

Workers' Tales – Socialist Fairy Tales, Fables and Allegories from Great Britain, edited by Michael Rosen.

This edited collection offers a tri-partite selection of tales that use traditional stories or traditional story forms; allegorical fairy tales and fables; and, moral tales. All of which were originally published in various British periodicals between 1884 and 1914. It also includes fairy tale illustrations and political images of the period, which add some further interest but are not critically examined in any way. The tales or socialist stories themselves are presented unaffectedly yet clearly, allowing the reader to engage in a period and cultural form that had a defined political intent: to make socialism attractive and intelligible to children. It is this very intention and the possibility for it to be critiqued, that this publication enables. The richness of metaphor in the tales, the shared tropes of the socialist movement, and the explicit - or as Rosen describes it – emblematic and symbolic language is exposed to reveal clear and moving links between art, education and politics. It is within the copulae of these ideas that the stories of resistance still echo in our time, and why this publication is an unnervingly apposite read given the current political climate.

Rosen also provides thorough and illuminating concluding sections, which provide explicative notes on aspects of the tales; citations for the tales; alphabetically listed, biographical information on the authors; and contextual information on the journals that first featured the tales.

Before chronologically presenting these tales (some written by luminaries such as William Morris) the work contextualises their original manifestation and historical usage by way of a detailed and persuasively written introduction. Persuasive that is, in regards to the contemporary potential of the works. As Rosen points out in his concluding paragraph, displaying or exposing societal structures and processes through story allows the listener or reader to see how these structures and processes 'make the majority of people's lives such a struggle' (p.18).

The introduction is an innovative means of re-contextualising the tales for the politics of our age, it offers them as a counterculture, an alternative perhaps to what might be described as a media-driven, late-capitalist society that otherwise imbibes political standpoints from seemingly and increasingly extreme or polarised perspectives. The book as a whole then while indubitably being a fascinating and thorough piece of research in itself could also be used pedagogically in the classroom. The value would be to open up debate; to present alternative perspectives; to challenge the means by which politics is communicated to young people as a static given.

There is, of course, a situation in which the book might have less or become of doubtful value or success. This would be if it were read entirely as an ad hominem argument for a political ideology. Although it should be stressed it does not read as if it were written with this intention, to explain, I would call upon the reasons for which folklorist Herman Bausinger wished to ally folkloristics more with sociology rather than any other discipline. Writing just after the growth of nationalism and fascism of the second world war, Bausinger recognised that a balance was desperately needed that disconnected folklore and political nationalism; that they had had a long and at times unfortunate relationship (1961). The manipulation of cultural tradition and folklore into differing political ideologies through the ages had in his view caused tragedy after tragedy. In short, when folkloric items are misrepresented as the 'spirit of the nation', often through a humanistic yet romantic lens, they can be used in a nefarious manner, irrespective of the leaning of the political machine willing the connection.

Nonetheless, the presentation of the works in this book successfully avoid this pitfall, due to the careful rendering of the political in a historical way. Ambiguously though, the tales are not entirely historicised, in that they are highlighted as relevant still today. As such, they could be used or positioned in a methopedagogic sense or within a framework of critical pedagogy to consider, for example, the governmental mandate for primary schools in the education system of the United Kingdom to teach 'British Values'. As stimuli for debate on this topic alone, the tales have great worth.

All in all, this publication is a timely yet time-honoured evocation of the enduring issues of inequality, injustice and exploitation.

References

Bausinger, Hermann. "*Folkskultur in der technischen Welt*". Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer GmbH. 1961

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