



Fairy Frameworks

Article Author:

[Adèle Geras](#)^[1]

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Adèle Geras talks about her new trilogy for teenagers.

Adèle Geras talks about her new trilogy for teenagers based on three well-known fairy stories.

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Once upon a time, I wanted to write a Fat Book, and then my Natural Laziness said: 'Far better to write three Thin Books. You can have a rest after each one and then they will make up that delightful and impressive thing, a Trilogy.' I had dreams of slipcases, tastefully embossed in gold, prominently displayed in major bookshops around Christmas time. Readers, I said to myself, like sets of things. Look at Topsy and Tim and Tolkien and Malory Towers. People like collecting the next one, then the next and so on. Thus it was that my mind turned to the concept of Three.

Unravelling the way a book has come to be written is a strange and maybe dangerous process. I remember the fate of the shoemaker, keeping watch to see who was making all that miraculous footwear. In the case of my trilogy, though, there are beginnings that I can identify without too much trouble, reasons why the books are what they are, all of which were very deliberate.

The First Thought: 'A trilogy would be fun.'

The Second Thought: : 'What can it be about?'

At this stage, I had no ideas at all, but because I'd been considering what my daughter calls 'Fat Shinies' the notion of three girls/women occurred to me at once. I wish I had a £5 note for every book I've read that has three women as its heroines. Of course, there's nothing new in that: think of Beauty and the Beast and King Lear. Okay then, three women. Sportswomen? Nuclear physicists? Lady lion tamers? Deep sea divers? I dismissed these frivolities because I'm ignorant about the worlds that such people would inhabit. Yes, there is Research. There is Invention. You can make up entire universes in your head. That is what I'm constantly telling children in creative writing workshops. Still (see Natural Laziness above), when the time to write comes, it's easier to step into a world you already know very well, whose customs, dress and speech patterns are completely familiar to you. Everyone has such worlds at their disposal, and when I shuffled through the cards in my hand (Jewishness, colonial childhood, Oxford, the theatre, suburbia, motherhood, etc.) shining out among them was one I'd never used before: eight years at an English boarding school for girls.

The Third Thought: School stories are ACE! I loved them as a child. I remember the Malory Towers books better than the one I read last month. The world of boarding school is both exotic and familiar. Why not tell it like it is? Or at least, like it was?

The Fourth Thought: Three girls at boarding school. Great. But (and this is something I try to do with every single book I write) it's got to be different in some way. It has to be something that hasn't already been written to a standstill.

At this point, my brilliant ideas petered out. I hadn't a clue what I might do with my three schoolgirls that would be different. A year went by. Every so often I would take this idea out and have a look at it, and sigh and put it away. Then one day, out of the blue, I recommended a book to someone. 'This book,' I said, in the best blurb writer's manner, 'changed my life. It's one of those books which alters the world for you once you've read it.' The book was *The Bloody Chamber* by Angela Carter. In it, she takes well-known fairy tales and recasts them in a dazzlingly poetic and enchanting way. I thought a little about fairy tales, without connecting them to my three schoolgirls. I've always read them, and always loved them. Grimm, Perrault, Hans Andersen, Andrew Lang's coloured 'Fairy Books': I gobbled them all up as a child. I had seen all the Walt Disney films with my children, and had thrilled to the fingernails of the Wicked Stepmother in *Snow White*. I had pored over Maurice Sendak's illustrations for his selection of Grimm stories, *The Juniper Tree*. Fairy tales had everything - sex, horror, death, mystery, romance and wonderfully decorative settings. More time passed. I stopped thinking about fairy tales, and went back to thinking about my three girls at school ... one of them could be a swot ... living in an ivory tower ... Suddenly; in my head I saw a clear image of David Hockney's engraving of Rapunzel, letting down her hair. Rapunzel in her tower. At this point, I have to say: ZOWEE! or KAPOW! This is the best kind of moment: pure pleasure, unsullied by the irritation of hard work. It's the moment when you know something is right, when one idea approaches another and they're a perfect fit, like two pieces from a jigsaw.

The Idea: My three girls would be at one and the same time, schoolgirls *and* the heroines of fairy tales. The real-life story of each girl would be *a version* of the fairy tale. Moreover, since we're into threes in a big way, what could be more convenient than to break the time sequence into Spring Term, Summer Term and Michaelmas Term? The next step was to choose the tales. 'Rapunzel' was obvious, but what of the others? While pondering this, I realized that the girls would have to be quite old in order to take part in the events in their stories. Well, why not? I was still at school doing A-levels in 1962, when I was 18. The year was thus decided. I chose *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White* as the other two characters because, as every fan of *Fat Shinies* knows, your three girls have to be very different, one from the other. If Rapunzel was quiet and thoughtful, then *Sleeping Beauty* could be neurotic and a little frightened of sex, and *Snow White* had always struck me as a high-spirited creature with a taste for *la vie Boheme* ... I could call her Bella Lavanne, and no one would ever know that 'lavan' is the Hebrew for 'white' . . . Such little ploys are what makes writing fun. I wonder how many readers of *The Tower Room* recognised Armand the hairdresser as the 'Mirror, mirror on the wall'? Or cottoned on that Bella was *Snow White* when I had her nearly choking to death on an apple?

The general outlines were established. I had to start. I wrote *The Tower Room* in about three months. I enjoyed it hugely. Every detail of school life is true. I liked putting in quotes from the texts I had studied for my A-levels, and to critics who say young readers will be put off by such things, I can only say 'Pshaw!' Once *The Tower Room* was written, I began to have problems I hadn't thought of when dreaming about *The Trilogy*.

Problem One: What if Book Two isn't as good as Book One? What if Book Three isn't as good as either?

Problem Two: Why *Sleeping Beauty*? Who wants a book about a hundred-year sleep? The answer was: I did. I wanted everything that went with this fairy tale: sleep, long summer afternoons, a force of evil, and roses, roses, roses everywhere; going mad, running riot, withering on the stem and dying. I also, I confess, was longing to write about the Aunts (the Good Fairies at the christening). What I didn't want to write about was the event that had caused Alice to withdraw from the world and become (as Maya Angelou did) a volunteer mute. I shan't reveal what this is, in order not to give away too much, but I can say that *Watching the Roses*, as it's called, took much longer to write and is quite different in mood from *The Tower Room*. I could see that unless I did something drastic, I was going to end up with altogether too much *Unity of Place*. Therefore, I've peppered the narrative with flashbacks to school, accounts of Alice's christening, dreams, extracts from letters, and a kind of running commentary on the state of the roses. This novel begins in June and ends in September. *The Tower Room* started in January and ended in May. *Snow White* (to which I've given only the most fleeting of thoughts... it hasn't even got a title...) will take us from September to December. What will it be like? I've no idea. I only know that Bella is an exciting person. I hope I can keep up with her.

One thing I am concerned about is that the trilogy should have a structure, an architecture, a discernible shape. I'm achieving this, I hope, by attaching each book to a season, with its attendant imagery. I'm also tying much (though not all) of the action to one place: Egerton Hall School. One setting all the way through three books would be boring for me,

though not perhaps for the reader. I think Bella may spend some time in Paris. Enid Blyton never sent Alicia or Gwendolen to Paris, but so what? She was dealing with a version of real life. I, on the other hand, have my eyes fixed on fairyland.

Adèle Geras has published many books for young people; those mentioned in this piece are **The Tower Room** (Hamish Hamilton, 0 241 12956 7, X8.50) and **Watching the Roses**, scheduled to be published by Hamish Hamilton in May 1991.

'In a utilitarian age, of all other times, it is a matter of grave importance that Fairy Tales should be respected ... everyone who has considered the subject knows full well that a nation without fancy, without some romance, never did, never can, never will hold a great place under the sun...'

Charles Dickens, *Frauds on the Fairies*, **Household Words** (1853)

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