

FAIRY TALES CAN COME TRUE ...

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I have always loved fairy tales. When I was in elementary school, at the beginning of each year we were handed a reading book that was to be used all year. The books were always divided into sections. There were stories about real people. There were nature stories. There were science stories. And, best of all, there was a section on make-believe. Each year I would take my book home and absolutely devour the section on make-believe. Then later I would read the rest of the book as the teacher told us what to read next. But, oh, that make-believe. It was delicious.

I confess that I haven't really changed all that much in my reading tastes. I still love fantasy stories. Stories where anything can happen. Where anything is believable. Where animals talk. Where spaceships fly to other galaxies. Where magic is possible.

I suppose make-believe stories are really kind of silly, aren't they? But there is a very good reason why authors use the vehicle of fantasy to tell a story.

The author, Yann Martel, wrote this about make-believe stories: *“If I tell a story about a dentist from Bavaria or Saskatchewan, I have to deal with readers’ notions about dentists and people from Bavaria or Saskatchewan, those preconceptions and stereotypes that lock people and stories into small boxes. But if it’s a rhinoceros from Bavaria or Saskatchewan who is the dentist, then it’s an entirely different matter. The reader pays closer attention, because he or she has no preconceptions about rhinoceros dentists—from Bavaria or anywhere else. The reader’s disbelief begins to lift, like a stage curtain. Now the story can unfold more easily. There’s nothing like the unimaginable to make people believe.”*

That’s all it is about, really. Just a device to force the reader to suspend his disbelief long enough for the writer to make his point. Sort of like the story of the parting of the Red Sea or a Virgin Birth, isn’t it?

But, going back to Yann Martel’s quote. What the heck is his point, you ask. How can there be a point worth taking when you’re talking about three little pigs or three bears or a girl locked up in a tall tall tower?

I’m so glad you asked!

It's only natural for the reader—of any sort of story—to identify with the main character. Or, at least, the main character who is the good guy. Let's take a fantasy story you all probably know. How about Little Red Riding Hood.

If you're a girl, you would identify probably with Red. She's an innocent little girl who is just out to visit her sick granny and take her some food. Her granny lives in the woods. The woods are lovely, but dark and deep. Who knows what could be lurking in the woods? She's a teenager, so she's excited about the thought of danger, but she's also still a little girl, so she's worried as well because there's no one around to protect her. She meets a wolf. Danger! But also Excitement! "Mother didn't tell me that a Wolf could be so interesting!"

So, the wolf eats Granny and lies in wait for Red, who, in the end, gets rescued by a passing woodsman. All's well that ends well...except for the poor wolf, of course.

And, so, the reader learns from the story that there are dark woods in life where bad things lurk, but also interesting exciting things. And, if you always play it safe and don't go into the woods at all, then you never meet

anything interesting and exciting. A good life lesson to learn, I think. Get up off the sofa and go into the Woods and be challenged.

The reader finds the story fun to read. It's easy to remember because it was fun to read. "What would I do if I were Little Red Riding Hood?" "Would I go into the Woods?" The fantasy world of Little Red Riding Hood is not the real world where children are faced with problems and fears and dreams.

It's make-believe, so it's safe. You can pretend to actually be Red and think about what you would do in her shoes. And, somewhere, back in the inner recesses of the reader's mind is the lesson learned.

Little Red Riding Hood is a fairy tale. A tale for small children.

How about bringing it up several notches and think about a book for adults—as well as children....Lord of the Rings. I didn't read this wonderful book until I was in my 40's. I really had never even heard of it until then. But, once I started it, I was mesmerized. It's a story that is timeless and fascinating.

It involves loads of make-believe characters—there are elves and orcs and dwarves and hobbits and ents and, best of all, wizards and even a dragon.

None of those characters are “real”. But, man, that story feels real, doesn’t it?

Through the story, the reader finds that even Gollum, the slithery, slimy keeper of the ring, has a tragic past. You almost feel sorry for the poor creature who is so torn between wanting his Precious ring and fearing for his own life. And, the internal struggle between the pride of the dwarves and the arrogance of the elves. You love them both. The reader is learning that all creatures, no matter how strange or ugly or web-toed, has a story, a reason for why they are what they are. Could it be that real people are the same? Maybe so. And all of these characters had to go into the deep dark woods in their quest to destroy the ring and save the world. The woods are full of dangers and excitement and lessons to be learned. And losses to be endured and love to find and growing up to be done. And none of it would have happened if they didn’t go into the Woods.

If Lord of the Rings were told using real people as characters, it would become just another non-memorable morality play. A cowboy story where the bad guys lose and the good guys win. But, in this amazing fantasy story,

we can vividly picture in our minds, even without the movie to help us, the struggles and the very believable Hobbits and Elves and Dwarves.

The lessons learned stay with us forever.

And, let's not forget the obvious...Reality is brushing your teeth, going to work, cooking a meal, shoveling the snow off the sidewalk, and so on and so on and so monotonously on. Reality is people you love getting sick and dying in your arms. Reality is growing old. Reality can be too painful to handle. But Fantasy!!! In Fantasy you don't brush your teeth or shovel the snow or wash the dishes. You fight off dragons and you win. You wave a wand and amazing things happen. People die but seldom the good guys.

You enter the woods and who knows what will happen in the Woods!

Fantasy is full of colors and smells and sounds you have never heard before.

Full of ideas you never thought of before. Full of possibilities. Full of what ifs.

Author George R. R. Martin says:

Fantasy is silver and scarlet, indigo and azure, obsidian veined with gold and lapis lazuli. Reality is plywood and plastic, done up in mud brown and olive drab. Fantasy tastes of habaneros and honey, cinnamon and cloves, rare red meat and wines as sweet as summer. Reality is beans and tofu, and ashes at the end. Reality is the strip malls of Burbank, the smokestacks of Cleveland, a parking garage in Newark. Fantasy is the towers of Minas

Tirith, the ancient stones of Gormenghast, the halls of Camelot. Fantasy flies on the wings of Icarus, reality on Southwest Airlines. We read fantasy to find the colors again, I think. To taste strong spices and hear the songs the sirens sang. There is something old and true in fantasy that speaks to something deep within us, to the child who dreamt that one day he would hunt the forests of the night, and feast beneath the hollow hills, and find a love to last forever somewhere south of Oz and north of Shangri-La.

They can keep their heaven. When I die, I'd sooner go to middle Earth.

I suppose you could make the argument—and I know one of you will—that Fantasy is just a way to hide from Reality. Someone has to fight the wars. Someone has to shovel the snow. You're right. Absolutely. Fantasy is definitely a means of escape. And reality can be pretty darn wonderful at times, as well.

But, if we admit that Fantasy is a means of escape from the brutality of Reality, then we also have to acknowledge that in the world of Fantasy dreams can happen. Ideas can be born and examined and expanded. In Fantasy we can study our dreams more fully and learn how to make them happen. Reality is wishing on a star. Fantasy is making those wishes come true.

G. K. Chesterton said that fairy tales are more than true. Not because they tell us that dragons exist, but that they tell us that dragons can be defeated.

All sorts of dragons exist—dragons of fear, dragons of evil, dragons of despair. And all dragons can be defeated. We know that because we believe the fairy tales.

I have read that some of the world's great scientists have vivid imaginations and love to fantasize. They what-if things. What if you could travel through time? What if you could fly? What if you could walk on the moon? What if you could turn this old horse and buggy into a smooth riding vehicle that moved without the need for a horse to pull it? What if we could store our food for a long time so it wouldn't spoil. All impossible ideas at one time. And, so far, that travelling through time idea is still just a fantasy. So far.

If scientists hadn't dreamed and fantasized about what ifs, we would still be back hiding in our caves and eating moldy road kill. Fantasy has changed our world over and over and over.

Our little congregation had a fantasy. What if all our children could learn and grow up healthy with dreams of a bright future? What if we could slay the dragon of generational poverty that is rampant in our area? Our congregation dreamed about solving that problem. And, we have gone into

the woods and are beginning to fight the dragons of ignorance and hopelessness by creating our Kids First program. We haven't made it through the Woods yet, but we're on our way. But we wouldn't have begun the journey without that dream, that Fantasy.

Fantasy worlds are never really banished from the imagination but remain powerful navigational instruments, charting paths through real life experience and helping us find ways to cope with it. Fantasy worlds help us to visualize actual worlds, building sturdy bridges to fears and desires that we encounter on a daily basis.

But there is a deadly danger to dreaming of what if's. The danger is that it gets you thinking. Thinking that if you can dream it, then maybe it can come true. The quote in your order of service spells it out for you. If you dream you can do away with generational poverty, then maybe it could happen and then maybe YOU could do something to help. If you dream that hatred would die out and people could just accept our differences, well, maybe it could really happen and then maybe YOU could do something to help.

Dreaming leads to doing. So, dream away all you can. Then, act on those dreams. Make something magical happen.

I'll leave you with a poem of sorts written by Neil Gaiman, a superb fantasy writer. The instructions he gives you for navigating through the world of fantasy are really quite good instructions for navigating your way through life, if you can allow your mind to float freely. He talks about all those magical tales you have read and the lessons learned from those tales. Here it is:

Instructions

by Neil Gaiman

Touch the wooden gate in the wall you never saw before

Say "please" before you open the latch,

Go though,

Walk down the path.

A red metal imp hangs from the green-painted front door,

As a knocker,

Do not touch it; it will bite your fingers.

Walk through the house. Take nothing. Eat nothing.

However,

If any creature tells you that it hungers,

Feed it.

If it tells you that it is dirty,

Clean it.

If it cried to you that it hurts,

If you can,

Ease its pain.

From the back garden you will be able to see the wild wood.

The deep well you walk past leads down to Winter's realm;

There is another land at the bottom of it.

If you turn around here,

You can walk back, safely;

You will lose no face. I will think no less of you.

Once through the garden you will be in the wood.

The trees are old. Eyes peer from the undergrowth.

Beneath a twisted oak sits an old woman. She may ask for something.

Give it to her. She

Will point the way to the castle. Inside it

Are three princesses.

Do not trust the youngest. Walk on.

In the clearing beyond the castle the twelve months sit about a fire,

Warming their feet, exchanging tales.

They may do favours for you, if you are polite.

You may pick strawberries in December's frost.

Trust the wolves, but do not tell them where you are going,

The river can be crossed by the ferry. The ferryman will take you.

(The answer to his question is this:

If he hands the oar to his passenger, he will be free to leave the boat.

Only tell him this from a safe distance.)

If an eagle gives you a feather, keep it safe.

Remember: that giants sleep too soundly; that

Witches are often betrayed by their appetites;

Dragons have one soft spot, somewhere, always;

Hearts can be well hidden,

And you betray them with your tongue.

Do not be jealous of your sister:

Know that diamonds and roses

Are as uncomfortable when they tumble from one's lips as toads and frogs;

Colder, too, and sharper, and they cut.

Remember your name.

Do not lose hope—what you seek will be found.

Trust ghosts. Trust those that you have helped to help you in their turn.

Trust dreams.

Trust your heart, and trust your story.

When you come back, return the way you came.

Favours will be returned, debts be repaid.

Do not forget your manners.

Do not look back.

Ride the wise eagle (you shall not fall)

Ride the silver fish (you will not drown)

Ride the grey wolf (hold tightly to his fur).

There is a worm at the heart of the tower; that is why it will not stand.

When you reach the little house, the place your journey started,

*You will recognize it, although it will seem much smaller than you
remember.*

*Walk up the path, and through the garden gate you never saw before but
once.*

And then go home. Or make a home.

Or rest.