

Once upon a time

WHATEVER RICHARD DAWKINS MIGHT SAY, THERE IS DEFINITELY A PLACE FOR FAIRY TALES IN THE MODERN SECONDARY SCHOOL, ARGUES ALISON DAVIES...

If you think fairy tales are for under fives, think again! We may have re-packaged them for young children, but the reality is a far cry from what they've become today. Consider some of the themes: the twisted step mother so obsessed with her looks she lets jealousy turn to murderous intent. The cannibalistic old woman, who kidnaps young children in the woods to eat for her tea. The savage wolf who slaughters grannies and children alike and finally the selfish girl with a red shoe fetish, who chops off her feet to escape her heart's desire. Not for the faint hearted, these gritty sagas contain elements that we can identify with today.

These tales do have a magical quality and a simplicity making them likeable and easy to

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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understand. The use of archetypes means small children can engage with the content,

because it's easy to picture the characters and the settings. But this is also part of their universal charm. From a young age we connect with them and that sense of wonder prevails into adulthood. We might not actively seek out fairy tales, but when we hear or read them we're once again immersed in that world. Couple that with the edgier aspects of the narratives and give them a modern twist and you have a winning formula!

I use stories to enhance teaching and learning, and traditional tales, which include folk and fairy tales, are my mainstay. A constant and enduring source of material, they work from 6 to 16 and beyond. The key, as with any kind of storytelling, is to identify your core message and develop a flexible attitude. Just



because a narrative follows a pattern doesn't mean you can't play around with it. There's nothing wrong with turning the story on its head or telling it from a different perspective, if it suits your purpose. Sometimes all it takes is the ability to adapt a story to meet your needs.

During one of my recent sessions, a teacher working in the area of social work, explained that her trickiest module covered the rules and regulations that should be in place when working with children in care. "The students never pay attention, even though it's essential to their studies," she sighed. We were discussing the three little pigs when she suddenly exclaimed, "I could use this! The first little pig thinks, I can't be bothered to do things properly and put everything in place. So he makes a house of straw. The wolf comes along, huffs, puffs and blows it down, leaving him vulnerable and exposed. The second little pig thinks, I'll just cut a few corners. So he makes his house out of twigs. The wolf comes along, huffs, puffs and blows it down, leaving him vulnerable and exposed. The third little pig thinks, I'll make sure everything is in place so that I have a secure home – and builds his house from bricks. No matter how hard the wolf tries, he can't blow the house down, which leaves the pig in a position of power to deal with the wolf."

She now uses this as an introduction to the module and it has proved both effective and memorable. The students immediately sit up and take notice of the story and what follows. They absorb the information easily and with an open mind.

Blueprints

It's no surprise that the story of the three little pigs illustrates the importance of following set rules. Most scholars agree fairy tales were originally a blueprint for everyday living. They were the way our ancestors made sense of the world and passed on what they'd learnt. This is why they cover a range of issues that can be applied to our life today. It's also why the content can be dark. Life isn't all sunshine and roses, it's about real issues like jealousy, betrayal, obsession, anger, and insecurity. Fairy tales show us how to deal with these things, in

some cases by playing devil's advocate to illustrate what could happen, and in others by revealing our best options.

Re-telling the tale

If you're struggling to see how a tale might work for you, re-tell it from a different perspective. Make it a group exercise and ask the students to choose a character or an inanimate object and tell the story from their viewpoint. They should consider at what point the character appears in the story as this will influence what they see and know. The outcome of this is that you'll have a selection of tales with very different themes and messages, illustrating the versatility of the story and the range of options available to you.

Identifying themes

Fairy stories have easily identifiable themes, but rather than going for the obvious consider alternatives by comparing them with real issues. For example, Cinderella might be about good triumphing over evil, but this interpretation is general. If we look closer at the main character we may see a deeper theme. Cinderella gets her name from the cinders in her clothes and hair. She sleeps in the kitchen and serves the rest of the family. As a character treated this way, she provides an introduction to a session on slavery, which could cover social history and then move on to evidence modern cases around the world.

Goldilocks commits a host of crimes when she breaks into the bear's house. Bring the story up to date and put her on trial. Build a court of law with prosecution, defence and a jury. Create a piece of drama and use it as a starting point for a discussion about the legal system. Go a step further and bring in journalists, and TV reporters. How would they put together the facts to make a good story? For a mathematical element, what about the statistics? How do her crimes compare with others today? Collect facts and figures to illustrate findings.

Jack and the Beanstalk is a tale about a hapless lad who makes a reckless decision, but what about using the beanstalk as a springboard into natural history basics? How

fast do plants and vegetables really grow? What kind of elements would they need to increase the rate of growth? Imagine if Jack tried to grow his beanstalk today in different landscapes and environments, what would the outcome be?

By stretching the imagination and relating these stories to the world today, we can use them as springboards into more serious subjects, making them accessible, creative and fun.

Symbol spotting

Certain symbols appear again and again in fairy tales. On a subconscious level we identify with them, making them great tools to spark creative activities. Use them in story settings and role play to stretch the imagination and help students explore new ideas.

+ The Big Bad Wolf

Whether it's the proverbial wolf at the door or a representation of your deepest fears, he's a popular occurrence in fairy tales. But is he that scary? Imagine swapping places with the wolf, what makes him tick? Use the wolf as a catalyst to break down social barriers and promote discussion.

+ The Magic Mirror

The mirror is a tool of self reflection and also of moving from one state of being to another. It can transport us into another world in a heartbeat. Imagine using the mirror in Snow White as a tool to voice opinions, to become different characters throughout history or to travel through time and learn about different periods in history.

+ The Wild Wood

A dark and enchanted place, it's easy to become lost in the wild wood; but most characters emerge stronger having faced some kind of challenge. Imagine navigating the woods like Hansel and Gretel, but instead of bread crumbs, you've a map with co-ordinates made up of equations and mathematical riddles to get you from one side to the other.