

Keynote address for Australian Fairy Tale Society Conference, Sydney June 21, 2015

by Sophie Masson

When I first saw the theme of this year's conference, I thought how very much it went to the heart of fairy tale. Transformations: humans transformed to animals, animals to humans; spells transforming beauty to ugliness and vice versa; poverty transformed to riches, powerlessness to power, and the contrary; sadness transformed to joy, love turned to hatred, even death transformed to life..the great power and magic of fairy tale lies in precisely the understanding that transformation is at the very heart of the worlds, both inner and outer. Fairy tale transforms reality and is in turn transformed by it. As a story genre, too, it transforms constantly, in form and style and approach, as it effortlessly shapeshifts through the centuries and through countless writers and tellers' imaginations, and yet, mysteriously, wonderfully, it stays the same, at its heart. That is the secret of the freshness of fairytale, the reason why no matter how the externals of our societies change, no matter how technological details of our everyday lives change, fairy tales still speak to our hearts, and our souls. If you can think of fairy tale as a season, it would be spring: spring, when everything changes, transforms, takes on new meaning, new life..

And that brings me to the second element of our theme, the element which defines in fact the aspect of transformation we are focussing on today. Spinning straw into green and gold..To Australians, immediately those colours conjure up a vision of the brightness of wattle trees in bloom. In my home region of the Northern Tablelands, where winters are cold and sharp, those colours, coupled with the striking pure blue of the big sky, immediately make you know spring is around the corner, and the bleak gaunt winter landscape, with its bleached grasses and shivery tracery of branches, will soon be transformed. But the green is also present in the many-hued greens of eucalypts, the gold embodying the beauty and richness of our light, that golden brightness that immediately strikes you as soon as you set foot in Australia after any time away in the Northern Hemisphere.

But in our context, it's more than that. Green and gold don't just mean Australian elements; they also mean elements found in fairy tale all over the world. The colour green is associated with fairies in many cultures across the world; and gold is so often found in fairy tale, both as something to be sought after and to be wary of: a symbol of fortune and a symbol of greed. And that first element: spinning straw. Straw is not something to be despised, incidentally. What is it, after all, but the transformed green then gold grasses of spring and summer, preserved in another form to nourish animals and keep them alive through winter and into spring, when the cycle of life begins again? And in fairy tale terms, the humble but essential straw is transformed by the spinning wheel—the storyteller's craft—into something new. In our case, that means into the green and gold of the very individual ways in which Australian writers approach and interpret fairy tale through our own works. And of course our home environment—nature, landscapes, society--influences that, even when we don't set our stories specifically within Australian settings.

So to explore that, I want to give first a bit of a selective overview of how Australian writers have spun the (mostly) European straw of traditional fairy tale into something very much our own, before looking at my own work.

What we might call a real strand of fairy tale retelling and reimagining didn't really appear in Australian literature, whether for children or adults, till the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and certainly after the 1870's. Yet it beggars belief to imagine that traditional European fairy tales weren't told in Australia long before that. However, for whatever reason, there appears to be were no published works of fairy tales, inspired by the European heritage, before the 1870's. And as has been pointed out by Jo Henwood, writing the introduction for the Griffith Review's fairy-tale themed edition, *Once Upon A Time in Oz*, (Edition 42, October 2013)the fact that there was no real access by European-heritage writers to indigenous folk and fairy tales and folklore also meant that at the time there was no understanding either that these existed.

From the 1870's, but especially from the 1890's onwards, a small group of Australian writers began not only to retell their own versions of classic fairy tales, but also to invent their own, in a

determined effort to impose the old magic on a very different landscape. In a fascinating post this April on the Women's History Network blog, <http://womenshistorynetwork.org/blog/?p=4829>, Robyn E. Floyd profiles one of these writers, Beatrice Wilcken, whose collection *Fairy Tales, Fables and Legends*, published in Hobart in 1891, includes stories clearly heavily inspired by Hans Christian Andersen, such as The Ice Queen and The Rose and the Nightingale, but also stories inspired by particular 'magical' places in Australia, with three stories set in the Jenolan Caves of NSW, and two in the Blue Mountains. You can read her stories online at <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-39525006/view>

Robyn Floyd also profiles another creator of fairy tales, Olga Ernst, in her paper *Olga Ernst's contribution to the development of Australian identity in Children's Literature*, presented at the 2010 Australian Association for Research in Education (<http://www.aare.edu.au/data/publications/2010/1707Floyd.pdf>).

She also mentions other writers in the genre, such as Atha Westbury, with his *Australian Fairy Tales* (1897) and Jessie Whitfield, writer of *Spirit of the Bushfire and Other Australian Fairy tales* (1898). All these writers made at least some attempt to link their fairy tales to an Australian locality, or spirit. Not so Joseph Jacobs, whose famous first book, *English Fairy Tales* (1890) is still easily available, but who, despite being born, raised and university-educated in Australia, spent the whole of his considerable career as a reteller of traditional fairy tales and expert in folklore, in Britain. In a way, I'd contend his work was a kind of precursor to the much more global appeal that our modern fairy-tale fiction has today. Was his way of telling inspired by his Australian heritage? I'm not sure..

The enchantment of fairy tale continued in the work of such classic Australian creators as May Gibbs, Dot Pedley, Pixie O'Harris and others, whose picture books and illustrated stories created magical worlds of their own, but we have to wait until the mid to late 1950's before we start to get longer fiction inspired by fairy tales, whether that be for children or for adults. My own contention is that one of the most important figures in this area is the great writer Patricia Wrightson (1921—

2010). Her books, publishing career, from 1955, to the late 1990's, spans 27 books, many of which feature elements of fairy tale and folklore uniquely combining both European and indigenous elements. Extraordinary books such as *An Older Kind of Magic*, *The Nargun and The Stars*, *A Little Fear*, and *The Wirrun Trilogy*, amongst others, create a thrilling, enthralling atmosphere which has the genuine stamp of a deeply-understood fairy world. It is important to stress that Wrightson was not only praised by Aboriginal readers for her sensitive use of this material; she also never used Aboriginal sacred figures or stories in her work. Instead she used the folk beliefs, the fairies and tricksters and monsters and ghosts of Aboriginal folklore which were pretty much invisible till then to people of non-Aboriginal heritage. For me, as for my children and many young—and older!--readers since, it was a real and exciting revelation and if you haven't read her work, I would highly recommend that you do. *The Wirrun Trilogy*, I believe, should be as well-known to Australians as *Lord of the Rings*, and is as grand a work, but breaking completely new ground in casting only Aboriginal characters, both human and nonhuman, in an epic quest and hero's journey.

Patricia's enormous knowledge and enthusiasm for the subject, as well as her desire to do for Australia what Katherine Briggs had done for Britain in her *Dictionary of Fairies*, also led Patricia Wrightson to create, with her son Peter, a book called *The Wrightson List* (Random House 1998), which lists hundreds of 'fairy-world' type beings from Aboriginal folklore all over Australia—narguns, nyols, potkuroks, and many more.

But from the 1980's onwards, the trickle of Australian books inspired by fairytale became a veritable flood. Interestingly, too, the specific Australian locality became less important as writers spun that rich scented straw into beautiful bales of green and gold. Patricia Wrightson's lead in plaiting indigenous and European tradition was only followed by a few other writers, such as Bill Scott, but a notable development was that the fairy tale influence leapt from children's literature to adult literature and from genre writing to literary fiction, and back again, in a back and forth that continues to this day. In her paper, '*Writing in a Fairy Story Landscape: Fairy Tales and Contemporary Australian Fiction*', (Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian

Literature, Vol 2, 2003) Lisa M. Fiander, of the University of Alberta, names several of these, including Janette Turner Hospital's *Charades* (1989); Rodney Hall's *The Second Bridegroom* (1991) Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* (1991) Peter Carey's *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* (1994) and Murray Bail's *Eucalyptus* (1998).

These days, fiction based either entirely on fairy tales or containing elements of fairy tale can be found in every area of literature in Australia. Intriguingly, some traditional fairy tales seem to have struck a particular nerve in this country. For instance, I've noticed that *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, with its disturbing undercurrents of luring, loss, and vanishment, and its enigmatic, otherworldly central figure appears to resonate with Australian writers. I can think of at least four Australian novels that have been inspired by it, across times, age ranges and styles: Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967) Victor Kelleher's *The Green Piper* (1985) Christopher Koch's *The Doubleman* (also 1985), and Ursula Dubosarsky's *The Golden Day* (2011).

Other fairy tales that have resonated with Australian writers include Rapunzel, for instance, Kate Forsyth's very successful *Bitter Greens* (2012); Fiona Price's recent *Let Down Your Hair* (2015) and my own *The Crystal Heart* (2014). Beauty and the Beast is also a favourite in both adult and YA: Juliet Marillier's *Heart's Blood* (2009) my *Scarlet in the Snow* (2013) and Kate Forsyth's forthcoming *The Beast's Garden*. Kate has also explored the world behind one of the greatest collections of fairytales, those collected by the Grimm brothers, in her historical novel, *The Wild Girl* (2013), while Keith Austin has used the grimmer aspects of Grimm fairytales in a series of horror novels including *Grymm* (2012) and *Snow, White* (2014). The influence of HC Andersen is felt in such very different works as Juliet Marillier's *Daughter of the Forest* (1999) and Ursula Dubosarsky's *The Red Shoe* (2006), while in her multi-award-winning *Fairytales for Wilde Girls* (2014), Allyse Near memorably explores a world in which several different strands of fairytale are mixed: from French, German, Danish and Russian sources, and Margo Lanagan explores Celtic fairy tales of selkies in her equally acclaimed *Sea Hearts* (2012).

Meantime, it is within the area of picture books that actual retellings of fairy tales are found, often

lavishly illustrated. The 90's saw quite a boom in this, with such works as Margaret Early's sumptuous recreations of *Sleeping Beauty*; *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* and *William Tell* and Lilith Norman's and Maxim Svetlanov's wonderful recreation of Andersen's hilarious story, *The Beetle*. In recent times, the picture-book fairy tale had almost disappeared in Australia, and this was one of the reasons why, with a couple of artist friends, I started a little publishing house, Christmas Press, two and a half years ago. We're so happy to give this genre new life, with great retellings by well-known authors and gorgeous pictures. We've published four so far, and they seem to really resonate with readers—both adults and children.

There are many more examples I could quote, but we'd be here all day just on that! From where I'm standing it certainly seems to be the case that it is children's and YA literature, as well as fantasy literature, which are the genres that in Australia as well as in other countries, are the most forthright in engaging directly with fairy tales as inspirations. And many of these new works seem to be translating well to overseas markets. But the global appeal of these stories has not, I believe, eliminated their 'green and gold'. Far from it. Just because a work does not specify an Australian locality, does not mean writers are not inspired by the fact they live in a very particular country. This country, Australia.

Now I'd like to look at my own experience of writing many fairy tale novels, from the 1990's to this very year, 2015. And to do that, I want to start with a story: a story of everyday magic, which also shows how enchantment exists here, in our landscapes, every bit as much as in Europe...

*It's one of those crystal-clear, bright blue New England winter mornings, and I'm walking the three kilometres to the general store. All around me as I walk, the landscape reveals itself like an illuminated page in an ancient manuscript: parchment-coloured grass, subtle grey-greens and silver of trees and bushes, flashes of stained-glass colour of parrots and rosellas, smoky-blue hills in the distance, the dusty-ochre road winding..There are no cars around this morning, and nobody else around at all.*

*All at once, there's a rustle in the long grass on the verges of the road, and I catch a glimpse of*

*silver-grey coat, a twitch of secret movement. Transfixed, I stand and stare; for slowly, slowly, arising as if from a spell, there is a huge male kangaroo, stretching his body up, as if he is shedding one form and entering another, and his bright dark eyes look straight at me. When at last he has reached his full height, he stands there for an extraordinary instant, still staring at me, and then, without hurry, turns, and hops away, clearing a fallen tree in one flying bound. I stand there for an instant or two after he is gone, then walk slowly away in my turn. I will go back home with the thrilling splendour and weird terror of that moment deep in me; and it will flow out through my fingers, onto the keyboard, on the screen, into the heart of the novel I'm writing, infusing it with a strangeness and a richness that would otherwise not have been so clear and real.*

*Now it's summer. There's a hot honeyed perfume to the air; the sky is no longer crystal-clear but pale blue, wild, and there's a feeling around that makes us tread warily when we go out to the vegetable garden. Coastal people talk of shark weather; well, there's such a thing as snakey weather, too, in the bush, some quality of silence, and you feel it in your bones, and in the prickle of your skin.*

*The berry fruit and the vegetables have gone crazy in the warm and wet spring weather, and the garden has an Edenic look, though the paddock just outside the garden gate is already acquiring that bleached look so characteristic of New England grassland once the spring flowers have gone. I stamp along the path, telling myself I know a snake's about, that I know..*

*And yes, it is there, coiled on the warm path, not an instant away; a shining, drowsy length of brown and pale yellow that has created a space of silence and waiting around itself. Like that moment when I saw the kangaroo rising like a metamorphosed man from the grass, I stand, transfixed, the hair rising on the back of my neck. But this time, it is for a different reason: for I knew it was there, inescapable, inevitable as fate itself.*

*Slowly, the snake uncoils; gracefully and fluidly as a golden stream, it slips away into the jade-green of the garden understory, and who knows where it went? We will go about carefully for a day or two, and shout at the kids to get back inside at once and put on shoes before they go outside, but*

*never once think of hunting the snake down. It has manifested itself in as mysterious and immediate a manner as any creature of destiny; it is to be respected, not trifled with, feared and sometimes hated, but never trivialised.*

*The road to the shop again, in autumn, the air is already sharp, the colours a mix of bleached native grasses, muted eucalypts, and blazing autumn leaves of European trees. I'm walking rather slowly, for I'm already tired. I've had a bad night, with a very vivid nightmare. In the nightmare, I am walking along a black, deserted road; then suddenly, I turn my head, and there is an immense mob of large-horned hairy cattle looking rather like Highland cattle, bearing down silently, relentlessly on me, and I know that in seconds I'll be engulfed. The dream ended there.*

*Now, in waking life, I reach the bitumen section of the road, up the top of the hill; and suddenly I hear a sound behind me. And there, there, bearing down on me, is a great mob of cattle, not hairy, not horned, it is true, for they are Herefords and Devons with placid faces and round heads, but still with that otherworldly look cattle have, that sense of having just patiently waddled in from some long-ago. There is that saying 'time stood still': and that is just what happened, to me. For an eternal instant, I thought I was done for; but then, as I move aside, trying to look unafraid, trying to look 'sensible', I see that there's two people with the cattle, a horseman and woman in Drizabones and hats, who give me a languid wave as they ride past at the flank of their bovine army. I watch them, cattle and riders, stream past in a timeless herding scene; smelling that warm, intimate, strong, honest bovine smell, a smell that is like a memory of the distant past, and yet so very immediate!*

Those were all real experiences, all things that have fed into my writing and made me understand, not just intellectually, but emotionally, spiritually, how magic can happen. How transformations occur. What the sudden irruption of magic into your life, as happens so often in fairytales, can actually feel like. How things happen in an arbitrary fashion. And much more. Yet though I might have had those experiences in another setting than Australia, they would not been quite the same.

They have an element which is different, and that element is to do with the land. And I think that, mysteriously, it also influences the way I write. As well, I think that the forthright, direct manners of Australians, the lack of class distinctions and the spirit of rebellion and the 'fair go' that is still a feature of Australian society, also influences the atmosphere of the novels. And I don't think I'm alone in this.

Yet, as well as that, I am, like so many Australians, of immigrant background. Mine is very recent. Indeed, I am first-generation immigrant yet I came here as a child. I lived in both countries—Australia and France. I have a foot in both worlds, both languages. And I grew up with a huge storehouse of traditional stories—not only from France and Australia, but also from other places where my globe-trotting parents lived: and in particular, Indonesia. I loved fairytales as a child. They were both consolation and escape; helped me to disappear into enchanted realms when family melodramas made life difficult and painful; but also helped me to make sense of the world on my return. I love fairytales now, both as a writer, and as a reader—and I have a particular attraction, as a reader, to fantasy novels based on fairytale. There's something about good fairytale-based novels—a lightness of touch, a freshness of spirit—that I think comes directly out of that sparkling spring, that bubbling source of fairytale. Fairytale is less grand than myth, and less 'serious' than legend, but it is more romantic than both. More human. And yet more magical. More geared towards not the great ones of this world, but the little people. Going from light to dark and all shades in between, managing all emotions from love to hatred, joy to sorrow, dread to excitement, fairytale is humble yet powerful, full of meaning yet full of adventure. As well, in my view, what makes fairy tales particularly suitable as a basis for modern fantasy is that in themselves they mix both enchantment and pragmatism, the world of the everyday and a realm of pure magic. And it's all done in such a matter of fact yet also profound way.

So fairytales, from all kinds of traditions, have always been a rich source of inspiration for me, and those of my books that are based on fairytale elements seem to have struck the strongest chord with readers. And that includes books which have been set in contemporary times! My four-volume

Chronicles of El Jisal series, published by Random House Australia from 2004 to 2007( they include *Snow, Fire, Sword; The Curse of Zohreh; The Tyrant's Nephew; and The Maharajah's Ghost*) are set in a contemporary parallel-world version of the modern Muslim world, the (imaginary)countries in them based on Indonesia, the Gulf States, Iraq and India in turn. Each of them features the Jinn, or genies, the fairy-world beings of Muslim folklore, in their myriad forms, from the small and weak to the big and mighty, from the kind to the whimsical to the dangerous and evil. And these Jinn survive very well in the modern world—they may take different forms but they happily domesticate technology and find extra spaces in the ether we've created in cyberspace. (*The Curse of Zohreh* particularly focusses on the different and inventive ways in which Jinn have adapted to the go-getting modern glitz of the contemporary Gulf Arab states). You can read more about this series at this link: <https://sites.google.com/site/sophievmasson/abouttheworldofeljisal>

As well, I've had lots of books published with traditional European fairytale elements set in pre-modern settings, starting from the 1990's, with the first being *Carabas*(1996) followed by *Cold Iron*(1998), *Clementine*(1999) . The 2000's *The Green Prince*(2000) *The Firebird*(2001)and *In Hollow Lands*(2004) while in my adult fantasy novel, *Forest of Dreams* (2000), I used a mixture of fairytale, legend and history to recreate the world of Marie de France, a 12<sup>th</sup> century poet who was one of the first to create her own 'fantasy' stories based on a mixture of Arthurian legend, French and Celtic fairytale, and classical fables.

Very recently, I've had four fairytale novels published, in a series that is not sequential but rather, linked, set in the same world, all published by Random House Australia: *Moonlight and Ashes*(2012); *Scarlet in the Snow*(2013); *The Crystal Heart*(2014); and this year's *Hunter's Moon*. Each is inspired by specific fairytales, and each of them inhabits a parallel world whose settings are based on late 19<sup>th</sup> century Central and Eastern Europe, but which also recreate that particular feel of fairy tale, and which is informed by my own particular experience as a French Australian writer living now. Each of them hasn't just sprung out of old stories and faraway places; very specific moments have woven themselves into the fabric, such as the ones I recounted to you earlier. But

also others, from the mundane to the magical. For instance, when I was writing *Cold Iron*, I did a lot of walking up and down that road to the shop, which at the time was not yet bitumened over, and that very particular feeling of walking dirt roads influenced the journey of the characters in my book; while another, more mysterious example was going home from Sydney on the train, on a bleak winter's day, and suddenly seeing a bright red feather—a rosella's, or a parrot-- floating past my window. Immediately the title of *Scarlet in the Snow*, and the beginning of my narrator's voice—came into my mind, as scalp crinkling, I recalled an old Russian legend of the firebird: when one of her feathers drops to land, then a new story is born.

It is moments like these that all of us writers know have transforming potential at their very core. They are fairy tale moments. The spinning wheel is readied; the richly-scented straw prepared; and the green and gold thread of re-imagined fairy tale will soon be woven into a shining fabric of original and distinctive story. Pure transformative magic indeed.