

Fifteen Russian Fairy Tales and What They Mean to Me

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These posts were written for *The House with Chicken Legs* Blog Tour, April 2018, by
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1. Vasilisa the Priest's Daughter (on challenging stereotypes)

'In a certain land, in a certain kingdom...'

In this Russian fairy tale, collected and published by Alexander Afanasyev in 1855, Vasily the Priest has a daughter named Vasilisa Vasilyevna.

Vasilisa wears men's clothing, rides horseback, is a good shot with a rifle and does everything in a *'quite unmaidenly way'* so that most people think she is a man and call her Vasily Vasilyevich (a male version of her name) ...

'... all the more so because Vasilisa Vasilyevna was very fond of vodka, and this, as is well known, is entirely unbecoming to a maiden.'

One day King Barkhat meets Vasilisa while out hunting, and thinks she is a young man. But one of his servants tells him Vasilisa is the priest's daughter. The King does not know what to believe, so he invites Vasilisa/Vasily to dinner, then asks a *'back-yard witch'* how he can find out the truth.

The witch tells the King to hang an embroidery frame on one side of the room, and a gun on the other, and that a girl would notice the frame first, and a boy the gun. But when Vasilisa comes to the palace, she only berates the King for having *'womanish fiddle-faddle'* in his chambers.

So, the King asks the witch for another test, and invites Vasilisa/Vasily to dinner again. The witch tells the King to cook kasha (porridge) with pearls in and explains a girl would put the pearls in a pile, and a boy would drop them under the table. But when Vasilisa comes to the palace, she only berates the King for having *'womanish fiddle-faddle'* in his food.

Once more, the King asks the witch's advice, and invites Vasilisa/Vasily to another dinner. The witch tells the King to suggest a bath after dinner, as a boy would visit the bathhouse with the King, but a girl would refuse.

Vasilisa agrees to go for a bath, but is in and out before the King has changed, and returns home leaving only a note for the King:

*“Ah, King Barkhat, raven that you are, you could not surprise the falcon in the garden!
For I am not Vasily Vasilyevich, but Vasilisa Vasilyevna.”*

‘And so King Barkhat got nothing for all his trouble; for Vasilisa Vasilyevna was a clever girl, and very pretty too!’

I find the narrator’s last comment about how pretty Vasilisa is entirely irrelevant; although when I’m in an optimistic mood I try to interpret that the narrator has recognised there are diverse types of beauty beyond stereotypical ones. That line aside, I love this tale!

Vasilisa the Priest’s Daughter was one of the first stories I heard that broke fairy tale stereotypes. Vasilisa was a young girl, but she was strong and independent; she was happy with who she was, and with being different from other *‘maidens’*; she wasn’t in need of rescue, and when she met the King she didn’t swoon or fall into his arms or marry him - she resisted his attempts to define her and rode off into the sunset unchanged from who she was at the start of the story. Vasilisa was complete and content on her own. It was such a refreshing tale to hear.

Russian fairy tales, like many other groups of fairy tales, are rife with stereotypes; the ugly, evil, old woman; the handsome brave young hero; the beautiful princess, who is often no more than a prize for the young hero; and the abused peasant girl who may, if she is hardworking and resourceful, rise to the giddy heights of becoming the wife of a tsar.

Even as a young child, these stereotypes felt deeply wrong. I knew real life was different. Elderly ladies were not, in my experience, ugly or evil. Young boys were not always brave heroes with a desire to prove their strength in battle and marry princesses. And young girls were certainly more than prizes for boys; and aspired to much greater things than becoming solely the wives of royals.

Tales such as *Vasilisa the Priest's Daughter* offered a tantalising glimpse of something different. They felt real and true, and I longed for more of them. Stories that broke stereotypes seemed to be few and far between, but in the rare and wonderful moments I heard them I knew they touched on an important truth: that stereotypes need to be challenged.

Thankfully, as I have grown older, I have discovered many more wonderful fairy tales from all over the world that break stereotypes.

I believe it is hugely important readers are given the opportunity to discover and share these tales, as they represent a far more accurate view of the world and give a much wider range of individuals an opportunity to see themselves in a story. And when we do come across stereotypes in stories, I think we all have a responsibility to discuss and challenge them.

Vasilisa the Priest's Daughter can be found in one of my favourite adult fairy tale collections, alongside plenty of other tales that break stereotypes: *Angela Carter's Book of Fairy Tales*, written by Angela Carter, published by Virago.

This blog post was originally published on *Miss Cleveland is Reading*

2. The Cat Who Became Head-Forester (on the dangers of a single narrative)

'If you drop Vladimir by mistake, you know he always falls on his feet ...'

In this Russian fairy tale, retold and published by Arthur Ransome in 1916, Vladimir is a tomcat who is always fighting. He has lost an ear in a fight and is *'not very pretty to look at'*. His owner decides to get rid of him, bundles him into a sack, and abandons him deep in the forest.

Vladimir tears his way out of the sack and sets off to explore the forest. He was head-cat in the village he came from and decides he shall be head of the forest too, so walks along like *'the Tsar himself'*. He finds an abandoned forester's hut and moves in. When hungry, he catches birds and mice in the forest, and when tired he sleeps in the hay loft. But he is not content, as he must catch all his own food and do all the work for himself.

One day, Vladimir meets a pretty young vixen and tells her his name is Cat Ivanovitch and that he has been sent from the far forests of Siberia to be Head-forester over all. The vixen is impressed and invites Vladimir to her earth, where she feeds him tasty game. She asks to be his wife, and spends each day catching game for her grand husband.

While hunting, the vixen meets her old friend Wolf and tells him about her new husband, the Great Cat Ivanovitch, Head-forester over all. Wolf wants to pay his respects, so the vixen tells him to leave a sheep near their earth. Next, the vixen meets Bear and tells him to leave an ox as an offering to her husband, the Great Cat Ivanovitch.

Wolf and Bear leave their offerings near the earth and decide to hide nearby, hoping to get a glimpse of the Great Cat Ivanovitch. Wolf hides amongst dead leaves beneath a bush, and Bear climbs to the top of a fir tree.

Vladimir emerges from the earth and begins eating the ox, purring as he does so. Wolf moves his head, attempting to get a better look, and the leaves around him rustle.

Vladimir stops eating and listens. Thinking the rustling is a mouse, Vladimir leaps onto Wolf's nose with claws extended.

Wolf yelps and Vladimir, startled, darts up the fir tree. Bear, at the top of tree, thinks the Great Cat Ivanovitch is attacking him and jumps down, breaking branches and bones along the way. Wolf and Bear run off, terrified and ...

'Ever since then all the wild beasts have been afraid of the cat, and the cat and the fox live merrily together, and eat fresh meat all the year round, which the other animals kill for them and leave a little way off.'

When I first heard this tale, I wasn't quite sure what to think. I started off feeling sorry for poor Vladimir, abandoned in the forest. But he lands on his feet, and by the end of the story is head of all the forest. I wondered if I was meant to admire his tenacity and resourcefulness; his ability to turn his luck around.

But how he achieves success is morally questionable. He lies to the vixen, and is lazy, making her do all the hunting. By the end of the story I felt sorry for the vixen, the wolf and the bear, who had all been lied to and tricked into hunting for Vladimir. However, I also felt they were partially responsible; for believing Vladimir without question, and for wanting to ingratiate themselves with the Great Cat Ivanovitch. I felt particularly cross with the vixen, as she offered to marry Vladimir simply because he was Head-forester, and she perpetuated his lies.

It seemed to me they might all be in the wrong; Vladimir for lying, and the others for believing him. But then again, it didn't seem fair to blame the others for simply being trusting. After all, I don't think it would be good to assume everyone we meet is lying to us. The story made me think about trust versus suspicion, and at what point it is important to do some fact checking.

Certainly, before you marry someone, or work for them, or repeat what they have told you as fact, I think it is a good idea to be sure they are being honest. The vixen, the wolf, and the bear, only ever hear Vladimir's story – that he is Head-forester – and

accept that as fact. But if they had checked his story, done a little research, listened to the thoughts and opinions of others, perhaps they wouldn't have been fooled so easily.

As I have grown older, this lesson has become only more relevant. The internet has appeared and grown to unbelievable proportions. Endless information is out there, easily accessible, yet still people are fooled by cats like Vladimir. Still people share information without fact checking, like the vixen. And still people rise to power through morally questionable actions.

Perhaps if we all sought out and listened to more than one side of every story, then cats like Vladimir (or Trump) wouldn't have so much power.

The Cat Who Became Head-Forester can be found in Old Peter's Russian Tales, written by Arthur Ransome, published by Puffin.

This blog post was originally published on *A Little But a Lot*

3. Vasilisa the Beautiful (on ambiguous villains)

'In a certain kingdom there lived a merchant ...'

In this Russian fairy tale, collected and published by Alexander Afanasyev in 1855, a merchant has one daughter, Vasilisa the Beautiful.

When she is eight-years-old Vasilisa's mother gives her a magic doll and says,

'Remember and heed my words. I am dying, and together with my maternal blessing I leave you this doll. Always keep it with you and do not show it to anyone; if you get into trouble, give the doll food, and ask its advice.'

Then Vasilisa's mother kisses her and dies. After some time, Vasilisa's father remarries – a widow with two daughters of her own. Vasilisa's stepmother and stepsisters are jealous of her beauty. They torment her and give her endless work to do. But, Vasilisa's magic doll comforts her and helps her do the work.

Then one day, the merchant leaves on business and Vasilisa's stepmother and stepsisters plot to get rid of Vasilisa. They snuff out all the candles in the house and send Vasilisa to Baba Yaga's hut to ask for a light.

Vasilisa is scared that Baba Yaga will eat her, but the magic doll says it will keep her safe. So, Vasilisa travels through the forest to Baba Yaga's hut, which is surrounded by a fence of skulls and bones.

Baba Yaga agrees to give Vasilisa a light on the condition she stays and works for her – and threatens to eat her if she does not. Then Baba Yaga makes Vasilisa serve her an enormous meal, and goes to bed, leaving Vasilisa with a seemingly impossible number of chores to do; including sorting a bushel of wheat.

Vasilisa feeds her doll a few crumbs and explains her troubles. The doll replies,

'Fear not, Vasilisa the Beautiful! Eat your supper, say your prayers, and go to sleep; the morning is wiser than the evening.'

And in the morning, all the work is done. The next day, Baba Yaga gives Vasilisa another seemingly impossible number of chores to do; including sorting poppy seeds from dust. Once again, Vasilisa's doll does the work for her.

Baba Yaga asks Vasilisa how she managed to do all this work, and Vasilisa replies, *'I am helped by the blessing of my mother.'*

'So that is what it is,' shrieks Baba Yaga. *'Get you gone, blessed daughter! I want no blessed ones in my house!'* And Baba Yaga send Vasilisa on her way – but before she leaves she gives her a skull with burning eyes from her fence, saying, *'Here is the light for your stepsisters.'*

Vasilisa returns home, and is about to throw away the skull, thinking her stepfamily will not need it anymore, but a voice from the skull says, *'Do not throw me away, take me to your stepmother.'* Inside the house, the skull stares at the stepmother and stepdaughters and burns them. They try to hide but the eyes follow them, and by morning they are burned to ashes.

The tale continues with Vasilisa moving to town, completing more difficult tasks with the help of her doll, and eventually marrying the tsar, but Baba Yaga does not feature again.

I love the Baba Yaga in this tale, as it is one of the first times I glimpsed the wise woman behind the evil old crone archetype. Baba Yaga's role in this story is ambiguous, as she could be considered a villain, or a helper.

Although Baba Yaga gives Vasilisa seemingly impossible tasks to do and threatens to eat her if she does not complete them, ultimately Baba Yaga gives Vasilisa the burning skull that frees her from her evil stepfamily – the real villains in the tale.

In *'Women Who Run With The Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype'* by Clarissa Pinkola Estés there is a thorough and fascinating analysis of this tale, which Estés believes is rich in symbolism and metaphor.

Estés writes Vasilisa is *'about the realization that most things are not as they seem'* and that *'Vasilisa is a story of handing down the blessing on women's power of intuition from mother to daughter.'*

Estés describes how Vasilisa's journey takes her from subservience to strength and independence, through facing fear and by learning from Baba Yaga, who represents the wild feminine nature.

This tale was the start of a long journey for me, which began with the realisation that Baba Yaga is not just the cannibalistic villain she is so often depicted as. She is a fascinating, complex character; a wild woman of folklore, fierce and formidable, watchful and wise. She can be a maternal benefactress or a dangerous witch and decides on a case by case basis how she will treat the visitors to her hut.

Her origins are ancient; linked to Pagan Goddesses associated with life, death, the forest and Earth itself; and the history of her portrayal reflects societies' attitudes to woman and paganism. I am still fascinated by Baba Yaga and have found no matter how much I read, there is always more to learn about her, and from her.

Vasilisa the Beautiful and Baba Yaga, written by Alexander Afanasyev, is available in a gorgeous edition with Ivan Bilibin's iconic illustrations from 1899, published by The Planet.

There is also a beautiful picture book of this tale, Vasilisa the Beautiful, written by Anthea Bell and illustrated by Anna Morgunova, published by Minedition.

This blog post was originally published on *That Boy Can Teach*

4. The Death of Koschei the Deathless (on untold stories)

'In a certain kingdom in a certain land ...'

The Death of Koschei the Deathless or *Maria Morevna* is a Russian fairy tale, collected and published by Alexander Afanasyev in 1855.

In the story, Prince Ivan's parents die, and his three sisters marry and leave the kingdom. Prince Ivan becomes lonely and sets off to visit his sisters. On the way he finds an army, slain by the warrior queen Maria Morevna.

Maria takes a liking to Ivan, marries him, and takes him to her kingdom. But after a while, Maria decides to leave Ivan at home while she goes off to make war again. Before she leaves, she tells Ivan not to look in a particular closet ...

Of course, Ivan looks in the closet, and finds Koschei the Deathless chained up. Koschei begs Ivan for a drink and Ivan gives him some water. This restores Koschei's strength and he breaks his chains, runs off, and takes Maria prisoner.

Ivan sets off to rescue Maria, visiting his three sisters along the way and leaving a piece of silver with each one. He finds Maria and attempts to take her home while Koschei is out hunting. However, Koschei catches him up and steals Maria back. This happens a second time, and a third, and on the third time Koschei cuts Ivan into tiny pieces, throws the pieces into a barrel, and casts the barrel out to sea.

The pieces of silver Ivan gave his sisters blacken, so they know something bad has happened and they send their husbands to find Ivan. They do find him, piece him back together and revive him with the water of life.

Determined to rescue Maria this time, Ivan steals a super-fast horse from Baba Yaga and whisks Maria away. But once again, Koschei catches him up. However, this time Ivan's super-horse swings a hoof and smashes Koschei's head, and Ivan finishes him off with a mace.

'Thereupon the prince gathered together a pile of wood, made a fire, burned Koschei the Deathless, and scattered his ashes to the wind.'

This story fascinates because of all the untold stories it contains.

Firstly, how did Koschei the Deathless end up chained in Maria Morevna's closet?

Considering that, at the start of story, Maria is a warrior queen capable of slaying armies, my theory is she captured and imprisoned Koschei herself. This is an untold story I would like to hear!

Secondly, why does Maria Morevna, this amazing warrior queen, turn into a damsel-in-distress half way through the story; allowing herself to be captured by Koschei and waiting at his castle – even when Koschei is out hunting - for Ivan to rescue her?

This has never felt quite right to me, and I can't help but feel something else is going on. Perhaps Maria willingly went with Koschei ... perhaps they had a history together ... perhaps she was testing Prince Ivan. Or perhaps this part of the story has been completely altered by a patriarchal storyteller. I would like to hear this part of the story told again, from Maria's point of view, and from Koschei's point of view, as I think they may provide a more realistic and balanced version of events.

And thirdly, how on earth is Koschei the Deathless killed by a blow to the head?

Koschei the Deathless is immortal, and according to other fairy tales, can only be killed by finding his death (or his soul) which is hidden far away ...

'in the sea there is an island, on that island stands an oak, under the oak a coffer is buried, in the coffer is a hare, in the hare is a duck, in the duck is an egg, and in the egg is my death.'

I have always been fascinated by the idea of Koschei hiding his soul to become immortal. It is another untold story I would love to hear. *Why did Koschei hide his soul?*

Untold stories like this are rife in fairy tales, and one of the reasons they provide endless inspiration for writers. Fairy tales beg to be told from different point of views; the hero's, the villain's, and the damsel-in-maybe-not-as-much-distress-as-all-that's. It is immensely satisfying to pick at the threads that don't feel right, and to reimagine the story until it makes more sense in your heart and mind.

And there is a lesson that carries over to real life too; about not making judgements on someone, or accepting them as a villain, without hearing their side of the story.

*There is an upper YA / adult reimagining of this tale, *Deathless*, written by Catherynne M. Valente, published by Tor.*

This blog post was originally published on *Read it Daddy*

5. The Tale of the Silver Saucer and the Transparent Apple (on injustice and resilience)

'There was once an old peasant ...'

In this Russian fairy tale, retold and published by Arthur Ransome in 1916, an old peasant has three daughters. The two eldest are always mean to the youngest, calling her 'Little Stupid' and making her do all the work.

One day, the father goes to a fair and asks his daughters what they would like him to bring back. The eldest daughters ask for jewels and gowns, but the youngest asks for nothing – until, when pressed, she asks for a silver saucer and a transparent apple.

When the father returns with the gifts, the two eldest daughters admire themselves in a mirror, whilst the youngest sits by the stove and spins the transparent apple in the saucer.

'Round and round the apple spun in the saucer, faster and faster, till you couldn't see the apple at all, nothing but a mist like a little whirlpool in the silver saucer.'

The youngest daughter spins the apple and asks to see the world: the Tsar on his throne, the rivers and ships and great towns far away. Inside the little glass whirlpool these things appear, and the girl's eyes shine. Her sisters look over her shoulder and, jealous, come up with a plan to get the silver saucer and the apple for themselves ...

The eldest sisters take the youngest sister into the forest to collect berries, kill her with an axe and bury her under a birch tree. Then they return home, claim she was eaten by wolves, and ask to have the silver saucer and transparent apple. But their father keeps them himself, in memory of his youngest daughter.

The following spring, a shepherd wanders close to the birch tree and finds a single reed growing amongst flowers. He picks it, makes a whistle-pipe, and the pipe sings, all by itself:

'I was killed – yes, my life was taken from me deep in the forest for the sake of a silver saucer, for the sake of a transparent apple.'

When the father hears the whistle-pipe's song he asks the shepherd to show him where he found the reed, and there he digs up the body of his youngest daughter. Then the pipe sings again, telling the father how his eldest daughters killed his youngest one, and how water from the well of the Tsar will wake her.

So, the father goes to the Tsar, tells the story, and asks for water. The Tsar gives him water, but makes his promise to return with the saucer, the apple, and all three of his daughters. The water revives the youngest daughter, and the father keeps his promise to the Tsar.

The Tsar orders the two eldest daughters to be killed at sunset, but the youngest daughter begs for their lives. Touched by her kind heart, the Tsar forgives the eldest daughters, and proposes to the youngest. She accepts, and they all live happily ever after in the palace.

'And ever since then the Tsars of Russia have kept the silver saucer and the transparent apple, so that, whenever they wish, they can see everything that is going on all over Russia.'

When I first heard this story, it made me immensely angry. The youngest sister, who was good and kind, was cruelly murdered. Then, when she is revived, she forgives her sisters and they live happily ever after. It felt wrong, and it felt unjust. And to be honest, it still feels wrong and unjust, and it still makes me angry.

I wondered if the point of the story was forgiveness, and I felt inadequate because I could not bring myself to forgive. I felt the eldest sisters should have been punished, although I was not sure how, and I certainly could not imagine wanting to live with my murderers again!

I have reluctantly come to accept this story as a reflection of the world: bad things happen to good people, and justice is not always served.

Perhaps the point of the story is to help prepare us for injustice and give us an opportunity to think about how we should face and deal with it.

Can we forgive wrongdoings and move on, like the youngest sister? Or do we need punishment for a crime? And what is fair punishment? Should the eldest sisters have been killed, as the Tsar ordered?

But neither forgiveness nor punishment will undo a wrong ... so how *do* you cope with injustice in the world?

I still haven't been able to forgive the sisters; and I'm not sure what, if any, punishment would make me feel better about this story. I have had to summon up strength and resilience to accept both the injustice in this tale, and how I feel about it. And now, I think perhaps that is the point. Humans have a seemingly endless capacity for resilience. People do survive, and cope with, horrendous injustices, and can even thrive afterwards. So perhaps fostering resilience is more important than either forgiving or punishing. And perhaps being angry at injustice is all right.

And as for 'Big Brother' Tsar; left watching everything that goes on in his kingdom with his magic apple ... I'll leave you to ponder the morals of that one alone!

The Tale of the Silver Saucer and the Transparent Apple can be found in Old Peter's Russian Tales, written by Arthur Ransome, published by Puffin.

This blog post was originally published on *The Teaching Booth*

6. Sadko (on the power of music)

*'In Novgorod, in famous Novgorod,
There lived Sadko...'*

Sadko is the main character in a Russian medieval bylina (a narrative poem or song). Sadko's only possession was his maple gusli (a stringed instrument), but he played it so beautifully he was invited to all of Novgorod's feasts.

One day, Sadko played his gusli on the shores of Lake Ilmen, the water began to swirl, and the Sea Tsar rose from the surface and said,

*'I don't know what I can reward you with
For my pleasure, for my great pleasure,
For your tender playing.
Perhaps with countless golden treasure?'*

The Sea Tsar tells Sadko to make a wager with all the merchants in the city that he can catch a fish with golden fins. Sadko does this, casts a net into the lake, and catches three fish with golden fins. He wins three shops of the finest goods and begins to trade and make great profits.

Sadko builds thirty scarlet ships and spends many years trading along the River Volkhov, Lake Ladoga, the Neva River, and across the blue sea. He earns barrels of gold and silver, but when he decides to return to Novgorod a storm forms in a cloudless sky and his ships stop in the middle of the sea.

Sadko realises it is time to make a tribute to the Sea Tsar and lowers a barrel of silver into the water, but the storm continues. He lowers a barrel of gold next, but still his ships won't move. Sadko realises the Sea Tsar needs a living tribute and asks his crew to write their names on wooden lots and cast them into the sea.

All the lots float, apart from the one with Sadko's name on. So, Sadko takes his maple gusli and sits on a plank in the sea while his ships sail away. He falls asleep and wakes on the bottom of the sea, with the Sea Tsar's palace before him.

The Sea Tsar asks Sadko to play his gusli as tribute, and when the music sounds the Sea Tsar begins to dance. For three days Sadko plays, unable to stop, and the Sea Tsar dances up a storm that, far above, on the surface of the sea, smashes ships and drowns sailors.

Finally, Nikola Mozhaisky (the patron saint of sailors) touches Sadko on the shoulder and tells him to break his gusli strings, so Sadko plays a chord that breaks his strings, the Sea Tsar stops dancing, and the water calms.

To reward him for his playing, the Sea Tsar asks Sadko if he would like to marry a beautiful mermaid. Under the guidance of the saint, Sadko lets hundreds of mermaids pass by, and chooses a maid at the back of the procession. Then Sadko does not sleep with her on their wedding night, as the saint tells him he will stay forever in the blue sea if he does. The next morning, Sadko wakes in his beloved city of Novgorod.

I recognise several themes in the Sadko bylina, such as paying respect to those who help you, and love of home. But to me, the story of Sadko was always about the power of music.

When Sadko had nothing else, his music nourished him; both metaphorically and literally as he was welcomed at feasts. Music made the Sea Tsar rise from Lake Ilmen and reward Sadko with riches.

Music took Sadko to the underwater realm, where he saw a great palace and many beautiful mermaids. And Sadko's music was so powerful, it made the Sea Tsar dance up a storm.

I have always loved music. Long before we can talk or understand speech, music provides an introduction to how we communicate, how we feel and express emotions,

and how we use our imaginations to create and tell stories. Music is a powerful magic, a universal language of the human soul.

And the story of Sadko has inspired more music! Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov composed a piece of orchestral music based on Sadko in 1867, and later developed this into an opera.

A version of Sadko can be found in Old Peter's Russian Tales, written by Arthur Ransome, published by Puffin.

Alexei Tolstoy wrote a poem, Sadko, but I have never found an English translation – so if you know of one, I'd love to hear from you!

This blog post was originally published on *Family Bookworms*

7. Ruslan and Ludmila (on layered stories)

*An oak tree greening by the ocean;
A golden chain about it wound:
Whereon a learned cat, in motion
Both day and night, will walk around;
On walking right, he sings a ditty;
On walking left, he tells a lay.
A magic place: there winds his way*

Ruslan and Ludmila is an epic fairy tale written in verse by Alexander Pushkin between 1817 and 1820. It begins by describing a magical place full of characters from Russian folklore; wood sprites, mermaids, Baba Yaga's hut on chicken feet, warlocks, warriors, and Koshei the Deathless. The narrator says he stayed in this place and heard many tales from the learned cat, and that one of those tales was of Ruslan and Ludmila.

In the story that follows, Ludmila, the daughter of Prince Vladimir of Kiev, is about to marry the brave knight Ruslan. However, she is abducted by the evil wizard Chernomor on her wedding night.

Ruslan, and three rival knights, set out on horseback to find and rescue her.

The verses of the poem contain many tales within tales. We hear stories from an old man who Ruslan meets in a cavern; stories from Ruslan's rivals Rodgay, Farlaf and Ratmir; stories from Ludmila, held captive by Chernomor; and stories from a giant disembodied head Ruslan finds on a battlefield.

Towards the finale, the tales link together, and all the threads resolve. Ruslan learns Chernomor's magic power is held in his beard and defeats him by grasping his beard as he flies away, and holding on for three days, snipping away at it until the wizard surrenders. Then Ruslan revives an entranced Ludmila with a magic ring ...

*And lo! The petals drew asunder.
The flower-eyes opened, shining bright;
She sighed, as if in musing wonder
About so lingering a night.
It was as if she felt the trace
Of some dim nightmare – then she knew him,
And gave a gasp, cried out, and drew him
Into the bliss of her embrace.*

Prince Vladimir gives the couple his blessing, and they live happily ever after.

I love Ruslan and Ludmila; for the beautiful poetry, the variety of Russian fairy tale characters that make an appearance, and the fantastic and imaginative elements of the story. It is a deeply layered narrative, with tales from different characters and plenty of subplots.

Many fairy tales only focus on the main character, and secondary characters are never developed to any great extent. But in Ruslan and Ludmila all the characters have a tale to tell and have their own hopes, dreams, and eventual outcomes that relate to these. I think for this reason I always found Ruslan and Ludmila immensely satisfying, either to read in its entirety, or simply to dip into. It mirrors life, in that everyone is the main character in their own story, and everyone has a tale to tell.

When Pushkin wrote Ruslan and Ludmila he was playing with different writing styles, breaking writing 'rules', and mixing up genres. He wove together elements of folk tale, fantasy, history, and the everyday; and alternated peaceful scenes with conflicts, and comic scenes with dark, scary ones. Again, I feel this mirrors life – which also refuses to fit neatly into one genre – and it certainly kept me, as a reader, interested in the tale.

Pushkin is immense fun to read, and his work contains many lessons for living and writing: the importance of being aware of all the subplots in your life or in your story;

and being sensitive to the hopes and dreams of the characters' that surround you;
and the benefits of being brave, breaking rules, and mixing things up in new ways.

My favourite translation of Ruslan and Ludmila is by Walter Arndt, and can be found in 'Collected Narrative and Lyrical Poetry' by Aleksandr Pushkin, translated by Walter Arndt, and published by Ardis.

This blog post was originally published on *Sister Spooky*

8. Baba Yaga (on kindness)

'Once upon a time there lived an old man and his wife ...'

In this Russian fairy tale, collected and published by Alexander Afanasyev in 1855, an old man becomes a widower and marries again, but his second wife doesn't like his daughter.

One day, the father goes away, and the stepmother sends her stepdaughter to the hut of Baba Yaga, to ask for a needle and thread.

When the stepdaughter arrives, Baba Yaga tells her to sit down and weave while the maid warms her a bath. The stepdaughter knows Baba Yaga is planning to eat her once she has bathed, so she gives the maid a kerchief and pleads with her to prepare the bath slowly. Then the stepdaughter gives a piece of ham to the cat and asks him how she can escape. The cat gives her a comb and a towel and tells her to throw them to the ground if Baba Yaga follows her when she runs away.

The girl takes the gifts and runs. Dogs try to stop her, but she throws them bread; the gates try to bang shut, but she oils their hinges; and a birch tree tries to lash her, but she ties it with a ribbon.

Meanwhile, the cat sits at the loom and weaves so that Baba Yaga doesn't get suspicious. However, soon enough Baba Yaga notices the girl has fled. Baba Yaga chastises the cat, maid, dogs, gate, and birch but they all retort how the girl was kind to them; giving them ham, a kerchief, bread, and a ribbon.

Baba Yaga jumps into her flying mortar and pursues the girl. But when the girl hears her draw close, she throws down the towel and a river appears, blocking Baba Yaga's path. But, Baba Yaga returns with oxen who drink up the river, and catches up with the girl once more.

The girl throws down the comb and a forest rises, blocking Baba Yaga's path again. Baba Yaga tries to gnaw her way through it with her iron teeth, but gives up and returns to her hut.

When the girl arrives home, her father has returned, and on telling him all that has happened the father grows angry and kills the stepmother.

"... and then he and his daughter began to live and prosper. I was there and drank mead and beer; it ran down my moustache, but it never got into my mouth."

The ending of the tale, where the narrator talks of mead and beer, is a traditional ending to many Russian folktales. It could be reference to how sober the narrator is - thus a testament to the truth of the tale - or a hint that the narrator would like a drink for his efforts.

In this Baba Yaga tale, she is portrayed as pure villain; mistreating her maid and animals, and plotting to eat the young stepdaughter who visits. I always preferred the Baba Yaga tales where she is more of an ambiguous character, but there is some imagery in this tale that I really love; the tying of the lashing birch with a ribbon, the cat weaving at the loom, Baba Yaga giving chase in her flying mortar, and the towel and comb growing into a river and forest.

It is an action packed, thrilling tale, that always has me rooting for the stepdaughter's escape. And the message in the tale is a simple one about kindness. In fact, some versions of this tale are called *Baba Yaga and the Girl with the Kind Heart* or *Baba Yaga and the Kind Little Girl*.

The stepdaughter is kind to the maid, cat, dogs, gate and birch; and as a result, they help her escape. It's a nice, clear message about the power of kindness; and how if you are kind to others they are likely to show kindness in return. And, more often than not, I think this holds true in real life.

However, the tale also makes me think about the nature of kindness. The girl wanted the maid to prepare the bath slowly; she wanted the cat's advice; and the dogs, gates, and birch to allow her to escape. So, was the girl only kind to everyone because she wanted, or expected, help in return for her kindness? And if that is the case, is that kindness? Or just clever trading?

Surely true kindness should be altruistic, expecting and demanding nothing in return. My favourite acts of kindness are the selfless ones, the random ones, and the anonymous ones. These make me feel all warm and fuzzy inside and I believe they can be hugely powerful in spreading happiness and compassion.

But would they get you out of Baba Yaga's hut? Maybe the message is that we need both pure selfless kindness, and a bit of clever trading too!

A version of Baba Yaga and the Little Girl with the Kind Heart can be found in Old Peter's Russian Tales, written by Arthur Ransome, published by Puffin.

This blog post was originally published on *Library Mice*

9. The Lime Tree (on magic in the natural world)

'In a certain village there lived a poor cottager ...'

In this Slavic folk tale, collected and published by Karl Jaromír Erben in 1865, a cottager is so poor he has no pony, no cow, and no firewood. When winter comes, he goes into the forest to find wood. He raises his axe, to cut down a lime tree, but the tree speaks to him,

"I will give you all that you want if you don't cut me down."

The cottager tells the tree how poor he is, and the tree tells him to go home and see what is there. When the cottager returns home, he finds a new house, horses, and storerooms full of corn. But the cottager is not satisfied and returns to the tree to ask for a handsome wife. Once again, the tree tells the cottager to go home, and back at home his wish has come true.

At first, the cottager is content, but soon he returns to the lime tree and asks to be head-borough, and the tree grants his wish. Still, not content as head-borough, the cottager asks to be lord, and then an official, then lord-lieutenant, and finally a tsar. At this request, the tree replies,

"Foolish man, what are you asking? Consider what you were, and what you have become."

But the cottager insists he wants to be tsar, and so the lime tree declares,

"Become a bear, and your wife a she-bear!"

This tale has a clear moral about greed that didn't interest me greatly as a child. What did fascinate me though, was the enchanted lime tree. I firmly believed in the idea of magic in the natural world and the thought of a talking tree that could grant wishes, or turn you into a bear, was thrilling.

I've since learned that lime trees were sacred trees in many ancient cultures; often associated with fate, fertility, and truth. Women danced or prayed under lime trees, and some communities held judicial meetings under their boughs.

Lime wood is good for carving, and lime bark can be used to make rope. The young leaves are edible and are a food source for many caterpillars. Lime flowers produce nectar for honey bees and can be used to make perfumes and tea. And the flowers, leaves, wood and charcoal can all be used for medicinal purposes.

Scientists have discovered that trees can communicate with each other, and other species, using chemical compounds; and that they defend themselves, and respond to injuries. Some scientists argue that trees are intelligent; as they can sense, learn, remember, and react in ways that would be familiar to humans. They can also make ultrasonic sounds – which, if you have read *The Sound Machine* by Roald Dahl, you might find quite chilling!

Sadly, I do not know of any scientific evidence that trees can grant wishes, or turn people into bears, but I am still convinced there is magic in the natural world.

Certainly, like the lime tree in the story, nature can give us great gifts, or bring disasters (droughts, hurricanes, floods, food shortages); so we do have to be careful how much we take from the natural world, or greed may well be our downfall, like the cottager who asked to be tsar of all the land.

My second book (title top secret!) is, in part, a reimagining of The Lime Tree, and will be published by Usborne when it is ready.

This blog post was originally published on *Library Girl and Book Boy*

10. The Crane and the Heron (on seizing the day)

'Once upon a time a crane and a heron lived in a bog; they had little huts, one at each end of it ...'

In this Russian fairy tale, collected and published by Alexander Afanasyev in 1855, crane grows weary of living alone and sets off to woo heron. But when he arrives and asks heron to be his wife, heron both rejects and insults him.

"No, crane, I will not be your wife; your legs are too long, your clothes are too short, your flying is poor, and you cannot support me. Go away, you spindleshanks!"

And so, crane returns home upset. But later, heron changes her mind - deciding she would rather marry crane than live alone after all - and so she flies to crane and asks to be his wife.

However, crane, still upset, tells heron he doesn't want her as a wife and demands she leaves. So, this time it is heron who flies home upset and ashamed.

Later still, crane changes his mind and flies back to heron, but she tells him to go. And then, heron changes her mind and flies back to crane, but he tells her to go.

"And to this very day they go to each other to propose, but never get married."

When I first heard this story as a child I chuckled and thought how silly! Both heron and crane want the same thing, yet they stop themselves from getting it. They should just seize the day and marry!

But as I have grown older, and thought about this story more, I have come to understand and empathise with heron and crane more deeply.

From an omniscient reader's point of view, it is easy to see heron and crane want the same thing, but this would not be obvious to heron or crane at all. Only half the time

heron and crane's words and actions reflect their desire to be together, so how can they ever be sure what the other truly wants?

If only heron and crane could communicate better but each time one rejects or insults the other, the upset it causes drives a wedge between them.

It can be quite an emotional experience to put yourself in heron or crane's shoes. They are struggling with pride, rejection, hurt, shame, and loneliness. Is the togetherness they seek worth this struggle? And could they ever be truly happy together? At what point should they give up and maybe fly off to a new bog?

I still stand by my childhood conclusion that heron and crane might find happiness if they could somehow seize the day and marry. But now I understand that seizing the day is not always easy. It can involve overcoming seemingly mountainous emotions; such as fear, pride, rejection, worry, or hurt. But if we don't learn to deal with these emotions effectively, we might end up like heron and crane flying back and forth over a bog forevermore, never getting what we truly want.

There is a lovely illustrated picture book of this tale, [The Heron and the Crane](#) written by John Yeoman and illustrated by Quentin Blake, published by Andersen.

This blog post was originally published on [Book Lover Jo](#)

11. The Gigantic Turnip (on community)

'Grandfather planted a turnip ...'

In this Russian fairy tale, collected and published by Alexander Afanasyev in 1855, when the time comes to harvest the turnip, grandfather pulls and pulls, but can't get the turnip out. So, grandfather calls grandmother, and grandmother pulls grandfather, and grandfather pulls the turnip. But still, the turnip doesn't budge.

So, grandmother calls granddaughter to help, and when the turnip still doesn't shift, granddaughter calls her puppy to help. The puppy calls a beetle, who calls another beetle, and another.

'Then the fifth beetle came. He pulled the fourth beetle, the fourth beetle pulled the third, the third pulled the second, the second pulled the first, the first beetle pulled the puppy, the puppy pulled the granddaughter, she pulled grandma, grandma pulled grandpa, grandpa pulled the turnip; they pulled and they pulled, and they pulled out the turnip.'

The gigantic turnip is a simple tale about the power of working together. The individuals pulling on the turnip have different strengths, but it is only by working together they free the turnip – and the last, tiny beetle is equally as important as the grandfather at the front of the line.

History is full of examples of people working together to make massive changes. The civil rights movement, resistance against apartheid, women's suffrage, LGBT rights, and the environmental movement, have all achieved levels of success as a result of people working together.

In recent months I have heard many people call for change to gun laws in the US; from former president Barack Obama, to eleven-year-old activist Naomi Wadler. All their voices are equally important, and perhaps the greatest power is in seeing so many individuals working together to create momentous rallies and demonstrations.

Away from politics, and on a more personal level, around two and half years ago I began writing *The House with Chicken Legs*. Although this was an individual endeavour, right from the start I was aware of my family supporting me, all the stories and storytellers who had inspired me, and all the folklorists, mythologists, and historians who had often spend lifetimes researching and creating books that I now dipped into for information. At the point I submitted the book to agents, it already felt like a joint effort between myself and at least one hundred other individuals!

And then I signed with my incredible agent Gemma Cooper, and she led me through several rounds of edits. And then I signed with Usborne, and my amazing editor Rebecca Hill led me through several more rounds of edits! And there were more editors! Becky Walker, Mallory Kass, and Sarah Stewart; as well as proof readers, cover artists, cover designers, illustrators, marketing people, publicity people, sales people ... a seemingly endless array of talented people all working together to bring *The House with Chicken Legs* into the world.

And then ARCs flew out and there were reviewers, book bloggers, librarians, teachers, and readers, all contributing to making *The House with Chicken Legs* a success.

Like grandfather wouldn't have that turnip without the help of many others, *The House with Chicken Legs* wouldn't be running around bookstores, libraries, schools, and reader's imaginations without the help of the countless people who have worked together to bring it into the world, and I am immensely proud of this bookish community and what we have achieved together!

There is a lovely illustrated picture book retelling of this tale, written by Aleksei Tolstoy and illustrated by Niamh Sharkey, published by Barefoot Books.

Naomi Wadler's speech at March For Our Lives:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=ElEmXC33l0I

Arnold Schwarzenegger's speech, 'none of us can make it alone':

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JflvstAljtk>

This blog post was originally published on *Mr Ripley's Enchanted Books*

12. The Snow Maiden (on love and happiness)

There are several different versions of the Russian fairy tale of *Snegurochka* or *The Snow Maiden*. Many of the stories begin with a childless peasant couple building a little girl out of snow, who then comes to life.

In Alexander Afanasyev's version, published in 1869, the peasant couple care for the Snow Maiden like a daughter, until one day a group of girls invites her for a walk in the woods. They build a small bonfire and take turns jumping over it. When the Snow Maiden takes her turn, she evaporates into a cloud above the fire and disappears.

The Snow Maiden was made into a play by Aleksandr Ostrovsky, with music by Tchaikovsky, in 1873; and was adapted into an opera by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov in 1881. In this version the Snow Maiden is the daughter of Spring the Beauty and Father Frost. When she meets a young man, she begs her mother for the ability to love. But, when she does fall in love, her heart warms, and she melts.

In Arthur Ransome's retelling, *The Little Daughter of the Snow*, published in *Old Peter's Russian Tales* in 1916, the Snow Maiden finds herself alone in the forest when her playmates go home at dusk. A red fox offers to lead her home and she accepts. Her parents are grateful to the fox for bringing their daughter home, but when the fox asks for a plump hen as thanks, they decide to trick him. They put a dog in a sack, and when the fox opens the sack – thinking a hen is inside – the dog chases off the fox. Then the parents hear their daughter singing,

*“Old ones, old ones, now I know
Less you love me than a hen,
I shall melt away again,
To my motherkin I go –
Little daughter of the Snow.”*

The parents run into their home and find their daughter's clothes in a pool of meltwater, although Old Peter (the narrator of the tale) explains that the Snow Maiden has been

carried away by Father Frost and Mother Snow ‘*over stars to the far north*’, where she plays all through the summer on frozen seas, and in winter returns to Russia.

The story of *The Snow Maiden* contains powerful seasonal imagery and has been interpreted as representing the death of winter and the coming of spring.

All the versions I have read or heard, also seem to contain the message that it is better to live fully, to seek out love and happiness, even if there are risks associated with this; as a short, full life is preferable to a long, empty one.

In Afanasyev’s version, the Snow Maiden revels in playing with her friends, and jumps over the flames joyfully before evaporating. In Ostrovsky’s version, the Snow Maiden chooses to give up everything for the gift of love. And in Ransome’s retelling, the Snow Maiden leaves her parents because she does not feel they love her enough.

One of the things I love about fairy tales is how they can mean different things at different times in your life. And since I have become a parent, I have found new meaning in the tale of The Snow Maiden. I think there is another message perhaps, about how our time with our children is fleeting, and all too soon they grow up and often move away. So, it is important we try to make our time together filled with as much love and happiness as possible.

*There is an adult reimagining of this tale, *The Snow Child*, written by Eowyn Ivey, published by Tinder Press.*

This blog post was originally published on *The Reader Teacher*

13. The Armless Maiden (on the transformative power of fairy tales)

'In a certain kingdom, not in our land ...'

In this Russian fairy tale, collected and published by Alexander Afanasyev in 1855, a brother and sister are living together after their parents have died. When the brother marries, his wife is jealous of the sister and performs increasingly horrific acts, each time blaming the sister, until finally the brother takes his sister into the woods, cuts off her arms to the elbows and leaves her there.

The armless maiden walks through the woods upset for years, until she finally finds a path out, arrives in a new town, falls in love and marries. When her husband is away on a trip, she gives birth to a son with arms golden to the elbow, a bright moon on his forehead, and a radiant sun near his heart.

The evil sister-in-law finds out about the child and forges a series of letters that result in the armless maiden and her new child being sent away from their home. Once again, the maiden wanders alone, until she finds a well, stoops to drink, and drops her child by accident. She reaches into the water and her hands are magically restored.

The maiden then finds her brother's house, where her husband also happens to be. She tells her tale, the evil sister-in-law is driven away, and the others ...

"... began to live happily and to prosper."

Variations of this fairy tale can be found all over the world; e.g. *The Girl Without Hands* in Germany, *Doña Bernarda* in Spain, *Biancabella and the Snake* in Italy, *Rising Water, Talking Bird, and Weeping Tree* in French Louisiana, *The Girl without Arms* in Japan. The details vary but a trusted family member; sometimes a brother, sometimes a father, cuts off a young girl's arms and leaves her alone in the woods. She moves to a new destination, where she learns to trust and love again, but then once more she is unfairly driven from her home. Finally, alone in the woods, her arms are magically

restored, and she returns to the world where the truth emerges, and she moves on with her life.

When I first heard this tale, shocked by the brutality of the opening scenes, I was unsure what to make of the story. But I recognised the mutilation of the maiden could represent any number of traumatic emotional or physical experiences, and the subsequent journey she goes on is one of personal growth and healing. Like many such journeys, it is not linear, and even when things are seemingly better, there are more obstacles to overcome before the happy ending.

Fairy tales such as *The Armless Maiden* that depict such graphic and brutal violence are not often told, but at the right time, for some individuals, they can be both comforting and restorative. They can symbolise the difficulties of passage into adulthood, or journeys of recovery from abuse. Ultimately, these stories are about transformation; the ability to not just endure but to strengthen and regenerate, not just once, but many times. And they tell readers that although they may feel alone in their journey, there are others who have walked the path before.

An exploration of the transformative power of fairy tales can be found in 'The Armless Maiden and Other Tales for Childhood's Survivors', an anthology edited by Terri Windling, published by Tor.

This blog post was originally published on *Book Monster Ally*

14. Vasilisa the Beautiful (on metaphors)

'In a certain kingdom ...'

In this Russian fairy tale, collected and published by Alexander Afanasyev in 1855, Vasilisa is sent by her stepmother to get a light from Baba Yaga – a terrifying witch who lives in a hut on hen's legs deep in the forest. Baba Yaga threatens to eat Vasilisa unless she completes seemingly impossible tasks, but Vasilisa succeeds with the help of her magic doll and earns a light – a skull with flaming eyes – that burns her stepmother to ashes.

Over on *That Boy Can Teach's* fabulous blog, I talked about how Baba Yaga's role in this story is ambiguous, as she is both villain and helper; threatening to eat Vasilisa yet giving her a gift that frees her from her evil stepmother. This time, I want to use this story to talk about metaphors.

Fairy tales are filled with metaphors; and folklore experts, psychologists and readers seem to find endless hidden meanings to seemingly ordinary objects (e.g. it has been suggested the hood in *Red Riding Hood* represents puberty; the cow in *Jack and the Beanstalk* failing to give milk represents the end of infancy; and *Rapunzel's* Tower represents the segregation of women).

In *'Women Who Run With The Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype'* psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola Estés presents a fascinating discussion of *Vasilisa the Beautiful*. Just a few of the metaphors she suggests include:

- Vasilisa's magic doll, given to her by her mother on her deathbed, represents a mother's blessing, or a mother's intuition.
- The death of Vasilisa's mother represents the first steps away from being protected, and towards independence.
- The evil step family represent the cruel parts of one's own psyche. As Vasilisa tries to do all the tasks demanded of her by her step family, it represents trying to fulfil all the demands of various parts of the psyche. This only builds pressure.

- The lights in the house going out represent a turning point; a death of an old way of life. Vasilisa steps into the dark to find light, representing the search for a new way of life.
- Knocking at Baba Yaga's door represents facing fear of the wild and powerful life force.
- Baba Yaga gives Vasilisa chores to do; cleaning her clothes represents cleansing and purifying the psyche; sweeping the yard represents clearing the mind; and building a fire and cooking represents sparking creative passion and nourishing the wild self.
- Baba Yaga also asks Vasilisa to separate mildewed corn from good corn, and poppy seeds from dirt. This represents learning discrimination and judgement. It is also notable that both mildewed corn and poppy seeds have medicinal uses, so may represent healing the mind.
- After the tasks, Vasilisa asks questions about the three men on horseback she saw while walking through the forest. Baba Yaga explains these are her bright dawn, her red sun, and her dark midnight. This conversation may represent learning about the cycle of life; birth, life, and death.
- When Vasilisa asks more questions, about the magic hands she saw wringing the oil from the corn and poppy seeds, Baba Yaga says "*to know too much can make one old too soon*", suggesting there is a right time to learn some things, and perhaps some things must be learned for oneself.
- On discovering Vasilisa has her mother's blessing, Baba Yaga casts her out. This may suggest the wild part of the psyche (represented by Baba Yaga) is at odds with the sweet side of the psyche (represented by Vasilisa's mother).
- The gift of the flaming skull represents a gift of power and wisdom; earned through the tasks and time spent with Baba Yaga (the wild part of the psyche). Its light gives Vasilisa a new way of seeing.
- The flaming skull seeks out and destroys the step family, representing how new knowledge and skills can destroy the negative aspects of the psyche that were detrimental to Vasilisa.

I find all these potential metaphors fascinating, and I love the way seemingly simple fairy tales can have much deeper meanings. But I don't believe there is ever a right or a wrong way to interpret fairy tales, or that any metaphor is definite and set in stone.

One of the things I love most about fairy tales, is how they can mean different things to different people, at different times of their lives.

I love the way individuals can ponder what various aspects of tales mean to them, and I think fairy tales can provide the starting points for fascinating discussions between readers about how they can have very different meanings for each of us.

Women Who Run With The Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype by Clarissa Pinkola Estés is published by Ballantine.

This blog post was originally published on *Mr Davies Reads*

15. The Fool of the World and the Flying Ship (on friendship)

'There were once upon a time an old peasant and his wife, and they had three sons ...'

In this Russian fairy tale, retold and published by Arthur Ransome in 1916, two of the sons are clever young men and the third is the *'Fool of the World'*; a simple but harmless young man. The parents thought a great deal of the two clever sons but neglected the fool of the world.

One day, the tsar proclaims that he will give his daughter's hand in marriage to anyone who can bring him a flying ship, *'that should sail this way and that through the blue sky, like a ship sailing on the sea.'*

The two clever sons set off to find such a ship, laden with fine foods and drinks from their parents. But when the fool of the world asks to go, his parents give him only dry crusts of bread and water and tell him they expect he will be eaten by wolves.

Unperturbed, the fool of the world sets off and meets an ancient old man on the road. He shares his meagre food with the old man, and it miraculously turns into a feast with vodka. Then, the old man tells the fool what he must do to obtain a flying ship.

The fool completes the instructions, laying down before a large tree, and when he opens his eyes a ship is there. The fool jumps in and off he flies. He picks up various people along the way; a good listener, a swift walker, a sharp shooter, a big eater, a big drinker, a man with magical wood, and a man with magical straw. They all arrive at the castle of the tsar and the fool awaits his prize.

The tsar, on seeing the man who has brought the flying ship is merely a peasant, decides to try to get out of the bargain, and he sets the fool increasingly difficult tasks; to get the magical water of life, to eat twelve whole oxen and drink forty barrels of wine, to bathe in a searing bath house, and to prove he can defend his daughter.

The fool's new friends help him complete all the tasks and he wins presents of rich jewels, elegant clothes, and the princess's hand in marriage. He dresses finely, goes to the palace, falls in love with the princess, marries her, becomes '*so clever that all the court repeat everything he says*' and ...

"... as for the Princess, she loved him to distraction."

The last line, with the suggestion of the princess falling in love, is not always present in other versions of the tale, and in my opinion doesn't compensate for her portrayal as merely a prize to be exchanged for a flying ship. Young girls being given away as prizes, or traded for riches, by their fathers is not uncommon in fairy tales, or in history (often under the guise of arranged marriages).

Aside from the portrayal and treatment of the princess, there are aspects of this tale I love. The flying ship of course captured my imagination as a child, and I spent many hours wondering where I would go and what I would do if I had my own flying ship.

I also enjoyed, and found meaning, in the 'fool's' journey. His parents neglect and mistreat him, and essentially tell him he will amount to nothing. They label him a 'fool' simply because he thinks differently to them and does not fit with their expectations or ideals. They assume because he is different, he has no value.

But the son appears unaffected by their malice; and remains kind and good and positive. He breaks free of them; and finds a whole shipful of diverse friends who help him complete great challenges and create a new and wonderful life for himself.

For me, this story is about the power of friendship, the importance of surrounding yourself with people who value you and your differences, and help you achieve your goals and become the best you can be.

I also like to imagine there is another version of this tale, where the princess finds some friends who help her escape the father who tries to trade her for a flying ship.

There is an illustrated picture book of [The Fool of the World and the Flying Ship](#), written by Arthur Ransome, illustrated by Uri Shulevitz, and published by Farrar Straus Giroux.

This blog post was originally published on [My Little Library in the Attic](#)