Twisting Tales: a guide to fairytale adaptation

Tori Forster
f.tori@wustl.edu
Twisting Tales:
A guide to fairytale adaptation
by T.H. Forster
“Twisting Tales” is a guidebook examining fairytales and the realm of fairytale adaptation. To begin with, I define fairytales by expanding on ideas from J.R.R Tolkien’s “On Fairy Stories”. By defining fairytales as abstracted tales set in the realm of Faerie, adaptations of fairytales become an avenue in which to explore world building and narrative, which fairytales naturally lend themselves to.

The guidebook also explores more troubling tropes and trends in the fairytale, particularly those regarding women. Marcia K. Lieberman’s essay “Someday My Prince Will Come” critiques heroines in fairytales and serves as a dialogue for the role of the female protagonist in fairytale adaptations. The question of how adaptations interact with their source material is a core question here, and the guidebook suggests that the best adaptations are made out of affection for their source material, and are designed to sit alongside the original tale, not replace it.

The relationship between fairytales and their adaptations is further fleshed out through world-building and a sense of place. W.H. Auden’s Secondary Worlds sheds light on how the development of a specific time and place for a fairytale adaptations can improve the story and lend a sense of believability to the narrative.

In the midst of framing these fairytale adaptation guidelines is a case study of the process of writing and illustrating my own book, Once Upon Three Swans. Discussions of the ballet Swan Lake as the fairytale source, as well as other existing adaptations of Swan Lake factor into this. The specificity of time and place is accomplished by crafting a world modeled after Tudor England, utilizing tapestries as a device for the visuals, with Ruth Goodman’s How to Be a Tudor as a source.

The essay presents readers with a tool to navigate, evaluate, and create fairytale adaptations on their own, and encourages creators to craft a variety of adaptations stemming from a love of classic fairytales.

I wish I could remember the first time I heard a fairytale.

Perhaps it was one of the Little Golden Books we had sitting in our nursery. Or perhaps it was my mother’s volume of Grimm Tales from when she was a kid. Or maybe it was just a VHS tape of a Disney movie.

But regardless of which tale in what form came first, fairytales have been with me my whole life1. I truly can’t remember a time that I didn’t know the story of Cinderella suffering under the cruelty of her step-family, only to triumph over them in a fairy-tale ending.

1 There have been three possible spellings of fairytale over the years: “fairy tale”, “fairy-tale”, and “fairytale”. The former is technically the correct term, but all three are increasingly used interchangeably. I have made the conscious decision here to spell the term as one word. The reason for this is my desire to distinguish the word from the literal “fairy tale”, that is, a tale about fairies, which many fairytales certainly are not. Spelling the term as one word denotes it as a unique genre or thing unto itself. The only times when I stray from this spelling are when utilizing “fairy-tale” as a modifier, i.e., “a fairy-tale ending.”
magical evening at the royal ball, or the tale of Rapunzel suffering in isolation as she and her Prince Charming conspired to free her from her tower (a plan that didn't turn out very well, I might add, I mean, they had ladders, right?). These stories meant a great deal to me growing up, as I watched dozens of fairytale adaptations in film, and read seemingly endless volumes of picture books, chapter books, and novels as I grew older and the books changed with me.

It was not until adulthood, however, that I began to recognize the profound impact fairytales had had on my life, and how core they were to my sense of visuals and my work as an image maker. I found myself debating the merits of various Cinderella adaptations with my friends, and took to studying the work of Arthur Rackham. Not necessarily because I adored his method of work, although his images are beautiful, but because he illustrated fairytales.

I had certainly been exposed to many other kinds of storytelling growing up, but for whatever reason, fairytales had wielded a kind of sticking power with me. Good and evil, magic and love are all at play here, but it is hope which is the true power in fairytales, and perhaps that is the special ingredient which stuck with me. They have become a well of source material that I return to again and again, for my writing, image making, and simply for my own amusement.

So for my MFA-IVC thesis, I knew I would be tackling a fairytale adaptation of some kind.

The finished product is essentially the beginnings of a middle-grade chapter book entitled Once Upon Three Swans. The story is a twisted tale, loosely inspired by Tchaikovsky’s ballet Swan Lake. The project consists of a sampling of illustrations paired with five finished chapters, a detailed plot outline, and character designs, with the intention of one day being able to finish and publish the book.

The process of selecting the fairytale to adapt, choosing how to adapt both the narrative and the illustrations, and tackling the notion of fairytale adaptation writ large all resulted in a great deal of research for the project, which I am quite pleased to present here in this little guidebook. So step into the realm of fairytales with me, and we’ll start with perhaps that most pivotal of questions — what is a fairytale?

---

### What’s in a Name?

The actual term “fairy tale” was first coined in the 17th century by the French aristocrat Madame d’Aulnoy (“contes de fees” in the French), but the stories which have made up the genre had been evolving for centuries. One of the more thorough and satisfactory definitions of fairytale comes from J.R.R. Tolkien’s essay “On Fairy-Stories”. In his essay, Tolkien proposes fairytale as stories taking place within the realm of Faerie, a heightened realm of magic, writing that:

“For the moment I will say only this: a “fairy-story” is one which touches on or uses Faerie, whatever its own main purpose may be: satire, adventure, morality, fantasy. Faerie itself may perhaps most nearly be translated by Magic…There is one proviso: if there is any satire present in the tale, one thing must not be made fun of, the magic itself.”

Tolkien then brushes lightly over the question of origin in fairytales, proposing a “cauldron of story”, in which pieces of story have been added over centuries, creating a near indecipherable history of any given tale. He then goes on to address the present state of fairytales, and refutes the misconception that fairytales ought to confined to the territory of children, writing “the association of children and fairy-tales is an accident of our domestic history...only some children, and some adults, have any special taste for them.”

Tolkien’s definition is certainly enlightening, and largely, I agree with his sentiment. However, this is a definition for “fairy-story”, which I believe is not quite a “fairytale.” His definition is a bit broad, as it can be applied to much of the fantasy genre writ large. By the parameters Tolkien has articulated, his own masterpiece, The Lord of the Rings, would count as a fairytale, and that is a classification which grates against my notion of the genre. Indeed, Tolkien seems to favor these more epic, grandiose tales as fairytales, as that is his area of expertise.

No, I think that fairytales are a subset of what Tolkien has described, rather than everything utilizing Faerie. A “fairytale” implies something which I can currently best articulate as being more abstracted. If a fantasy novel (like Lord of the Rings) is

---

Case Study: J.M. Barrie’s *Peter Pan*

*Peter Pan* is a text that’s status as a fairytale is often debated, and may prove helpful in articulating my distinction, as it may be tempting to suggest that my definition simply eliminates anything longer than an instruction booklet. The book *Peter and Wendy*, written by J.M. Barrie and published in 1911, was based on Barrie’s successful 1904 play *Peter Pan*, and has spawned many film and book adaptations over the years, perhaps the most well known of which is the 1953 Disney film (for the record, no, Disney films are not equal to fairy tales, but many Western audiences are first exposed to these tales in their Disney-fied versions, for better or worse). The story certainly meets Tolkien’s criteria, as it takes place within the realm of Faerie, known here as Neverland. The question that remains, then, is to what degree the book is a fairytale, as opposed to a fantasy story? For this, we look to Barrie’s prose — specifically, both what is said and what is unsaid.

Fairytale are chock full of things which are never fully explained and would not make sense in the fully realized world of a fantasy novel. This is part of what enables them to be adapted over and over again in new, fresh ways. The very nature of Barrie’s protagonist, Peter Pan, is a mysterious one that has led to many authors trying their hand at an origin story for the Boy Who Wouldn’t Grow Up. Peter himself tells Wendy that he ran away the day he was born to live with fairies in Kensington Gardens, with no explanation as to how he got from the Gardens to Neverland, or how a day old baby was able to run away in the first place (just the beginning of many illogical elements to that narrative, leading many to believe Peter was lying). Barrie’s book is full of odd, fantastical moments like these that are rife with magic and adventure but also would not quite make sense if they were in our real world. There is an abstraction and a simplicity to Peter Pan that firmly places it in the realm of the fairytale.

Another less-obvious entry into the genre is that of *Swan Lake*, from the Tchaikovsky ballet of the same name. The story is often regarded as essentially fairytale-adjacent, an afterthought when listing out the fairytale “canon” (a term I hesitate to use, but gets at the notion of those stories which are generally undisputed in their fairytale status). What prevents *Swan Lake* from broader acceptance as a fairytale, however, is its medium, not its narrative. Swan Lake was a ballet in its first form, not a folktale or myth, so there is no definite written version of the tale. Despite this, the narrative itself is unequivocally a fairytale and sits perfectly alongside the romantic tales of “Beauty and the Beast” (human transfiguration), “The Little Mermaid” (mistaken identity and tragic ending), or “Snow White” (sorcerer villain, curse, and magical forest).

Because of its status as a ballet first and foremost, however, adaptations of Swan Lake in book or film are far fewer in number than many of the classic fairy tales. It was this unique combination of being a narratively traditional fairytale, but with very few notable adaptations, that drew me to writing my own take on the tale, and producing *Once Upon Three Swans*.

In order to unpack the process of writing and the work produced however, it would be best to first explain the original story of Swan Lake, and the form most recognize when they hear the name.
Walt Disney Pictures and the American Fairytale

Ah, Disney. The film conglomerate is an elephant in the room when it comes to discussing fairytales nowadays. The impact of Walt Disney's fairytale productions on Western audiences (specifically Americans) is considerable, in that the popularity of his films is so widespread they have essentially overshadowed the source material which they adapted. A simple Google search of “Snow White” “Cinderella” or “The Little Mermaid” will inevitably produce a bumper crop of Disney-skewing results. Disney adaptations have developed a reputation over the years for watering down elements of the original fairytale to fit within their family-friendly oriented branding. Notable examples include changing the ending of The Little Mermaid from a tragedy to a happily-ever-after, and ignoring the Brothers' Grimm ending of Cinderella in favor of Perrault’s which avoids that portion of the tale where the evil stepsisters cut off their toes and heels to fit into the glass slipper. Most Disney adaptations of fairytales are also musical in form, and begin with at least some kernel of inspiration from a certain historical place or time period in its design (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, for instance, is drawn roughly from 15th and 16th century Germany, although the finished design of a Disney feature rarely resembles anything like a “historical” past.)

Most fairytale adaptations nowadays must actively work to ensure they are not too “Disney-fied” in their plot or design choices, something which may often creep up in the creator unintentionally (how many of us must actively search for a color for Cinderella’s dress other than blue, which ironically, was not even the color she wore in the movie?).

Disney's domination of fairytale visual culture has led many to develop a distaste for the company’s films and what they have done to the genre. For my part, I grew up watching Disney movies, and indeed, spent my early years living an hour away from the Anaheim theme park in California. I had, and still have, a very deep affection for Disney films. The problem arises with the control these films wield over the fairy tale genre in the minds of the general Western public. So while I’m all for future generations watching Disney movies, I do wish parents would have their kids read other fairytales alongside the movies, if for no other reason than sparking their imagination. Adaptations are not meant to replace the original, and although Disney films certainly have a place in my heart, they will not spawn other original stories and fresh takes in the same way that the classic tales of Perrault, Grimm, or Andersen will for years to come. Crafting one’s own take on a princess whose character, motivations, and story are fully fleshed out, as is the case in Disney’s Cinderella, doesn’t work nearly as well as the the blank slate that is the titular protagonist of Perrault’s Cendrillon.

Above: Poster for Walt Disney’s Cinderella (1950). If anyone was curious, Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty are my favorite Disney films, but don’t ask me to choose between them. It’s impossible.
A Brief Summary of the Ballet *Swan Lake*

The ballet’s opening sequence follows the kingdom’s Prince Siegfried as he longs for adventure, despite being urged by his aging mother to marry and settle down. Siegfried is unimpressed by the women of his kingdom, and cannot be persuaded to do so. He and his best friend Benno depart to go hunting.

While hunting out in the woods, Siegfried spies a swan and attempts to shoot it. Struck by the swan’s beauty however, he finds himself unable to do so, and instead follows the bird to a lake, where it is joined by many other swans. When night falls, all the birds are transformed into young maidens. Siegfried approaches the maiden he has nearly killed, who identifies herself as the Princess Odette, and she explains that she and her compatriots have been placed under a spell by the sorcerer Von Rothbart which traps them as swans by day, and they regain their human form at night by the lake. The spell can only be broken by a man who pledges to love her and has never loved another. Von Rothbart himself, in the form of a giant owl, eavesdrops on the conversation. Siegfried abruptly pledges his love for the fair maiden he has only just met (who is apparently so special as to overcome his previously avowed disinterest in marriage), and determines to defeat Rothbart, somehow, somewhere. He informs Odette of a ball his mother is hosting the next day where he is supposed to choose a bride, and insists that she attend, which she explains is impossible, as she can only regain human form at the lake. Sunrise arrives and Siegfried departs with Benno.

The next day, at the ball, Siegfried ignores all the young ladies in attendance, to his mother’s disappointment. All the while, he anxiously awaits the arrival of Odette (despite her refusing his invitation, the man is evidently not a great listener). At that moment, the sorcerer Von Rothbart arrives with his daughter Odile, who he has transfigured to look like Odette (the roles of Odile and Odette are typically played by the same ballerina in the ballet). Siegfried, convinced that this is the maiden from the lake (in his defense, he only met her once), dances with Odile, and is oblivious to the swan at the window of the castle — Odette, attempting to warn him of Rothbart’s deception. Siegfried chooses Odile as his bride and swears his eternal love to her, thus forever dooming Odette. In another moment, Siegfried realizes his mistake, and follows a heartbroken Odette to the lake.

At the lake, Siegfried and Odette mourn together, and Odette determines to drown herself. Siegfried does not wish to live without her, and so they throw themselves into the lake together. In doing so, Von Rothbart, in his owl form, is killed, and the spell on the other swan maidens is broken, but Odette and Siegfried are lost to the lake.

THE END.

Bit of a downer, right? And plenty of magical elements that don’t really make sense. Like why are Odette and the other maidens trapped as swans in the first place? What was Von Rothbart’s motivation in including the “spell can only be broken if a man pledges to love you who has never loved before” thing? Why swans? How does Odile fit into all this? She only appears in that one scene, and in the ballet, she only ever looks like the darker, more sinister version of Odette. So many great questions that could be answered in so many different ways.

It is questions like these that abound in fairytales, and it is these seemingly illogical qualities which so lend them to adaptation. We are given just

---

5 Typically. Like most fairytales it is not uncommon for dance companies to edit or even drastically change the plot during new productions of the ballet. The most standard plot line summarized here comes from the libretto of the 1895 revival of the ballet, which was produced after Tchaikovsky’s death in 1893.
enough of a story to intrigue us, entrance us, make us care – but we are left with so much to want to fill in, fix or tweak, that the potential stories which could arise from these tales are possibly endless. In a way, fairy tales are the stars in that sky, and adaptations are all the ways we could draw the constellations.

Swans All in a Row

Since its initial performance in 1877, Swan Lake has been told and retold in innumerable forms. The ballet itself has nearly always been in performance on some stage, somewhere, with the dual character of Odette/Odile regarded as one of the most prestigious roles a ballerina can perform. Like many other popular 19th and early 20th century ballets, such as Sleeping Beauty, the Firebird, or The Nutcracker, Swan Lake has frequently been translated to the form of book and film. Unlike the previously mentioned ballet productions however, Swan Lake is notable in that its narrative was an original one written for the ballet itself, pulling pieces from various Russian and German folktales rather than one single story. Thus, there is no adaptation preceding the ballet by which to evaluate the books and films bearing the title afterwards. It is worth noting that most adaptations of Swan Lake outside of the dance form set the story in a generically medieval world, and switching the ending from a tragic to a happy one. The most notable adaptations are briefly described below:

The 1981 Japanese anime Swan Lake, produced by the Toei Animation company, was the first film adaptation of Swan Lake ever made. The movie remains fairly faithful to the original narrative of the ballet, with the notable exception of switching the ending to a happy one, where Odette and Siegfried’s love is stronger than Rothbart’s power, and they are able to live on together rather than drown in the lake. The film also features music from the original ballet, and sets the story in a generic fairy-tale setting with an indecipherable time and place, a precedent followed by subsequent adaptations.

Perhaps the most well known film version of Swan Lake is the 1994 animated picture The Swan Princess. A musical film produced by Nest Entertainment, it is regarded as a wannabe-Disney picture (one of many from the era that were produced by rival studios), and it is not uncommon to find the character of Odette mislabeled as a Disney princess even today. The story maintains the element of Odette’s swan-by-day/human-by-night curse at the hand of the sorcerer Rothbart, but most of the similarities end there — her fellow swan maidens have been replaced by a gaggle of comedic animal friends, and Prince Siegfried has been renamed Prince Derek, and is a former childhood enemy now grown into her one true love. Most significantly, Odile has been erased from the story. Instead, Odette’s double takes the form of Rothbart’s hag-like assistant, magically transformed to mirror Odette perfectly. And of course, when Derek realizes his tragic mistake, he is able to successfully defeat Rothbart, and live happily-ever-after with the now freed Odette in a true Disney ending.

The most recent film adaptation is 2003’s Barbie of Swan Lake. At which point many a reader may throw up their hands in defeat, but consider — as most parents will not expect their child to sit through a ballet when they are in preschool, and some of the more concerned parenting styles will hold off with the slightly violent sequences from The Swan Princess, Barbie of Swan Lake is likely the first version of Swan Lake many young children in the U.S. are introduced to. What is more, setting aside the admittedly poorly-aging CGI of the film, the quality of the picture is actually comparable to that of The Swan Princess. Most of the movie’s score comes from the original ballet, lending that magical, melancholic feel to the story, and tonally feels far truer to the ballet itself. The movie is injected, however, with the presence of an Enchanted Forest and Fairy Queen to oppose Rothbart, as well as a Chosen One trope, neither of which do the story any favors. Of course, the happily-ever-after ending remains the same, with Odette and her Prince (named Daniel in this case), defeating Rothbart, via some poorly-explained crystal magic.

Margot Fonteyn’s 1989 picture book Swan Lake is an example of a traditional ballet to book transition of the story. Beautifully illustrated by Trina Schart Hyman, the book features a generic fairytale setting, with adjusted silhouettes to more closely resemble ballet costumes. It is also notable for retaining the swan maidens, an element most adaptations of the story choose to remove. Most important of all, however, is the presence of the ballet’s original tragic ending, as Odette and

---

Clockwise from top left:
Figure 3-8: Poster for Swan Lake (1981), Poster for The Swan Princess (1994), Poster for Barbie of Swan Lake (2003), Cover for The Black Swan (1999), Cover for Once Upon Three Swans (2022), and cover for Swan Lake (1989).
was written as an accident). Hence, Odile and Odette became twin sisters.

So now I had a fairytale adaptation with two leading ladies. And as you may know, female characters in fairytales have a complicated history to say the least. One need only skim the surface of Disney scholarship to understand that the cultural signifier of a Disney Princess is a deeply controversial one from a feminist perspective, and this is a matter which predates Disney’s take on fairytales.

Marcia K. Lieberman’s essay “Someday My Prince Will Come” is a landmark piece in the history of fairytale and feminist scholarship. Lieberman structured her essay as a response to Alison Luthrie’s book review for The New York Review of Books which defended fairytales as containing feminist themes, an argument Lieberman wholly refutes. Operating under the established thought process of fairytales as reflective of its society’s morals, Lieberman showcases that the vast majority of traditional fairytales teach their young readers that women’s value is found in their beauty and passivity, and that if they are fair and submissive, they will experience the “happy ending” of being chosen by a prince. Women who are plain or powerful are portrayed as morally bankrupt and serve as antagonists to the martyr-like heroine.

Lieberman then moves on to critique the notion of happily-ever-after that female heroines receive — marriage to a prince, a move Lieberman criticizes as passing unrealistic expectations onto readers. “Marriage,” she writes, “is the fulcrum and major event of nearly every fairy tale; it is the reward for girls, or sometimes their punishment...[it] is associated with getting rich.”

She is careful to point out that yes, poor boys marry princesses in fairytales too, but suggests that they are part of a package deal. In addition to receiving a lovely bride, the lad also receives her kingdom and the power that comes with it; once again, the princess has been “chosen”, rather than the other way around.

Lieberman’s essay remains a touchstone in fairytale scholarship, and there is no denying the validity of her arguments. The passivity of the

---

fairytale heroine, and indeed of the heroine in fiction writ large, has fed feminist scholars for decades. At the conclusion of Lieberman’s compelling argument, however, the reader finds themselves tasked with a question — what are they going to do about it? Lieberman herself fails to propose any form of solution, only suggesting that the full psychological effect of fairytale on children has yet to be understood. Does it follow that fairytale should be sworn off entirely? Edited down to their most wholesome form? Rewritten for future generations? Or perhaps even left as they are, with a nice companion guide to contradict everything the children read? 

As fairytale experienced a resurgence throughout the 1970s and 80s in concurrence with a rise in feminist scholarship, reconciling the two has become a question not just for scholars, but for the writers who are crafting new adaptations of these tales. All the previously mentioned approaches for handling fairytale were taken at various times, but in recent decades, more and more adaptations have fallen under what I am referring to as the “fix-it” fairytale.9

Simply put, the “fix-it” fairytale is an adaptation that is extremely aware of the issues raised by Lieberman in her essay, and is doing everything in its power craft a new kind of fairytale that breaks free of the feminist tropes that dominated the genre for so long. There are comparable fix-it moves like these being made in film, television, and books across genres at the moment, but in fairytale specifically, there are certain identifiable tropes that have replaced the very moments Lieberman criticized, to mixed success. In place of the beautiful, kind, passive, princess, “fix-its” have a beautiful, kind, active princess, often a tough warrior of some kind, who desires to rule and protect her own people, or perhaps seek out adventure. She inevitably interacts with the character who, in the old story, would have been Prince Charming, but who is now either A: a scumbag, or B: a nice, supportive lad, who has dreams of his own and no interest in marrying said princess, at least until he’s gotten to know her a little better, I mean, they just met. Adventures and hijinks ensue, often with a mystery villain whose evilness is not immediately apparent to the audience like the sorcerers and witches of old who wore all black and appeared in puffs of green smoke. No, these villains are subtle, perhaps not even revealed until near the narrative’s end, to the heroine’s great shock and astonishment. Whenever the time comes for the Most Important Moment from the original story, typically where true love would save the day, something else takes its place — perhaps the princess’s determination and self-worth is all she needs, or she simply isn’t put in danger in the first place. Finally, the ending. Instead of marriage as the “fulcrum” of the fairytale, the princess archives her dreams, maybe assumes the throne of her land, having learned some valuable lesson along the way, and if the prince is still not a scumbag by the story’s end, they will perhaps begin to date, or share a kiss. Because heaven forbid two compatible people be just friends at the end of the story.

One of the most successful and well-known examples of a “fix-it” fairytale is that of Disney’s Frozen (2013), inspired by Hans Christian Andersen’s The Snow Queen (1844). The massive success of Frozen has sent Disney scrambling to replicate the formula of independent heroines who set out on adventures with magic, learning valuable lessons about their self-worth along the way, and remain firmly unattached by the end. Sadly, this way of telling the story has led to an abandonment of the fairytale as a mode to tell it. To date, Frozen (and technically its sequel) is the last formally fairytale-inspired animated film Disney has produced. However, a few of its subsequent features have felt as though they are attempting to be new, original fairytale. Specifically, Moana, Raya and The Last Dragon, and Encanto all follow the female heroine attempting to save her land in an original, lush world filled with magic (a Faerie-like realm, perhaps?) as she is accompanied by wacky companions, human and animal, and according to Disney, with no hint of romantic attachment at all throughout the entire picture (though scholars and fans alike disputed this in the case of Raya). This Frozen formula is in a sense Disney’s new fairytale.

9 It occurs to me that this term no doubt sounds very similar to the phrase often used in fairytale adaptation (and which I used in my own book), the “twisted tale”. In my mind, the two are quite different. “Fix-it” fairytale describe a specific series of tropes and way of telling the story, particularly regarding the lead characters, with the goal of modernizing the fairytale. “Twisted tales” have no clear definition when applied to fairytale, but when used often refer to some adaptation of a fairytale which markedly differs from its source material in plot, and often in tone as well (i.e. a romance becomes a satire, or a children’s story becomes a horror, etc.)
Other examples include *Mirror Mirror* (2012), a colorful, offbeat film devoting story to both Snow White and the Wicked Queen, with Snow White joining the seven dwarves to form a Robin-Hood style group of bandits. Notably absent from the film is the poisoned apple, save for a hasty nod in the finale. Snow White is not cursed, therefore, and defeats the Queen herself, with some help from the dwarves and prince.

In books, the “fix-it” trend is even more apparent. Several collections of fairytales in recent years have been published with titles such as *Fairytales for Fearless Girls* (2019) and *Power to the Princess* (2018). The tales have been rewritten, beautifully illustrated, the princes lifted out. The heroines assert and save themselves.

To clarify, most of these books and movies are good, even great (my disappointment with *Raya*’s writing is for another paper). The active female heroine is deeply important to storytelling, as is dispelling with the “happily-ever-after” as the ultimate reward for her deeds.

Where many storytellers today (including myself) have the tendency to get tripped up is by thinking a traditional fairytale or happy ending is a sign of a bad modern adaptation. How many writers set out to write their take on the fairytale thinking, “but this must improve the original, or else what’s the point?” This shirking of the very source material we seek to adapt is simply not sustainable. The best adaptation must stem from a genuine love and/or respect of that which it adapts, even if it satirical or critical in nature.
A few recommendations for truly stellar twisted tale adaptations that every fairytale enthusiast should read:

**The Princess Tales** (1999-2002) by Gail Carson Levine is an anthology of 6 short chapter books loosely based on fairytales such as “Toads and Diamonds”, “The Goose Girl”, and “The Princess and the Pea”. Levine’s writing identifies what moments are needed to mirror the original tale, and then stretches the story in a way that freshens, enlivens, and in many ways creates a narrative entirely new. *The Princess Tales* served as a touchstone, a model of storytelling which I continually circled back to in undertaking this project.

**Bella at Midnight** (2006) by Diane Stanley is a loose retelling of Cinderella. Set during a hundred year war between two neighboring countries and told through multiple points of view, the book follows a young girl from her early years in a peasant’s house to her abrupt change in circumstances as she is returned to her cruel father and stepmother. Exploring themes of prejudice, social class, and love, the book tells the Cinderella story from the eyes of every party involved as they share their outlook on life and Bella herself.

**The Hero’s Guide to Saving Your Kingdom** (2012) by Christopher Healy is a quick-witted adventure tale focused on another undeveloped group of fairytale characters: The Princes Charming. Plucking the Princes from Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and Rapunzel from the aftermath of their tales, Healy crafts four distinct, hilariously entertaining personalities, all of whom are disgruntled for various reasons with their newfound label of “Charming.” Healy’s adaptation is a mash-up approach, and is intentionally irreverent and fun.

**The Rumpelstiltskin Problem** (2000) by Vivian Vande Velde is a series of short stories grappling with the plot holes stemming from the original story of Rumpelstiltskin. In each entry, Velde offers up a different take on the tale in order that the characters’ actions and motivations would makes sense. The result is an entertaining series of stories, some of which could easily be developed into chapter books.
Above
Figure 14: "Chapter 2: A Court Tableau", illustration by T.H. Forster for Once Upon Three Swans. Fluid Acrylic.

Right
Figure 15: Various character designs, illustrations by T.H. Forster for Once Upon Three Swans. Colored pencil and pen.
The Characters

In unpacking the choices made in this adaptation of Swan Lake, I thought it best to begin with an introduction to my characters, and how they parallel their ballet counterparts:

**Odile von Rothbart** serves as the protagonist for *Once Upon Three Swans*. Like her father, she is a magician, and is in training to gain a license. Unlike her father, she has no love for her magic, and when the king contracts her out to a neighboring country as an indentured mage, she wishes to remain home and have the opportunity to marry, like her sister.

**Odette von Rothbart** ("Dett" for short) is Odile’s twin sister, but she lacks her sister and father’s magical capabilities. Odette has a great love of dance, and wishes to join a dance troupe, but is engaged to the king’s youngest son, Prince Rillian, whom she does not care for, and worse, she lacks the grace and skill necessary for dancing.

**Lord Rothbart** is Odile and Odette’s father, and chief advisor and magician to the King. He has been training Odile and Herb for several years now. When Herb accidentally transforms Odette and Rillian into swans, Rothbart strikes a deal with Odile — he will break his daughter’s contract if she is able to undo the spell in one month. The morality of Rothbart’s character is questionable for much of the book, particularly given the evil role he filled in the ballet.

**Prince Adrian of House Cygnus** is Rillian’s older brother, and at the outset of the book, has been missing for three years. It is eventually revealed Rothbart turned him into a swan in an experiment gone wrong and hid him at the lake three years ago. He shares his brother’s formal manner, but is more bookish and blunt, lacking patience with others, particularly Herb. Adrian loosely fills the role of the swan maidens from the original ballet.

**Prince Dorian of House Cygnus** is the eldest of the King’s three sons, and serves as the primary antagonist of the story. It is eventually revealed he has been blackmailing Rothbart for years after what happened to Adrian, controlling him and his movements at court, and is planning to overthrow his father and launch an invasion of a neighboring country. Dorian partially fills the Rothbart role for the original ballet as well.

**Herb** (short for “Herbal”) is a counterpart to Prince Siegfried’s friend Benno. In this case, he is Odile’s close friend and fellow magician, apprenticing with Lord Rothbart. Herb provides a comic role in the story, and it is his magic which transforms Odette and Rillian into swans. The decision to have Herb cast the spell, rather than Odile or Rothbart, was to maintain the initial moral grayness of the Rothbart family, as well as focus Odile’s arc on breaking her apprenticeship, rather than grappling with any guilt she would have carried from casting the spell herself.
Twisting Tales

Once Upon Three Swans: A Brief-as-Possible Synopsis

Odile von Rothbart and her twin sister Odette (“Dett” for short), are the daughters of the King’s Minister of Sorcery, Lord Rothbart. While Odile possess her father’s rare gift for magic, Dett does not, and as a result the sisters had two completely different upbringings. Odile is training with her father gain her license as an enchantress, and despite her considerable talent, she resents her status and place in life, specifically since enchantresses (the term used for female sorceresses) are not permitted to marry or have children, something which she greatly desires. Odile’s closest friend is her father’s other apprentice, Herb, who is appointed to succeed her father as Minister of Sorcery upon his death. Herb has a great passion for magic and wishes to excel in his future role, but he lacks Odile’s raw abilities. The two, despite their friendship, also possess a sort of rivalry as they vie for Lord Rothbart’s favor.

Dett, meanwhile, is engaged to be married to the king’s youngest son, Prince Rillian, an overly polite young man who adores his beautiful fiancée. Dett, however, does not particularly care for Rillian, and instead dreams of becoming a dancer, an ambition she has held since childhood. She is keenly aware that these dreams are not approved of by her parents, particularly her mother, who often mourns that Odile was born with magic, as she otherwise would have made a far better match than Dett.

After a ball in honor of the king’s birthday, Lord Rothbart informs Odile that the King is contracting Odile to work in a neighboring country once she gains her license, a common practice for new enchantresses. Odile is angered by the news, and argues with her father about appointing Herb as his successor, rather than herself.

Meanwhile, Herb is convinced by Prince Rillian to assist the Prince in trying to impress Dett. The two break into Lord Rothbart’s study. Rillian instructs Herb to secretly perform a spell to turn a nearby vase into a swan while Rillian pretends to perform the magic, thinking this will woo his fiancée. When Dett arrives, the spell goes wrong, and Herb accidentally transforms both Dett and Rillian into swans. In a panic, Herb seeks help from Odile, who attempts to undo the spell, and although unsuccessful, she does manage to grant Rillian and Dett the ability to speak.

The group then go to Rothbart for help, who is livid. He informs them he doesn’t know how to break the spell and sends them to the family country estate to figure out how to break it, promising Odile that if she can free Rillian and Odette by next week, she won’t have to take up the king’s relocation offer. Oh, and Herb won’t be executed.

At the country estate, they stroll down the lakeshore and find a flock of swans gliding on the lake as the sun sets. As the moon rises overhead, a human clammers out from the lake. Rillian recognizes him as his missing brother Adrian.

Adrian explains to the shocked group that he had paid Rothbart to experiment with human transfiguration several years ago, but one of those experiments had gone wrong and he’d transformed into a swan. Rothbart had been unable to undo the spell completely, only tweaking it so he regained his human form at night. Even this seems unsuccessful, as Adrian seems slightly unstable and a little more swan-like than Rillian remembers him. The king had stashed him here ever since. Odile then reasons that her father was on the right track with the spell and if she can find his notes she should be able to develop it further and undo it completely. In order to do so, however, they must find the spell-book, which Rothbart has hidden away. Adrian directs them to a network of caves below the estate which has been filled with books.

In the caves, Dett discovers Rothbart’s notes, but conceals the book from the others. She enjoys her swan form, and is hopeful that she will gain greater freedom and independence by staying this way for now.

Meanwhile, Odile and Herb are increasingly at odds with one another as they attempt to find the spellbook, and quarrel over their futures as magic-wielders, with Odile declaring she feels trapped in her role, something which Herb understands—he left his father’s apothecary business to become a sorceror.
and is terrified that this spell has ruined everything for him. At the lake, Rillian and Adrian discuss their third brother, Dorian, who is crown prince of the kingdom and who, back at the king’s party at the beginning of the book, was established as rather unpleasant character. Rillian insists Dorian couldn’t have known what became of Adrian all those years ago, that it must have been a secret between Rothbart and the King, but Adrian has his doubts.

Their conversation is cut off when the two are captured by hunters, who have overheard two talking swans and hope to fetch a prize for such rare animals. They are spotted being carried off by Odile. She sends Dett to fly after and track them, while she and Herb follow on foot. A battle involving magic ensues, where Odile, Herb, and Dett work together to free Adrian and Rillian. In doing so, Dett recognizes her own helplessness in swan form, and feels guilt about keeping Adrian and Rillian trapped. Odile and Herb are also able to work out their differences, and agree to be friends once more. With Adrian and Rillian rescued, Dett confesses she had found the book, and asks for forgiveness. Rillian is shocked and hurt by this betrayal, and recognizes that perhaps he and Dett are not well-suited for one another.

With the spell-book in hand, Odile is able to perform the spell her father used on Adrian to grant Rillian and Dett human form at night. She then begins to work with Adrian on gaining a more complete solution, but days tick by with no progress. Late one night, she awakes in the library to find an owl sitting on her desk. It suddenly transforms into her father. Rothbart informs Odile that she must solve the spell by the engagement party tomorrow, or he will be forced to arrest Herb. Odile confronts him about Adrian, and Rothbart expresses remorse for his actions, but refuses to explain his reasoning.

Odile suggests to the group that they try using the location in which the spell was cast, which means they need to get back to the palace. They leave first thing that morning, with Adrian in tow, and sneak in. They spend all day in the library, with no results. They run out of time when Dorian walks in to find them all.

Dorian has Herb arrested for transforming royals, quarantines the swans, and threatens Odile. Odile realizes Dorian and the king have been keeping her father pinned under them as punishment for Adrian, and now Rillian is all they need to ruin him completely. In a last-ditch bid to keep up the engagement ruse and buy them more time, Odile uses transfiguration on herself and turns into an owl, flying into the aviary to bust out the now-human swans. However, she finds Dett’s ankle has been sprained from when Dorian grabbed her by her swan feet, so she can’t show up at the party. As the party begins, Odile disguises herself as Dett, and she and Rillian appear, leaving Adrian to watch Dett.

Odile has to force herself to dance like Dett, all the while ruminating on the spell. She has an idea that maybe the way to undo the spell is not to focus on swan to human, or form itself even, but simply the person. She focuses on Dett as much as possible, and performs Dett’s dance. She tries again, with Rillian, and impersonates his gangly pre-established run. Then Adrian and his swan-waddle. Dorian tries to out Odile, but just then Dett appears, ankle healed. Adrian follows close behind, lucid for the first time in years. He denounces Dorian’s plans, and has his brother arrested. The group anxiously await sunrise, to see if they are truly human again.

An epilogue, set six months later, reveals that Dett has joined a dancing troupe, Adrian has replaced Dorian in the succession, and Rillian is about to depart on a journey in search of love and adventure, with Herb in tow as his companion (Herb having been banned from acquiring his license). Odile has been named her father’s successor, and she and Adrian sit down to plan some future changes in the kingdom... THE END.
In writing Once Upon Three Swans, I knew there were a couple major themes I wanted to tackle that were going to trip me up. First, the relationship between Odette and Odile. Balancing two heroines and their endings was one element of writing that proved unexpectedly challenging and laborious to this process, largely due to the weight of this scholarship informing and watching me as I wrote. I disliked the notion of pitting them against one another, but I couldn’t have them be so united that they were difficult to distinguish from one another.

Second, and perhaps the most challenging, was their relationship statuses by stories end. When I initially set out, I knew Odette would be unattached by the conclusion, and Odile and Rillian were ill-matched, and I thought it too great a coincidence in the original tale that Odette was able to fall in love with the first person willing and able to break her curse. So writing her ending came easily enough.

But then there was Odile, my chief protagonist, and a character who I had written with a desire for marriage and children. A character with a close friend in Herb, her fellow magic-user, and the two had an easy, friendly dynamic. But I liked that the two of them were just friends, and as hard as I tried to give Odile her happily-ever-after with Herb, because it was convenient and it was what she wanted, something about it didn’t sit right.

Instead, Adrian, the missing prince and third swan in my story, kept cropping up. As I hemmed and hawed over the “to be or not be” question surrounding Odile and Adrian’s relationship status at the story’s conclusion, I had a moment of realization. My reluctance to insert any form of romantic attachment between the two stemmed from their relationship’s lack of development prior to the third act. I was hesitating because there hadn’t been time to explore how I, as the author, even felt about their relationship in the first place. Instead, I had been approaching it as the fairytale writers of old would have — “is my protagonist’s reward a man and true happiness or loneliness and the bittersweet?” I had fallen into the age old trap, the very thing I had been fighting against.

So I decided to taste some of my own medicine, and structure ending “C”. Odile is young in this story, there is no reason to suppose she should be set for life by its conclusion. I decided to end her arc with the idea of “possibly”. There’s something in the concept of optimistic potential that I attempt to use as a way of saying “happily-ever-after.” I focused the majority of my ending on establishing Dett’s career as a dancer and the consequences/fallout of swan-related sorcery. By the book’s albeit not-yet written conclusion, Odile and Adrian are established at court as two up-and-coming powerhouses, who are allies at court, with the possibility of being something more (no dating, no kiss, just friends). This also worked into the historical elements of my story, as I didn’t want to dismiss the notion of marital alliances entirely.

I had intentionally layered in another element to this world that made it important to leave in the possibility of Odile becoming a wife and mother: in this fictional kingdom, enchantresses do not marry. This was one of Odile’s burdens, that her life, like her sister’s, had been dictated, only this time not just by her gender, but by her gift of magic. If her political partnership with Adrian is something of her own choosing, placing her in a position of power by her own choosing — it left the door open for her eventually achieve becoming a mother.

It is worth mentioning that there is a second version of Swan Lake in this tale. True, the version I have just described is one, but there is another that I realized a few weeks ago I’d written into the story unintentionally. Odile also serves as an alternate version of Prince Siegfried, as she saves the alternate version of Odette, Adrian. In a way, their version of the story is a more accurate one, as Odile almost kills Adrian in his swan form when they first meet, and he subsequently tells her all about his enchantment at the hands of Rothbart. Perhaps in the midst of all my overthinking, this was the version of the story I had been trying to write all along.
The Power of Place

Situating a fairytale adaptation with a specific time and place can lend a simultaneous feeling of believability and wonder to a fairytale adaptation. W.H. Auden’s essay “On Secondary Worlds” builds upon a concept Tolkien introduces in “On Fairy Stories” — that of the titular secondary world, worlds created by authors. Auden presents a spectrum of style in writing friction — one the one end, the Poet ("will-to-recreation"), on the other, the Historian ("will-to-truth")10. This spectrum helps us to understand the story’s degree level of believability which the writing conveys —, that is, the degree to which the world constructed might in fact be our reality11. Auden then offers a case study of Icelandic sagas as examples of Historian-style storytelling as a way of crafting relatable narrative for the reader.

What Auden is getting at is the idea that crafting a world that is fleshed out and believable can lend sticking power to a narrative. He discusses this primarily in the way that a story is written, (it’s form) and how it can communicate time and place with prose, poetry, dialogue, plot, etc.

Where Auden’s ideas get especially interesting is in considering this same Poet-Historian spectrum and the very concept of Secondary Worlds when applied to the visual form of world-building, a simple enough jump to make.

World-building plays a significant role in fairytale adaptations. In traditional fairytales, the sense of specificity of the world almost invariably has come at the hand of the illustrators, whereas the original text was located in the secondary world of Faerie which define the genre, but typically failed to distinguish the world any further. Consider, for instance, this sample text from Beauty and the Beast taken from Andrew Lang’s Blue Fairy Book (1889):

---

10 W.H. Auden, Secondary Worlds (1968), p 49
11 W.H. Auden, Secondary Worlds (1968), pp 52-53
At length he made out some sort of track, and though at the beginning it was so rough and slippery that he fell down more than once, it presently became easier, and led him into an avenue of trees which ended in a splendid castle. It seemed to the merchant very strange that no snow had fallen in the avenue, which was entirely composed of orange trees, covered with flowers and fruit. When he reached the first court of the castle he saw before him a flight of agate steps, and went up them, and passed through several splendidly furnished rooms. The pleasant warmth of the air revived him, and he felt very hungry; but there seemed to be nobody in all this vast and splendid palace whom he could ask to give him something to eat. Deep silence reigned everywhere, and at last, tired of roaming through empty rooms and galleries, he stopped in a room smaller than the rest, where a clear fire was burning and a couch was drawn up closely to it.12

The text itself gives some hint as to the world this tale inhabits, but there is little in the way of specificity. We have a “castle” of course, though that is a term that may encompass many centuries and regions throughout Europe. The presence of orange trees in a world that should otherwise be covered in snow hints at the magic, Faerie element, and lends credence to a specifically northwestern European country which would see snow and treasure citrus as a delicacy. Vague descriptors such as “vast”, “splendid”, and “pleasant” grant no further sense of time, though the term “galleries” may call to mind a post-Renaissance period.

So the text alone would open up possibilities for Beauty and the Beast to be set in many Western European lands spanning from the 16th to the 19th century (when Lang’s text was published).

Why, then, are the vast majority of Beauty and Beast adaptations and visuals situated in the 18th century? Specifically, France?

Two principal reasons lie behind this. The first is the image-makers: the illustrators, painters, engravers, animators, costumes designers, and the myriad of other creatives who have had a hand in visualizing fairytales over the years have built up world for the fairytales to live in, and Beauty and the Beast is often set within such a world. Indeed, 18th century France has grown only more common as a setting for the tale in recent decades, as more creatives who set out to try their hand at this tale must have the mounting precedence living within their heads.

Second, and perhaps the reason this setting became so common in the first place, is the origin of the tale itself. Beauty and Beast was first published as La Belle et La Bête by French novelist Gabrielle Suzanne de Villeneuve in 1740, and in recent decades situating the tale within the time and place of its original publication has become the norm, particularly in the age of cinema, with most film adaptations situating the story in 18th century France (or at least trying to, in Disney’s case, with mixed success). All this to say that the visuals of fairytales and their adaptations have significance. A fact that is sadly set aside in most adaptations. Beauty and the Beast is one of the few fairytales to avoid a generic fairytale setting as its norm. Many illustrated fairytales avoid crafting a sense of location or time frame within their story, other than a generic medieval, or perhaps loosely, once-was-German feeling that would have the Grimm Brothers rolling in their graves.

Exceptional Settings:

A personal recommendation list for beautiful and unusual world-building in fairytale adaptations.

**Rapunzel** (1997) by Paul Zelinsky: One of the most beautifully illustrated fairytales in the picture book market, Zelinsky’s take on Rapunzel is inspired by the Italian Renaissance, from the Botticelli-style curls of Rapunzel’s hair, to the brightly tiled tower, to the rolling hills of the Mediterranean landscape. It received the Caldecott Medal in 1998.

**East of the Sun and West of the Moon** (1994) by P.J. Lynch: Lynch has taken an 18th century influence to this tale, specifically an almost colonial feel at times, as the peasant protagonist must sail and explore to get her true love back.

**Cinderella** (2015): Not every fairytale adaptation has to draw from one place or time. Kenneth Brannaugh’s live-action remake of Disney’s *Cinderella* is a triumph of design, and very consciously merges two time periods — that of the mid nineteenth century with the mid twentieth century. This is reflected most clearly in Sandy Powell’s costumes, which experiment with the distinctive silhouettes, fabrics, and colors of the two eras.

**Cinder** (2012) by Marissa Meyer: Visual imagery isn’t essential to craft a sense of place in a fairytale adaptation, as showcased in Meyer’s retelling of Cinderella in a futuristic earth. Here, Cinder is a cyborg mechanic, slaving away for her step-family to make ends meet when she is caught up in the world of galactic politics upon catching the eye of the handsome Prince Kai. The first in Meyer’s Lunar Chronicles brilliantly combines fairytales and sci-fi in a compelling story well worth the read.

**Snow White: A Graphic Novel** (2012): by Matt Phelan tells the tale of Snow White within the time frame of the 1920s. Boarding schools, policemen, flappers, and all of it told in swaths of india ink, with red spot treatments from time to time, the result is something cold and crisp, and a unique blend of fairytale and flapper.
Setting Swan Lake:

In crafting a world for *Once Upon Three Swans*, I knew setting out that there was one time period I didn’t want to touch with a ten-foot pole — the medieval era.

Most adaptations of *Swan Lake* set the story in a vaguely medieval setting — in fact, as of writing this, I cannot think of a single version of the story which explores a specific time and place outside of the Middle Ages.

Outside of that, my options for a setting were wide open.

The nineteenth century held some appeal — that was when the original ballet appeared, and I would be able to acknowledge perhaps more of the original costumes that way. But incorporating magic into a world that close to the modern era would be more difficult, and I was less interested with the production of the ballet and more so with the actual story.

Eventually, I arrived at a world loosely influenced by Tudor England.

The 16th century was a logical way for me to zero in on a distinct sense of place — the century brushes up against the Late Medieval period enough that I could still operate in the land of potions and enchantments, especially if I situated my story in a Northern European location, where the Renaissance settled a little later. Tudor England came to serve as my specific source of inspiration for two reasons. First, Tudor England during the 16th century was experiencing a season of growth and change after over a century of political and societal instability, and was in the process of carving out an identity for itself. It is a place that feels real and grounded but also provides a lot of opportunity for the mystical and and make-believe — much like a good-fairy tale itself.

The politics of Tudor England also provided real stakes for the story — one of the most infamous Tudor figures, King Henry VIII, is best remembered for the number of people he had executed during his reign (including two ex-wives). A world with such brutality could be woven with the magic in a way that produced an interesting combination — in the original *Swan Lake* there is no space for politics, really. The idea of Herb facing imprisonment and probable execution as a result of his spellwork served as the character’s motivation for much of the story, and would not have been able to operate in the same way if the story had been set in the 1890s, for example.

In studying the specifics of world-building for the Tudor period, Ruth Goodman’s book *How To be A Tudor* (2017) is an unusual one — rather than chronicling historical events, or individuals, Goodman is writing about a way of living. Goodman’s goal in undertaking the volume *How to Be a Tudor* was not to write a comprehensive biography of leading Tudor figures, but rather to unpack the day to day routine and lifestyle of the average Tudor citizen, with emphasis on the middle and lower class. The book begins with an brief outline of the structure of social and economic classes in Tudor England, as well as the number of people making up each class. Goodman then unpacks living in the Tudor period by social strata, from what each group had for bedding, to their probable clothing, diet, labor, and education. With my own academic and historical research background largely rooted in the upper class, this is a much needed grounding, or historical touch, to layer into the more fantastical elements of my retelling.

Goodman’s work serves as a reference tool for imbuing a sense of place into an otherwise fantastical tale. She spends a chapter discussing the various bedding options for various social strata in
the 16th century — from thrushes on the floor all the way to the feather beds of kings. Little details like these inform the world I am creating, and even work their way into the dialogue, as seen in this excerpt from Chapter Nine:

Dett and Rillian hovered outside the entrance, eyeing the thrushes on the ground warily. “I say, Adrian,” Rillian said, “someone seems to have stolen your floor.”

Adrian looked over at Odile and Herb, who shrugged. “Right.” He said, ducking back out. “It would benefit you to clear something up right away, brother of mine.” He squatted to reach their level and pointed a finger at Rillian’s chest. “You are a swan. Something I have been living as for three years. Whatever standards you had for life are now out the window. Floors, clothing, food, pastimes, health, meaning, the very essence of your existence, it’s all something else now. I suggest you let the prince go, the sooner the better.”

Rillian stared. “But don’t you miss your feather bed?”

“Rillian, we are the feather bed.”

In addition to informing the writing, researching the Tudor era had a deep influence on the illustrations for Once Upon Three Swans. The decorative has always played a large part of my work, and such was the case here. The visual look for the images in Once Upon Three Swans was partly modeled after tapestries from the Tudor period, focusing on the flattened space and heavy patterning present in that material.

For the illustrations, I looked at Tudor-era architecture, decorative motifs, and compositions, and worked at translating them to the more modern, stylized approach in which I was working.

And of course, there were the costumes.
16th century citizens managed to live in with relative comfort.

Color served as the final step in articulating the image designs for *Once Upon Three Swans*. The color palette for the book is quite limited, and is the one visual element that I made a conscious decision to entirely deviate from the Tudor period on. Instead of drawing from the warm jewel tones and muted colors of 16th century pigments, I opted for my color palette to more closely mirror hues associated with the original ballet. The use of lighter, cooler colors contrasted with Tudor-influenced designs was intended to remind the viewer of the fantastical influences in the world as well as historical ones.

Of course, *Once Upon Three Swans* is a book which has yet to be finished. The world-building is far from complete, and as it evolves, it stands to reason the narrative may change too, for in the best fairytale adaptations, visuals and narrative work together to produce a unique and memorable take on a fairytale classic.

The struggle of creators to craft fairytale adaptations in this day and age is not an easy one. Creating something that connects to its source material, but is also new, and that rings true to the storyteller is a daunting task.

And yet we keep doing it. An intrinsic element of fairytales is how they lend themselves to adaptation, to fresh takes and insightful new narratives. As long as fairytales are still being read, new authors, artists, and creators will be producing their own versions of fairytales for years to come. For all that, however, fairytales don’t need to be fixed. The best adaptations sit alongside their source material rather than replace it, and we as storytellers must be careful not to fall into the trap of thinking there is only one way to approach fairytale adaptation. Hopefully, what will result is a varied selection for all those readers with that “special taste” for the land of Faerie.

The End.

Tudor-era costuming carries a weight to it (literally) that few other periods in European history do. Predating the hoopskirt, crinoline, or pannier, the hefty brocades, damasks, and petticoats simply look like they are weighing their owners down in Tudor portraiture. Pairing this cumbersome looking material with a story stemming from a dance filled with light, airy movements was far from intuitive, but that held part of the appeal. I was writing a twisted tale, first and foremost, and utilizing heavy, impractical clothing was once way to indicate the more irreverent tone being struck in contrast to the original ballet. In addition, I have a genuine love for the look of the Tudor period. There are so many wonderful silhouettes from that time. Bell-shaped skirts, headaddresses, obscenely large sleeves and ruffs, not to mention hats, hose, doublets, and jewelry. There is a beauty to these clothes which seem so foreign to our contemporary eyes, but obviously, real

---

**Final Thoughts**

The struggle of creators to craft fairytale adaptations in this day and age is not an easy one. Creating something that connects to its source material, but is also new, and that rings true to the storyteller is a daunting task.

And yet we keep doing it. An intrinsic element of fairytales is how they lend themselves to adaptation, to fresh takes and insightful new narratives. As long as fairytales are still being read, new authors, artists, and creators will be producing their own versions of fairytales for years to come. For all that, however, fairytales don’t need to be fixed. The best adaptations sit alongside their source material rather than replace it, and we as storytellers must be careful not to fall into the trap of thinking there is only one way to approach fairytale adaptation. Hopefully, what will result is a varied selection for all those readers with that “special taste” for the land of Faerie.
Bibliography


Acknowledgements

Special thanks to John, Heidi, Shreyas, Cassie, Dan, Jen and the IVC 2022 cohort for their valuable support and feedback (and without whom I would not have undertaken writing this many words).

Thanks also to Bernadette Lamb for being my sounding board and fellow fairytale enthusiast throughout this year and for helping me develop excellent title ideas.

Of course, many thanks to my sister Jodi for reading iteration after iteration of this paper and my book and telling me when my words truly made no sense.

This project is dedicated to my parents, who decided it was a good thing when their daughter never stopped reading fairytale, and to my Oma and Opa, who always encouraged me to create.