

RECOMMENDED FOR

Ages 15+ (Upper secondary and adult crossover)

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KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- **Learning Areas:** English
- **General Capabilities:** Literacy; Critical and creative thinking

REASONS FOR STUDYING THIS BOOK

- Studying the structure and conventions of fairytales, and how fairytales can be retold
- Studying an unconventional fiction structure
- How the author develops character and motive, layer by layer

THEMES

- Contemporarising the traditional fairytale
- Reconciling different realities
- Alternative storytelling

PREPARED BY

Allyse Near and Random House Australia

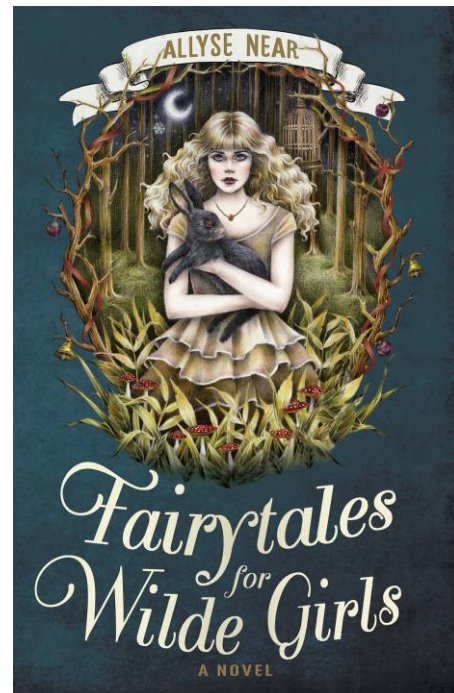
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Fairytales for Wilde Girls

Allyse Near

PLOT SUMMARY

There's a dead girl in a birdcage in the woods. That's not unusual. Isola Wilde sees a lot of things other people don't. But when the girl appears at Isola's window, her every word a threat, Isola needs help.

Her real-life friends – Grape, James and new boy Edgar – make her forget for a while. And her brother-princes – the mermaids, faeries and magical creatures seemingly lifted from the pages of the French fairytales Isola idolises – will protect her with all the fierce love they possess.

It may not be enough.

Isola needs to uncover the truth behind the dead girl's demise and appease her enraged spirit, before the ghost steals Isola's last breath.

A deliciously dark bubblegum-gothic fairytale from a stunning new Australian talent, *Fairytales for Wilde Girls* combines contemporary YA/crossover fiction with magical realism and fairytale.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in 1989, Allyse Near counts Neil Gaiman, Jeffrey Eugenides, Francesca Lia Block and the Brothers Grimm among her biggest literary influences. She obtained a Bachelor of Arts from Deakin University, majoring in Professional and Creative Writing, and won Deakin's inaugural Judith Rodriguez Prize for Fiction for her short story *Venus in the Twelfth House* while in her second year. Throughout 2010 she was mentored by multiple-Aurealis Award-winning author Jane Routley, and published short stories in a number of literary journals, including *Verandah*, *Short and Twisted*, and *Etchings*.

Allyse writes deconstructed pulp-fables that almost always revolve around women, the wilderness and witchcraft. *Fairytales for Wilde Girls* is her first novel. She is currently studying primary teaching and blogs at www.allysenear.com.

AUTHOR'S INSPIRATION

Allyse says:

The original idea for *Fairytales for Wilde Girls* struck me in the best possible way – all at once, complete with the necessary passion to see the work through.

It's the best way to start off writing a book, I've found; the inspiration never peters out, and I never had to fight my way out of accidental nooses I'd tied in the plot threads. It was the best experience I've had with writing, and I'm very proud of the product that has come of that.

Fairytales is an amalgamation of two separate stories. The first manuscript I was working on at the time was a long-cherished pet project of mine, the aim of which was to write an entire volume of original fairytales, all short and easily devoured like the Grimm Brothers' were. Of course, because I wasn't collecting stories for a compendium, I wasn't able to draw on common folklore; each story had to be unique to all those that existed already, and I had to mimic the styles of the cultures from which the forebears had originated; namely Germany, France, Denmark and Russia.

It would have been nearly impossible to sell to a publisher (short story collections are hard-going at the best of times, let alone an outlandish undertaking of Grimm-impersonations).

Then came the sudden idea of a girl who lived her life through a prism of fairytales; I wondered, how would a story with all the classic hallmarks of a

fairy tale play out in the 'real', modern world? What place would fantasy and pure fae have in the here and now?

When people asked what I was writing with such fervour, I generally said: 'Imagine a fairytale, with all the embellishments and trappings, except it's playing out in the real world.' The 'world' of Avalon, the town where Isola lives, isn't designed to fit in the faeries and mermaids and other such creatures – I never felt that I had to explain myself to the readers in that way. Rather, the folklore archetypes are transported to the 'real world'. I placed the story firmly in the genre of magical realism, and took to calling it a pulp-fairy tale, echoing the gritty mania of trashy pulp fiction.

The Tomb of Sleeping Beauty and *Lady of the Unicorns* were both stories I had drafted for my 'Grimm Book', as well as a short story about a character who later became Christobelle. In the original form, she was an out-and-out villain, the Bloodpearl Mermaid, but when I redeveloped her character for *Fairytales*, she became more ambiguous, struggling against the darkness that defined her earlier version, which had then become her back story.

I worked on the book throughout 2011. I raced through the initial drafts, then spent much longer on the editing; even still, most key points and scenes have been retained, with the opening pages practically untouched. My initial vision was pure and total; Isola and Alejandro were the first characters I invented, and as such are my favourites.

Isola was actually a difficult character to define throughout the editing stage; she had to come across as human and relatable, and someone the reader would actually want to spend time with. But she had this closed-down side to her; Isola was emotionally stunted, trapped in the traumatic moment that happened on her tenth birthday, which is gradually – and then shockingly – revealed. That's where the association with ice came from; the 'Ice Girl' metaphor inspired in part by the Snow Queen figure (who is usually regal, sinister and magnetic in traditional fairytales). This 'secret past' of Isola's was something I had to be aware of in every scene, particularly when *she* wasn't aware, instead subconsciously suppressing the truth of it. It gives emotional heft to the journey she undertakes over the course of the book, and I did enjoy writing the 'lightening' of her mental load, the metaphorical melting of the ice.

Questions and activities

1. What defines a fairytale? Refer to the website <http://www.surlalunefairytales.com/introduction/ftdefinition.html> and then examine the Arne-Thompson classification system (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arne-Thompson_classification_system). Can Lileo Pardieu's stories be assigned to any of these 'types' mentioned?
2. Is Isola an 'Ice Girl' (p. 28)? Did you find her human and relatable? Look for techniques Allyse used in creating and developing the character of Isola that humanise her and allow the reader to empathise with her.
3. Allyse had to be very careful not to reveal what actually happened at Isola's tenth birthday. How did she conceal and then reveal the facts? Was she successful? Were you surprised at the twists in the climax of the book?

WRITING STYLE

Structure and language

Allyse says:

European fairytales often trip into the territory of the dreaded 'purple prose'. Lileo Pardieu's short stories are reminiscent of this, the language of which is drenched in mystical imagery, lyricism and an old-world narration-style. Outside of that, I tried to imbue a dreamy, psychedelic atmosphere in the 'real' world of Avalon through the writing – using clipped sentences, sharp dialogue and unusual structure – contrasting the classical elements of the storytelling with modern sensibilities.

The short chapters are more like vignettes, impressionistic glimpses that highlight character development and key moments, pieced together to reflect Isola's psyche and to highlight the mind-bending 'reality' of fantasy. Fragmenting the book in this way meant that every scene needed to carry its weight, resulting in quite a bit of shuffling of scenes. It also allowed me to clearly delineate between flashbacks, dreams, back story and point-of-view changes. Furthermore, it made the manuscript visually comparative to a book of Grimm-like fairytales.

Questions and activities

1. Identify the following story structure and language techniques in the story: (1) Flashback (2) Dream (3) Back story (4) Point-of-view change (5) Descriptive language (6) Short sentences (7) Simile or metaphor
2. Compare the complete Pardieu fairytales included within the story: 'The Tomb of Sleeping Beauty' (pp. 51–2), 'Lady of the Unicorns' (pp. 137–47), 'The Seventh Princess' (instalments throughout) and 'Wolverine Queen' (pp. 398–9). Note the very different writing techniques used for each, and discuss why the author chose to use such different techniques.

Scriptwriting techniques

Allyse says:

The *dramatis personae* is a list that appears at the beginning of a playbook one might find at the theatre. It lists the names of the characters in the play, along with a brief description, and sometimes includes the actors' names. Ending credits in television and film have evolved from this. The *dramatis personae* for a play – and for *Fairytales for Wilde Girls* – had to be clever in what it revealed, in order not to give away any plot points to the audience.

It is used in *Fairytales for Wilde Girls* as a reference to William Shakespeare, who commonly used them, and to lend theatrical elements to the interactions between the characters, particularly the brother-princes, who often feature in conversational scenes that take place in single locations, such as Isola's bedroom, and function in the same way a set in a stage-play would.

Fairytales for Wilde Girls uses other scriptwriting terminology and techniques, such as the chapter 'Curtain up – A Setting' on pp. 6–7.

Screenplay elements are also used – but only in scenes with James, as he is obsessed with films (e.g. see pp. 199–200). It's a way to step away from the characters and to view the scene from a different perspective. James is also the only major character who doesn't have a moment told from his point-of-view; instead, the use of screenplay elements relegates the reader to 'viewer'. As such, the reader is free to interpret the scenes that include him without Isola's emotional interplay. I also imagine that the inner workings of James's mind reflect the movie-world he's obsessed with – he uses movies the same way Isola uses the Pardieu fairytales.

Questions and activities

1. Did the dramatis personae help you to ‘meet’ the characters such as the brother-princes? What did Allyse reveal in the dramatis personae, and what did she hide? How does she subvert the *dramatis personae* – for instance with her definition of ‘dead body’ as a character on p. 30?

Allusions

Fairytales for Wilde Girls is packed with hidden and obvious allusions, pop-culture references and nods to literature, fairytale tradition, and real-world people and events. Some real-life references include mentions of:

- Alice Liddell
- Alejandro’s sisters, named after the Children of Fatima – Lucía, Jacinta and Francisco (Francesca) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%C3%BAcia_Santos, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacinta_and_Francisco_Marto
- Death masks, including that of L’Inconnue de la Seine http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L’Inconnue_de_la_Seine)
- Saint Dymphna, Irish martyr, patron saint of princesses, of those possessed and of the mentally ill <http://saints.sqpn.com/saint-dymphna/>

Literary and pop-culture references include:

- Orpheus and Eurydice
- The River Styx
- *Alice in Wonderland*
- *The Wizard of Oz*
- The Furies (Greek mythology)
- Pandora’s Box (Greek mythology)
- Harry Potter
- Sailor Moon
- Oscar Wilde
- Sylvia Plath
- Edgar Allan Poe
- William Shakespeare
- *The Virgin Suicides*
- Arthurian legend (Avalon, the school houses)
- Quentin Tarantino films

Questions and activities

1. How do allusions help to deepen the reading experience?
2. Choose one of the literary allusions in the book and read the original version. Compare and contrast writing style, language, storytelling mode, structure and morals with *Fairytales for Wilde Girls*.

Formatting

Allyse says:

One of the best compliments on my writing I’ve ever received was from a tutor at university when I was studying creative writing. He talked about my inclination towards *painting the page* – a concept I really took to heart. I like to mess around with the sprawl on the pages; instead of great chunks of writing and long paragraphs, I like to break up the density with quirky arrangement. I think the use of white space should complement the text, and the reader should never have to wade through paragraphs, tiring just at the sight of all those black words. I want the reader to linger in the inevitable descriptive texts, rather than skim them.

This culminates in a postmodern design that makes *Fairytales for Wilde Girls* appear somewhat like a draft version of the book Isola publishes at the end of the story; it contains diary-like reflections, notations and memories, scraps of Pardieu’s stories, and visually disintegrating writing in moments of emotional upheaval, such as the use of liberal ‘white space’ in confrontational scenes.

Questions and activities

1. How did the structure of the story, with its short chapters, interludes and postmodern storytelling techniques, affect your reading?
2. Research the idea of ‘white space’. What is it? How do designers and creators use it to evoke emotion? In what other fields is it important (e.g. graphic design, architecture)?

VISUAL LITERACY: ILLUSTRATIONS

Allyse says:

Although it is unusual in a book for older teenagers and adults, my publisher and I thought it was important to have some illustrations in the book, scattered here and there on full pages, echoing the look of a book of fairytales with illustrated book

plates, as one might have looked in the nineteenth century. Australian artist Courtney Brims was commissioned to create the cover illustration and illustrations of the six brother-princes.

We loved Courtney's work because she is so brilliant at inserting hidden iconography in her illustrations and making them textually rich. Courtney's style and vision for her art matches Allyse's style in *Fairytales for Wilde Girls* beautifully – for instance, on her website (<http://www.courtneybrims.com/>) Courtney's art is described as 'a sweet and sour wonderland of stray creatures and lost damsels, exploring a mishmash world of reality and make believe most of us left behind in childhood'.

Each character is featured in a meaningful portrait, but each is 'escaping' the confines of the frame in some way, and Courtney imbued each character with her own, beautiful interpretation.

Questions and activities

1. Do Alejandro, Christobelle, Ruslana, James, Grandpa Furlong and Rosekin look as you imagined them?
2. What motifs and iconography can you find in each illustration, including the cover, which add depth to the character?
3. What other illustrators can you find whose work would have matched Allyse's style? (For instance, Allyse also likes the work of Yoh – see <http://www.yoh-gallery.net/> (site in Japanese).)
4. Re-interpret the brother-princes in your own choice of illustration style. What would you change? What other motifs and iconography might you include?
5. Imagine you are a fashion designer inspired by Isola's fashion style. Draw your creations, based on or inspired by the descriptions of Isola's outfits in the book. For instance, see descriptions on p. 10, 23, 97 and 153.

FAIRYTALE MOTIFS

Fairytales for Wilde Girls relies on fairytale conventions, which it subverts to redefine and contemporarise traditional notions of this genre.

Elements of classic fairytale structure include:

- food and eating, specifically meat, with cannibalistic elements (a surprisingly common feature in fairytales!)
- magic numbers

- refrains, repeated words and sentences, and emphasis upon certain key phrases (Recall the instances of Alejandro telling Isola that 'everything will be all right', Florence's fixation on the heart, the rhyming couplets of the unicorns as they speak to the Lady, etc.)
- knowledge imparted by animals
- unbalance in the natural world signalling disharmony in the lives of humans
- a fairy godmother and her 'gifts'
- brothers and sisters, princes and princesses
- dragons
- wise woman who imparts knowledge
- consequences that seem harsh or unfair

Questions and activities

1. What other fairytale motifs can you find in *Fairytales for Wilde Girls*?
2. Is the 'oldest' known version of a work the definitive version? What does this say about the oral tradition of fairytales? Does the underlying moral change as the story inevitably does?
3. Write your own fairytale, inverting, re-appropriating and manipulating some of these common symbols.

Mother-figures

After reading the text, students may recognise Isola's tendency to seek out mother-figures throughout her life, following her own mother's mental illness and inability to look after her daughter.

Questions and activities

1. Discuss to what extent Isola finds mother-figures in the female characters of the story, in particular Lileo Pardieu, Nimue, Mama Sinclair, Edgar's mother, Grape, Sister K, and the Lady of the Unicorns, who eventually becomes the mother to Dusk – and to an extent, Isola's dead grandmother and the wood witch.

Double identities

This major theme in the story came from one of Allyse's favourite concepts – *doppelgangers*, folkloric 'shadow-twins', which served to highlight the importance of names in retaining identity.

Questions

1. Identify the parallels and doubles of all the characters in *Fairytales* (e.g. the brother-princes have their counterparts as the lost brothers of *The Seventh Princess*).
2. Research the importance of certain numbers in fiction. For instance, D. L. Ashliman in *Folk and Fairy Tales: A Handbook* notes that 'the most common number used in fairy tales is two' (http://books.google.com.au/books?id=s_WyX-DD43YC&pg=PA7&lpg=PA7&dq=fairytales+symbol+of+number+seven&source=bl&ots=V0q_BYoOKW&sig=_O8nvhFhYN9WNsyNys9E38TRV9M&hl=en&sa=X&ei=wbNJUZe7AsWTiOeArAE&ved=0CDAQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=fairytales%20symbol%20of%20number%20seven&f=false). Why do so many stories set up a duality to be explored, such as 'good versus evil'?

The Legend of Nimue

Consider the title given to the 'Children of Nimue', and the mother-role assigned to the figure of Nimue. Research the Arthurian legend of Nimue, the Lady of the Lake, who was often cast in a poor light, particularly when she was defined with her secondary name of Vivien, and was associated with a dangerous sensuality.

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lady_of_the_Lake)

Vivien/Nimue

Consider the amalgamation of Vivien and Nimue throughout the developing canon of the Arthurian tales, along with many artistic examples of the character:

<http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/vivmenu.htm>

There is a negative connotation with Vivien that does not reach Nimue; this echoes the distinction between *Fairytales'* interpretation of Nimue as a 'mother-figure' and Vivien as her wilder counterpart, who lends her name to the woods. As she represents aspects of the same character archetype, is this another example of doppelgangers in fiction?

Merlin and Vivien

Read Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem *Merlin and Vivien* (<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/merlin-and-vivien-2/>) as well as an analysis and summary here: (http://www.cliffsnotes.com/study_guide/Literature/Idylls-of-the-King/Summary-Analysis/Merlin-and-Vivien.html).

Traditionally, Merlin gives the witch the spell to eternally seal him in a tree because he truly loves

her; in Tennyson's poem, he does not, and is wise to her attempts to 'enchant' him. Vivien is therefore portrayed as more villainous in this poem than legend usually shows her, and the resolution is confused: if Merlin has not been fooled, why does he give Vivien the knowledge she seeks with so little struggle on his behalf?

Consider Vivien as a feminist icon, and whether this poem undermines her strength of character. Use this examination of the overtures of misogyny in *Merlin and Vivien* to construct your own argument:

<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/tennyson/idylls/iwama8.html>

Questions

1. What is the difference between Nimue and the figure of Vivien, another adaptation of her?
2. Why does sexualising the figure of Nimue/Vivien inevitably make her more wicked? What does this say about the sensibilities of the (male) authors?

WOMEN, THE WILDERNESS AND WITCHCRAFT

Allyse Near says that her stories revolve around 'women, the wilderness and witchcraft'.

Questions and activities

1. What did you think of Mother Wilde's interpretation of *Beauty and the Beast*, where she says that 'The original *Beauty's* just an encouragement to young women to accept arranged marriages' (p. 48)?
2. Consider the following quote: 'That being a girl in a terrible world was akin to being a princess, wicked queen, heroine, ugly stepdaughter, witch and fairy and child and mother in one fiery package, a bomb beribboned like a beautiful gift and left to tick tock tick tock behind high castle walls. And then, one day too soon, Mother had blown.' (p. 49) What pressures are there on girls and women in society that are explored in this quote and in fairytales in general? Is being the 'perfect' girl, woman or mother an impossible task?
3. Neighbour Boo Radley quotes a Bible verse at Isola: 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live!' (p. 151). How has witchcraft been interpreted over the centuries? How have witches been persecuted throughout history?

4. 'The Pardieus were a long line of women all bearing single daughters, all cursed with unhappiness if they tried to deny their roots – roots that sprouted where the Lake met the Tree – or cursed with men who denounced them as whores or witches or hysterical madwomen if they couldn't suppress their true natures.' (p. 374) What link is drawn in the book between women's connection to the faerie world and to nature, and mental illness or societal stigma?
5. 'Isola had never learnt to call them sisters – a sister was a wicked nun who smacked Mother's hands, and a sister in a fairytale was almost always evil. And so, Ruslana, Christobelle and Rosekin had remained brother-princes to Isola.' (p. 61) Consider and discuss why the female characters among the brother-princes have been labelled as such, and why Isola might have disassociated them with the storybook-evils of sisterhood. Compare different fairytales to see how the concept of 'sisters' is explored.

WHAT IS A 'FAIRY-STORY'?

On Fairy-Stories by J.R.R. Tolkien

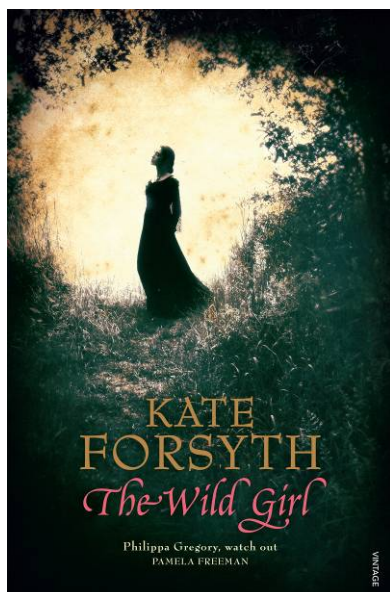
Examine the celebrated essay by famous fantasy writer J.R.R. Tolkien.

<http://brainstorm-services.com/wcu-2004/fairystories-tolkien.pdf>

Discussions can be held around these particular ideas:

- 'The definition of fairy story' and 'the nature of Faerie, the Perilous Realm itself': Tolkien says defining fairy story 'cannot be done . . . for it is one of its qualities to be indescribable, though not imperceptible' (p. 4 of PDF). Do you agree with this statement? Why/why not? Discuss in relation to the fragmented structure of *Fairytales for Wilde Girls* – does this structure enhance the idea that the faerie realm within the book is indefinable?
- Tolkien says fairy-stories have three faces: 'the Mystical towards the Supernatural, the Magical towards Nature, and the Mirror of scorn and pity towards Man. The essential face of Faerie is the middle one, the Magical. But the degree in which the others appear (if at all) is variable, and may be decided by the individual story-teller.' (p. 9 of PDF). Think of books or stories you have read that could be considered fantasy, speculative fiction or fairy-story. Which of Tolkien's 'three faces' do they exhibit? Which is more prominent in different stories? Why do you think the author of each book you are considering chose to write a particular 'face' more strongly than others? Which 'face' is prominent in *Fairytales for Wilde Girls*?
- 'Fairy-stories were plainly not primarily concerned with possibility, but with desirability. If they awakened desire, satisfying it while often whetting it unbearably, they succeeded.' (p. 13 of PDF) Discuss the use of desire, in all its forms, as an element in *Fairytales for Wilde Girls*. What does Isola desire? What do the six brother-princes desire? What does Florence desire?
- 'If fairy-story as a kind is worth reading at all it is worthy to be written for and read by adults.' (p. 15 of PDF) What does Tolkien mean by this statement? Have fairytales always been considered as children's stories? Why have darker themes – namely, gore and death – been exorcised in sanitised versions? (Consider Cinderella's stepsisters cutting their feet to fit the glass slipper; Rapunzel's beau falling into thorns and becoming blind; Goldilocks's death, the Little Mermaid's death.) Do the sanitised versions lose meaning and complexity for adult readers?
- Tolkien asserts that 'the story-maker . . . makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter', which you as the reader believe while you are 'inside' the story. 'The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken, the magic, or rather art, has failed,' Tolkien concludes (p. 12 of PDF). How does Allyse Near create a Secondary World in *Fairytales for Wilde Girls*, in which the reader can believe that there are faeries in the garden and that Vivien's Wood contains unicorns, dead girls in cages and all sorts of magical creatures? Is the Secondary World in *Fairytales* successful? Why/why not?

FURTHER READING



The Wild Girl
by Kate Forsyth

Why this story? Read it as another example of subverted fairytales.

The Wild Girl tells the story of Dortchen Wild, who grew up next door to the Grimm brothers in the 19th century, and was the source of their most powerful and compelling stories in the famous fairytale collection.

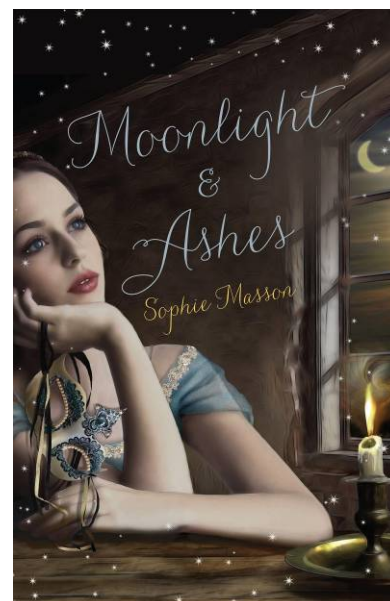


The Complete Fairy Tales
by the Brothers Grimm

Why this story? The most famous collection of fairy tales ever published.

Wolves and grandmothers, ugly sisters, a house made of bread, a goose made of gold . . .

The folk tales collected by the Grimm brothers created an astonishingly influential imaginative world. However, this is also a world where a woman serves her stepson up in a stew, a man marries a snake, a princess sleeps with a frog, and an evil queen dances to death in a pair of burning shoes. Violent, funny, disturbing, wise and sometimes beautiful, these stories have intrigued children, adults, scholars, psychologists and artists for centuries.



Moonlight & Ashes
by Sophie Masson

Why this story? Another way to see how contemporary fairytales are re-shaped and re-told.

A girl whose fortunes have plummeted from wealthy aristocrat to servant-girl. But this is not the story of a girl whose fairy godmother arranges her future for her. This is the story of Selena, who will take charge of her own destiny, and learn that her magic is not to be feared but celebrated.

Teachers' resources available.