

The Healing Power of Story

Fairy Tales. Despite the force of mass media in our lives, these simple tales of once-upon-a-time still have the power to hold our attention after, literally, thousands of years. Media giants like Walt Disney have even made millions by tapping into them. As a children's librarian, I have the opportunity to retell these stories on a regular basis. Without fail, audiences from preschool to high school will listen with rapt attention. Kids approach me years after I've seen them, and exclaim "You told me the story about..." What is it about these tales that makes them so compelling in an age of virtual reality and downloadable media?

You've probably heard that Grimm's fairy tales, in their original forms, were truly grim. For example, at the end of older versions of Hansel and Gretel, the children put their wicked stepmother into a barrel with nails driven into it and roll her down a hill. Cinderella's stepsisters cut off parts of their feet in an attempt to get the glass slipper to fit. (It doesn't help). And Snow White's wicked stepmother is made to dance in iron shoes that are heated in a fire. It's all enough to make Quentin Tarantino blush.

The stories were cleaned up in the 19th century to make them more suited to modern tastes, but they are still among our most basic stories of good versus evil. Psychiatrists have long believed that these tales speak to our deepest fears, and give us the tools to face and overcome those fears. Think about it. Hansel and Gretel (abandonment by parents). Cinderella (betrayal by sisters and mother). And in the stories, Good always triumphs.

Of course, you wouldn't tell really scary stories to very young children, but within the folk tale collection of the library, there are countless stories that are appropriate for every age. Today we get them from books, but the core plot of each tale has been worked down to perfection by our ancestors, who told them to audiences that could neither read nor write. Their structure makes them easy to remember, and simple to tell. Who among us, if pressed, couldn't recount the adventures in some form, of Red Riding Hood, Goldilocks, or Snow White?

So, the next time you have to put a child to bed or keep them occupied during a long car trip, think of a fairy tale. Tell it. You'll be surprised at the response you get. If it made enough of an impression that you remember it from childhood, even in skeletal form, it will ring true. But don't be surprised if you're asked to tell it again and again. The magic is still there.

Josh Wolf was Children's Librarian at Bartholomew County Public Library