Kate Bernheimer
In Conversation with Bret Nye

Kate Bernheimer has been called "one of the living masters of the fairy tale" (Tin House). She is the author of a novel trilogy and the story collections Horse, Flower, Bird *and* How a Mother Weaned Her Girl from Fairy Tales*, and the editor of four anthologies, including the World Fantasy Award winning and bestselling* My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me: Forty New Fairy Tales *and* xo Orpheus: 50 New Myths. *She is associate professor of English at the University of Arizona in Tucson, where she teaches fairy tales and creative writing.*

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NDR: *If it's not too irritating, I'd like to start with the obvious question: why is it that you keep coming back to fairy tales? More specifically, what is it about the form/genre that affords you an infinite cache of material to work with, cull from? And how is it that you keep coming back to that font with inspiration and an apparently endless reservoir of language?*

KB: Why fairy tales? This is a *very good* question. I often ask people a similar question: "why trees?" one asks the dendrologist. "Why snakes? the herpetologist. Why fairy tales? Books. It's all about thinking in books. I fell

in love with reading through fairy tales. They taught me how to think and to daydream. Their grammar, their ethics, and their aesthetics spoke to me from a very young age, and I've never stopped learning from fairy tales. I was lucky to have experienced what I took for a moment of intellectual and artistic clarity in my early twenties when I stumbled upon fairy-tale scholarship in a library—entirely by chance—and I got an idea about contemporary fiction and art as "post-Grimm." It helped me finish my first novel, part of a trilogy based on fairy tales.

At that time I decided (I remember the night I decided this) to follow the breadcrumbs of fairy tales wherever they would take me for my whole life! I really decided that, in a hotel in Seattle. I wrote it down on the free hotel notepad. It definitely didn't hurt that fairy-tale scholars were among the most welcoming humans I had ever met at that age—they urged me to write about fairy-tale aesthetics. This was astonishing to me because a lot of the literary people I had encountered until then told me, basically, "You've got to get away from this fairy-tale thing in your fiction." I can only do what I do because of translators, folklorists, mythologists, fairy-tale scholars, editors (of contemporary literature in diverse forms around the globe).

But why fairy tales? I can't remember where but I read that Claude Monet once said something along the lines of, "I perhaps owe my life as a painter to flowers." I don't know where he said that, or if these are his exact words. Not to put myself in the artistic company of Monet, but I suppose I owe my life as an author *to* fairy tales. I owe my life as a reader—a person able to think and to daydream in books—to fairy tales.

But why? Like Claude Monet's flowers, fairy tales are wild and they have composition. They are perennial, they can be cultivated. We can represent them, but we cannot *be* them or be inside them except in our minds. They can be hybridized, cloned, altered, buried, transplanted, devoured, and very easily damaged. I know I have a deep affinity for their troubling yet beautiful ways. It is more than that though. They help me think about art and emotion, help me try to be better at that.

And of course it helps with fairy tales that there are millions and millions as-yet untranslated; there is always a fairy tale I never have heard of to read. Fairy tales are the ultimate all-you-can eat banquet of story.

NDR: *In your introductory remarks to* The Complete Tales of Merry Gold *it states, "The author wishes to acknowledge the German, Russian, and Yiddish fairy tales of her cultural heritage, on which portions of this novel are based." Do you feel that fairy tales are part of your heritage in very specific ways? Were they a major part of your upbringing, and did this have anything to do with*

your taking this form as your calling, as a writer and scholar? When did you begin identifying yourself (if you in fact do) as a modern-day progenitor of this ancient, somewhat reduced form?

KB: A progenitor! No one has ever called me that. I don't think I ever identified myself as anything but a fan of fairy tales who tries to write them and has a hunger to entice other authors to write them (and so I publish them, too). That being said, around ten years ago or so I started to be called an ambassador, a protector, a guardian, a spokesperson, an expert, a scholar—and my colleague and friend Ander Monson (a great writer) once referred to me as the "Spice Girl of fairy tales, Fairy Spice" when introducing me to a class. I grew up loving fairy tales. They were mixed up for me as a child with Old Testament stories, library books, Disney movies, Holocaust films, family Holocaust history, which we kids only heard by eavesdropping, 1970s news broadcasts, punk music—something about fairy tales made sense to me in a deranged world I did not understand.

The fairy tales that ignited my imagination as a child had, I learned as an adult reader, a very special kind of narrative grammar. It was through the books of Max Luthi, a Swiss scholar of fairy-tale techniques, that I began to apply fairy-tale thinking to contemporary American (and eventually international) fiction and to formulate my theory of post-Grimm fairy-tale fiction. But my idea to commit myself to fairy tales was kind of simple—a lot of my friends who are in bands say that they realized at some point, pretty young, that they could be in a band even though they were messed up—that if you got a few friends together and had a few instruments, you could be in a band. Whether the band was going to be liked or disliked by anyone else wasn't the point—it was a way they could feel at home in the world.

I liked writing fairy tales: the first story I ever "published" (in a magazine my friend and I wrote, edited, and published from third to fifth grade) was a serialized fairy tale based on my Latvian great-grandmother's elopement and immigration. My story is pretty vague—it features roses, hidden envelopes, ladders, and ships. The characters are totally flat, but not in a good way. It's early autofiction. What's not in my story is the fact that all of my great-grandmother's relatives whom she left behind in Latvia, about 32 people ranging from a few months old to eighty years, were murdered by their neighbors in 1941 when the news about the Germans crossing the Latvian border reached their small town. I wasn't drawn to fairy tales as princess-gets-married stories, but to their composition: where does the light go? Where does the shadow go? The more I learned about my family history as I got older, the more it made sense to me that I was drawn to fairy tales,

because I was told them all my life.

NDR: *I'd also consider you an ambassador for the fairy tale as a contemporary, literary form. I'm speaking not only about your novels and stories but also your fairy tale criticism you mentioned, as well as the numerous lectures you've given and the classes you've taught that were focused on the genre. In your essay "Fairy Tale is Form, Form is Fairy Tale," you say, "That many writers do celebrate the dark, fantastic cosmos of fairy tales is wonderful, but I would also like to see an increased recognition of their artistic dexterity." Can you elaborate for us on the importance of "artistic dexterity" in the writing/rewriting of fairy tales?*

KB: One of my best friends in high school and college (and after), the late poet Sarah Hannah, wrote her PhD dissertation in part on the poetry of Sylvia Plath. We had heated conversations in defense of Plath's form—so often, her body of work is looked at in a transferential way, for emotional and autobiographical content. I have, to be frank, no problem with that on one level; she expresses many unpopular ideas that are important to express, and she's a receptacle for lots of fear and even hatred that society has for women who dare to say no. But as Sarah so brilliantly writes about in her dissertation, Plath was a surgical stylist—working and reworking her poems, using scansion, using etymology, churning her ideas and imaginings through her poetics. That is to say, in Plath's best work she is *exercising her mind* (thinking about her ideas and emotions through the medium of language and form)—not, when writing well, merely *exorcising her demons*. Fairy tales aren't these free-floating stories: they are written by someone, somewhere, at some time, who is thinking.

The particular moment I was speaking to in "Fairy Tale is Form, Form is Fairy Tale" (an essay I wrote around eight years ago, and to which I've added pages and pages of unpublished material as my thinking has evolved) was a time when writers associated with "fabulism" were being praised as special because of their dark, weird, fantastic fiction (as opposed to the less-dark, less-weird fiction, I guess). By celebrating mainly the weird, dark turns of fairy tales only, this praise neatly glossed over the centuries old international tradition on hand which is a tradition interested in social justice, philosophy, environment, language, history—the whole of experience. Neatly glossing over the diversity of a tradition by praising its practitioners as acceptable for just one element of the tradition is always a sign of diminishment. Basically, people were being encouraged to appreciate fairy tales because they're weird, dark, and twisted—there were "special issues" of literary journals dedicated to "weird" stories, etc. Sure, they *are* weird and dark,

but so are eighty percent of the stories you'll read in any daily newspaper. In fact, the Grimms included "sensationalistic" stories in their early editions of *Kinder und Hausmarchen*—and they perfected a particular style that influenced profoundly, in my argument, hundreds of years of writers around the globe, and very notably many prominent realist American authors.

Basically, when I wrote that essay, too much attention in mainstream literary circles was on the "dark" aspects of fairy tales, and hardly any attention was paid to their techniques. I decided to take on the job of studying their aesthetic influence on writers and artists. No one was doing that, and it frustrated me. I wasn't interested in taking credit for being weird—I wanted to understand the art form that had so profoundly influenced me as an author, and I wanted to share my ideas, as a way to generate new thinking and artwork.

In short, fairy tales are artworks. In literature, fairy tales are aestheticized stories that many authors apply their subjectivity and discipline to. Old fairy tales have deeply influenced newer fairy tales—they contain very specific techniques that diverge from the standard menu of "mainstream realism" (though mainstream realism works exclusively with fairy-tale techniques). Fairy tales change from artist to artist, movement to movement, political time to political time, etc.

NDR: *Do you think that this genre needs saving, or more recognition amongst those who call themselves "literary"?*

KB: Absolutely, but I think that the minoritarian status of fairy tales is what will "save" fairy tales. When banished from "serious" literary study around the time English departments were founded, fairy tales found safe haven in the nursery, among educators, and in children's literature. Fairy tales never disappeared from so-called adult literature, but they put on a disguise. Survival is one of their great themes, and also their greatest performance.

I do think that a lot of the work I set out to do has taken shape—we see more and more books that foreground the influence of fairy tales being published and read. I'm sent a few fairy-tale novels or story collections a week from publishers—mainstream publishers of literary fiction. When I founded *Fairy Tale Review*, despite the fact that many great books were clearly based on fairy tales, editors weren't interested in that. That's why I started the journal. That's changed now. Yet fairy-tale fiction is still marginalized, now as "trend." There is something about fairy tales that has a big "Kick Me" sign on their back. That is definitely something that has ignited me to defend them, to work in resistance to status quo ideas about what "serious"

fiction is, and can be.

NDR: *Might you say, then, that fairy tales are somewhat marginalized, at least in this country's literature scene, because of their reversal of some of the prevailing norms of mainstream American literature, which I'd personally characterize as having been dominated by psychological realism for years and years? For me, this prevailing, normalized literature includes conventions like hyper-developed characters (sometimes to the point that they become less "real" even than the flat characters we have in fairy tales), obsessively logical plotting and narrative structures, and, in some cases, the notion that extended first-person narration is the best way into a character's head? Please feel free to take issue with any or all of my wide-scale reduction of mainstream American fiction.*

KB: I like what you say. Yes. I take issue with none of it.

NDR: *For me, one of the most unique aesthetic bits about your fairy tales, and your writing in general, is how incredibly poetic your language is, the rolling rhythm of your lines, and how much your stories are interested in conjuring unique, striking, truly singular images. Perhaps I'm thinking specifically about your novel trilogy,* The Complete Tales of Ketzia, Merry, *and* Lucy Gold. *At the risk of sounding subtractive, this is not how I'd describe the language of the classic fairy tale, which typically read much more simply in terms of their language, if not their imagery. How much of your style is a conscious amplification of traditional fairy tale aesthetics? Or is this phenomenon just a natural aspect of your writing voice? In other words, are you trying to mutate the often-straightforward language of the traditional fairy tale? If so (or if not), what reasoning do you have for doing so (or not doing so)?*

KB: The sentence structure I use is emblematic of the translations of the fairy tales I worked from for the novels—my friend, the noise musician and poetry scholar John Melillo once said he liked how I was bringing back the "good old S.V.O." (subject-verb-object). My style involves a lot of simple construction. A lot of the "source tales" in the novel trilogy are little known fairy tales, some of them a type referred to as "nonsense tales," or "riddle tales," and often the construction from sentence to sentence translates directly from the old tale into the novel.

That said, the novels are novels, not individual stories, and each novel repeats and mutates the one that preceded it—the girls are having trouble with history, with "definitive" versions of *what happened*—with trauma. As part of their existential journey the trilogy employs historical fairy-tale

techniques—that is, techniques of their history across disciplines, including translation, ethnography, transcription, repetition, repression, documentation, authentication, censorship, excision, illustration, alteration, annotation, and erasure. But I did these things as a novelist—a daydreamer—who is also fascinated by form, style, etc.

As I said earlier, I was enlightened through Max Luthi on the highly specific aesthetics I admired in old fairy tales—techniques such as flatness, abstraction, everyday magic, and intuitive logic. As I studied the techniques of fairy tales in old collections—on display in stories from Japan, Egypt, Korea, Germany, France, Africa, Ireland, to name just a few places—I realized that the techniques described by Luthi in *Fairy Tale as Art Form* could be transformed to create a new template for contemporary literary fairy tales. Working from this idea, I began to perform same-language translations of old fairy tales into a new form with the new composition, the new aesthetic I continue to explore today in my novels and stories. My insight—which respectfully diverges from other authors closely associated with modern fairy tales—is to focus exclusively on the aesthetic variables of fairy tales as identified by Luthi, to highlight these elements and bring them into high relief.

So yes, a "conscious amplification" for sure, mainly focusing on abstraction on the sentence and sensation levels, in those novels. As for mutation, I don't really "try" to mutate, it's just what art does. I try to make sense and be accurate, but it is all imitation, and the way we imitate things will inevitably mutate from a primary object. I try to "cover" fairy tales the way a rock band will cover a beloved rock song—but it will come out a little bit different. Radiohead covering Joy Division isn't Joy Division. Andy Warhol's Campbell soup can isn't a Campbell soup can.

NDR: *Can you say something about the way you think about allegory in fairy tales? Every story's different, of course, but I think that many people's first reading of a fairy tale, at least those who are so inclined to think about the critical questions we're raising here, involves regarding the narrative elements of that fairy tale as allegory, a collection of symbols meant to import a moral or ethical subtext. The strange worlds we find in fairy tales, with their alternative logic and odd, hybrid characters, are often read as being metaphorical stand-ins for some real-world counterpart, I think. Does a fairy tale need to work as allegory, and should it? Is there a more complicated and productive way to read fairy tales?*

KB: I don't think there is any "more complicated and productive" way to read fairy tales than a way that makes sense to you, to any reader. You could read lots of great scholarship on allegory in fairy tales if it speaks to you, for

example—Jungian fairy-tale scholarship would be a good place to start.

I think we are trained to read fairy tales as allegories when we are told they are cautionary stories; thus, people think that when they read "Little Red Riding Hood" they must take a lesson from it, something like *don't talk to wolves*, or *do as your mother tells you.* Some versions of that story type may be read as cautionary tales.

But these are not stories that lend themselves to singular interpretations. If you look at "The Story of Grandmother," which is widely considered one of the first literary versions of that tale, the little girl does a striptease for the wolf—takes off all her clothes and gets into bed with him. Only when he threatens to eat her does the girl figure that she'd better save herself fast, and she does so by asking to go pee in the woods. Is that an allegorical story? It's a beautiful story that takes place in the woods, a natural story, a story with danger, poetry, adventure and wit—but I'm not sure what it is an *allegory* for. Part of the delight of fairy-tale literature is that you can't pin it down.

That said, allegorical readings are fantastic and fun: they're interpretations, thinking and feeling in action—associations from images to history, art to experience. They are vital to human empathy.

NDR: *I've seen your name cited in a number of articles online about literary collaboration. In the long historical debate about literature and authorship, it seems to me that a collaborative effort is often looked at as something radically different from an individually authored book, and there are not a great many examples of collaborative literature that I can personally bring to mind at the moment (the Strugatsky brothers, Deleuze and Guattari). I know there are many more that I'm blanking on now, but collaborative efforts certainly aren't as prevalent in the way we* teach *literature, whether in the examples we use or in the concept of collaboration itself. I imagine you feel very different about this, about the general diminishment that seems to haunt collaborative literature. What are you thoughts, as a consistent collaborator with both visual artists and other writers?*

KB: We put such a premium in American culture on the individual (whether author, actor, or musician) as a great artist, one-of-a-kind, a genius, the real thing, a wunderkind, etc. But all art is collaboration. It is a conversation. I find it disheartening when authors don't talk about other artists who have also grappled with the artistic things they are trying to do. But it's risky to make your life about collaboration—case in point, editorship. Huge collaboration. Editorship is an overlooked art form—it's the art of conversation. The seminal editor Ursula Nordstrom's letters' *Dear Genius* are testa-

ment to this (she's the person who discovered Maurice Sendak and urged him to write his own books).

Collaboration comes naturally to me. Edited, translated fairy-tale books are always collaborations. One of the first books I ever fell in love with was by The Brothers Grimm, after all. Brothers! It sounds like a fairy tale. I collaborate closely with my own brother on a multi-year (ongoing) architectural fairy-tale project for the international magazine called *Places*, along with structural engineers, designers, architects, and musicians. I couldn't imagine doing my work without other artists. I would gladly live away from humans, in the deep woods, but I could not imagine a world without conversations with my friends who are artists, and by that I mean without their pictures, their songs, their books. And all those I will never meet—I have plenty of students who say a book saved their life. If that isn't collaboration, I don't know what is!

I like your question. I think there is a great tradition of collaboration alive in the world. The Brothers Quay. Eva and Adele. The Coen Brothers. The Rodarte sisters. And dance—it relies on collaboration—contemporary dancers interpreting Martha Graham's choreography today, that's a collaboration.

And what about literary families, historical literary circles—we should talk more about this. Thanks for this question. We're collaborating here.

NDR: *I'm interested in the collaboration you've done with your brother that you've just mentioned, your brother Andrew who's an architect and professor in New York City. Can you tell me about that "Fairy-Tale Architecture" series you've been involved with for* Places*, which has been described as an interdisciplinary journal for scholarly work on architecture and urbanism? How is it that fairy tales and architecture, two seemingly disparate forms of expression, work together?*

KB: I'm going to quote my brother, Andrew Bernheimer, who is a professor of architecture at Parsons/The New School, and the principal of Bernheimer Architecture in Brooklyn. He says, "I hope that the series challenges architects to contemplate the spaces of stories—not just fairy tales. And pursuing this series has also challenged me to think about the making of drawings, the methods by which we represent design. This is the case for both conceptual projects as well as 'real' projects for clients. We tell stories with our drawings, just as authors tell stories with their words. We have used this series to catalyze thought about how stories, their spaces, and our drawings act as narrative tools."

It is through the language and images that I select tales for participating architects. I'm looking for tales with structural elements that I think will inspire designs. These could be phrases, images, landscapes, and so forth. It seems, when I look back at the many installments that have come out of this project, that the fairy tales I choose often have a sad quality to them. But then there are other stories I've chosen, such as Borges's "The Library of Babel," which is a highly intellectual, philosophical, architectural story. I try to vary the type as much as possible, first studying the participating architect's body of work (and they're so accomplished that this is often intimidating). It's great fun. I get to interview the architects after their designs are produced and their answers are amazingly intellectual, concrete, inspiring.

NDR: *Maybe it's alright if we end with another really obvious question, since we started with one: can you tell us about a few of the writers whom you think are doing good work in the effort to bring fairy tales back to the forefront of literary output?*

KB: My graduate student, Joel Hans, who is current managing editor of *Fairy Tale Review*, is doing heroic work with the journal and with contributing authors (and a team of undergraduate interns) to do the Good Work. Since *Fairy Tale Review* was founded, I've heard about a few journals inspired by our mission statement—the editors reach out about this, thanking the journal for paving the way, and that's lovely. I admire Jack Zipes's Oddly Modern Fairy Tales book series (he is the series editor, and a brilliant scholar) with Princeton University Press. I'm in talks to edit a series of contemporary fairy-tale novels with a press, too—if I can find time to do it, I will.

Of course, Maria Tatar is a fantastic icon in fairy-tale studies, and Marina Warner is a phenomenal novelist and critic whose work revolves around myth and fairy tales. There are a lot of fabulist writers who aren't afraid to say they love fairy tales. Anyone who admits characters facing terrible problems sometimes need to find radical solutions, and also wish for some luck, is doing the good work. I think it's very real to say that, these days, as it was once upon a time ago…