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Rebekah Hartshorn
ellnaessa@gmail.com

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Rebekah Hartshorn

Professor Gideon Burton

Writing Literary Criticism

April 12, 2016

Folklore, Stories, and Truth

Folklore, legends, myths and fairy tales have followed childhood through the ages, for every healthy youngster has a wholesome and instinctive love for stories fantastic, marvelous and manifestly unreal. (Baum)

Most people when met with the term “folklore,” think of stories, legends or tall tales. However, within the discipline of folklore, formal stories only consist of a very small portion of what is studied. Informal stories, however play a key role. In informal situations, when people communicate, they do so through stories. People describe the events of their day or why they did what they did, unfolding a story for their listeners. Another person might relate the same story very differently however, because each person filters all observations through their own experiences and world view. Even so there is a pervasive idea that a true version of the story exists. Stories that have a lot of imagination and elaboration aren’t given the same validity as something we expect to be true. The phrase “true story” is often used to convey that the events related actually happened and gives the teller a certain level of authority and believability, though someone with a different perspective might describe a situation very differently. Despite the unreliability of stories, they have a wide influence on the people who hear them, true or not.

Folklorists study this by studying a group’s culture and what is important to that group. Folklorists take the stories people tell about their lives and study their culture through that medium. A folklorist will take a group of people and study their culture through the things those

people say, do, make, or believe in informal settings (McNeill 38). The study also includes how those things are repeated throughout the group and how it varies in repetition (13). Why do people do certain things when no one is requiring them to do it and why does a particular group of people find something meaningful enough to share with someone else? For example, why do people make chocolate chip cookies? Because they taste good, but why not make something else that is equally as delicious? To study this question, folklorists might collect family recipes for chocolate chip cookies. They would also collect along with the actual recipes, the processes and environments the cookies are produced in and any stories that may accompany a particular recipe. If possible they could even sample the cookies. They might find that people prefer gooey chocolate chip cookies, that in some places chocolate chip cookies aren't favored at all, that the cookie dough is only there to hold the chocolate chips together, or that the cookies don't even make it to the oven. The folklorists would then look at the information they collected and ask broader questions about the group and culture from their observations. Almost everything the folklorist would have collected would be in the form of stories as the people told them about their experiences. Often the things collected aren't necessarily true in the traditional sense, but they are true in that they are meaningful to the person who shares them. Although it is widely held that truth consists of facts and reality, stories are true and are perpetuated because they become part of and shape people's lives and because they depend on and are moved by stories.

This principle is demonstrated in Michael Ende's *The Neverending Story*. It is the story of a boy, Bastian, who finds a book in a bookshop by the title of "The Neverending Story," which he steals, reads, and finds himself trapped inside and trying to find his way home. The description of both our physical copy and Bastian's copy match each other and throughout the book, Ende hints to his readers that their copy of *The Neverending Story* could be the very same

copy that they are reading about and he goes to great lengths to establish that (6). He uses the visual appearance of the book, including red and green text and elaborately decorated letters along with several literary devices such as the phrase “but that’s another story and shall be told another time,” to allude to the idea that when the book is shut, more than appears might be going on between closed covers (25, 11). Bastian also interacts with his copy of the text, as he cries out in response to what he is reading and the characters in the book hear him. At one point, when Bastian discovers that he is a part of the story, he wonders if someone else is reading a book about him, which the reader of course is.

He, Bastian, was a character in the book which until now he had thought he was reading. And heaven only knew who else might be reading it at the exact same time, also supposing himself to be just a reader. (Ende 175)

All of these elements are used to create the effect of the story being more than it seems and to bridge the gap between reality and imagination. It “plays with the old notion that all worlds, including our own, are a story...” (Hiley 126). Because Ende continually brings the attention of the reader to the idea that they could be reading the magical version of “The Neverending Story,” it brings the story out into the lives of the reader and they interact with the story in a way that makes it seem more like truth rather than if it were actually a story, and by interacting with the text it becomes real (Hiley 131).

Ende continues this game of playing with reality and truth by establishing that Fantastica, the world of imagination and the human world are connected. The gateway between the worlds is contained inside AURYN, a metal medallion emblazoned with a black and a white snake on the front, which forms an oval by biting each other’s tails. These snakes are found in many places including on the front of AURYN, on the cover of the Bastian’s copy of “The Neverending

Story,” on the cover of our physical copy, and the place where the huge snakes are, instead of just the image of them. The back of AURYN is inscribed with elaborate letters, “DO WHAT YOU WISH” (Ende 186). AURYN is and represents the power of the Childlike Empress, the ruler of Fantastica. Near the beginning of *The Neverending Story*, we learn that the name of the Childlike Empress had been forgotten and because of that Fantastica was sick. Since the two worlds were connected, the human world was sick as well. No one in Fantastica can create or invent new stories or have new ideas, so they needed to bring a person from the real world to give the Childlike Empress a new name. In the interim, whole sections of Fantastica disappeared along with all of the creatures who were inhabiting it and they end up in the real world in the form of lies (130-134). Fantastica was in trouble because the real world had forgotten them. The real world was in trouble because they had forgotten Fantastica which riddled the world with lies. This sets up the idea that when something is forgotten, it is no longer true. On the other hand, all the creatures of Fantastica are considered true while they are within the borders of the land. In Fantastica, creatures that are good or evil aren’t assigned any importance one way or the other. They are all subjects of the Childlike Empress. They all respect her because she respects all of them. The Childlike Empress passes no judgment on her subjects. She accepts all of them the way they are. The wearer of AURYN is protected and guided and is given power to act with the authority of the Childlike Empress and is expected to behave like the Childlike Empress by going unarmed and respecting all the way she would (38).

The ideas that lies are truths that have been forgotten is also represented by the massive black and white snakes of AURYN. If we assume black represents lies and white represents truth, most people would rather see the black snake eradicated, to leave only truth. However, the snakes are always depicted in balance with one another by biting each other’s tails. “The havoc

they could wreak was checked only because they held each other prisoner. If they let each other go, the world would end. That was certain” (Ende 383). As the snakes guard the doors to enter both worlds, if the snakes let go of each other, both Fantastica and the real world would end. Truth and lies are thus kept in a delicate balance, maintaining the integrity and paradox of stories, which are a mix of both truth and lies.

In our own lives, there are stories and tall tales that we don't know where they came from or why we do something the way we do. The origin of those stories have been forgotten over time. Because the history of these stories involves so much time and so many people the story has passed through, the idea of what is true has become very convoluted and confused. Folklore is also like this, where if it is a piece of folklore that has been passed on for a while, the origin of how the tradition started gets lost, though everyone has an idea of how it started. A lot of the ideas of where it came from are espoused to be true, but can we know what is true? In *The Neverending Story*, truths that have been forgotten become lies. In our world things that were once true, but have been forgotten, become stories. An example of the confusion between truth and reality can be found in the story when Bastian's mother died and his Father had all but forgotten him. A parent should never forget a child, but with the loss of his wife, Bastian's father forgets the past that was connected to her.

For Bastian, his copy of “The Neverending Story” becomes real, as he is pulled into the story and becomes involved in it. As a character, Bastian is a sort of an anti-hero. He isn't brave or courageous, he is very selfish, and he doesn't really “save the day” so much at the end of the book. Through a lot of help on the part of Atreyu (the hero), in the end he remembers who he is and goes back home. The only thing compelling at all about Bastian is that he is average. He is relatable, but not liked. He makes a lot of really selfish and terrible decisions. The only thing he

is good at creating stories. This talent does help him save Fantastica in the middle of the story by giving the Childlike Empress a name. After that, though, his task was to follow the desires of his heart, which hopefully would lead him back home, but most people in his situation get stuck in Fantastica and never make it home with no hope of ever doing so. In Fantastica, Bastian is a wearer of AURYN which grants wishes for him as well as protects, but it doesn't guide him very much like it would for another wearer. Instead his heart is enabled by AURYN and allows wishes to be made. That task "require[s] the greatest honesty and vigilance, because there's no other journey on which it's so easy to lose yourself forever" (Ende 213). Most of his desires aren't that great and he comes very close to that miserable demise.

...it is only after a long and painful process of learning, during which he loses his friends and forgets even his own name, that he realizes this is a moral injunction not just to blindly follow his own desires, but the deepest, truest wishes of his heart... (Hiley 132)

Ultimately what he really wants is to have a relationship with his father and to be loved by him and remembered by him. He doesn't recognize that though, until he goes through all of his desires, almost loses himself, and finally finds his last wish. Near the end, he does start to have desires that bring him closer and closer to that ultimate desire and he does go back to the real world changed.

Atreyu, Bastian's foil, and a subject of Fantastica, is given AURYN and is the one sent to travel all over Fantastica to bring Bastian to Fantastica to give the Childlike Empress a brand new name. Atreyu is the classic hero. He is brave, loyal, determined, and willing to pass through every obstacle to reach his objective. In the real world, his exploits are read by Bastian who admires and desires to be like him. In going on the journey, Atreyu learns that his innermost

nature is who Bastian is, though to all appearances, they are opposite each other on the outside. Atreyu means the “Son of All” and Bastian considers himself the son of no one. Atreyu and Bastian become connected at this point and are able to help each other through the ordeals they much pass through. Atreyu and Bastian both forget everything about themselves at one point and require the other to save them from not fulfilling their objectives of saving the world and saving themselves. Atreyu forgets everything in order to get through a magical gate to bring Bastian into Fantastica, save the Childlike Empress and get rid of the nothing. He forgets his mission and his identity in the process. In this forgetful state there was a moment when he almost wandered away from his next step and lost everything. The only reason Atreyu was successful was with encouragement from Bastian on the outside of the book, for Atreyu to continue and go through the last magical gate. Once Bastian has made it to Fantastica, he forgets his entire identity piece by piece as he makes wishes. He was saved eventually by Atreyu vouching for him when his name was required to go through the door to reenter his own world once more.

In the end, Bastian becomes a changed person by his interaction with “The Neverending Story” and took that with him as he moved on with his life and he continued that story as he lived his life. Many people when they read a story that touches and moves them, it becomes part of their life as well in the form of folklore. People live by stories that create their identity or stories they are inspired by and connect with. These stories become part of the world of the audience and part of reality. For example, cosplay has become a form where audience members interact with their favorite books, movies, and TV shows by making costumes and dressing up as their favorite characters. The characters have become part of their lives. It even goes so far that cosplayers get together to dress up like characters to help bring excitement and happiness to other people (Ruiz). As stories and folklore are perpetuated, they become a new kind of truth as

people live their lives according to those things. The stories people encounter become a part of their own personal life story by their interaction with it.

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