Title: Japanese Fairy Tales

Author: Lafcadio Hearn (Koizumi Yakumo 小泉八雲)

Place of Publication and Publisher: Tokyo, T. Hasegawa

Publication Date: 1898-1922

UBC Library Call Number: PZ6 1898 H427

UBC Library Permalink: http://resolve.library.ubc.ca/cgi-bin/catsearch?bid=940351
The words seemed very polite; but as she saw that the little men were only teasing and laughing at her. Then she knew they were little devils, and became so frightened that she could not even cry out. They danced around her until morning, then they all vanished suddenly.

She was ashamed to tell anybody what had happened, because, as she was the wife of a great lord, she did not wish anybody to know how frightened she had been.
Title: The Tale of Ginger and Pickles

Author: Beatrix Potter

Place of Publication and Publisher: London, F. Warne

Publication Date: n.d.

UBC Library Call Number: PZ4.9.P47 Tag

UBC Library Permalink: http://resolve.library.ubc.ca/cgi-bin/catsearch?bid=1049627
Title: What the Blackbird Said: a story in four chirps

Author: Frederick Locker

Place of Publication and Publisher: London, George Routledge and Sons

Publication Date: 1881

UBC Library Call Number: PZ6 1881 L624
UBC Library Permalink: http://resolve.library.ubc.ca/cgi-bin/catsearch?bid=889767
THE THREE FRIENDS—THE ROBIN, THE ROOK, AND THE BLACKBIRD.
Title: The Water Babies: A Tale for a Land Baby
Author: Charles Kingsley
Place of Publication and Publisher: London, Macmillan
Publication Date: 1869
UBC Library Call Number: PZ6 1869 .K548
UBC Library Permalink: http://resolve.library.ubc.ca/cgi-bin/catsearch?bid=153540
Stop for a second and grab a book, any book that’s near you. I know you’ve got a lot, and they can’t be very far away, because, after all, most of us are stuck in quarantine for the time being. And yes, I’ll give you a second to find one … now go!

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I assume you’ve got one? Great. Let the book rest in your hands for a moment, close your eyes and pay attention to the book as you flip it from top to bottom, side to side, hand to hand.

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Did you notice it? The texture of the cover as it slid across your palm and your fingers? How did it feel during the brief moment that your fingers slid along the spine of the book, or when they dangerously dragged across the book’s sharp collection of pages? Did you become lost in the uniform texture of the book’s casing? Perhaps you felt grounded, realizing that what pushes upon your hands is the weight of every letter, thought, grain and speck of dust, which fatedly found itself lying between each cover. Some of you probably feel silly, sitting alone, or with others, tossing a book around with your eyes closed.

No matter, I have even sillier investigations for us to do. Open the book and run your hands across the grain of the page. Great. Now hold the book perpendicular to a lamp. When the light hits the grain, does it cast shadows across the page? Or does it create a gradient? Now keep the book open and hold it up to your eyes. Do the pages stretch across your vision as elegant arches, or do they droop down lazily into your palms?

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Finally, and this is the most important part, hold the book up to your nose and take a whiff.

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Ok, that last part was a joke. But we need to feel a little silly anyways, because, after all, we’re about to talk about fairy tales, and to talk about fairy tales, we need to step away from the all too serious “real world” for a little bit.
I am glad you all have learned how to properly become acquainted with your books, because it will allow you to understand how I have become acquainted with all of the fairy tales listed above. My analysis of these fairy tales does not pay attention to their plots. In fact, I have not even read the majority of these fairy tales, approaching them solely from the perspective of physical, and visual, experience. My hope is that readers of these short musings can more greatly appreciate the physicality of books themselves, and the way that a book interacts with its surrounding environment. To analyze the various dimensions of the reading experience, I often compare the very different printing and drawing styles of both British and Japanese fairy tales.

When putting together my collection, I tried to find books of various sizes. *The Tale of Ginger and Pickles* and *Beauty and the Beast* are both pocket-sized books, while the other fairy tales are the size of a regular book. When I investigated each book in a similar way to what we just did, I became aware of many minute distinctions. While appreciating smaller books, the distractions of the real world come to the fore. The presence of one’s hand on the page is much more prominent; and one must move the book closer and farther to properly see the images. Ultimately, the surrounding world becomes very distracting as it encroaches upon the boundaries of the book and its images. For these reasons, one must struggle to project themselves into the fairy tale. The escape from life, the illusion of fantasy that was so highly valued in the Victorian era is largely lost in such an experience. Admittedly, however, there are some things about tiny, pocket-sized books that make them seem more fantastical and fairy-tale-like. Though the reader may have trouble becoming visually immersed in a pocketbook, the lightness of such books, how they barely press against your hands as you read, and how they can be transported anywhere with ease, contributes greatly to the fairy tale’s magic. Moreover, the book itself becomes a representation of the fairy-tale’s oddness. The abnormal size of the book, much like the abnormal size of Alice as she shrinks and grows in Wonderland, juxtaposes the book’s existence against the ordinariness of everyday objects. In other words, the book itself becomes something that is apart.

The next thing I analyzed is paper texture. Here is where we see a large contrast between the British fairy tales and the Japanese ones. Hearn’s Japanese Fairy Tales are printed on a crepe-like paper, which, much like the pocket-sized fairy tales, forces the book to interact more intimately with its surrounding environment. To more deeply understand the function of this
crepe paper on our experience of the fairy tales, I call upon Tanizaki Jun’ichiro’s In Praise of Shadows. In this essay, Jun’ichiro, a famous Japanese novelist, laments the light that western technology shines upon traditional Japanese aesthetics. He argues that Japanese aesthetics are best appreciated in a “dim half-light” (Jun’ichiro 8), which creates “a world of confusion where dark and light are indistinguishable” (Jun’ichiro 14). Imagine how the crepe paper of the Japanese fairy tales may fit within the aesthetic that Jun’ichiro describes. If you flip through these fairy tales in a dimly lit room, the first thing you would notice is how the ridges in the pages cast a thousand, tiny, spider-like shadows across each page and each illustration. As you move the page, the shadows dance and flicker, and the book becomes alive in your hands, each page slithering through the darkness. The beauty of the texture is only magnified by the flimsiness of the page, which forces the book’s position to be different every moment, creating constantly unpredictable kaleidoscopes of shadow. The illustrations, too, drawn in a traditional style which avoids shading and produces flat colours, sacrifice their own shadows in order to allow the beauty of the page itself to come forth. Surely, the British fairy tales do not fit in this aesthetic: the rigidity of the pages makes their position more predictable; the smooth texture does not give life to the same plethora of shadows; and any shading in the book is already embedded in the illustrations themselves.

Another thing that blossoms within the contrasting textures of the Japanese and British fairy tales is the existence of the reader and the illustrator. As you turn the page of Hearn’s fairy tales, and as the book sags, molding itself into your hands, the resulting shadows intimately reflect your own body. Within each page and illustration, you experience a constant blooming of the self, the dark shadows becoming almost mirror-like. Contrarily, in the British fairy tales, we can more clearly feel the presence of the illustrator. The rigidity of the pages and their smooth surfaces allow the illustrator’s drawing to appear on the page uniformly. We could say that each image presents itself similarly to every reader, regardless of location. The few small differences that may exist most likely arise from a lack of uniformity in printing practices, or from the aging of the book.

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Hello.

Yes, I’m back, and I want you to grab your book again. Feel its weight, notice its texture, put it through the test once more.

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Did you find the experience different this time? I find it is so mind-boggling and mysterious that the exact same thing—the exact same book, or movie, or illustration—can approach our conscious over and over again and seem so different each time. The existence of the self in art and in the fairy tale is undeniable. What I find interesting is that British and Japanese fairy tales both make room for the reader, even if they do it in different ways. With regards to British fairy tales, people such as George MacDonald write criticism that gives the reader a place in fairy tales. On the other hand, in Japanese fairy tales, the physicality of the book itself emphasizes the reader’s presence. But, what I think I was getting at in the playful opening to my analysis is that: It does not matter whether or not someone has made room for you. If you want to see yourself in a fairy tale, you can—you need only introduce yourself to the book in your hands, and watch closely as it reflects your smile back at you.
Works Cited