DJ Stoneham, November 2025

It's time we recognised the value of fairy tales for adults too

The essence of fairy tales is in the lessons they teach

Chances are you remember Little Red Riding Hood being seduced by the wolf. Maybe you recall Cinderella's sisters losing their eyes to doves. But how many people have heard of Sleeping Beauty being impregnated in her sleep by a king or her mother-in-law dying in a vat of vipers? These adult-rated versions hark from fairy tale origins and contrast sharply with the later sanitised versions we are more familiar with. The early darker tales also explore less noble human emotions, such as lust, jealousy, ambition, greed and justice – and preach bitter lessons which nowadays have been all but sidelined. In mass media, at least, modern fairy tale versions favour action over depth, losing the moral complexity. This is a greater loss for adults than it is for children because fairy tales were originally created for adults to learn from.

Conceived centuries ago, fairy tales deal with life stripped bare, exploring raw emotion through fantastical plots. Their action entertains us, their primal anxieties disturb us, revealing the best and worst of human nature. Passed down from generation to generation, carried from childhood to the grave, their lessons have subconsciously shaped our choices in life. Yet today, their essence has been diluted, and the stories we see in movies and TV neglect the motives behind characters' actions. Filmmakers have relegated them to mere objects of entertainment. Without preserving their core purpose, fairy tales risk fading into irrelevance.

Simple morals like "don't trust strangers" are easy to spot in Little Red Riding Hood but deeper lessons about deception, analytical thinking and perseverance lie hidden. As the writer/researcher **Maria Tatar** notes, fairy tales offer "an intelligible lie" and "an unintelligible truth." Amidst all the fantasy, things can get deliciously complicated. However, with the plethora of brain-numbing online content today, people have grown impatient and superficial. The information age has crippled our attention span, dulled our sense of curiosity and we are unable or unwilling to read between the lines. We no longer have time for proper fairy tales.

Fairy tales have endured because of the universal relevance of their morals, which advocate justice and fairness. Depending on the version you are familiar with, the wolf was boiled in oil, drowned in a well or chopped up. Despite being altered, censored, stretched, kicked around and reconstructed, core plots have survived. Unfortunately, mass media, including books, tend to fix one version in our minds, sometimes adding superficial extras (Snow White's seven dwarfs had no names until Walt Disney came along). The entertainment industry has swept what remained of original versions aside, rendering personal interpretation unnecessary and stifling the art of individual storytelling. Nowadays, widely dismissed as children's entertainment, the value of fairy tales ('wonder stories' as the German term for fairy tales 'Wundermärchen' implies) is grossly underestimated. CGI-heavy films and binge-worthy TV series have edited out their lessons, laying waste their learning potential. Sadly, the lessons of fairy tales have become marginalised.

At some point, we began to take fairy tales for granted. We became passive consumers, losing sight of the importance of their meaning. Fairy tales were made to be parodied, mocked and reinvented but not overlooked. Their magic fades only when we stop questioning their messages. In fact, fairy tales require that we stray from the straight and narrow in our minds to learn from all their intricate lessons. And in a troubled world of uneven distribution of wealth,

discrimination, corruption, environmental degradation and indifference to the truth, we need those more than ever. Fairy tales could provide food for though on a wide scale, especially for adults. They might not be a panacea, but their moral lessons could encourage more self-reflection, challenge norms and trigger debate.

Many adults still enjoy fairy tales, but mostly for nostalgia's sake, as bedtime stories for their kids, or as light entertainment, rarely for their deeper meaning. Their wisdom for adults is explored mostly in academic circles, by literary researchers, psychological experts and other interest groups, whose conclusions tend to be recycled within tight-knit communities and written in a form sometimes unintelligible to mere mortals.

This is not the first essay to suggest that fairy tales are an undiscovered gem. But it is fair to say that most adults' knowledge of and reaction to fairy tales still does not reflect the potential benefit fairy tales have to help them better understand themselves and the world around them. It is a strange situation because that's exactly how most fairy tales first came into being – as moral guides for adults. Concrete action should be taken.

What benefits do fairy tales offer adults?

A core characteristic of fairy tales are the lessons they offer, both clear and hidden. Their fluid, oral nature allowed early tellers and listeners to shape meanings together for relevance and impact. Short and adaptable, tales were customised for each community and household.

The secret beauty of fairy tales lies in personal meaning. Fairy tales offer multiple takeaways, some obvious, some less so. Each story can lead us to think, feel, or act in a slightly different way, thereby enabling personal growth and the chance to positively impact the environment around us. Some fairy tales deal with managing change, others offer comfort during hardships or reinforce certain beliefs. Because they help us reflect on pivotal challenges in life, they are even used in psychological therapy, as non-threatening tools for self-exploration, or as allegories in management consultancy. Fairy tales also entertain and provide escape, and their ethical dilemmas provide sources for debate and analysis. What each of us gains from a tale is unique, and the more thought we give to each one, the more we benefit.

This personalisation of stories by storytellers and recipients has become a lost skill. Overloaded with information and short on time, we now rely on mass media to deliver readily digestible content. The media industry freely admits to giving people "what they want," but is that what they need? As a result, fantasy plots have grown predictable and reasons to use our imagination removed. While visually stimulating, modern stories rarely challenge us to decode the meaning in order to foster a deeper personal understanding of the context – something the telling of fairy tales once did well.

The longevity of fairy stories is another strength – their lessons can mean different things at different stages of our lives. In some tales, happiness requires the protagonist to step out of his or her comfort zone; Cinderella goes to the ball, Jack climbs the beanstalk, Red Riding Hood ventures into the woods. Going into the woods is scary but transformational. Fortunes change only through bold moves, as Hansel, Gretel, and Snow White discovered. And it's something we face throughout our lives.

Kindness over cruelty is another recurring theme, as seen in Beauty and the Beast. Overcoming prejudice and keeping an open mind help us grow. It seems many adults have forgotten this.

Fairy tale protagonists often face crises, both physical and mental, that mirror real life. They must cross liminal spaces, like bridges or swamps, and use their wits to succeed. These trials, common in Greek mythology, require facing up to fears, making sacrifices and learning new skills. But the reward is worth it. Jack (of beanstalk fame) and the Little Mermaid learnt this. This is why motivational speakers often use just this kind of story.

Today, people read or watch a fantasy story for reasons other than the teachings it offers; escapism, positive reviews, stunning CGI effects, relaxation, a good trailer or favourite actor or writer are more likely reasons. The lucky ones may find unexpected insights but unlocking the lessons, especially hidden ones, requires decoding the clues, assuming the storyteller provides any.

The meaning of a fairy tale for any individual depends on the recipient's character, upbringing, beliefs, state of mind, environment and context, all of which shift over time. The lens we see a story through is also impacted by relationships, career and health. The permutations for the ways in which just one person can interpret a single story are numerous. The versatility of fairy tales is astounding.

Fairy tales appeal to the heart as well as head. Our strongest personal associations with them come through feelings rather than thoughts. This is powerful as feelings can be catalysts for intense self-reflection or positive action against wrongdoing.

As Hamlet, Alice in Wonderland or Ice Age show us, fantasy stories can be enjoyed by all ages, for fun, wit or deeper meaning. You don't need to be a child to appreciate fairy tales. As Albert Einstein famously said: "Imagination is more important than knowledge. If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairytales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairytales." The best fairy tales are intelligent and stimulate intelligent thought.

Some may think fairy tale lessons border on the mundane (which, in many modern fairy tale interpretations, they do) but in matters of self-reflection, we humans are masters of denial, neither do we enjoy listening to criticism from others. In story form, fairy tale messages are less threatening. By reinforcing self-realisation and self-enlightenment, fairy tales can foster lasting change.

Fairy tales throw light on the core aspects of human nature

Wars, climate change, corruption, inequality and dependence on technology – all suggest humanity has lost its way. Not only have we wandered into the proverbial woods, we seem intent on burning the trees around us, destroying the very environment that sustains us. Like children, we need guidance. Cue fairy tales.

Crises are nothing new in our history but in the past, humans were isolated, less educated and easier to lead. Damage could be contained and often corrected. Today, we have more freedom to think, act and influence our world, yet we abuse that power. We sometimes vote in leaders who abuse it. Individualism, resistance to change and bias are all around us. They highlight the need for a catalyst to make us think independently and nudge us into making mindset changes on individual and societal levels. Fairy tales may represent one small but vital grass roots response to phenomena that destabilise our societies.

The past is shrouded in mystery

Stories have been told, acted out and documented ever since Man could speak, walk and draw on cave walls. Humans shared stories about survival, family, and creation – core themes tied to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The most popular tales were meaningful and memorable. They provided guidance, gave hope and, when language evolved, sparked discussion. Fairy tales became vital learning tools for communities.

Throughout history, people have craved imaginary stories, especially those that offered survival tips and moral lessons, which were often more engaging than official messages (the reason why those in power tried to own fairy tales). To understand the true value and relevance of fairy tales for today, we must first explore their roots and development.

Scholars have long debated and disputed fairy tale origins, sometimes contradicting themselves as well as each other, but most stories trace back to ancient history; Beauty and the Beast echoes Lucius Apuleius Madaurensis' Cupid and Psyche (2nd century AD); crusaders brought India's Jatakas (300 BC) to Europe from the Middle East; Aesop's fables (6th century BC) are considered the first Western fantasy tales; Red Riding Hood dates back two to six thousand years. Ancient texts from India, China, as well as biblical sources, have been found to contain fairy tale elements.

Before rigid genres existed, stories were passed down orally, blending myths, fables, and folklore. Their origins may be blurred, but fantasy is present in legends from China, the Middle East, Greek mythology, and, more recently, in works by Chaucer and Shakespeare. The ability to imagine is hardwired into human DNA.

Deep-set in the folklore of their respective cultures and indistinct from other story forms, fairy tales were only separated from fantasy in the late 20th century. In fact, works like Tolkien's Lord of the Rings and Baum's Wizard of Oz were themselves first considered fairy tales. Most of today's fantasy contains fairy tale roots, even if we don't consciously realise it.

Traditionally, fairy tales were short, magical stories told by ordinary people to inspire hope and dreams, to teach values and the merit of courage, and to warn against wrongdoing. They emphasised that success came from good deeds, hard work, and a spot of luck. Children had to obey their parents, strangers were either threats or good Samaritans. Simple plots and clear symbolism made the messages accessible to knowledge-hungry audiences; the uneducated as well as those seeking deeper meaning.

Despite being characterised by elements outside known science, geography or time periods (spells, talking animals and magical lands are common) fairy tales reflected real-life lessons. Fantasy could help mask the true identity of antagonists – often figures in power. Although social structures and moral codes changed over the centuries, albeit slowly, fairy tales remained relevant, because they spoke to fundamental issues in life.

The original term *fairy tale* is often ascribed to Madame d'Aulnoy in the late 17th century, where it appears in French as *'conte de fées',* though some claim the German term *Wundermärchen* ("wonder tale") may be more accurate, not least because *märchen* can mean "little story". Victorian writers popularised the term "fairy tale," though few tales featured fairies.

Strictly for the adults, starting with women

Most people assume fairy tales are for children but before the 19th century, they were primarily created by and told to adults. The Midde Ages was a time of religious wars, the plague, feudalism and witch trials. Stories helped people make sense of their world. From the German term for fairy

tale *Wundermärchen,* the word *märchen* can also mean news story, reflecting this role of information. Back then, education was reserved for the wealthy, most diseases were fatal, there was no welfare system and news travelled slowly. People cried out for guidance, support, reassurance, a sense of belonging and yes, entertainment. Fairy tales provided this. Although children naturally eavesdropped, adults were both the storytellers and the audience.

Before books, tales were shared orally, often by women – mothers and grandmothers at home, storytellers around campfires and hostesses at social gatherings. In male-dominated societies, women began crafting tales with female protagonists who endured real-world abuse. In their original forms, Sleeping Beauty was raped by a king, Rapunzel and Beauty (of Beauty and the Beast) were both abandoned by their fathers (Beauty was visited at night by the Beast, Rapunzel seduced), Cinderella was stalked by a prince and Red Riding Hood was seduced by a wolf. These mirrored societal issues few dared to talk about by their real name.

A good example of how women propagated fairy tales stems from the 17th-century salon culture among the aristocracy in Europe, France in particular. These gatherings, designed to educate and amuse, were often themed around philosophy, politics, science or culture. Primarily at home, wealthy women began to take a leading role in organising these gatherings and adapted the concept into a bedroom parlour game where they discussed feminism and challenged norms. Allegories and innuendo were used to discuss "imaginary situations". Through dark, brutal tales, women could share traumatic experiences and warn others without the risk of shame or directly criticising men. It became a discreet way to express social critique and thereby avoid condemnation by the court or church.

Scholars have traced many modern fairy tale versions back to these women-led circles and the ensuing censorship. We can still see remnants of those brutal metaphors – the woodsman intent on cutting out Snow White's heart (originally lungs and liver), the witch fattening up Hansel and Gretel in order to eat them, the ugly sisters cutting off their toes to be married. Much of the savagery, however, including rape and incest, was edited out long ago. Only more recently have retellings, including feminist literature, dared to revisit these controversial or provocative themes to spotlight social injustice, and so repeat what women once did centuries ago.

The printing press was both a blessing and a curse

Although it took decades, the shift from oral to printed fairy tales, driven by the invention of the printing press, radically changed storytelling by expanding the accessible audience, changing the way people consumed stories and altering content. As literacy grew, fuelled partly by the industrial revolution and women's emancipation, fairy tales spread from aristocrats to the middle then working classes, and eventually from adults to children.

Early printed tales targeted adults, especially wealthy women who generally stayed at home while their husbands were away. This led to recurring fairy tale themes of women at home. Written stories were shaped to reflect traits favoured by male-dominated societies – boldness, strength and wisdom in men; meekness, beauty, and obedience in women. Rebellious female characters were often cast as the villains, such as witches or evil stepmothers.

Printed books marked a turning point in fairy tales; the ones published became the de facto versions. A mere handful of European authors curated seminal collections, choosing what to include and what to leave out, shaping plots and emphasising certain morals. These fixed versions were reread and passed down, reinforcing consistency, narrowing the scope for

interpretation and inviting censorship. Control over content had been wrested from the more informal and impactful word of mouth.

Fairy tale collections first appeared in Italy and France, the first one said to be Giovanni Francesco Straparola's Le Piacevoli Notti (Pleasant Nights or Facetious Nights), published in 1551. This two-volume work include some 75 fables, many borrowed from earlier sources (the writing of the monk, Gurolamo Morlini or Boccaccio's Decameron (1350)), as well as stories from Spain, ancient Rome, India, and the Middle East.

The Neapolitan courtier, Giambattista Basile, published his collection in 1634, and included Rapunzel and Cinderella. Charles Joseph Mayer created Le Cabinet des Fées and compiled 41 volumes of other writers' work between 1785 and 1789. Charles Perrault's Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passé (1797) featured Little Red Riding Hood, Puss in Boots, Blue Beard and Sleeping Beauty. It would be many decades before the brevity and morals of these tales, originally for adults, would be deemed suitable educational material for children too.

While these writers undeniably helped popularise the fairy tales we know and love today, they also made them more rigid and their lessons prescriptive. Writers edited stories according to their personal taste, which was greatly influenced by what rulers and clergy wanted. With their hands effectively tied, history's early fairy tale writers – Straparola, Basile, Perrault, the brothers Grimm, Madame D'Aulnoy – rewrote, combined and tweaked a vast number of fairy tales also for literary effect. Successive print editions simplified stories further, reducing the need or possibility of the teller to customise the story or the recipient to interpret it.

Popular versions were standardised, while obscure ones faded away. Some scholars argue this narrowed selection diluted the richness and cultural diversity once preserved through oral tradition and embedded in folklore. Though regional variants still exist today, much of the deeper knowledge of origins has been lost or is highly subjective and fiercely debated.

The example of the Brothers Grimm

The Grimm brothers' rise to fame illustrates how social norms impacted the development of fairy tales. With clergy in the family, Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm's writing was strongly influenced by Lutheran scripture as well as societal expectations. It is no coincidence that the Lutheran Bible and Grimm's fairy tales are the most popular books to come out of Germany. After the death of the brothers' father in the late 1700s, and with the onset of the Napoleonic Wars and civil unrest in German states, the Grimm family's financial status plummeted. Though accepted to study law, the brothers returned to their passion for German folklore, possibly because of the stigma their reduced social standing generated among peers.

The Grimm brothers had been randomly collecting folk stories since 1807 and published their first collection of 86 folk tales in 1812, *Kinder- Und Hausmärchen*. They had gathered tales from peasants, middle class, the aristocracy and earlier writers. Even Wilhem Grimm's wife, Henriette, contributed several stories from her own family. Despite high literacy in Germany (85% vs. 52% in England), early editions were not successful due to disputes with the publisher and lack of illustrations.

To appeal to the bourgeoisie, the brothers revised stories repeatedly, removing provocative sexual content, adding Christian themes (such as the seven deadly sins), and shortening texts. Many tales ended in marriage, with sex before marriage being edited out (for

example, Rapunzel's exploits in the tower). The brothers ensured that women's non-human spouses, like beasts or frogs, were always male before turning human.

Female characters were often passive and redemption was reached through suffering. Harsh, eye-for-an-eye punishment was favoured – Snow White's stepmother was forced to wear red-hot shoes, Cinderella's sisters had their eyes pecked out. Misogyny and cannibalism were deemed acceptable, but magic was made to resemble religious miracles to appease the church.

Their work gained literary recognition, abroad too, but still didn't sell well. Interest surged only with the rise of romantic nationalism in mid-19th-century Germany. Though not written for children, the Grimms eventually added parental guidance and revised later editions to suit younger readers. Between 1812 and 1864, they republished their collection 16 times.

After their deaths, the tales were widely re-edited and translated into over 160 languages. In the U.S. alone, 120 editions are available, testament to the enduring appeal of their moralised messages.

Dumbing down content to indoctrinate women and children

Fairy tales are rich in allegories, metaphors and symbolism. Their mix of obvious and obscure meanings appeals to diverse audiences. The blend of simplicity and opportunity for personal interpretation makes them a powerful and persuasive influence.

It is therefore not surprising that historically, fairy tales were used by those in power to indoctrinate people, particularly women, children and the uneducated. Those in power shaped plots and characters to promote desired behaviours and values, and applied familiar symbols to garner deeper, often subconscious, significance to everyday life.

The "rule of three" (three wishes, acts, challenges) builds suspense and tells of perseverance, dating back to ancient teachings from China, Egypt, and Greece. Life itself is full of threes; past, present, future; body, mind, spirit; birth, life, death; beginning, middle, end. Fairy tales reinforced these patterns (the wicked stepmother tries to kill Snow White three times, there are three little pigs, the genie gives three wishes), and the Church is thought to have encouraged an association with its own group of three, the Holy Trinity.

Common symbols include the rose (a central prop in Beauty and Beast, Sleeping Beauty, and Snow White and Rose Red stories), which was seen to represent pain and pleasure, masculinity and femininity, crime and justice, puberty or religious themes, such as the blood of Christ. Spinning wheels are thought to have symbolised independent women, who told their own stories as they span and threatened the rule of men. Other recurring early motifs include missing mothers, persecuted heroines, magical godmothers, and trials. If the magic was more of a supernatural nature, it was usually associated with women, to lessen the risk of condemnation by the church.

Use of simple allegories and symbols in stories are an effective way to keep people's attention and get across desired messages, but clearly not all intentions have been noble. History is full of examples where powerful stories have been used for evil intent, especially when carried by propaganda machines. Leaders who practised this include Hitler and Mao Zi Tong. Even the Ku Klux Klan apparently used fairy tales.

Rooted in German folklore, Grimm's tales included antisemitic elements and stories like *The Jew Among Thorns*, *The Girl who was Killed by Jews and The Jews' Stone* were used by Nazi Germany to indoctrinate children (Red Riding Hood became mandatory in the school curriculum and there was even a film showing Little Red Riding Hood being rescued by an SS Officer). Some claim these themes subtly influenced later media, including Disney, though the evidence (evil equates to dark horns and swarthy complexions) is tenuous, to say the least.

Fairy tales still face criticism for shaping children's views, especially regarding gender roles. In 2017, a mother called for the banning of Sleeping Beauty, arguing that the prince's kiss lacked consent and the film was therefore condoning sexual harassment. Presumably the same mother was unaware that earlier versions of the same story featured overt rape and cannibalism. In recent years, new interpretations have taken gender profiling more into account, at least to some degree.

Fairy tales haven't only served the powerful. They can also be used to enlighten people. French storytellers in the 17th and 18th centuries used them to critique rulers like the Sun King, Louis XIV. And many of today's retellings challenge societal norms. However, it is fair to say that for centuries, the church and court dictated what was acceptable reading content for the population, thereby establishing today's fairy tale versions. Later on, stories were reshaped again for children and commercial success, further narrowing their scope.

The further dumbing down of content for children

The shift from oral to written storytelling reduced fluidity and ambiguity. Stories were transformed, simplified, and "owned", allowing greater control over who read them and how.

Children were first recognised as a distinct readership audience in 1659, when Comenius published Orbis Sensualium Pictus, a pioneering picture book. It acknowledged that children were not simply scaled-down adults but learnt and consumed literature in their own unique way. However, widespread commercial interest in children's literature didn't emerge until a century later. In 1744, John Newbery established one of the first publishing houses for children's books, which produced the iconic A Little Pretty Pocket-book.

Early children's books continued to focus on morality and instruction. Even street-sold chapbooks (cheap, comic-like pamphlets for poorer people) included lessons on manners. Higher-quality printed books catered for middle-class families seeking educational content for their children. Children's books did not seek to entertain until much later.

As with the transfer from oral to written stories, so the recognition of children as an audience was a long and gradual process. But once the two co-existed, publishers exploited new market opportunities with a vengeance. Demand was clearly there, as stories like Robinson Crusoe and Gulliver's Travels, originally for adults, became favourites among wealthy children. Parents began to see books like these as tools for parental guidance.

Under the watchful eye of the church and court, writers and publishers further softened classic fairy tale content for consumption by children. While some violence remained – especially in Grimm tales – more disturbing elements like rape, pregnancy, and abusive fathers were removed to align with moral expectations. Hence, the tamer fairy tale versions we have today.

Here are some events from original versions that you might not be aware of:

In One Thousand and One Nights, Aladdin actually kills the evil sorcerer, and there are two different genies.

In the 1883 story Pinocchio, the police arrest Geppetto on the charge of abuse of Pinocchio. The puppet later kills Jiminy Cricket and is lynched on a tree.

In some old versions of Little Red Riding Hood, the wolf chops up the grandmother, stores her skin in the pantry cupboard, pours her blood into a wine bottle and feeds Red Riding Hood her own grandmother's remains.

Mulan returns home to find her father dead, and her mother remarried to a khan, who asks Mulan to be his concubine. She becomes overwhelmed and kills herself.

After being fooled by the miller's daughter, Rumpelstiltskin gets so frustrated that he tears himself in two.

In the Brothers' Grimm's The Goose Girl, a maid swaps identities with a princess then kills a talking horse to hide the evidence. She is eventually stripped naked and thrown into a spike-filled barrel and rolled around until dead.

The frog in Frog Prince needs to have his head cut off in order to turn into a prince but instead, the princess throws him hard against a wall.

The Little Mermaid dies of a broken heart.

In early versions of Chicken Little, the fox ambushes and eats the animals.

Blue Beard is a misogynist serial killer. And so it goes on.

To avoid overly frightening children, cruel mothers became stepmothers, child protagonists grew more resilient and lust melted into attraction (Hansel and Gretel, Snow White, Beauty and the Beast).

Akin to this came more gender stereotyping. Princes were brave heroes focused on action, female characters were passive, praised for beauty and gentleness. Snow White became a domestic for the dwarfs and had to be saved repeatedly. In Rumpelstiltskin, the miller’s daughter earns royalty by spinning gold. Female protagonists often cleaned, cared for animals, or sacrificed things (like Ariel giving up her voice or her sisters giving up their long hair) to find happiness. Though women had the power to transform beasts into princes, it was typically men who liberated them.

Patriarchal norms shaped fairy tales, reinforcing gender roles that children would emulate and establishing now-familiar notions. Women were pitted against each other, innocent youths were expected to obey their elders. And if a character was an old, ugly woman, then she was a witch.

Major changes in power, such as the French Revolution, ensured that art and culture, including literature, remained under scrutiny and that writers continued to conform to the prevailing moral and political standards. By the mid-18th century, children’s literature flourished. Authors like the Brothers Grimm, Carroll, Andersen and Barrie created tales to suit young audiences, while avoiding societal backlash. It paid for writers to toe the line.

Uncensored fairy tales faded away. Giambattista Basile’s Tale of Tales (1630s), ironically subtitled Entertainment for Little Ones, featured bawdy, graphic content – rape, cannibalism,

decapitation – and was too extreme to adapt. It faded into obscurity, though was revived in the 2015 movie Tale of Tales, which was not surprisingly rated K15.

New editions of existing books escalated from around 1850 onwards, especially when publishers recognised the power of illustration, which left even less to reader imagination. In the 20th century, new media and the rise of the entertainment industry boosted marketing to children and perpetuated the direction towards more sanitised fairy tale versions. Fairy tales spread across all art forms; music, theatre and painting.

The dark side of entertainment

Humans have long been drawn to fantasy, using their imagination to fill in the gaps of stories told orally, printed or illustrated. But then came movies. Fairy tales transitioned easily into movies, and later into TV, which cried out for visual storytelling content. Walt Disney led the exploration into children's entertainment. Striking visuals, haunting music, simple plots and lessons bordering on the naive made them universally attractive. Disney chose public domain tales to avoid paying royalties. Snow White (1937) was the first feature-length film, followed by Cinderella (1950), Sleeping Beauty (1959), The Little Mermaid (1989), and Beauty and the Beast (1991), all tweaked and simplified for children.

The rise of academic fairy tale studies in the 1960s was no doubt a factor in fantasy's revival but media companies' pursuit of profit through new distribution channels and readily available source material was the main driver. While producers were no doubt inspired by the chance to create fantasy stories, commercial interests shaped what ultimately reached the public.

Over the past half-century, fantasy has skyrocketed, thanks to new consumer trends, more sophisticated channels, advances in technology, more leisure time and social media. AI is the latest fad to blur creative boundaries and take the responsibility for storytelling out of our hands.

The beauty of modern, high-budget productions is that it brings depth to fantasy – technological wizardry enables stunning visuals, realistic performances give rise to authentic dialogue, iconic costumes and memorable music complete the spectacle. Yet, most movies and TV programmes focus on entertaining their audience, sidelining the deeper lessons fairy tales offer. Low-budget rushed productions especially prioritise action over meaning, with platforms like Netflix ready to snap up mediocre content to broaden their offering.

Technology continues to raise the bar for realism, making fantasy more immersive but requiring less imagination from the audience, who now expect fantasy to be believable, like drug addicts needing ever stronger fixes. The TV production of George Martin's Game of Thrones arguably owed its success as much to the complex, troubled characters as it did to the world building and battle scenes. But only too often, the quest for realism purely as entertainment means more sex and violence – gimmicks to maximise the wow factor and get more eyeballs on the screen. People are shocked by scenes but not surprised by the plot. Hence the prevalence of movies that feature four teenagers stranded in a cottage in the woods.

Action dominates stories and special effects suffocate the messages, overshadowing any opportunity for deeper reflection. We see what happens, hear what is said, but have few clues as to why. Ironically the visual quest for realism dilutes the fairy tale's potential to connect fantasy with real life situations and so inspire self-reflection.

The media industry may say it is just meeting consumer demand, but who is leading whom?

While TV programmers look at new ways to raise viewer ratings and hook viewers into binge-watching cycles, they run the risk of ignoring the content. Fairy tales, at least, require a classic storytelling structure – a beginning, middle and end – with a clear purpose.

Traditional fairy tales once entertained us, while challenging us to reflect on human nature and moral dilemmas. To fully deliver, modern versions must do the same – stimulate our imagination, give us food for thought and spark discussion. Entertainment alone isn't enough.

The trend for "low cost, fast delivery" is by no means restricted to fantasy stories. The same phenomenon can be seen across all genres, even news coverage. To some extent, one can argue that it is a malaise of the service industry in general.

Today, the world seems somewhat paralysed by polarisation in a wide range of issues. There is widespread distrust of governments. With news channels broadcasting negative news 24/7, people are confused and despondent. Escapism is fine, but fiction should also provoke thought. Quick-fix entertainment offers a distraction, not a solution.

Spiralling out of control

Fairy tales can benefit people of all ages, but simply regurgitating stories en masse risks losing their value. The push for profit and faster production often compromises quality. Tools like AI currently focus on saving time and money, not so much on enhancing content.

Young people emulate this. On social media, you can find teenage authors who lament having had only ten books published. AI can now handle everything from content creation to daily video marketing. It can even write your book or create your movie. The question asked of new artists who seek commercial outlets is not "What can you create?" but "How many followers do you have?".

While technology can make content creation easier, there are long-term trade-offs in addition to job losses. Overreliance on automation also weakens human curiosity, creativity and our ability to interpret – all essential to the value of fairy tales. Creators and consumers alike need to be vigilant. Fantasy shouldn't be just disposable entertainment, it's supposed to make us think. In fact, fairy tales themselves remind us that shortcuts can be perilous. Just ask Little Red Cap.

In a fast-paced world of information overload, social media now shapes young minds more than parents or schools do. Whole generations of people are less concerned with whether information is accurate or not, and more with it being delivered fast and in a readily consumable package. Accuracy matters less than speed and reinforcement of existing beliefs. Entertainment trumps information. Affirmation over enlightenment.

Marketing also drives this trend. Bold visuals and constant rebranding – a book with a variety of different covers, a movie with numerous edits, trailers and movie stills that fool you into thinking you haven't seen the film. And then there is the merchandising; dolls, clothes, post cards, calendars, colouring books.

In a complex world overflowing with information, people of all ages need the simplicity and wisdom of traditional fairy tales more than ever. Themes like hope, perseverance, justice, love, bias, ambition and accountability help us make sense of our complex lives. Fairy tales are simple yet profound, imaginative yet direct, exciting yet meaningful. The benefit of their lessons

is unique to each individual, yet sadly, this versatility has been ignored for the sake of entertainment. This is also ironic, because done well, a fairy tale can offer the ideal blend of meaning and enjoyment.

Woke thinking evokes a backlash through conservatism

Over the past 50 to 100 years, the link between fairy tales and life lessons has weakened, at least in so-called developed countries. Perhaps rapid societal change – influenced by technology, world wars and consumerism – has rebranded fairy tales as childish or irrelevant. Perhaps new generations have become complacent and have grown up too fast with a different set of values and expectations. Whatever the reason, the educational value of fairy tales has been largely dismissed by the very cultures that once embraced them.

Some people have fought back. Writers like Roald Dahl revived fairy tale elements – short, shocking stories for both children and adults, with dark humour and room for interpretation. Established fiction writers such as Stephen King and Neil Gaiman have also used fairy tale-like storytelling approach. Fairy tale retellings by authors like Angela Carter and more recently, Sarah J. Maas, have made inroads among fans of fantasy. Ethical awareness, especially around discrimination, has pushed for more diverse and complex characters, even in movies and on TV. Yet, stereotypes on our screens persist – heroines have large eyes and slim waists, villains are ugly and dressed in black. Beauty still equates to goodness. Preconceptions are buried deep within our psyche and money talks.

The woke movement, active for over a century and reignited in recent years, has influenced fantasy through high-profile campaigns like Black Lives Matter, #MetToo, and Pride marches. However, a backlash has polarised the public debate about ethics, and a new round of government-driven censorship now threatens creative freedom. What could have been a platform for ethical exploration has become a toxic battleground, for now at least.

In spite of this, more and more storytellers have begun to question established interpretations of fairy tale characters and plots, aiming to create stories that challenge our preconceptions and engage both children and adults.

Some retellings have gained enough visibility to challenge outdated norms on a vast scale. One of the more notable attempts, Disney's movie Frozen (2013), based on Andersen's The Snow Queen (1844), and even Tangled (based on Rapunzel), introduced layered characters and bolder dialogue. Nevertheless, some of those who want radical social change or remain true to original fairy tale versions still criticise Disney's approach as being little more than sugar-coated musicals.

One of TV's more successful forays into fairy tales was The Storyteller, a series of more obscure fairy tales from different countries, narrated by John Hurt. It demonstrated one of the purest interpretations of fairy tale concept by delivering visually and mentally stimulating stories for children and adults alike, while stressing clear morals, typically through harsh ordeals.

Films like Snow White: A Tale of Terror (1997) returned to the darker roots Grimm's tale. Other movie or TV productions – Maleficent, Once Upon a Time, Grimm, Carnival Row, and Stranger Things, all blend fantasy with ethical dilemmas, echoing fairy tale tradition.

This revival is promising, but there's a caveat; as with the influence of printing, fairy tale content is now shaped by powerful corporations focused on profit. Entertainment sells – and unfortunately that drives which stories get told and how.

Fairy tales can help adults grow up by becoming children again

In recent decades, relaxed censorship and new communication methods have changed how we define adult content. Global digitalisation, the internet and gaming have made adult content widely accessible to all. As media has evolved, original fairy tales with their darker themes have resurfaced, dramatised and embellished to sate the modern audience's endless appetite for thrills and spills.

In a digital world that, to all intents and purposes, now practices self-censorship, some people, children especially, are at risk. The boundary between adults and children has become blurred. Fairy tales may not pose the most harmful content, but their disturbing themes and potential to influence still warrant consideration.

Today's children grow up in a very different way to earlier generations. Everything is online. Rightly or wrongly, social media has taken the place of the playground, online communication the place of face-to-face dialogue. Most parents don't know what graphic video clips or games their children view. People see more and know more at an earlier age. However, that's not to say children understand more or benefit from the increased exposure, especially if they are left to process content alone. In most cases, children access adult-level content without the emotional maturity to process it. The original fairy tale versions contain just such dark content, which is why they were censored long ago then repurposed for children.

The concerns above naturally apply to all shared content, of which the realm of fairy tales is just one part. While kids have instinctively been able to distinguish the terror in fairy tales (violent ogres, child-eating witches and executions) from reality, today's constant stream of hyper-realistic, in-your-face images blur the line between fiction and reality, adult and child content. Children have become more desensitised to images of violence and news of horrific crimes. Stories that once shocked are now familiar. On the one hand, we may have gone too far in exposing vulnerable audiences, on the other, dark fairy tales can offer valuable lessons, especially for adults. One solution might be to focus more on getting the original moral lessons across and allowing space for personal interpretation.

As much for adults as children

Reaching both adults and children with the same content makes economic sense, as seen in modern movies like Shrek and Ice Age, which included jokes clearly geared for adults. Films like Snow White and the Huntsman or Hansel and Gretel contain scenes not suited for children, yet many still watch them. However, the target audience of a fantasy piece can sometimes feel as confusing as the plot itself.

Assuming one-size-fits-all when delivering fairy tales en masse is misguided. These stories were originally shared orally and meant to be interpreted. Their apparent simplicity hides centuries of thought-provoking content, making storytelling in mass media a real challenge.

Fantasy stories could be more meaningful for both adults and children if the action was framed through moral dilemmas, exploring how the protagonists and antagonists became who

they are, what choices were made, and what was learned along the way. But production companies often overlook fairy tales' deeper life lessons.

Children link fairy tales to real situations and experiences in their lives, often subconsciously, which contributes to shaping their sense of right and wrong, defining values and building resilience and self-confidence. Fairy tales leave lasting impression. Hence, adults are understandably drawn to childhood nostalgia. Later on in life, the same tales from childhood can evoke powerful emotions – innocence, fear, guilt, triumph, trauma – these primal feelings are the things of nightmares as well as epic adventure. Revisiting them in adulthood, when we are wiser, more resilient, less vulnerable, offers the potential for new insight and personal growth.

Some modern fairy tale retellings, including their artwork, embrace the grotesque and quirky roots of the originals, like Natalie Frank's unsettling Grimm illustrations or the adult-oriented TV series Once Upon a Time. Staying true to fairy tale philosophy typically means unsettling audiences before offering a resolution – danger, fear, bravery and conflict are a necessary part of the journey to happiness and well-being. In that sense, gruesome events are justified. And the focus on adults is fitting, since adults were the original audience for fairy tales hundreds of years ago.

Triggering primal feelings and behaviours at different ages

Such is the power of fairy tales that adults continue to see many aspects of life through fairy tale lenses without knowing it. The quest for beauty, wealth and power goes hand in hand with fairy tale plots. Many sayings we apply to life, such as "nothing ventured, nothing gained" or "if something is worth doing, it is worth doing well", reflect original fairy tale lessons. We even describe happy endings as a "fairy tale ending" and obsessively devour media coverage about royal families.

The lessons of early fairy tales remain relevant for today's adults. The Little Mermaid's sacrifice to be with a prince who is more interested in another tells of spurned love and denial. Puss in Boots extols resourcefulness and appearance (though the cat uses lies and cheating). Rapunzel was given away by her parents, held captive and abused by the first man who came along. Cinderella was bullied. With these darker interpretations in mind, fairy tales resonate with adults every bit as much as with children, though in different ways.

Psychologically, fairy tales are relevant for adults long after middle age. With experience of success and failure, older adults tend to become more tolerant, more realistic and less fearful of uncertainty. Their interpretations of familiar stories will therefore differ from younger adults, offering fresh and stimulating perspectives.

Today's adults also feel more comfortable embracing their inner child, playing computer games at sixty, collecting Star Wars memorabilia at seventy. They might be receptive to revisiting to the power of fairy tales, if only moral dilemmas were given equal weight to entertainment. Adults today are also better educated than those centuries ago and have the capacity to interpret layered stories more analytically. We should challenge audiences intellectually, not just entertain.

What modern fairy tale productions need is therefore more focus on conveying life lessons and inviting audience interpretation.

So what can we do?

The first step is to acknowledge the role fairy tales can play in getting us to question the status quo and reflect on how we demonstrate values in our everyday lives. Fairy tales aim to define right and wrong behaviours, evoke a response, provoke discussion, and yes, entertain. This has been the case for centuries.

The significance of stories varies across cultures. For example, a princess may represent very different feminine ideals in Denmark, the Philippines, or Morocco. History, geographical location and language affect interpretation. Individual interpretation depends on upbringing, values, environment and so on. Some will admire Jack's bravery climbing the beanstalk, while others see him as a common thief who discriminates against large people. Some will applaud the ingenuity of the cat in Puss in Boots, others will condemn its immorality.

Themes like love, hate, courage, kindness and cruelty take on different meanings according to cultural context, which in turn shapes the evolution of fairy tales. The German Hansel and Gretel featured famine-stricken parents (later replaced by a wicked stepmother to reaffirm the sacred role of parents) whereas the French version introduced a bloodthirsty Devil who tortured Christian children. Slavic Baba Yaga emphasised starvation and cannibalism; Japan's Three Brothers and Oni, and versions from Portugal and India, all reflect local customs and values. Despite differences, themes of hunger, cunning, independence and coming of age are common, allowing the core tale to survive to this day.

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs also appears in many countries; the Netherlands, Denmark, Italy, Spain, Chile, Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Turkey, Iceland, each with different characters, plots, and lessons. The core story explores beauty, youth and aging, the futility of jealousy and the value of kindness from unexpected sources. These lessons remain relevant today when adapted to local culture or individual context. But not without effort from both the storyteller and recipient.

So, what is to be done? Somehow, we need to unlock the full value of fairy tales, for adults too. Fantasy is popular, fairy tale content is abundant and copyright free. What we now need is people with vision and influence to reignite interest in the lessons of fairy tales and re-enable personal interpretation on a grass roots level. These visionaries may be few and far between but imagine how interesting a rework of an original fairy tale by the creators of Black Mirror, a TV series that takes a critical and thought-provoking look at technology, might be.

There could be more awareness for winners of fairy tale literary awards like the Hans Christian Andersen award, emphasising the original purpose of fairy tales. In movies and TV, there could be recognition of those who adapt fairy tale lessons to modern contexts or those who, in the same way many books do, present the moral dilemmas as well as seek to entertain. We could give more recognition to interactive games that present moral choices through player engagement. The content is out there, either in ready form or waiting to be produced, but the visibility to mainstream audiences is missing.

Perhaps the organisations promoting fairy tales could team up with influential NGOs, secure major corporate funding or combine forces. Maybe they could persuade UNESCO (which supports fairy tales as part of intangible cultural heritage) to increase advocacy towards education boards around the world. With funding more critical than ever, has the power of social media been harnessed to achieve this? To what extent do schools use fairy tales systematically to teach a whole range of skills, also with older children, and how are fairy tales used in adult education?

From the audience perspective, specific groups – parent groups, support networks, businesses – could benefit greatly from analysing fairy tale lessons in their challenges. Some educators and consultants already use Shakespeare as pedagogical aids; fairy tales may already be serving a similar purpose. Chances are the uptake is minimal, so there would need to be an outreach programme to spread success stories through dedicated associations.

The ultimate and greatest potential influence of fairy tales is what it was hundreds of years ago; on an individual level. Interpretation is subjective and by definition personal, there is no single "correct" meaning. Whether influenced by movies, books, family or friends, each of us processes a story through our own unique lens. We will each settle on the meaning that best suits our situation. What matters is engaging with the story and staying true to oneself.

So, what happens if we misread the messages, are deliberately misled or simply don't understand the messages being told to us? Originally, fairy tales aimed to educate through interaction and discussion, not be interpreted in isolation. This group or community approach is highlighted in Maria Adelmann's collection of feminist retellings How to Eat me, as it explores the idea of telling stories in a post-trauma group. Is Ms Adelmann suggesting that fairy tales could be used more widely in such groups to tackle sensitive issues? Or is she saying all of us should engage in that way?

Some research says that the majority of parents still use stories to teach their children basic values. That is excellent. But how are we supporting them and how can we reach those parents who don't consider fairy tales at all. The ultimate challenge is to reach all adults, many of whom tend to have their eyes glued on a screen of some shape and size.

Fairy tales present mass media with an opportunity as well as a responsibility

The most obvious way to reach large populations quickly is through mass media, TV and movies in particular. The lure of profit still entices media moguls to provide a steady stream of new or rehashed fantasy stories, many with fairy tale elements. To meet demand, some producers are turning to lesser-known tales from other cultures, often with comparatively low licensing costs. A prime example of this relatively untapped source is The Witcher, based on Andrzej Sapkowski's Polish saga, which has been successful, in part, due to the deliberate blend of moral dilemmas and action (the violence predictably more graphic in later seasons).

Despite globalisation, cultural differences persist. Global media companies have learnt how to tailor content to local audiences. Therefore, taking and adapting local folklore could offer fresh, thought-provoking material. However, this requires effort, risk, and possibly new business models, something shareholders may resist.

For now, major media outlets seem happy to spoon-feed audiences easily digestible entertainment. The result is that many fantasy productions lack depth, relying on simple plots and action, rendering them neither meaningful nor memorable. True, sometimes all we want to do is flop down in front of the TV and be entertained. But what little cerebral content there is, typically comes in the form of crime thrillers, family tragedies and historical dramas. Fairy tales, when adapted to modern themes, can offer similar intellectual and emotional engagement in their own unique and powerful way.

These days, stories travel the world at the speed of light, yet media and politics often favour polarised views over discourse, propaganda over fact. Fairy tales can be used to simplify

the complex, provide new ways of looking at things, encourage independent thought and foster dialogue.

Enter the woods – good fairy tales are out there

For those that see the light, there are literally millions of fairy tale productions out there, yet they lie like fallen leaves in a vast forest, layer upon layer. Many are faithful reproductions of childhood classics, others revive darker originals or regional variants, and some are entirely new creations by modern writers.

When it comes to books, there are no shortcuts to finding good stories. It's a matter of personal taste, curiosity and effort. Recognising the value of well-crafted fairy tales and knowing your preferences in genre, values, and style can help guide your search.

With over 10,000 books published daily worldwide, most never reach bookshops or reading lists, not necessarily because of poor quality but because of how the media and publishing industries operate. Only a few succeed, thanks to a mix of content, timing, reputation, perseverance, connections, publicity and luck. Recommendations from friends, family, book clubs and platforms like Goodreads can help someone find what they are looking for. Independent reviews are useful, though the most revered reviewers focus mainly on established authors. Likewise, marketing favours the well-known and those with deep pockets, unless you are a social media guru who started early and built a following. Finding a good fairy tale is a quest in itself and many give up before they have started.

Retellings are in fashion

Unless you consume hundreds of books and movies yearly, you will need to narrow down your search. A popular genre for rediscovering fairy tales is retellings, which modernise classic plots to reflect current issues. For example, Red Riding Hood might become a story about an elderly woman deceived by an online scammer who dabbles in identity theft. These retellings can reinforce, invert or tweak original lessons, making them relevant and engaging for today's audiences. Created typically by those seeking social reform, female leads are often sassier, males more emotionally open and the cast of characters more culturally diverse. However, as we can see in some movies and TV productions, tick-in-the-box changes made to enhance ethical reputation rather than meaningful storytelling can backfire.

Female writers in particular have dismantled traditional tropes. As one of the first modern retellings, Angela Carter's The Bloody Chamber (1979) reintroduced sex and cannibalism into the fairy tale, while Margaret Atwood, Kate Bernheimer, Mona Awad, and Maria Adelmann offer creative retellings that rival the originals. The fact that women seem to be leading the way is no coincidence – it's a throwback to the time when women told fairy tales hundred of years ago in salons and suggests there has been sluggish progress in gender equality.

A modern retelling often shares the original's rebellious spirit, especially on themes like discrimination. They tend to be more complex and graphically realistic than their predecessors, which can alienate some readers. However, similar to street actors (the hypokrites of Greece, the histriones of Rome, and the minstrels and mummers of the Middle Ages, not to mention some of today's populist figures), there is a reason why original fairy tales used simple, vivid allegory and exaggerated action to get their messages across to a wide audience.

As said, some people struggle with bold female leads or see retellings as distortions of tradition. Yet many original tales were feminist in nature, exposing societal abuse. Modern

versions often include humour, realism, and self-irony, inspiring the reader to think about the big picture from all angles, while preserving the shock factor and versatility of the original versions.

Traditional fairy tales feature naive, larger-than-life characters whose plights we nevertheless subconsciously relate to. Modern stories must handle these raw traits carefully to avoid being seen as offensive (misogyny or misandry, racism, homophobia) versus insincere (liberalist propaganda or merely lip service). It's a balancing act because all fairy tales need moral lessons, throwing light on right and wrong, while also entertaining. These goals can complement each other when the storytelling is strong.

In modern-day retellings, creators often look for new ways to thrill and shock audiences, often adding token surprise endings, like evil triumphing. Fairy tales allow for this as long as basic storytelling guidelines are followed and the story balances both the message and entertainment factors.

The benefit is worth the effort

The core of a good fairy tale has remained unchanged for 500 years, perhaps 5,000 – stories of our deepest desires and fears; love, loss, death, wealth, betrayal, and resilience, distilled into allegories that transcend age, culture and gender. They still offer lessons vital to our survival, happiness and prosperity today. Adults too still face "evil stepparents," "rivers to cross", "ogres," and "poison apples" – modern metaphors for life's challenges. We all need to find our way home. In today's noisy world, fairy tales can guide our choices.

They remind us of what it means to be human – why wisdom and kindness matter, why we need others, why caution and courage are necessary, how greed and jealousy can backfire, how honesty can be rewarded, and what bravery and wisdom can achieve. Their simple structure and symbolic language help us distinguish right from wrong and make sense of life.

Fairy tales are a global treasure because despite our differences, shared emotions – fear, joy, envy, grief – are universal. In chaotic times, we should embrace the rising popularity of fantasy and use fairy tales to explore deeper lessons, not just entertainment.

An optimist would say that things will sort themselves out – consumers will become more demanding, technology will be seen as no more than a tool, and people will again prioritise truth, learning and personal development. Here too, fairy tales can teach us something about embracing change and the risk of becoming set in our ways.

Whether we are consumers of stories or storytellers (we should be both at times) fairy tales can help us connect with our inner selves, encourage us to question the status quo and better balance both rational and emotional thinking. Through sharing and communicating what we learn, all of us can care more about we say and do. Those skills would seem to be a prerequisite for saving our species and protecting the planet we live on. And that's why fairy tales matter for adults too.