

Not Your Mother's Library Transcript

Episode 16: Fairy Tales & Folklore

(Brief intro music)

Leah: Hello, and welcome to Not Your Mother's Library, a readers' advisory podcast from the Oak Creek Public Library. I'm Leah.

Rachel: And I'm Rachel.

Leah: Just a head's up that our audio might sound kind of different this episode because we are recording via Zoom. It's important to maintain at least six feet of distance from one another these days. But, as we look towards reopening the library building, we want to tell you about what's happening at Oak Creek Public Library this summer. Right now, we are celebrating the Summer Reading Program. Could you tell the listeners what that is, Rachel?

Rachel: You bet. This event kicks off every year with theatrical performances, enrichment activities, and the Summer Reading Challenge to promote a love of reading while away from school. Patrons of all ages can take part in the challenge which involves reading and logging 10 hours of any books you want. This year, the Challenge is available entirely online, and readers can earn a series of cool badges by writing book reviews, completing creative activities, and reading plenty of books. Participants will receive special recognition from the library for reading at least 10 hours. You can register on our website at oakcreeklibrary.org/src to sign up. Please feel free to visit the events calendar on our website, too, in order to learn more about the upcoming showcases and activities. Many of our summer programs have gone virtual, meaning that they are held remotely via Zoom, but a few others are tentatively being held in-person with COVID-19 restrictions and new best practices in mind, of course. This year's Summer Reading theme is 'Imagine Your Story', and what better way to do that than by discussing fairy tales and folklore? To help get in the mood, let's talk about some of our favorites!

Leah: Well, when I first starting thinking about fairy tales that I could mention for this episode, I was a little stuck. I've never been one for fairy tales or princesses, but I do certainly like fantasy and folklore. That immediately brought to mind a delightful little book that I remember from my childhood. It's entitled "Mother West Wind 'Why' Stories." I have a copy of this printed in 1915, that I inherited from my grandma, which was from her childhood. It sat on my bookshelf for years, which I have cared for as a precious book from my grandma. But I haven't tried to crack it open or reread any of the stories. Until, of course, I pulled it off the shelf for this episode. I remembered the book being filled with loads of lessons about how to be a good person and, upon reading it again, I'm still of that opinion. So, perhaps they're not fairy tales...but let me talk about one of them, and that ought to explain why I'd include them with this theme of fairy and folktales. I'll just select the first one in the book, because it contains many little stories one after another. I certainly did reread all of them. You know, in preparation.

Rachel: Uh-huh.

Leah: (laughs) So, the first story in the book, is titled "Why Striped Chipmunk is Proud of His Stripes." Basically, you're introduced right away to some clever Merry Little Breezes, who are children of Old Mother West Wind and they are "great friends of Striped Chipmunk." One day, they wonder why he has

such beautiful stripes, so they shoot down to the Smiling Pool to see Grandfather Frog who is the one in the forest with absolutely all of the stories. They beg him for the story of how Striped Chipmunk got his stripes. Those Merry Little Breezes find out that those are stripes of honor! Grandfather Frog tells the story of how Striped Chipmunk's grandfather a thousand times removed was a very hard worker—just like Striped Chipmunk is today—and how he generally didn't like to meddle in his neighbor's affairs. But one day, he saw that his friend, Mr. Meadow Mouse, was in utter danger from Mr. Bob Cat. Mr. Striped Chipmunk jumps into action and baits Mr. Bob Cat into coming after him. Mr. Meadow Mouse is spared and goes merrily on his way, oblivious to his near miss. But our hero, Mr. Striped Chipmunk, is in a race for his very life. It's very exciting stuff here, folks. He does make it to a stump to hide inside, but mean ol' Mr. Bob Cat is just swiping around in that stump with his big ol' claws. Mr. Striped Chipmunk gets a couple big furrows down his back where the claws caught on his coat and it ripped.

Rachel: Oh, no.

Leah: He's feeling some kind of way about having helped after Mr. Bob Cat finally gives up and goes away. He's regretting helping, until he happens to see Mr. Meadow Mouse playing with his kiddos and realizes that he's really glad to have helped. He also is glad that the good deed has gone unnoticed by his neighbors. But it doesn't go unnoticed by Mother Nature, who gives him a brand new coat in the fall. One with beautiful white stripes, one for every tear in the old coat that was made by Mr. Bob Cat. She tells his they are stripes of honor, and his family will always have that coat because of his good deed. I'm sure we all understand that the moral of this story is to do good deeds even if no one is watching; to do them expecting no kind of reward. I just really appreciate that lesson being wrapped up in the form of animals going about their normal little animal lives. The book is chalk full of a bunch of those stories and, luckily enough the book, "Mother West Wind 'Why' Stories" has been reprinted a number of times since its original publication in 1910, written by Thornton Burgess. Unfortunately, in our system only Central has a copy of the book, and it's in their reference collection. But the stories are also available via Project Gutenberg. If you're not familiar with Project Gutenberg, books that the original copyright has expired...are digitalized and are available on that website. You can download most of them in multiple forms. It's pretty cool! The site itself says that it has 62,396 free books available. If you're looking for a classic read, and the copyright has run out on that book, chances are that you can find it on that site, which is just Gutenberg.org. Rachel, how about you? What fairy tales caught your attention for this episode?

Rachel: Well, I want to say first that as an undergrad, my very first English lit. course was all about fairy tales in fiction. And it was great, but not only because we got to analyze movies like "Pan's Labyrinth" and "The Village" and do deep dives into timeless stories by Hans Christen Anderson and the Brothers Grimm, but because we were introduced to some of the more obscure stuff...? I have with me a copy of the main text we used in that course, called "The Classic Fairy Tales" edited by Maria Tatar. It's a Norton Critical Edition—which sounds official.

Leah: (laughs) It does.

Rachel: Yeah. (laughs) It basically lays out major stories like "Little Red Riding Hood" and "Cinderella" as written by different authors, because it turns out that each tale has a few tellers a piece, all from different countries and cultures and time periods. For example, the famous story "Beauty and the Beast" about a beautiful girl imprisoned by—and then falling in love with—a monster-turned-prince is only one version. There is another called "Tiger's Bride," written by Angela Carter. It came out in 1979,

about 240 years after the original French version. So, in the original that most people already know, the beautiful girl's name is Belle, of course, and her father steals a rose from the Beast's palace. To his credit, he didn't really know that the garden where he got the rose from belonged to anybody. Plus, you know, it's a flower. Those tend to be free, out in nature. (laughs) Anyway, the Beast flips out and demands that the father give him one of his daughters as recompense, which seems really intense to me.

Leah: Yeah, I mean...checks out.

Rachel: (laughs) Sure. The father agrees to this condition, after much heartache and woe, and Belle is so kind and lovely that she just...sort of...goes along with it. In "Tiger's Bride," the girl's father is a gambler who keeps losing to the Beast at a game of cards. When he loses for the umpteenth time, he bets his own daughter and ends up losing her, too. She then has to go and live with the Beast just like in the first story. Only this girl ain't havin' it.

Leah: I like here.

Rachel: Yeah, same. She's given a bouquet of white roses as a gift from the Beast, and while her dad's busy feeling sorry for himself he asks her to forgive him by giving him one of the roses. She pricks her finger on a thorn so that when she hands him the flower it's smeared with her blood. And a quick aside here: fairy tales, no matter when they originate, are chock full of symbolism. You can probably determine what a white rose smeared with an innocent girl's blood is supposed to symbolize.

Leah: Mhm.

Rachel: Also, plenty of these tales—the original versions, anyway—are quite sexual. "Tiger's Bride" is, too, but I'll keep it PG for the sake of this podcast. (laughs) Your welcome.

Leah: Probably good.

Rachel: Yeah. So, the girl goes to live with the Beast, and she's pretty unhappy about it. He tells her that he only wants to see her virgin body, then he will let her go and give her father back his fortune. She's galled by this request—understandably so, I think. Still, after a while she starts to feel like she has more in common with the Beast than with other people, because all her life mankind has objectified her and made her seem less than human. Her own father treated her as though she were a possession, after all. So, long story short, she eventually goes to the Beast and accepts him for what he is. Turns out, his true form is that of a tiger, hence the name of the story, and he's so happy that he starts licking...her. Again, fairy tales are something else. (laughs) As he licks her with his rough tiger tongue, he starts to lick away her skin, revealing a beautiful pelt underneath. It's as though she were a beast in her own right. And I feel like this one could be interpreted in a variety of ways. It's considered a feminist work, majorly because the girl is seen as and taught to be a lamb by societal standards but, really, she has been a tiger her entire life and only at the end does she 'accept the beast', as it were. So, instead of it being 'Beauty and the Beast' it's more 'Beauty who is also a Beast'. You can analyze the story for yourselves, if interested, but for now let's move onto another one of your fairy tales, Leah.

Leah: The next ones I'd like to talk about are some of my favorites and really hold a place in my heart. I loved them so, so, so much as a kiddo. I still find a lot of joy in them as an adult, too. The author and the illustrator of these has quite a few children's books that she's put out, but two of them are my favorites.

I'm talking about the beloved Jan Brett. Her illustration style is just so captivating and engaging, and I don't mind admitting that when I have kiddos I'll definitely be stocking up on all of her titles to read to that future kid.

Rachel: I read a bunch of those when I was a kid, too. They are fantastic.

Leah: Yeah! Now, as a kiddo, I was read and then continued to read myself her titles "The Mitten"—which is probably one of her most famous books—and "Trouble with Trolls." Perhaps lesser known, but I really appreciated the story of that one. Basically, a young girl sets off on an adventure, hiking a mountain with her dog. She has to hike up one side, but then plans to ski down the other side to reach her cousin's house. But along the way she encounters trolls who want her dog! She has to bargain with them, and is soon running out of items to trade. When she encounters the trolls for the last time she has her cleverest moment yet! If listeners have caught almost any of my mini-episodes of the podcast, it's probably not a surprise that I like hiking and adventures. So, this book really spoke to that part of me when I was younger, too. And in a very simplified way, I saw myself in the main character. You see, I too had a beloved dog, and my family would go cross-country skiing. So, obviously, I could stumble across trolls and have trouble of my very own at any point!

Rachel: (laughs)

Leah: I'd read the book to keep fresh on all those important pointers. The other book of hers that I love, "The Mitten", features...well, a mitten. A little boy loses his mitten just for a little bit, and all sorts of animals want to move into it. It's just such a fantastical story! At first, the animals are small ones that can sort of kind of fit, but the sizes of the animals quickly increase. As someone who crochets, it's boggles my mind that a mitten might stretch enough to hold all those animals. And yes, I know it's not a nonfiction story. The book features more of Jan Brett's unique illustration style, and her attention to small, little details. For instance, in one panel you might see the main storyline happening, but you also see the boy looking for his mitten. That part is smaller and off to the side. but gosh, all that detail really does get the imagination going. Which, I suppose, makes it a really perfect addition to this episode where we want to encourage everyone to imagine their own stories and participate in Summer Reading. Rachel, what's the next tale you'd like to tell?

Rachel: Well, the first one I talked about came out in '79—if you remember—and this next one came out in '83, so I guess I'm all about more contemporary fairy tales. It's "Bluebeard's Egg," written by Margaret Atwood. Like "Tiger's Bride," it is also based on a fable of French origin well over 200 years old, this one titled "Bluebeard." The titular character in that story is a rich noble who keeps marrying women that go missing one after the other.

Leah: Weird.

Rachel: Yeah! It's not suspicious.

Leah: (laughs)

Rachel: He finds a new, young bride and brings her with him to live in his manor. One day, he sets out to take a trip, leaving his wife behind and giving her a key that will open every door inside their home. He forbids her from unlocking and opening one door in the basement, which of course she does pretty much the moment he leaves.

Leah: Yeah, that's what I would do.

Rachel: Uh, absolutely the same! (laughs) The mysterious room's floor is coated in blood: the blood of his previous wives who are all hanging on hooks on the walls. It's really freaky.

Leah: Oh, no.

Rachel: Yeah—super dark. She freaks out and drops the key, staining it with blood. And, much like Lady MacBeth, she cannot get the stains out no matter how hard she tries. Upon his return, Bluebeard sees the bloodied key and instantly understands what his bride has done. I won't spoil the ending, and depending on which version you read there may or mightn't be a happily ever after. I have to mention that, in some versions of this story, Bluebeard gives his wife more than just a key: he gives her an egg and asks her to carry it with her wherever she goes. Which, again, that's not weird!

Leah: Mhm. (laughs)

Rachel: When she discovers the horrible room of doom 'n' gloom, it's the egg that she drops, and it either breaks or gets covered in blood because it's a magical egg that can't break—whatever. Either way, she's boned. That's where Atwood got the name for her story. It is set in the modern world, and the lead character, Sally, is also having marital problems. Although, I would argue that hers are not quite as dire. She's basically just feeling unfulfilled in her marriage with her husband, Ed, revealing that he doesn't pay enough attention to her and that she wishes she knew what went on in that head of his, because he's certainly not sharing things with her. She's looking for more romance in their relationship, wanting it to be quote-unquote “like a fairy tale” where she is the princess. But Ed, instead of being her charming prince, is currently more like the force lurking in the background of her personal fable. Cut to the end where Sally walks in on Ed cheating on her with her best friend, and she starts to question everything that she thought she knew about the situation. This one reads a lot more like a present-day story, from the settings to the characters and the situation they're in. Atwood highlights something we only tend to get a glimpse of in older tales: unreliable narrators and multiple points of view. If we are being told a story by a woman who tells us that she's feeling unloved, that her husband isn't putting in the effort to try and communicate with her, we're going to assume based on the few things that we're actually privy to that we should be on her side and hope that she can solve the problem. Sally becomes the sole voice in the story and, because we only see things from her perspective, she is the protagonist almost by default. But, turns out, she was blind to quite a lot of things herself, namely who she thought Ed was as a person. Even if there are things going on that Sally does see, or at least suspect, she isn't conveying them to the reader. When it then comes out that Ed is cheating on her, it isn't just a betrayal, it's almost a completely separate narrative. Atwood is a pretty brilliant writer, and she forces us to question Sally's honesty, both with herself and with those to whom she is narrating. I think, perhaps, some of “Bluebeard's Egg” went far over my head, so it will read it again because I really want to appreciate it more fully. But yeah, I recommend giving it a try. But with that we have reached the end of our episode. Make sure that you check the show notes for information on the Summer Reading Challenge. I will remind you, dear listeners, that you can subscribe and rate the podcast if you like what you hear. Reach us through Oak Creek Public Library's website or Facebook page. Just use the #notyourmotherslibrary. We will be back next month for another episode. Things are busy with Summer Reading and the reopening process, so we have not decided on a theme as of yet, but you can stay tuned. Until next time, happy reading. Bye!

(Brief outro music)