

Book Review: *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* by Bruno Bettelheim Knopf, New York, 1976

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1981



I first became aware of *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* by Bruno Bettelheim when I read an interview with the author in the December, 1976 issue of *Reader's Digest*. I was immediately fascinated because my hobby is writing stories for children. "Professor Bettelheim, the interview began, "why are fairy tales important?"

"Children have rich fantasies, many of which contain chaotic fears and anxieties," Bettelheim answered. "Often the child is overwhelmed by them and sees no solution to the predicaments he imagines. Fairy tales guide him to reassuring solutions.

When the hero or heroine undergoes some of the most terrifying experiences imaginable, a child gets some idea of how to deal constructively with his fears. What child, for example, has not felt at one time or another mistreated by his parents or older siblings? In most fairy tales the mistreated hero wins out over those who seem to have much more power. Fairy stories nearly always contain evil figures who are properly punished. And good is always rewarded."

When asked if fairy tales had influenced his life, he replied, "Yes. My mother told them to me and I also read them. Even when I was in the Nazi concentration camps, the basic message of fairy stories stayed with me: that in life you encounter terrible events, but if you can hold on to your values, you might survive and be better for it."

I really wanted to read his book! But I had to look for it for months because it was always sold out. When I was finally able to read it, I was amazed at the similarity between Bettelheim's ideas and the Divine Principle.

Bettelheim believes that the most important and difficult task in raising children is helping them find meaning in life. They must first understand themselves and with this they are more able to understand others. "To find deeper meaning," he explains, "one must become able to transcend the narrow confines of self-centered existence and believe that one will make a significant contribution to life, if not right now, then at some future time. As an educator and therapist of severely disturbed children, my main task was to restore meaning to their lives. The work made it obvious to me that if they were reared so that life was meaningful to them, they would not need special help. Regarding this task, nothing is more important than the impact of parents and others who take care of the child; second in importance is our cultural heritage, when transmitted to the child in the right manner. When children are young, it is literature that carries such information best."

Bettelheim states that many children's books are so shallow in substance that very little other than entertainment can be gained from them. "For a story truly to hold the child's attention," he says, "it must entertain him and arouse his curiosity. But to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination; help him to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions; be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggest solutions to the problems which perturb him. In all these and many other respects, of the entire 'children's literature', with rare exceptions, nothing

can be as enriching and satisfying to child, and adult alike as the folk fairy tale."

Bettelheim has analyzed many of the classic fairy tales, from "Sinbad the Sailor" to "Cinderella" and he gives clear descriptions of why stories of fantasy are better in many ways than regular stories. He explains that a young child's mind is rapidly collecting many impressions, but at first these are ill assorted and only partly integrated in his mind. Many of these impressions are completely dominated by fantasy. Because of a child's way of interpreting things, fantasy stories fill many gaps in his understanding. Bettelheim states that "locations which a fairy tale speaks about suggest a voyage into the interior of our mind, into the realms of unawareness and the unconscious. Having taken the child on a trip into a wondrous world, at its end the tale returns the child to reality, in a most reassuring manner. As we awake refreshed from our dreams, better able to meet the tasks of reality, so the fairy story ends with the hero returning, or being returned, to the real world, much better able to master life."

Often parents try to repress a child from dwelling on fantasy, but Bettelheim feels that this is a mistake. First of all, it will not keep him from having fantasies of his own; all children, whoever they are or whatever their age is, have fantasies. Bettelheim says: "When a child tries to understand himself and others or figure out what the specific consequences of some action might be, he spins fantasies around these issues. It's his way of playing with ideas!" If a child is denied access to fairy tale-like stories, he is left to feel that he is the only one who has such thoughts. This makes his own fantasies very frightening. On the other hand, allowing him to learn that others have similar fantasies as his makes him feel like a part of humanity.

However, many parents feel that their children may come to believe that fantasy stories are real and are worried that they will believe that they are true. Bettelheim explains that the child, "when he asks whether a story is true, wants to know whether the story contributes something of importance to his understanding, and whether it has something significant to tell him in regard to his greatest concerns." In other words, children understand that these stories aren't real in the literal sense, but in them they are trying to find truths related to something they are concerned about.

What does a fairy tale contribute to a child and how does it do it? To begin with, in spite of the fact that fairy tales take place in fantasy settings and happenings in them are of ten wondrous and magical, the main characters in them are usually ordinary people with problems that the child can easily relate to. Sinbad is simply one of many shipmates on a large ship when he finds himself cast into a series of fantastic adventures. Cinderella is also just an ordinary girl who suffers at the hands of her jealous step-sisters.

Yet she goes on to be the most beautiful girl at the ball. The stories are fantasy. But what little boy, when faced with the drudgery of day-to-day chores, doesn't dream of going off to distant lands and having fantastic adventures? And what little girl doesn't experience jealousy from other girls and yet dream to be a beautiful princess?

Fantasy, yes. But the stories relate to true experiences that every child has and they deal with emotions and problems that children face every day of their lives. And through the fantasy elements, the stories show the child how to cope with these everyday situations and emotions. Another element usually present in fairy tales is the conflict between good and evil. In "Hansel and Gretel," there is an evil witch; in "Little Red Riding Hood," a wolf; "Jack and the Beanstalk," a giant; and in "Snow White, a jealous queen.

Again concepts of what is good and what is evil are things children deal with every day and have many questions about. In fairy tales there is a clear distinction made between good and evil. There is no question of which characters are in what positions. More often than not, those in the position of evil have the upper hand throughout most of the story and in fact often come close to winning out over the hero. Yet no matter how powerful the evil person is, or how terrible the situation that develops, good always triumphs in the end and those in the position of evil are punished for their wicked deeds.

Very often a child sees people who are greedy or self-centered, people who take advantage of others. And these seem to be the successful people, the ones who get ahead. Often when a child tries to do the "good and right thing" he winds up getting pushed around, stepped on, and taken advantage of. It seems to him that doing the "right thing" brings only trouble and difficulties, and being "bad" is much easier and much more profitable than being "good." But fairy tales remind him that although evil may be in power a long time, it will eventually be punished, of ten in the same way that it made others suffer. Good, on the other hand, may have to face many struggles and hardships, but it will eventually win out in the end and gain rewards which will more than make up for any hardship.

The conclusion one reaches by reading Bettelheim's book is that stories with a fairy-tale framework not only entertain children, but also educate them in dealing with every day problems, inspiring them to be good and to do heroic deeds.