

## The Child in the Story

The representation of children is an age-old practice. The stories and legends that still permeate our culture from centuries before contain numerous examples of lost children, endangered children, but also malevolent and dangerous children. The tales have morphed in the hands of different writers in different countries across centuries, their images have moved from wood carvings and paintings to television and film. Many portray children victimised and in danger, if not murdered and eaten, and yet many have come to view ‘fairy tale’ as a signifier of an ideal of happiness, even if this signification is also considered a fantasy which is remote from reality. A production line of extremely popular Disney films based on fairy tales present versions that, at least on the surface, remove the darkest, most violent elements. Beneath this surface, other writers and filmmakers have sought to use the fairy tale to expose the society they live in.

From centuries past, there is already a dichotomy between the figure of the child as innocent and in danger, and as evil and a threat to the community. It is striking to think of the impact of such small compact collections of words. From oral transmission, through refined literary renditions intended for aristocracy and scholars, to popular Hollywood films, the stories are cultural history, our verbal DNA. Some would claim they are attuned to our psyches: Bruno Bettelheim’s influential book *The Uses of Enchantment* analyses the tales in psychoanalytic terms, arguing that they provide important lessons for children in meeting developmental stages such as leaving home and living apart from their parents.

Others argue that the tales are attuned to the external structure of our lives. Jack Zipes has written many texts discussing the social environment in which the tales were born and the way the tales have been adapted to influence or comment on changes in society.

Zipes also asserts the nature of fairy tales to provide guidance on ‘social action—to transform the world and make it more adaptable to human needs while we try to change ourselves and make ourselves fit for the world. Almost all fairy tales involve a quest’ (Zipes 2012, x). The conflict within the stories is understandable as human life is about conflict. They are short narratives to aid us in fitting in with the people and the world around us because we are ‘all misfit for the world’, and we need to ‘invent or find the means through communication to satisfy and resolve conflicting desires and instincts’ (Zipes 2012, x). It is important to ask, as Janet Frame does in her posthumously published *Towards Another Summer*, ‘why [are] so many stories ... of boys and girls who set out with a message or to make a journey and never deliver the message or reach the end of the journey because they are seized by wolves’ (Frame 2008, 160)? She identifies an abiding message that her young self internalised, like many boys and girls over the years: other people, individually or collectively, will try to prevent the child from fulfilling his or her quest. These people are not necessarily the predatory strangers lurking in the shadows that we were warned not to talk to; Frame’s semi-autobiographical novel (which I will discuss further in this chapter) shows that evil witches can lurk amid the familiar in the shadows of the home.

Frame wrote her question in a novel in 1963 that was not published until 2007, more than ten years after her death, because she regarded it as ‘too personal to be published in her lifetime’ (Frame 2008, dust-jacket). The times have not changed for the better: in 2014, Marina Warner refers to the ‘unspeakable—unbelievable—acts’ which are ‘spoken of’ in fairy and folk tales and are now ‘echoed, week by week, in the news’:

When a child dies at the hands of parents who have starved and tortured him, as in the case of Daniel Pelka, and nobody moves to help him; when young girls are kidnapped and held prisoner by an apparently ordinary man in an ordinary American suburb; and when Josef Fritzl imprisons his daughter in a cellar and keeps her there for twenty-four years, fathering seven children on her until he was discovered in 2008, then fairy tales can

be recognized as witnesses to every aspect of human nature. They also act to alert us – or hope to. (Warner 2014, 79)

Warner argues that the function of fairy tales in the past was to say the ‘unsayable’ in a way which ‘encode[d] them cryptically for the younger generation to absorb’. In the current age, children as well as adults can watch the horrors ‘unfold in the media’, though ‘recognition and familiarity with the possibility does not seem to have sharpened sensitivity or produced change, only increased a general fear for children’s safety’ (Warner 2014, 80). The imaginary has become the real, and the barrage of images of the horrors inflicted on children seems only to increase the propensity to ‘lose’ children in our society, even if it is only because the anxiety of children and parents means more children are locked away.

Steedman’s metaphor of the interior child becoming ‘released’ from texts in order to enter the psyche of society (Steedman 1995, 19–20) can be adapted: the child figure becomes lost within texts and imprisoned within the collective consciousness. This is the textual and psychological equivalent of the children physically locked away in institutions and the tragic young people who are imprisoned by relatives or strangers. Warner refers above to the imprisonment of young girls in a basement and to the case of Josef Fritzl. This latter case of a father imprisoning his daughter for decades in an extended basement is, as Warner argues, like a fairy tale made horrifically real and present. It was noted by many in reports of the case that it uncovered dark depths beneath supposedly peaceful, ‘normal’ homes.

Fritzl was one of the formative ideas for Emma Donaghue’s novel *Room* (2010). A young woman has been imprisoned in a room since she was a teenager, abducted by a man she names ‘Old Nick’. She calls him this to her five-year-old son, Jack, who was born in the ‘Room’. As he has never seen the world, he views ‘Outside’ as purely representation, believing it can only exist in television, stories and songs. This perception has been taught to him by his mother as a means of protecting her son from the harsh reality of their lives. So he can help them escape, his mother later tries to convince her son that the programmes he watches avidly on television are actually representations of a vast material world. It is then that the unreality of their own life, confined to a single room, must be highlighted by the mother: ‘We’re like people in a book, and he [“Old Nick”] won’t let anyone else read it’ (Donaghue, 90). ‘Room’ is the title of the book, and the characters are indeed trapped within its pages.

The novel makes the reader question to what extent we are all contained within the structures that define our world and asks 'How do people in a book escape from it?' (Donaghue, 105). The cultural representation of children can result in restrictions to adults too, as the way we are defined as children and the way we are taught to view the world become ingrained.

'Old Nick' is like an author trying to impose meaning on his story, but also a society attempting to control and position people within it. However, the words in a story, their meanings, cannot be contained by one author. Meanings are a 'negotiation' between text and reader, and each reader is influenced by the culture which surrounds him or her (Buckingham 2000, 115, to name one of many critics who have discussed this). The boy narrator of *Room*, Jack, is an extreme form of the child narrator used by many writers across different centuries and countries: a narrator that can present worlds through eyes, ears and minds which are not yet fully clogged up with how those worlds have been defined.

When Jack escapes with his mother into the world, he is understandably overwhelmed by 'Outside'. Although he begins to enjoy some experiences he still yearns to return to 'Room'. Towards the end of the novel, Donaghue inserts a passage in which Jack sees part of a television discussion about himself. Jack is surprised to hear that 'We're all Jack, in a sense', the 'inner child, trapped in our personal Room one oh one' (Donaghue, 293); an inner child who 'perversely, on release' feels 'alone in a crowd' and reels 'from the sensory overload of modernity' (293). A woman asserts that, 'at a symbolic level, Jack's the child sacrifice ... cemented into the foundations to placate the spirits' (Donaghue 2010, 293). Jack's grandmother angrily turns off the television with the remark that 'Those guys spent too much time in college' (294). I accept, with this book, I am joining the ranks of such academic commentators, seeking the symbolic amongst human tragedy. Grandma's criticism is understandable: there is a danger that by making the lost child into a symbol the humanity of the person and what they mean to their family is demeaned. And yet, I argue, it is important, while treading carefully along the overlap of reality and representation, to analyse that connection between the symbol and the real. Donaghue states on her website that, apart from the language and behaviour of her own five-year-old child,

*Room* was also inspired by... ancient folk motifs of walled-up virgins who give birth (e.g. Rapunzel), often to heroes (e.g. Danaë and Perseus). *Room* was also inspired by ... the Fritzl family's escape from their dungeon in Austria – though I doubt I'll ever use contemporary headlines as a launching point again, since I didn't like being even occasionally accused of 'exploitation' or tagged 'Fritzl writer'.

So, the novel's narrative is a mixture of the symbolic—from nursery tales and legends—and 'contemporary headlines', and a blueprint also for my book. It is impossible to divide the representational from the real and argue that one would not exist without the other.

In Donaghue's narrative, Jack's heroic status derives from the fact that he is outside of the cultural cage that has been built to contain our society; he highlights the failings of our world. He embodies a different facet of the lost child figure: the child outside of society, outside of culture, sometimes outside of human language. Jack's isolation from the outside world and his subsequent impressions of it recall such Enlightenment and Romantic creations such as Condillac's statue and the monster created by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. They are thrust into a harsh and scary, though also beautiful, world and must learn how to interpret the sudden influx on their senses.

As Zipes argues, even with the 'hybridization' of the fairy tale (from oral transmission, to the written and printed word, to the 'audio-visual inventions' from the late nineteenth century onwards) the stories still 'compel storytellers and listeners alike to explore the Freudian question of why humans are so discontent with civilization' (Zipes 2012, x). The fairy tale has always existed as both a means of transmitting the social codes and prohibitions of a society at the same time as questioning authority (Zipes 2012, xi). Like the figure of the child, the tale has become an ambiguous site used as, or considered to be, a means of either positive transformation or negative manipulation and control.

The emergence of the literary fairy tale in Europe involved educated writers adapting the oral folk tales into a literature that enforced the moral and social codes of the time (Zipes 2012, 3). An example of this process is the way the Brothers Grimm edited and revised the original oral tales that they compiled. In 2014, Zipes made the first English translation of the *Complete First Edition of The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*. He notes that these tales are largely unknown now (Grimm and Wilhelm 2014, xix) as subsequent editions were re-written and various

tales heavily edited or omitted, particularly by Wilhelm Grimm who tried to make the tales conform to his ‘sentimental Christianity and puritanical ideology’ and ‘more artistic to appeal to middle-class reading audiences’ (Grimm and Wilhelm 2014, xx). Zipes asserts that the original tales, in contrast, ‘have a beguiling honesty and an unusual perspective on human behaviour and culture’ (Grimm and Wilhelm 2014, xxi). It is significant that Zipes identifies that the ‘tales of the first edition are often about “wounded” young people’ and many ‘illustrate ongoing conflicts that continue to exist in our present day’ (Grimm and Wilhelm 2014, xxxv). The story of the lost child pre-dates literacy, existing outside of controlling narratives while also becoming an indelible part of the lives within them.

In these early forms of literature, children are the object of adult representation. The tales were ‘not told for children, nor can they be considered truly children’s tales’, though they would often have heard or read them, but ‘they are *about* children’ (Grimm and Wilhelm 2014, xxxv). In the same way as I discussed with reference to autobiography and psychoanalysis in the Introduction, the child is the object and not the subject. Zipes asserts that the tales in the Grimms’ original collection

frequently depict the disputes that young protagonists have with their parents; children brutally treated and abandoned; soldiers in need; young women persecuted; sibling rivalry; exploitation and oppression of young people; dangerous predators; spiteful kings and queens abusing their power; and Death punishing greedy people and rewarding a virtuous boy. (Grimm and Wilhelm 2014, xxxv)

Many of the situations listed by Zipes resonate with the categories of missing children from the *Scoping Report* that I mentioned in the Introduction. The ‘exploitation and oppression of young people’ has become front-page news as well as a staple of publishing houses and film companies up to the present day. Numerous biographical and autobiographical accounts of abusive and neglected childhoods have also become a notable publishing phenomenon of recent years. Books such as Dave Pelzer’s trilogy, beginning with *A Boy Called “It”*, and *Ugly* by Constance Briscoe, to name only two of the more prominent authors, have become ‘bestsellers’.<sup>1</sup> It remains a fundamental crisis as destructive now as it was in the ages of the oral folk tales that the Grimms collated.

Living within families or communities where they are surrounded by or subjected to violence creates within some children a sense that it is

part of normal, everyday life. This can result in the children themselves becoming violent abusers. A pamphlet produced by UNICEF cites a figure of 275 million children worldwide who are exposed to violence in the home and asserts that there is ‘a strong likelihood’ that this violence will pass to the next generation with women more likely to become victims of husbands who witnessed violence when they were children. It is significant that one of the tales removed by the Grimms from subsequent editions is *How Some Children Played at Slaughtering* because it was ‘gruesome’ (Grimm and Wilhelm 2014, xxxvi). The tale is actually printed as two different versions, both of which involve children playing at being a butcher and a pig, the one slitting the other’s throat. In the first version, the children are apparently unrelated and the fatal act is witnessed by a councillor. The child who acted as the butcher is brought before the council and, at the suggestion of ‘a wise old man’, is made to choose between a ‘beautiful red apple’ or a gold coin. The boy’s choice of the apple ‘with a laugh’ means he is ‘set free without any punishment’, presumably because it signifies his innocence in ‘a children’s game’ (Grimm and Wilhelm 2014, 79). However, the council’s tacit acceptance of the boy’s action could be interpreted as a realisation that the society they purport to lead and control is one founded on violence. The need to set the boy free may be because they fear that if they were to punish him, they must also punish themselves. Real life modern cases such as the murder of two-year-old James Bulger by ten-year-olds Jon Venables and Robert Thompson reveal a tendency to portray the murderers as inherently evil monsters and to blame factors such as violent films as a means of avoiding collective social responsibility and guilt. The actions of a number of politicians in response to the Bulger murder put them in a similar position as the Grimm councillors: keen to be seen to act and yet unwilling or unable to make the fundamental changes to the social conditions that permitted the violence.

The second version of *How Some Children Played at Slaughtering* contains the trauma within one family. The children see their father slaughtering a pig and decide to re-enact it on each other, the one slitting the other’s throat. The mother, on seeing one of her children kill the other, reacts in anger, stabbing the surviving child. She then returns to her third child, a baby, to find he has drowned while she left him unattended in the bath. The tale then relates how the mother was so distraught that she ‘finally hung herself’ and the father too, on returning home to see the carnage, ‘died soon thereafter’ (Grimm and Wilhelm 2014, 79). This scene of

domestic trauma encapsulates family breakdown, violence and neglect. It makes clear how one action within a family transmits to other people in a self-destructive cycle. The decision to remove these tales from the collection is like the actions of the councillors, ignoring the issues of child violence, and violence to children, and therefore avoiding the wider social issues that precipitate the violence.

### GIRLS IN THE HOOD

While those tales of children slaughtering each other did not last long in the history of published writing, 'Little Red Riding Hood' has been rewritten and produced in books, films and other media to show its continued resonance. A quick internet search brought up thirty-three wildly different film versions of the tale, made in several different countries over a span of decades and crossing such diverse genres as horror, romance, comedy and even a Tex Avery cartoon. A dominant theme of the tale is 'to what extent the boundaries of our existence have evolved from male phantasy and sexual struggle for social domination'. Zipes advocates 'an attempt to recall a repressed history in hope that we will explore alternatives for the future' (Zipes 1993, xi). The lost child figure exists in this space where narratives are repressed and voices are silenced, a space which is also an opening in time, where past and future mix. The promise of the future which a child is thought to represent becomes collapsed in the loss, as we grieve over hopes which have gone missing, remember our pasts and what we have forgotten.

The tale of Red Riding Hood was born out of fear. Zipes refers to Marianne Rumpf's research revealing that one of the most common oral warning tales in the Middle Ages 'involved hostile forces threatening children who are without protection'. This malevolent force 'was portrayed as attacking a child in the forest or at home. The social function of the story was to show how dangerous it could be for children to talk to strangers in the woods or to let strangers enter the house' (Zipes 1993, 2). Rumpf's research places the origins of *Little Red Riding Hood* in superstitious tales about werewolves eating children, which flourished in certain areas of sixteenth-century France where there was an 'epidemic' of trials of men accused of being werewolves and of killing children (Zipes 1993, 4). In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, 'hunger often drove people to commit atrocious acts' and 'little children were attacked and killed by animals and grown-ups in the woods and fields' (Zipes 1993, 6).



The transmission of this violence through time to impact on children's lives centuries later is shown through analysis of a section of Janet Frame's posthumously published novel *Towards Another Summer*. The novel follows the semi-autobiographical character Grace Cleave and portrays her inner mental anxieties. It is significant that central to this is Grace's reminiscence of her childhood and this is intrinsically connected to the reading of *Little Red Riding Hood*. The passages begin by placing the fairy story within the context of a child's first introduction to written language: verbal representation. When the young Grace is just learning to read she believes that 'once the words are on the page they never change; when you open the book the print never falls out'. This contrasts with people whose 'faces change ... sometimes people look like wolves' (Frame 2008, 159). Frame's passages express the feelings—conflicted and divided—which a young child can have about the world around them, most directly and immediately embodied by the child's close family. The child Grace initially thinks she would 'know at once' if a wolf dressed up as her grandma, but then she asks herself 'Should I?' (Frame 2008, 159). She is beginning to question whether the surface appearances of people actually reflect who a person is.

The first story that Grace remembers reading is *Little Red Riding Hood*, and it is significant that a story of a lost child is the first she remembers. Although Grace has internalised the fear and sense of prohibition in the story there is a suggestion that she is already beginning to wonder how she can influence narrative herself. She thinks that 'nothing you can say can change the story as it is written', even if she writes '*Watch Out Red Riding Hood* at the bottom of the page or in the margin' (Frame 2008, 158). In the story, if not in life, she sides with the wolf, looking forward to when the child is eaten. This could be seen as a symbol of the erosion of her self through social prohibition, but at the same time it is also identification with the feral part of life that is outside the accepted limits of society.

At the onset of literacy a division is already forming between the written word and the social world of interaction with other people. At this stage, Grace assumes a literal meaning for words as interpreted by her and she is troubled by the incongruity between her interpretations and the social narratives that crowd in around her. Amidst this struggle to assert her own narrative, Grace is made aware that language cannot

contain all meaning, whether an individual interpretation or a collective one, when her grandmother dies and Grace is not allowed to see the dead body before the funeral (the dead grandmother also suggesting that the myth of *Little Red Riding Hood* is living and embodied in the child Grace's experience). Her older sister, Isabel, *is* allowed and teases Grace with this extra knowledge of the way a body looks after death. This knowledge of death is resistant to textual comprehension, retaining a silence that refuses to offer up explanations: 'because only she *knew*, and I couldn't put grandma into a book and try to get her to answer if I wrote in the margin *Grandma do you look asleep now you are dead?*' (Frame 2008, 161). There is something (nothing) which must remain outside of the text. This revelation that the written word cannot contain all the answers to life, and particularly death, opens up the possibilities that, even if the written word cannot alter its 'physical' appearance, the meaning within it is not always fixed.

In *Towards Another Summer* Grace reflects that 'we must tend the myths, [for] only in that way shall we survive' (Delrez 2010, 13; Frame 2008, 97). Importantly myth, as with language as a whole, must be recreated and reinvigorated with a connection to the emotional and to a spiritual state beyond the material world. Instead of myths as just another codified, deceptive use of language that has lost meaning, they can instead become transformative. After her childhood reflections, which show how the imaginative self can be suppressed and disconnected from the social world, Grace wakes up and asks:

Why stop at God? Why make him lid, blanket, roof of human mythology? Because, reaching God, we are wordless, why grow afraid and stop in our journey, why not continue, singing at first, as Noel sings when he awakes, the unintelligible words that one by one will blossom into the new language? (Frame 2008, 164)

Noel is the young son of her hosts, and it is important that it is a child who is offering a path outside of conventional language. A young child or baby's babbling sounds are the building blocks of each individual's speech, and Frame describes them in this passage as offering an opening through which every person can access a different perception or understanding of reality. Frame is using the Romantic ideal of the child and the power of the imagination to create a positive change in the world. As a writer she is conscious that she is already participating in 'human

mythology' but is advocating a new mode of language which will break free from what has become traditional and accepted. Essentially, she is suggesting that the means of escaping this 'mythology' is to access our own individual inner child.

The appeal not to be afraid and to continue 'in our journey' recalls the question earlier on why so many children are prevented from completing their journey. The passage places God within 'human mythology'—arguably, therefore, within the construction of language—but suggests that God is ineffable or, rather, is representative of an aspect of humanity, or life, that is outside of language. The passage here does not make a patriarchal God the master of language, as in the story of the Tower of Babel; instead the self is encouraged to find, or create, a new language—and mythology—outside of what was formerly prescribed.

What Frame advocates is for people to use language creatively and not be restricted by identities and roles which have been forced upon them. Delrez points out that the novel contains 'mythological references to the story of Philomela and ... Procne' and indicates that 'the miracles of mythology, no less than those of fiction, allow for a form of continuation beyond the finalities of lived experience' (Delrez 2010, 13). It is significant that this story of metamorphosis involves the removal of Philomela's tongue so she cannot tell her sister Procne of her rape by Procne's husband. Philomela overcomes this by weaving a tapestry and sending it to her sister, in at least one version of the story through the agency of a bird. The tapestry could be seen as an artistic form of communication when the purely verbal was curtailed: a metaphor for the difficulties Frame experienced in expressing herself socially and her desire instead to create with the written word artistically. The sisters' transformation into birds occurs after they have killed Procne's son and served him to his father as a meal. This gruesome metaphor could represent the need to incorporate the dead child of our own pasts within us before we can transform ourselves and fly free of the restrictions and violence of conventional social structures.

Angela Carter, one of the best known authors of the modern retelling of fairy tales, argued that such tales were never 'as consoling as [Bettleheim] suggests' (quoted by Gamble 2008, 22). Instead, she saw the stories as documents of the working-class poor and accessible for all who want to adapt the templates for new stories (Gamble, 22). The original oral folk tale on which *Little Red Riding Hood* was based symbolised a girl's transition to womanhood and also narrated her overcoming the

wolf (or werewolf) through her own cunning and resourcefulness. This was changed significantly by Charles Perrault in the first known literary version of the tale, in the eighteenth century. Whereas the original peasant girl is 'forthright, brave, and shrewd', Perrault wrote Little Red Riding Hood as 'pretty, spoiled, gullible, and helpless' (Zipes 1993, 9). Her faults lead her to be consumed by the wolf, punished for her deviance from the prescribed route and behaviour. This new fate was given to the girl in line with new codes of socialisation that were developing in Perrault's time (Zipes 1993, 9). Bettelheim complains that Perrault's tale 'is not—and was not intended by Perrault to be—a fairy tale, but a cautionary story which deliberately threatens the child with its anxiety-inducing ending'. Bettelheim goes on from this to assert that it 'seems that many adults think it better to scare children into good behaviour than to relieve their anxieties as a true fairy tale does' (Bettelheim 1991, 167).

Angela Carter's rewriting of *Little Red Riding Hood* in her story *The Company of Wolves* connects back to the oral originals by extending the fear of wolves to that of werewolves. Carter reintroduces the concept of a man who can become a wolf, and who always has a wolf inside him (although Perrault's wild animal was always a very thinly veiled symbol for a predatory man). But Carter gives her Red Riding Hood (all three of them, in three different reworkings of the old tale) an assuredness and strength which makes her a match (in two senses of the word) for the wolf/man. In *The Company of Wolves*, the pubescent girl sheds her clothes with eagerness to get into bed with the wolf/man, and removes his clothes as well. On hearing his 'All the better to eat you with' she laughs, as 'she knew she was nobody's meat'. She ends the story in grandma's bed 'between the paws of the tender wolf' as if she has been through a 'savage marriage ceremony' (Carter 2006, 139). Carter reverses the age-old tale of the female being the victim of male oppression which the casually administered beating of the woman at the beginning of the tale demonstrated.

Red Riding Hood's gaining of the upper-hand from the wolf returns her to her position in the original oral tales, where it is the girl's own ingenuity which enables her to perform a rite of passage and defeat the wolf. Carter introduces blatant sexuality, as if to rip open the hypocritical innuendo of the morality tale written by Charles Perrault (which cast aspersions upon the character of a girl who had been escaping the clutches of the wolf long before he existed). Zipes argues that Perrault introduces 'a new child, the helpless girl, who subconsciously

contributed to her own rape'. The literary version 'contributed to an image of Little Red Riding Hood which was to make her life more difficult than it had ever been' (Zipes 1993, 10). If these words were put into a different context, it could be referring to the way an abuser, perhaps an abusive parent, or even a repressive society, has forced a resourceful, spirited girl to become a victim.

There are echoes of this in Joyce Carol Oates's short story 'Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?' Connie is a pretty fifteen-year-old girl who feels isolated within her family because she is unable or unwilling to conform to the conventional respectability of her older sister. Her mother is 'approving' towards the sister but 'disapproving' of Connie, whenever they come close to being friends 'something would come up—some vexation that was like a fly buzzing suddenly around their heads—and their faces went hard with contempt' (Oates 2003, 8). Connie's father is uncommunicative. She finds escape in picking up boys at a diner but one night catches the eye of a man (or 'boy' as she first thinks (5)) who wags his finger at her and laughs, saying 'Gonna get you, baby' (6). On a future afternoon, her family go out to a barbeque but Connie refuses to go. She is alone in the house when the man from the diner drives up, with another man called Ellie. Connie is at first uncertain whether 'she liked him or if he was a jerk' (12) but seems to be participating in a cagey flirtation until he starts to reveal how much he knows about her, her family and friends and she realises that the man is much older, in his thirties (18).

Connie starts to feel nauseous but is also overpowered by the man's presence: 'another wave of dizziness and fear rising in her so that for a moment he wasn't even in focus but was just a blur'. She has the 'idea' that he had 'come from nowhere and belonged nowhere' and everything associated with him 'was only half real' (21). His language twists the conventional phrases of love, which are present in the songs referenced through the story: 'I'll hold you so tight you won't think you have to try to get away or pretend anything because you'll know you can't. And I'll come inside you where it's all secret and you'll give into me and you'll love me' (22). The man uses words which he speaks 'with a slight rhythmic lilt' which Connie recognises as 'the echo of a song from last year, about a girl rushing into her boyfriend's arms and coming home again' (25). The concept of 'home' is separated from the family she grew up with. The language used by the man, ironically named Arnold Friend, emphasises that society presents such controlling and possessive

behaviour as normal for a man to exhibit to a woman. The woman is frequently objectified and thus robbed of her self. In Oates's story, Connie is made to feel she is 'hollow with what had been fear but was now just an emptiness' (30). Friend uses and twists the alienation she feels within her family and home, telling her the 'place you are now—inside your daddy's house—is nothing but a cardboard box I can knock down any-time' (30).

The reference to knocking down a house recalls the fairy tale of the *Three Little Pigs* where the houses of the first two pigs are destroyed by the wolf because they are not made of strong enough substance—they are superficial—and they cannot protect the pigs from being eaten. Perhaps a moral, in connection with Oates's modern story, that a home and family needs a strong basis to bolster the self-esteem of their children and prevent them succumbing to superficiality and becoming victims. The image of the wolf as a predator who tricks his victims returns us to the tale of *Red Riding Hood*. Caldwell links Oates's description of Friend as having 'big and white' teeth (Oates 2003, 18) and a 'nose long and hawklike, sniffing as if she was a treat he was going to gobble up' (14) to the wolf in *Red Riding Hood* (Caldwell 2006). Caldwell references the moralising ending of Perrault's version of the tale:

One sees here that young children,  
Especially young girls,  
Pretty, well brought-up, and gentle,  
Should never listen to anyone who happens by,  
And if this occurs, it is not so strange  
When the wolf should eat them.  
I say the wolf, for all wolves  
Are not of the same kind.  
There are some with winning ways,  
Not loud, nor bitter, or angry,  
Who are tame, good-natured, and pleasant  
And follow young ladies  
Right into their homes, right into their alcoves.  
But alas for those who do not know that of all wolves  
The docile ones are those who are most dangerous. (Quoted by  
Zipes 1993, 71)

Caldwell points out that Oates has never cited this text as an influence; however, it 'speaks to the pervasive worries of young women

victimized by predatory men' (Caldwell 2006, n.p.). Many critics have discussed the allegorical nature of Oates's story which had a working title of 'Death and the Maiden' (Caldwell n.p.). This traditional tale of a mythical figure of death who takes the lives of young persons has been frequently represented in Western culture; Widmayer discusses Oates's finished story in conjunction with the traditional motif and refers to paintings located in Basel which refer to the maiden being over-conscious about her 'toilette' and golden locks'. Widmayer connects this to Oates's portrayal of Connie as fixated with her appearance and her attractiveness to men (Widmayer 2004, 3–4). Like *Little Red Riding Hood* (at least Perrault's version) the onus is again on the young woman as encouraging her attacker. It is sadly a rhetoric that has prevailed into recent social commentary.

The inspiration for Oates's short story was a magazine article about a 'psychopath known as "The Pied Piper of Tucson" ... I have forgotten his name, but his specialty was the seduction and occasional murder of teen-aged girls'. He 'mimicked teenagers in talk, dress, and behavior, but he was not a teenager—he was a man in his early thirties. Rather short, he stuffed rags in his leather boots to give himself height ... You think that, if you look twice, he won't be there. But there he is'. Oates did not read the entire article, instead focusing only on 'the disturbing fact that a number of teenagers—from "good" families—aided and abetted his crimes' (Caldwell 2006, n.p.). Caldwell notes that this reference to the Pied Piper is another reference to a fairy tale amongst several allegorical references in Oates's story; I would add that it is a further reference to a fairy tale involving lost children. The enduring image of a 'pied piper' who can mesmerise young people and lead them away from their families is another indictment of our societies where children are 'spirited away'.

It is interesting to compare another Oates story of a pubescent girl being pursued and seemingly endangered. In 'Small Avalanches' a teenage girl wanders home in a remote country location in mid-western America. She has just been hanging out at the petrol station owned by her uncle and just before she leaves a man pulls up in a white car, 'a color you don't see much, and his license plate was from Kansas' (Oates 2003, 48). As the girl, Nancy, walks along the road, the man draws alongside her and tries to engage her in conversation. As she cuts away from the road to cross the rough, hilly terrain to her house, the man gets out of his car and follows her. Although Nancy frequently thinks to herself that the man is acting strangely, the sense of threat that he poses is evident

more to the reader than to Nancy. She is teased by the man for often answering ‘Oh I don’t know’ to his questions (57).

The similarities to ‘Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?’ are the pursuit of a young girl by a much older man who initially seems younger than he actually is (Nancy belatedly realises that the man is older than her father (54)). But in ‘Small Avalanches’, although the girl is intrigued by the man’s seeming friendliness towards her, she doesn’t allow herself to be captured by him. She runs ahead and up hills, looking back at the man as he stumbles and falls. She feels strong and confident in the environment she has grown up in, whereas the man is weak and unable to cope. Eventually he pleads for her not to leave him because he is sick, possibly having a heart attack (61–62). Nancy muses that this will ‘*teach [him] a lesson*’ as she runs safely home to her mother (62). The story is in the first person, from Nancy’s point of view, and it is a story of a young girl who is coming of age but not as a victim of men. She is able to outwit and outrun the older, predatory, male figure. To link it again to the traditional fairy tale, Nancy is closer to the original, oral, Red Riding Hood who outwits and kills the wolf, rather than the victim of Perrault’s cautionary tale (who is closer to Connie in ‘Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?’).

Geraldine Cousin, in her analysis of British theatre productions between 1990 and 2005, notes the frequent adaptation of, or references to, fairy tales. The old tales ‘provide a structure and a set of expectations that can either be realised or subverted’ (Cousin 2007, 6). Cousin includes a discussion of Bryony Lavery’s play *Frozen* which was first performed on 1 May 1998. Cousin contextualises the play with journalists’ accounts of the murders of Sarah Payne (which happened in July 2000) and of Jessica Chapman and Holly Wells in August 2003. Payne was abducted and murdered on the way to her grandmother’s house, as was the character in *Frozen* (Cousin 2007, 74). This recalls, of course, Red Riding Hood’s journey, but with a terribly real outcome. Cousin refers to Nicci Gerrard’s assertion that Ian Huntley’s murder of Wells and Chapman is like ‘a nasty modern fairy tale’ and Cousin argues that the ‘murders that we respond to most strongly are the ones that we can frame within recognisable, if disturbing, narratives’ (Cousin, 80–81). The public, consumers of media and culture, are often most strongly affected by those murders and abductions which are presented to us in the form of a narrative that connects consciously or unconsciously with the stories that have framed the history of our culture and our personal



histories as we grew through childhood. These histories have in turn influenced the way that journalists have chosen to describe and present these particular murders of children. Cousin describes one ‘Special Report’ on the murder of Wells and Chapman in *The Observer* newspaper (on 21 December 2003) which is written ‘primarily in the form of a whodunnit’ (Cousin, 78), another familiar narrative form. Also, the crime was commonly referred to as the ‘Soham Murders’, placing emphasis on the place where it was committed in contrast to other infamous murders where the location is forgotten. Could this be because ‘Soham’ resonates with the names of places in our communal memory and imagination such as Salem and Sodom?

The focus of attention on a few well-publicised cases should be considered in the context of the thousands of other tragic children whose lives are prematurely ended. If those cases which are given prominence ‘possess the horror of the strange; the spooky dread of the unknown’ (Gerrard, quoted by Cousin 2007, 80) then those thousands of forgotten, unremarked, neglected children *are* the unknown; a breath-taking absence upon which all the words are written and stories told. The girls’ presence in, and then absence from, the streets of a quiet English country town, disrupts our sense of place, our expectations of what is normal and expected in the places where we live.

Cousin refers to Zipes’s assertion that *Little Red Riding Hood* is ‘the most widespread and notorious fairy tale in the Western world, if not the entire world’ because ‘rape and violence are at the core of the [story’s] history’ (Zipes 1993, xi, quoted by Cousin 2007, 82). Cousin discusses how the playwright Bryony Lavery uses these underlying themes in her play *Frozen*. In this play, the ‘wolf’ is a paedophile who murders a young girl, Rhona, when she is going at her mother’s request to her grandmother’s house. In Lavery’s retelling of the fairy tale, the mother of the murdered girl, Nancy, ‘at one point becomes a surrogate Red Riding Hood through an encounter with [the killer] Ralph, the “wolf”, from which she emerges as the more powerful character’ through undertaking ‘an inner journey’ (Cousin 2007, 83). In a parallel to the later, real actions of Sara Payne (mother of Sarah), Nancy becomes involved in an organisation looking for missing children and then campaigns for parents to be given information about dangerous paedophiles living nearby.

Lavery’s Nancy eventually decides both to confront her own grief and loss, by holding her daughter’s bones, and then to confront the killer, Ralph, in prison. Cousin contrasts Nancy’s assertion of her gaze by

forcing Ralph to look at her before he has to look away, with the consuming gaze of the wolf portrayed by various illustrators of the Riding Hood story such as Gustave Dore (Cousin, 84–85). Ralph is forced to realise the pain and terror he caused Rhona and her mother and this leads him to commit suicide. Lavery has taken the symbolic journey of a young woman in the early oral versions of the tale and, in the absence of the girl herself (who is never physically present in *Frozen*), transferred it to an internal journey for the mother (absent largely from the traditional tales) and even for the ‘wolf’.

The conflict between Perrault’s version of *Red Riding Hood* and that of the earlier oral tales (and many subsequent versions) is whether the figure of the lost or endangered girl is purely symbolising a loss of hope and victory for controlling forces, or whether the child can at least offer some resistance and hope that there can be a better future. Resistance is certainly shown by a modern day Red Riding Hood in Matthew Harris’s film *Freeway* (1996), which presents a modern urban version of the *Little Red Riding Hood* story. The opening credits reference Little Red Riding Hood with cartoon drawings of a young woman in red coloured provocative clothing chased by a wolf in the form of a man. The film follows Vanessa Lutz who is an illiterate teenager with a prostitute mother and a drug-using stepfather who sexually abuses her. When mother and stepfather are arrested she runs away to try and find her grandmother in another town. After her car breaks down she is picked up by Bob Wolverton, a seemingly caring man who works with boys with emotional problems. At Bob’s prompting she reveals the extent of her dysfunctional life. Wolverton’s questioning suddenly takes an aggressive and obscene turn when she starts to discuss her abuse from her stepfather. She is responding to his earlier comment that for him to help her she is first ‘going to have to let me in’. This, in hindsight at least, has sexual connotations and Wolverton’s job as a supposed carer and educator means he is both therapist and the-rapist. The film’s portrayal of the injustices and abuses prevalent in society and its institutions makes the ‘system’ the actual ‘wolf’—or perhaps more appropriately the dark forest in which it is so easy to stray, or be led, from the path.

Wolverton’s probing questions, designed to make Vanessa ‘open up’, lead into violence and the threat of rape and murder, perhaps making a comment on the way that the language of analysis can actually become another form of abuse. Vanessa herself is outside of the written language system as the opening scene of the film shows her struggling to read

words on the blackboard at school. The film does revert to the original written version of the tale by making Vanessa the eventual victor in her battle with Wolverton. Despite all her disadvantages and the scepticism of the authorities due to her past criminal record ('Once you've been in the legal system no-one believes you') she triumphs, not only by brute force (although she is violent) but also by ingenuity. The climactic scene has Wolverton posing as Vanessa's grandmother (who he has just raped and murdered) and is presented as darkly comic. After a fight between Vanessa and Wolverton she emerges having strangled him to death. She asks the two detectives who arrive late if they have a cigarette, to which they all smile and laugh. The film ends with a freeze frame of Vanessa's face with a big grin. Of course, it could be argued that this is a positive ending with the girl victorious and the 'wolf' killed. However, the casual humour at the end of a scene, and film, which has contained multiple references to violence and abuse, becomes a comment on the way society trivialises or accepts such behaviour.

### EATEN UP INSIDE

The effect of social deprivation is portrayed in several fairy tales with reference to the lack of food. In both *Hansel and Gretel* and *The Children of Famine* (Grimm and Wilhelm 2014, 43–49 and 457) the impoverished and starving parents are driven to sacrifice their children in order to survive. In the latter, brief tale the mother (the father is absent, unmentioned) becomes 'unhinged and desperate' through hunger and tells her daughters she will kill them so she can eat them. Each of the two daughters in turn goes out and brings back some bread to spare temporarily their lives. However, the relief from hunger is short and the mother demands their death again. They respond by laying down and falling into a deep sleep from which 'no one could wake them'; the mother 'departed, and nobody knows where she went' (Grimm, 456). This tale thus avoids telling the reader that someone has died, which is what many of the tales do; however, the snapshot of desperation caused by poverty is harrowing.

The threat of starvation has its correlation in scenes where children are cooked and eaten (or it is threatened), a frequent motif across ancient myths and tales. As mentioned earlier, *How Some Children Played at Slaughtering* refers to children being killed as if they were pigs, and the serving up of his son to the king is a dramatic culmination to the

legend of Philomel and Procne (reproduced by Shakespeare in *Titus Andronicus*). It is interesting to consider why consuming children should be so prevalent in cultural history. It suggests a desire to incorporate the child back within the adult, as a macabre symbolic reclamation of the lost child. The motif has meanings that change over time: McDonagh argues that its use in the eighteenth century by Jonathan Swift in his satire *A Modest Proposal* (1729) is to criticise changes in ‘commercial life, the pleasures and pains of luxury, the pitfalls of colonial policies, the corruption of the state’ (McDonagh 2008, 15). A child’s position of vulnerability as the weakest in society means their ill-treatment shows cruelty in sharper focus. McDonagh discusses how child murder was a frequent occurrence in Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and, when child victims of the growing industries are also considered, Swift’s satire is not a great exaggeration of the truth; society was consuming children to feed itself.

In the fairy tale *Hansel and Gretel*, the parents do not threaten to eat their children, they simply plan to abandon them to their deaths in the forest. They are, however, threatened with becoming dinner for the wicked witch who they encounter while lost in the forest who plans to cook them. The witch’s house is made of cake and sweets (or ‘gingerbread’), and making it a place of danger could be seen as a way for impoverished parents to ward off the longings of their children for unobtainable luxuries. For Bettelheim, his psychoanalytic reading of the tale includes the child’s ‘need to transcend a primitive orality, symbolized by the children’s infatuation with the gingerbread house’ (Bettelheim 1991, 15). This is a good example of how fairy tales, or any writing, can be interpreted differently through the perspectives of each individual, and certainly in different eras. Bettelheim also argues that this particular tale has an important message for a child who wants to cling on to his parents ‘even though the time has come for meeting the world on his own’ (15). The tale ‘gives body to his anxieties, and offers reassurance about these fears because even in their most exaggerated form—anxieties about being devoured—they prove unwarranted: the children are victorious in the end, and a most threatening enemy—the witch—is utterly defeated’ (Bettelheim, 15).

While this may have validity in some senses, I am struck by the primary plot device being the parents’ choice to abandon their children to die, a choice they are driven to by the extreme poverty of their situation. Zipes’s translation of the Grimms’ first version of the tale quotes

the children's father as thinking it would be 'much better to share your last bite to eat with your children' rather than sacrifice them to preserve some extra life for the adults (Grimm and Wilhelm 2014, 45). The father is rewarded for at least being reluctant in carrying out his wife's plan to dispose of the children when he rejoices in their return with riches plundered from the witch; in contrast, the reader is told abruptly that the mother 'had died' (Grimm, 49).

The anxieties and fears which Bettelheim refers to may not be worked out in the positive way he describes. The child may instead internalise the financial, material burden which she places on her parents, a burden she can alleviate by absenting herself from the family, perhaps by going out and earning money, or perhaps simply by not being alive. In Thomas Hardy's novel *Jude the Obscure*, the young son, known as 'Little Father Time', feels the burden of his parents' poverty and kills himself and his siblings. He leaves a suicide note saying 'Done because we are too meny [*sic*]' (Hardy 2002, 325). Narratives of lost children are perhaps the starkest, most powerful way to convey themes of poverty and social exclusion. They draw attention to the brutal realities of life in the time in which they were written, but they sadly also reflect realities for children and their families in our own era also.

The lost child figure is also a reminder of time itself. 'Little Father Time' is so-named because he acts and speaks with world-weariness even though he is only a young child. He is youth and age, life and death, in one small package. A doctor in the novel asserts that the boy is an example of a modern child who sees the pain of life too early and embodies different views to the previous generation. The figure of the lost child has been and is an embodiment of the conflicts of the modern world but is also a more profound symbol of something beyond history. It is appropriate therefore that fairy tales are so often associated with children and are frequently used in a similar way by more modern authors to suggest a non-linear, disruptive notion of time. Benson argues that the 'fiction of the past forty years has sought repeatedly the company of the fairy tale, a mutually transformative relationship of backward glances, revisionary updatings, wild anachronisms, and imaginary futures. The attraction of such literature may very well lie in this temporal eclecticism' (Benson 2008, 4). 'Once upon a time ...' is outside linear time, it is no time and every time. Both the figure of the lost child and the fairy tale are tropes that persist throughout cultural history. Their repetition and persistence

through time and their relevance to different eras are enfolded in ‘this temporal eclecticism’, transgressing boundaries.

This gives an alternative understanding to Bettelheim’s assertion that ‘for the child himself, real events become important through the symbolic meaning he attaches to them, or which he finds in them’ (Bettelheim 1991, 62). The symbolic meaning can be negative as well as positive. When the child incorporates the anxieties of her parents and of the wider community, then they may themselves feel impelled to make a symbolic ‘event’ that is also tragically real, such as suicide or running away from home. Alice Miller argues that people carry into adulthood the emotional demands and/or neglect their parents imposed on them: ‘if the repression stays unresolved, the parents’ childhood tragedy is unconsciously continued on in their children’ (Miller 2005, 26).

Bettelheim argues that fairy tales assist children in making the necessary break from their parents, a break which causes internal conflict as ‘there is always a wish to have an existence entirely free of them and what they stand for in our psyche, along with the opposite desire to remain closely bound to them’ (1991, 95). This conflict is most acute in the period immediately before school age (separating infancy from childhood) and the one that ends it (separating ‘childhood from early adulthood’) (Bettelheim, 95). It is unfortunately the case in recent Western society, if it was not already in the post-industrial age, that the separation between parents and children is often a traumatic experience, and one that frequently occurs before the child has left home.

A significant recent category of publication is the ‘misery memoir’ where people relate their suffering as children. The children who have been abused and neglected over all those centuries in fairy tales are now ‘talking back’ in these memoirs. Instead of parents reading fairy tales to their children, there has been an explosion of books written by adults, for adults, which are stories of how they were abused or abandoned by their parents. Kate Douglas’s 2010 study of autobiographical writing describing traumatic childhoods dates the beginning of the trend to the ‘mid-1990s’ and found that a ‘search on Amazon.com reveals that over a thousand autobiographies of childhood have been published in roughly the past fifteen years—and this only considers mainstream forms of publication’ (Douglas 2010, 1). As Douglas argues, the autobiographies must be viewed within the context of other forms of cultural representations of children through media, advertising and fiction. In these representations, images of nostalgia for ‘playful innocence’ are countered by

traumatic images in which children are “‘stolen”, abused, murdered’, are ‘victims and perpetrators of violent crime’ or even objects of ‘apocalyptic notions of youth disorder’. Within these ‘binaries of innocence and experience’ the ‘child becomes a malleable scapegoat for a wide range of fears related to the future of social life and the preservation of identities in a rapidly changing world’ (Douglas, 13).

These narratives present latter-day versions of the evil father or stepfather and stepmother or mother (Zipes explains that the early versions of many famous fairy tales had the child’s own mother as the evil protagonist until the Grimms amended some of them to stepmothers to preserve an ideal of untainted motherhood (Grimm and Wilhelm 2014, xxxvii)). The first of Dave Pelzer’s autobiographies, *A Boy Called ‘It’*, begins with his ‘rescue’ from his abusive mother, when he is taken into social care after the physical abuse he suffered is reported by his school to the police. The narrative then goes back to the ‘Good Times’ of his early childhood when his family life and relationship with his mother is idyllic. This happiness is soon replaced by fear and abuse as he is violently told by his mother he is a ‘bad boy’ (Pelzer 2004, 21) and transformed from ‘good’ to ‘evil’ in his mother’s estimation. It is notable that this transformation is described using fairy-tale language. When his mother shouts at him ‘her voice changed from the nurturing mother to the wicked witch’ (Pelzer, 20). Bettelheim argues that the witch figure in fairy tales represents ‘the creation of our wishes and anxieties’ (Bettelheim 1991, 94). Bettelheim also argues, with reference to *Little Red Riding Hood*, that a child will not find it unusual when the wolf takes the grandmother’s place and dresses in her clothes as it will symbolise the times when, for instance, a child’s normally kindly grandmother scolds the child for being naughty. The fairy tale symbolises for the child how the ‘good’ grandmother can suddenly be transformed into a seemingly different person: ‘similarly, although Mother is most often the all-giving protector, she can change into the cruel stepmother if she is so evil as to deny the youngster something he wants’ (Bettelheim, 67). Unfortunately, in Pelzer’s story the transformation to the evil mother is more extreme than denying wishes, and is seemingly permanent.

Pelzer describes how his mother frequently made him search for some item that she had lost. He starts to fantasise that he will return the missing item to his mother (which he never can) and be rewarded with ‘hugs and kisses’: ‘my fantasy included the family living happily ever after’ (21). Pelzer’s autobiographies do ultimately read as an extended quest to find

a place in the American Dream, a memoir of abuse becomes a modern tale, without magic but in the direction of myth.

When the boy Pelzer gets a minor victory over his mother by stealing frozen food to eat (because she routinely starves him) he dreams he is 'a king dressed in the finest robes, eating the best food mankind had to offer. ... I was the king, and like a king on his throne, I gazed down on my food and smiled' (43). For triumph and trauma, the language of the fairy tale frames it in culturally familiar symbols. The epilogue of the trilogy is Pelzer's ecstatic account of his wedding day, a 'day that was taken from a fairy tale' (476). He, not uncommonly, refers to his new bride as a 'princess' (478). His reference to a fairy tale here is the usual connotation of living 'happily ever after' but, as I have shown in examples above, the original tales frequently ended far from happily.

### INTO THE WOODS

Bettleheim refers to the frequency of lost children in fairy tales, whether through abandonment or murder (attempted at least):

Many fairy-tales begin with children being cast out, an event which occurs in two basic forms: prepubertal children who are forced to leave on their own ('Brother and Sister') or are deserted in a place from which they cannot find their way back ('Hansel and Gretel'); and pubertal or adolescent youngsters who are handed over to servants ordered to kill them, but are spared because the servants take pity and only pretend to have murdered the child ('The Three Languages', 'Snow White'). In the first form the child's fear of desertion is given expression; in the second, his anxiety about retaliation. (Bettleheim 1991, 98)

For Bettleheim, these stories are about a child's wish to be independent from his parents or the child's 'belief that the parent wants to be rid of him' (98). As such, Bettleheim argues that the narratives of abandonment both reflect unconscious desires and fears in the child and offer them reassurance that these feelings are a necessary stage in their development as they prepare to make their own way out in the world. Bettleheim goes on to assert that maybe 'if more of our adolescents had been brought up on fairy tales, they would (unconsciously) remain aware of the fact that their conflict is not with the adult world, or society, but really only with



their parents' and that this is a conflict that the child will ultimately win 'as the ending of all these tales makes amply clear' (98–99).

A counter-argument that I will make, however, is that these tales reinforce the idea that the rejection of children, even to the point of murder, is the basis of society and even the family unit on which it is supposedly built. In the brief narratives, adult characters frequently exhibit jealousy and antagonism towards children, whether they are related to them or not. And the terrible reality, which I will discuss further in the next chapters, of child murder, abduction, abuse and neglect which has pervaded humanity over centuries shows that the 'fairy tale ending' is too often a screen which obscures the truth. The deeply ingrained narratives within which we grow up and become socialised are almost advocating, at least normalising, the need for children to be 'cast out' in order for society to function. In the next chapter I will refer to the practice of child migration, an institutionalised form of removing children from their parents, families and communities to colonies around the world; many young children were sent off to a 'land far, far away' with the apparent intention of enabling them to 'live happily ever after'. It is part of a continually tightening narrative bind that our stories of lost children, many of which stem from real-life tragedy, give birth in minds to the fears and desires that produce further real lost children, which are then represented in further stories.

Carolyn Steedman argues against Bettelheim's views of many fairy tales as encouraging a child's development into adulthood. For her, the classic tale 'tells the story of women in our culture, and simply states that they must be either innocent or beautiful, so passive that they are almost dead, or profoundly and monstrosly evil: good mother, bad mother' (Steedman 1982, 141–142). Steedman discusses particularly the effect these stories have on the working-class girls that she used to teach in the 1970s, highlighting the proliferation at the time of versions of the tales sold by Ladybird Books which were 'often the only children's books on sale in working-class areas' (Steedman 1982, 142). For her, the classic fairy tales convey 'vast and destructive messages' which are so powerful because they operate 'at the mythic level of our common currency of social belief, setting out power and money, glamour and romance, sex and death, good and evil, like pieces on a chessboard ready to be played with'. Steedman sees a specific transmitted, one that 'every little girl knows, that mothers are quite simply monstrous, however good

they may be and however much they love, and the real problem, for little girls, is that they too are likely to become mothers' (Steedman 1982, 142). She refers to a cycle within the family and within society where hierarchies and stereotypes are passed on and reinforced from one generation to another. According to her, the concept of mothers as monstrous becomes internalised from an early age in those who will later become mothers themselves.

Steedman argues for fairy tales which illuminate the stark realities for many children growing up in previous eras as well as in society now: family relationships frequently punctuated with absences if not by aggression or manipulation. Steedman's text *The Tidy House: Little Girls Writing* centres on a story written by 'three working-class eight-year-old girls, Melissa, Carla and Lindie' in 1976. 'The Tidy House' is the girls' own title for their story about the relationships and day-to-day lives of families in their own experience. Steedman sums up the plot as 'the getting and regretting of children' (19) and she quotes one of the young authors: 'my mum would love us if we didn't want to come home. From school' (23). Her mother has openly expressed to the young child how having children has restricted her life. The children who wrote the story are acutely aware that 'their parents' situation was one of poverty and that the presence of children only increased it' (24). Children 'were longed for, materially desired, but their presence meant irritation, regret and resentment' (Steedman 1982, 25). The children's absorption that they are a financial burden to their parents recalls the words and actions of 'Little Father Time' in *Jude the Obscure*.

As I have argued previously, there is at the heart of our social relations and cultural representations a contradictory attitude towards children. They are seen as essential, desirable and innocent while also often being regarded as a nuisance, a drain on finances, inconvenient or delinquent. It is notable that the girls Steedman taught were already participating in the culture that defined their lives. Their composition of a story was used to 'understand what set of social beliefs had brought them into being. They used the act of writing in order to take part in the process of their own socialisation' (Steedman 1982, 25). As with Janet Frame's Grace Cleave, the children perceive the dominant narrative. Grace's remembrance of *Little Red Riding Hood* is bound up with fear of the world around her when she worries about getting home from school: 'How could a wolf possibly get there first: if I hurry?' (Frame 2008, 159).

Although Disney films are the most high-profile and visible reproduction of fairy tales in our recent culture there are many other book, film, television and stage productions which use elements of fairy tale narrative or imagery to comment on the contemporary world. Many reach back to the feeling of the earlier tales not only to highlight that contemporary society retains many of the hardships which the tales reflected, but also to emphasise a darker world beneath the Disney images.

Zipes compares *Freeway* with *Pan's Labyrinth* as rare examples of late twentieth/early twenty-first century 'fairy-tale films that focus on the indomitable and resilient spirit of courageous human beings to confront the cruel and arrogant forces that appear to be dominating our world today'. Zipes points out that the more 'critical and complex fairy-tale films ... focus on a persecuted young heroine, generally a teenager or prepubescent girl, who has the perspective and courage of a moral arbiter in a perverse world' (Zipes 2008, 239). These films 'seek to pierce the deluding spectacle of our daily lives that distracts us from the brutality in our world' and offer hope that 'humans can use their imaginations to comprehend reality and to create better worlds' (239). The narratives of such films draw on the centuries-old tales and it is significant that the figure of the lost child is still central to stories that highlight traumas in our communities but which also suggest a way of transcending them.

*Pan's Labyrinth* brings a fairy-tale world into a twentieth-century setting, using elements of fairy tale narratives both to represent the horrors and struggles of the material world and to advocate the power of the imagination to at least effect personal transformation. The film is set in rural Spain in the aftermath of the civil war. It follows a girl named Ofelia (with obvious mythic connotations of a famous literary heroine who has become an archetype of the female victim) who has been brought by her widowed mother to live with her new husband, a brutal commander of Franco's army called Vidal. The narrative then weaves a realistic account of the struggle of a small local band of rebels against the vicious control of Vidal alongside the fantastical tasks that Ofelia embarks upon. She is sent to complete these tasks by the faun, a form of the legendary half-man, half-goat god, who says she must complete several tasks in order to resurrect the ancient king who will bring back the benevolent kingdom of the past. This vision of a return of the king and a peaceful land resonates with Ofelia's trauma over her dead father and the wider trauma of Spain under dictatorship.

Zipes, in his review of the film, argues that Ofelia ‘*wills* herself’ into the imaginary tale in her head and ‘for all intents and purposes, it is she who appropriates the tale and creates it so she can deal with forces (her mother, Vidal, the end of the civil war) impinging on her life’. The tasks and ordeals she faces in the tale ‘provides her with the courage to oppose the real cruelty of monstrous people’ (Zipes 2008, 238). Zipes draws attention to Del Toro’s use of imagery to impel us to ‘open our eyes’. This is most visually striking with the monster whose eyes lie on a plate before being placed in holes in his hands. He is awakened because Ofelia disregards the faun’s instructions not to eat the tempting array of food laid on his table (an allusion, perhaps, to Hansel and Gretel’s endangerment of themselves due to an obsession with food). Her disregard leads to the failure in her task, the death of several fairies and almost her own demise. Zipes asserts that Del Toro ‘wants us to see life as it is, and he is concerned about how we use our eyes to attain clear vision and recognition’ (236). Zipes argues that Del Toro is ‘telling us that neither the real world nor the fairy-tale world is safe from perversity if we close our eyes, if we are not alert, if we don’t maintain a vigilant and imaginative gaze at our own experiences, imagined and real’ (2008, 238). The imaginary merges with the real: the monster (who is depicted in pictures on his wall eating children) has a table laden with food which resembles that around which Vidal and his guests dine in a previous scene (a meal which Ofelia is excluded from as she muddies her special dress during her previous task). The luxury of the fascist regime is built on the horrors inflicted on people. Later, when a fascist soldier shoots a peasant guerrilla, the guerrilla puts his hand to the barrel to try and stop the bullet. The bullet pierces the hand leaving a bloody hole resembling the monster’s hand, a hole where the monster places his eyes so he can see. Zipes asserts that Del Toro’s film is about ‘the great significance of looking, perceiving, recognizing, and realizing’ what lies behind the reality of our world and that the fairy tale ‘offers a corrective and more “realistic” vision of the world, in contrast to the diversionary and myopic manner in which many people see reality’ (Zipes 2008, 236).

Zipes argues, with reference to Guy Debord and Horkheimer and Adorno, that the mainstream dominance of Disney in productions of fairy-tale films is designed to maintain the status quo and reinforce the already dominant forces in society. Their ‘signs and images’ are ‘organized to create the illusion of a just and happy world in which conflicts and contradictions would always be reconciled in the name of a beautiful

ruling class' (Zipes 2008, 240). Zipes quotes Del Toro discussing how important fairy tales were for him in his traumatic childhood but only those tales that were 'anarchic':

There are fairy tales that are created to instill fear in children, and there are fairy tales that are created to instill hope and magic in children. I like those. ... I think all of them have a huge quotient of darkness because the one thing that alchemy understands and fairy tale lore understands is that you need the vile matter for magic to flourish. (Sheila Roberts, 'Guillermo del Toro Interview, *Pan's Labyrinth*', MoviesOnline, [http://www.moviesonline.ca/movienews\\_10799.html](http://www.moviesonline.ca/movienews_10799.html). Quoted by Zipes 2008, 240)

As I have stated previously, this double-edged outcome, or intention, of the fairy tale reflect the dual attitude within society towards children, a dichotomy which is emphasised by the figure of the lost child. At the end of *Pan's Labyrinth*, Ofelia is tasked with sacrificing her recently born brother to provide an innocent's blood to bring back the benevolent king. It is actually her blood which has this result when she is shot by Vidal, before he himself is killed by the rebels who claim his son. Vidal's last request that the boy will be told that he is his father is denied. The final shot of the film shows a fairy-tale world below ground where the king (Ofelia's father) is on his throne alongside Ofelia and her mother (who is now queen). The scene of Ofelia in the magic kingdom is revealed to be one she has drawn herself in the blank magic book which the faun has given her. Del Toro's message is that we can create new realities through our imagination, despite being surrounded by horrors. In an important scene, which challenges any perception that the fantastical scenes are purely in Ofelia's mind, Ofelia is locked in a room. The faun has given her a chalk with which she can draw a door on a wall that will then open for her. When the fascist guards come back into the room, Ofelia is gone and they cannot see how she has escaped. The guards notice the chalk outline she has drawn on the wall and it's made clear that Del Toro does not want the viewer simply to dismiss magic as a young girl's immature fancy (as her mother does). It is also significant, relating back to my argument at the beginning of this chapter, that Ofelia uses her imagination to escape from her locked room, and to draw her own reality, which Janet Frame's child feared she could not do.

As I will argue further in the following chapters, the horrors inflicted on children are not, tragically, a recent phenomenon. As fairy tales were

not always intended for young people, perhaps the encoding was more a warning to adults about what they already knew but were afraid to reveal: that they had lost the child within themselves. Any innocence which they had as they came into the world had been led out into the forest and left to the cruelty of witches. Now, the encoding is no longer cryptic, but the child is still the subject of the story.

## NOTE

1. There have been debates, and indeed legal actions, which have questioned the authenticity of some of these accounts which opens up other aspects of the lost child's troubling of boundaries between the real and imagined. I will discuss these 'misery memoirs' further in Chap. 5.

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