imagination and encourage play with other children. Nadiah loves to dress up as her favorite characters. "She pretends that she is Cinderella all the time," says Sukri. "Even when she plays Little Red Riding Hood, she dresses up as the wolf! I think it develops their creativity and teaches them about playing roles."

Parents know best

When it comes to reading fairy tales, parents know their children best. "In my experience as an educational psychologist, I've never come across any major issue regarding fairy tales and their effect on children," says Appleton.

"There are some very cruel fairy tales, as there are very cruel cartoons. But children learn very early that this is fantasy. And, they do teach us something about empathy, anger, lying, cheating, and being kind. Telling fairy tales will always be a nice way to teach children a host of things."

Snow White opened her eyes, lifted the lid of her crystal coffin, sat up, and was once more alive. "Good heavens, where am I," she cried. The prince was filled with joy and said, "You are with me," and told her all that transpired. "I will love you more than life itself, come with me to my father's palace and be my wife." So, Snow White went with him and they were met by thunderous cheer in a magnificent kingdom. And they lived happily ever after. HT

