



# Classics in Short No.54: Selected Tales by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm

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**Brian Alderson** on the Brothers Grimm's **Selected Tales**.

**Fed up with hearing about Andersen? Turn back, turn back to the Grandfathers Grimm.** <!--break-->

## *Authenticity:*

that's the thing. But how do you recognize it if you ever get it? Easy enough ? however often flouted ? with HCA; you adhere to what he wrote and put up with no monkey-business. The Brothers Grimm though were not so much writing as recording and ?authenticity? comes to be a much more tricky question.

## *It's bad enough in German*

(even their title causes trouble, with never a fairy in sight. **Kinder- und Hausmärchen** What's that? ?Little fanciful tales for children and the family? ? true-ish, but hardly the rubric for a world bestseller.). And beyond the title lie barely penetrable thickets.

## *So let's have some boring history.*

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (1785-1863 and 1786-1859) were young scholars working in Kassel at the time when the various independent states that now comprise Germany were beginning to assert an awareness of a common nationhood. The brothers were venturing on a study of how such a nationhood might be prefigured in the language and folk traditions of the land and they had forged connections with other interested parties such as the writers Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano who, in turn, were in touch with the painter Philipp Otto Runge. (You could apply to Maurice Sendak about that chap and his surprising arrival in **Outside Over There** .)

## *Pursuing their ambitions*

the Grimms had started to copy out oddments of stories that they came upon as examples of a native German storytelling tradition, a parallel labour to that of Arnim and Brentano, the first volume of whose anthology of folk poetry had come out in 1805: **Des Knaben Wunderhorn** (and you can apply to Gustav Mahler for some insights there).

## *You should not think though*

that the good brothers donned slouch hats and went round the local pubs and doss-houses soliciting juicy anecdotes (that *would* have been beyond all precedent). Rather they stayed at home assembling stories at one or two removes from ?the field?, prevailing on friends and neighbours, or their servants, to offer tales, however startling, recollected in a fairly comfortable bourgeois tranquillity. And eventually, with the discovery of Dorothea Viehmann, a tailor's widow, they

gained their most prolific storyteller who contributed some of the most dramatic tales in the collection.

### *The first volume of the first edition*

of the **Kinder- und Hausmärchen** containing no fewer than eighty-six tales, was published in Berlin in 1812 and was followed in 1815 by a second volume of seventy tales. Although some additions were made and much editorial activity undertaken in the years that followed up to the Grimms' final edition of 1856-7, with its canon of two hundred stories and ten Children's Legends, the first edition has claims to be one of the world's most revolutionary books. For while there had been printings of popular tales in the past there had never been, first, so large a display of stories which originated in a local vernacular and, second, so astonishing a range of themes and narrative subjects compacted into two small volumes (and with the second edition of 1819-22 the Grimms would start adding extensive scholarly notes and comparisons). Not just Germany, but the literate world, was awakened to the power of folktale.

### *So what about the authenticity?*

For, invaluable though the collection is, it is also highly variable in the degree to which it reflects a storyteller's voice and, as Joyce Crick points out in her scholarly introduction to a new translation of over eighty examples\*, Wilhelm Grimm's work on the later editions subtly shifted the directness and 'gappiness' of the oral tales towards a finely-tuned literary text. This was hardly damage, but it played down raw storytelling and, both in Germany and where translations of the tales are concerned, encouraged publishers' natural tendency to further eliminate the oral origins. There could be no copyright in a folk tradition. Stories were retold, bowdlerized, re-invented and, all-too often, smothered in overdone illustrations.

### *Amid so many incommensurables*

judgment must finally fall to the knowledge and sensibility of whoever is passing the stories on as either an experience for reader or for hearer. In two notable instances however a perfection of storytelling has been maintained which illuminates the potential of print to reflect the spoken word. Peculiarly, we owe this evidence not to the Grimms but to Runge the painter who, circa 1807, had sent to Arnim and Brentano two stories cast in a North German dialect which he had copied down from the fisher folk amongst whom he was working. These tales, which Arnim passed on to the Grimms, were those of 'The Fisherman and his Insatiable Wife' and 'The Juniper Tree'. They appeared in the collection (and have continued to do so) in a transcription that seems to replicate the Pomeranian dialect and, although the tales are small masterpieces in themselves, the rhythms of the storytelling voice behind them enhance their beauty. There at least Authenticity is manifest.

\***Selected Tales** by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, translated with an introduction and notes by Joyce Crick, Oxford World's Classics, 0 19 280479 0, £8.99 pbk. The cover features a detail from an illustration to 'The Tale of the Boy Who Set Out to Learn Fear' by Karl Fahringer c.1905.

Brian Alderson's attempt to reclaim the storyteller's voice for the tales in **Popular Folk-Tales from Grimm**, illustrated by Michael Foreman, came out in 1978 and has been long out of print.

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