

TO WEAVE A WORLD

Walter Wangerin, Jr.

One: Snow White, How Story Interprets the World

When I was a child, I spoke as a child; I understood as a child. When I became a man I may have put away childish things—but the man I became was shaped in childhood, and that shape remains forever.

Fairy tales shaped me. I have since "put them away." That is, the adult is a mostly rational creature, aware that fairy tales are not "real," but are a fantasy, an entertaining escape from the problems of the real world. As a man, I make such tales an object of my attention and maintain an analytical control over them: I read them. I interpret them; they don't interpret me. I master the tales, placing them within my memory and my experience exactly where I wish them to be.

Fairy tales dwell within the adult.

But as a child all full of wonder I approached the fairy tale as something real indeed. Children meet the problems of the world not with their logical minds, but with their imaginations, and the fairy tale honors and feeds and abets the imagination. I accepted its invitation myself to enter it—and there I dwelt: within the tale which, in fact, *did* interpret me. As a child I felt the tale; I sank inside it; I lived its composed experience from "Once upon a time" to "happily ever after." I *lived* the solution to which the tale had walked me, the whole of me, my mind, my emotions, my senses, my bone, my self.

The fairy tale was like a well-built house which I inhabited safe and strong and significant. The problems outside didn't vanish when I entered the house; but its walls protected me from immediate danger.

More wonderfully, when viewed through the windows of the fairy tale, those "real world" problems shrank to proportions equal to my child's size, and I discovered marvelous ways to triumph over them. And the shape of the house (when it was truly experienced, primally experienced) became the shape of the exterior universe when finally I stepped outside again. By the art of the tale and by the power of my magic imagination, the tale that interpreted me had

also interpreted and ordered the world around me. I became a citizen and a survivor in an otherwise confusing universe—and sometimes, even, a hero.

* * *

Real world problems? Seeking a storied solution?

Once upon a time, my mother was the problem.

She, the largest figure of my real world, was beautiful beyond my deserving, and I loved her. I, the oldest of all her children, would truly have died for her, could it assure her happiness. But things were not so simple, and I despaired of solving the problem of my mother ... until a tale revised my comprehension of the world and persuaded me of the secret of mothers in general.

Here's the problem:

In an evening darkness my mother would come to tuck me in bed. At any time there was tremendous comfort in the experience. But on those nights when she had dressed to go out I grew dizzy in the glory of her presence, all my senses alert to her beauty. When she sat on the side of my bed, her weight dipped the mattress, and I rolled against her. I felt her warmth. I felt the coolness of her hand upon my cheek. I heard the murmurous quality of her voice. I smelled the sacred cloud of perfume that surrounded her.

"Good night. Wally. Good night."

She had midnight hair, deep red lipstick. We prayed together, and then she would lean down and kiss me on the center of my forehead. Woman of mystery, going forth to possess the night.

That kiss was a medallion, reassuring me. If I sought proofs of her love in her absence, I would slip from bed and run to the bathroom mirror, there to see the red smack of her lips upon my flesh. Yes. She loved me.

How many mornings, then, didn't I wander downstairs to seek my queen, forgetful of the problem which every morning I encountered?

Mother is in the kitchen, at the counter, stuffing lunch bags. Her bathrobe is snagged and ratty, her hair wild, her heels hard, her gestures abrupt.

"Mom?" I say, anticipating kindness.

No answer. Siblings are hushed. I should take the hint. I don't.

"Mom, do you know where my sock is?"

And she erupts.

"What am I, your slave? I should, what? You tell me, Wally: what should I do? Do everything for you? You're lazy and you're late!" Her cheeks are white with anger, her mouth stiff.

I say, "But—"

She snaps: "If you'd keep your room clean, you wouldn't *lose* your socks!"

"But, I—"

"Don't you *but* me, mister! One more *but* and I'm liable to—"

What my mother is liable to do is terrifying. She's liable to say, "Come here," then, "Take off your glasses," because she doesn't want to break them when she slaps me.

I *but* her no more *buts*, though I have several yet to go.

"You've got fifteen minutes, mister. If you're not dressed and ready in fifteen minutes, I'm leaving without you. You'll walk to school."

I don't find the sock. Trembling, I cannot find the sock.

My mother keeps her promise. I hear the car whining backward down the driveway, shifting, roaring off to school, while I sit on the side of my bed, filled with a diffused guilt, lonely in the universe.

When she returns and finds me sitting so, she drags the whole bed away from the wall and points to a spot between the wall and the bedpost. There is my sock.

I dress.

When I'm ready to go, my mother gives me a note for my teacher.

Amazingly, I find my way through town to school.

The entire class turns to look at me when I creep in the door. I give the teacher the note. She reads it, then glares at me.

"So," she says, "your mother says you are not sick. Your tardiness is your own fault."

* * *

As long as my mother was unsolvable, so was the whole world an impossible complexity to me, and a dangerous place besides. Cause and consequence had no connections I could trust. I withheld myself from the treacheries of friendship. I listened to everyone, but spoke to no one.

Then one day the teacher read aloud a fairy tale whose fiction I genuinely entered, whose events I believed and experienced as my own, whose world resolved my own most troubled world—and (as a child, by the marvel of imagination) I did at last understand my mother. I was set free to love her again without fear.

Allow me to recount some of the details of this fairy tale; they are the images which invited my full experience precisely because they were familiar to me. They crossed both worlds, the tale's and my own. They became my doorway:

A queen sits in the casement of a high window, sewing and sighing. She sighs for the lack of a child. She yearns to mother a child. The casement is ebony black. A cold snow is falling, pillowing the sill in white.

As she sews, the queen pricks her finger. Three drops of blood print the snow with crimson.

"Oh, let me have a child," the queen prays to heaven. "Let me bear a child with lips as red as blood and cheeks as white as snow and hair as black as ebony."

It is absolutely certain this queen will love completely and forever. I know her. I know her perfume, and I give her my own complete devotion. And when God grants her the child of her heart and her prayer, I am not surprised: I recognize the baby, too.

But then the good queen dies.

And soon, too soon, the king marries another woman, a second one to raise the child who is as beautiful as the first mother was. But this mother is wicked. She talks to herself. And her Self answers from the depths of a mirror.

"Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of us all?"

The image in the mirror answers. "You are," and the wicked mother is content—but only for a while.

Because, as the child grows, so does the child's beauty, until it surpasses the beauty of the wicked second mother.

"Who is the fairest?" now she asks.

And the image in the mirror responds with flat truth: "Snow White is the fairest."

Snow White: the child of the first mother, the godly mother, the one who died.

Oh, how the second mother howls at the knowledge, which must accuse her even as it diminishes her! Cheeks white with anger; a mouth gone stiff—I know this woman, too! I meet

her often in the mornings, and suddenly I understand (as a child understands these things) her changes and her rages.

For I am Snow White, imprinted with the enduring, deep red beauty of the first mother forever, for hadn't *she* borne me, and hadn't she placed her crimson emblem upon me?

So this was the freedom that I carried back into the "real" world. (I am neither exaggerating nor fabricating for the sake of an argument; I am in fact reporting the genuine effect upon me which the fairy tale had, although I did not then reduce the effect to analytic words as I do now.) My liberation came in the fantastic revelation that I had not one, but two mothers. As I parsed it I had a Mother of the Evening who loved me truly and well, whose beauty I shared, but who disappeared (died) not once only, but night after night. And I had a Mother of the Morning who possessed a different nature altogether, and who probably saw in me (the child of both) the beauty, the godliness and the goodness, of that other mother who was (well, *look* at me!) more beautiful than she.

Now, if the accusatory angers of the Mother of the Morning came because I was a reminder (merely a reminder) of a better mother (of my own mother's better self, the psychologist might explain today), why, then, *it was not my fault after all!* I did not have to accept a crippling guilt. The wickedness here rested altogether in the "stepmother," not the real mother; therefore. I could endure her mistaken criticisms of me; and I could love; I was set free to love completely and without fear; I needed only to wait till the Mother of the Evening reappeared—as surely she did, again and again throughout my childhood, for my mother *did* love me, and I was her son of a certainty.

Even so did I peer at the "real" world through the windows of a fairy tale. Even so did I find a certain fantastic sense in nonsense, and the sense preserved me. As I have indicated, this explanation is more subtle than I could think it through as a child. But that's the point: I didn't think it through. I lived it.

And I knew even then, on some functional level, that Snow White was "just" a fairy tale, and that I was engaged in a serious pretense. But the comfort it afforded me was actual. What the story *accomplishes* is as real as faith—or as the effects of psychiatric therapy. In those days I loved the better for it, walked the freer, *was* a better, healthier son and child.

* * *

Two: Lily, Entering the Story

“The child,” writes Bruno Bettelheim in *The Uses of Enchantment*, “is subject to desperate feelings of loneliness and isolation, and he often experiences mortal anxiety. More often than not, he is unable to express those feelings in words, or he can do so only by indirection.”

Mortal anxiety: the sense of loss and endings. A suspicion of death. And then, surely, a cold encounter with death, when it enters the child's life as fact (whether suddenly or slowly, it doesn't matter). The wall against which life must crash ...

It's my intent in the second half of this essay to anatomize the process by which children enter, stage by stage, the world which a fairy tale has woven for them—until, finally, the tale becomes their own most personal experience, reshaping (in this case) a mortal anxiety so that they *can* attend to it, to death, without being overwhelmed. The story must not deceive them! It cannot pretend there is no death where children have truly encountered death (as parents so often, in tenderness, try to do). But it can empower them.

In order to describe the general process of entering in, let me first present the particular context in which and for which *Lily* was created. It will give an illustrative substance to stages that must otherwise seem abstract.

* * *

On Tuesday the twenty-second of December, Miz Odessa Williams died of a cancer. She was elderly. Her own death was not untimely nor in other ways extraordinary—at least not to me, an adult and the pastor of the small congregation where she held membership. I had by then sat by many a bedside of the sick, stood by many a graveside of the dead.

On the other hand, as death itself is extraordinary to the living and the loving, and as *this* death was the first into which several children in our church had crashed heedless and headlong, it was to them scoundrel, monstrous, astounding.

My young daughter Mary, Dee Dee Lawrence, Herman Thomas, Timmy Moore, and three or four others had sung Christmas carols to her in the hospital just two days earlier. Miz Williams had responded with such frowning pleasure and praise, that the children had

straightaway fallen in love with her. (I've written about that particular event elsewhere, the short story called "The Manger Is Empty" in the book *In the Days of the Angels*.) What a child loves, of course—especially when it is an older person—it becomes something like the polar star in that child's life. She orients herself by it. It is the very familiarity of her days.

But Odessa, fresh in the hearts of these children, died.

On Thursday morning at eleven o'clock we memorialized her with a funeral. The children attended. Before the service I accompanied my daughter Mary forward to the open casket, where the child gazed on the corpse, then touched Odessa's hand with the bare tip of her finger, then suddenly turned to me and burst into tears. Accusing tears. "It's Christmas Eve!" Mary cried, pressing her face into my stomach. "You're going to put Miz Williams in the ground on Christmas *Eve!*"

As quickly as she started, she stopped. My little daughter pinched her face, walked back to the pew where her mother was sitting, sat, folded her arms across her chest, and poked out her bottom lip.

She gave every sign of being angry.

So did Dee Dee. And Herman and Timmy.

During the service and the sermon that followed, others nodded and wept, dissolved, responded, made the moves of a gentle grief—walked with me the way of sorrow and healing.

But the children sat stuck, *un*-moving and unmoved. Angry, so it seemed to me, yet unexpressive of anger or of anything else.

Come the following Sunday, some of them were still continuing that shut-up behavior. I tried to talk with them, but they wouldn't respond with their true feelings, and I began to wonder whether there wasn't a streak of fear across their spirits. Anger in children can, by its surprising force, frighten them. But what if the anger is spontaneously turned against the greatest mysteries and the greatest authorities they know? The church. The pastor. God. What then? What retribution must follow *that* sort of insolence?

Well, so it occurred to me that the children were afraid to express their truer feelings, even to themselves, and that permission for this natural resentment should somehow be communicated to them.

Prepositional language doesn't cut it, where children are concerned. It isn't enough to kneel before them (to kneel down as adults who are, after all, "ignorant" of the intensity of the fires within them) and to say, "It's okay. Go ahead and be angry."

Story, on the other hand, can ambush them. Story can walk them *without* retributive consequences to death and to rage and *through* the most sweet release of rage, to blessed conclusions—even before they have recognized exactly what in particular the tale is about.

So I made up the story now called "Lily."

On the following Sunday, in place of a formal sermon, I announced that I would be talking to the children, though adults could listen in if they wished. It was a simpler version I told them that day, but the elements were much the same as they are in this book. When I said that Marigold thought of herself as a "knockout," they laughed. Oh. How dearly I had coveted that laughter, because it is precisely this, laughter, which proves the involvement of the *entire* child in the world the fairy tale is weaving around her: spirit and mind and body and lungs and humor. But more than involvement, laughter proves (permits) in them a sense of superiority over and against the evils which this story will confront. Laughter can be more than humor. Laughter can be a sharp gesture of contempt.

And when I said that the "Murderer" was coming, who could kill by kissing (an honest grotesquerie, as we cannot be *dishonest* with the images that must comprehend the deeper feelings of the child), I asked: "Who is the Murderer?"

Wonderfully, the children called out, "Winter!" though I had not given the name away. Yes, they were in it. Yes, it comported with the details of their daily experience.

But the whole purpose of the tale (as far as I was concerned on that particular Sunday) was to bring them to the point where they could, with Lily (with whom they identified, for all children consider themselves the youngest, the third, the most putdown), look death in the face and cry, "I hate you! I hate you!"

At that point in the tale I invited the cry.

And cry out they did: "I hate you, Murderer! I hate you, Death!"

I concluded the Lily story slightly differently then: I told the children that come *Easter* I could take them to that northern forest and I could show them the white blossom in which there trebled a waterdrop, which was no dewdrop, but the tear of life and love and gladness again.

It is, after all, central to our faith that we can hold death in vile contempt, freely and powerfully able to cross-examine it down to a maundering silence: "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"

* * *

In fact, after a long career of telling children serious or silly stories, I am convinced that those who heard "Lily" that Sunday did not all enter it to the same depth, nor with the same personal intensity. Some went very deep. Some laughed, as it were, at the surface.

One of the most wholesome characteristics of the fairy tale is that each child can and will (albeit unconsciously) choose the level of reality at which he or she shall experience the tale. In other words, "Lily" can be mere fun on a Sunday morning, if that's all the child is prepared to experience at that point. Or, if the spirit of the child needs to and is emboldened to go deeper, "Lily" may be a personal, real encounter with death: at one level, death in general; at the deepest level, *this* death, the death of Odessa Williams. There is a natural safety factor in this form of communication, the fairy tale, fantasy, because it is the child's spirit that chooses the depth.

Roughly, I have found some six levels at which a child might experience a story like "Lily" or "Hansel and Grethel" or "Cinderella" or "Jack and the Beanstalk," and so forth. And one reason why children will ask for certain stories to be told over and over and *over*, is that they are dwelling within the place of the tale—and are moving deeper and deeper into it, as their spirits grow the more ready.

1. The story is a pleasant diversion. It isn't real. It is, in fact, a break from one's real life, like milk and cookies in the middle of the day, or like the twirl a father might give his little daughter, grabbing her hands and spinning her until they laugh together. It's an opportunity for companionship, for jokes and smiles, for a lightweight flight of imagination; but it's the fun that leaves the impression thereafter, not the tale itself.

2. The second level involves the child's admission of the general truth of the tale, that it has a sort of universal value: it is, she realizes, despite its fantastic elements, compatible with her own experiences. Yes, people are like this. Yes, these exaggerations are not just "made up." They represent things she has seen and felt and experienced abroad.

At this level she is paying attention to the story itself, not just to the teller and the fun of it all. On the other hand, she maintains a personal distance from its particularities (Hansel and Grethel's mother is *their* mother and in no way signals to the listening child her own or any mother she has ever met).

3. At the third level the child, conscious of her own selfness, perceives parallels between that self and the protagonist. There may be a mirroring quality to this relationship: the child remains the listener outside the tale, but at the same time "sisters" it with the child inside the tale, walks *with* her, as it were, but not yet with-*in* her. This is, surely, the beginning of identification. It is its own level of delightful, but earnest and concentrated "watching," as when children watch, say, fish in a tank, their spirits playing with the notion of seeing life through the fish's eyes, their mouths already making pop-pop-pop gestures.

But there still remains the film of separation between the listening child and the hero—and story still is story.

4. This is a transitional stage. When she is ready, she allows this stage to happen in an instant, whether at the first time she hears the tale, or at the thirteenth. *When she is ready*: she chooses. It is a discrete act accomplished by the child herself. Such is the proof of an emerging and independent personhood. And something like a living covenant is thereby established between herself and the story: what the story now becomes, it becomes at *her* volition.

What is the stage and the transition? The listening child releases her whole self into the tale. She enters the protagonist. Suddenly its setting, its populations, its narrative statutes and limits are altogether her world. And presently her personal history, her time—all the time of the outer world—spirals into the time and sequence of this world. This isn't so much the suspension of disbelief, as it is the present shape and behavior of all belief.

5. In consequence, the child assents to the particular experiential effects of this story. She wears the story like a glove, and now it becomes her own genuine experience.

The protagonist's actions are her actions. The words are her own, giving voice to notions and emotions she could not otherwise have uttered. As the narrative events flow, they bear her along like a chip in a river. The mothers *are* her mothers, the problems and the disasters are hers in the sufferance, even as the solutions (so often in fairy tales discovered within the protagonist, having lain there in secret all along) are likewise hers.

6. And sometimes the child's trust in the tale may go so far that she is no longer conscious of an external, listening, experiencing self. No longer does she "wear the story like a glove," as if there might yet be one degree of separation. The subject/object polarity (where once she was a subject reacting to, or else acting upon, the object of the story) is lost in perfect singularity. When the child utters word-for-word what the parent reads, she isn't speaking in unison with her parent or with the story, two voices *like* one; this is the *one* voice finding place in the child's own mouth.

Elements of her "real" life finally exist (and, for the story is duration, only exist) within the precincts of this tale.

The story is the temple, the child at devotions within it.

There is a remarkable passage in Deuteronomy 5:2-5, in which Moses utters a chronological impossibility as if it were the *only* possibility. To the children of Israel, about to cross the Jordan into the promised land; to Israelites who were born in the wilderness and who could therefore not have experienced in person the presence of God at the holy mountain in Horeb, Moses says: "The Lord our God made a covenant with us in Horeb." Now comes the comment that cannot be squared with mundane history: "Not with our fathers did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive this day. The Lord spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the midst of fire...."

In Hebrew these words have a rhythmic, liturgical effect. They seem to have been recited over and over again down the ages by priests in celebration of the giving of the law, the Ten Commandments—which means that *often* those who could not have been physically at the mountain were told that, surely, they themselves had been at the mountain after all!

How do we interpret such an absurdity?

By recognizing the Hebrew's sense of sacred story. (Indeed, the sense that most oral cultures had regarding the telling of their epics, their myths and their histories.) When the story was being told, all time collapsed into *its* time; all time found purpose and meaning in its time; all human events received divine validation under *its* narrative events; a people experienced God again; and the past was thereby made present again—so that the hearers of the story were, truly, truly, there at the mountain, too.

No degree of separation.

No polarities.

Even so it may be for children crying out, "I hate you! I hate you, Death!"

Each one is speaking for herself and himself. *I* is each their "I." And *hate* is immediate hatred indeed. And Death is Death.

* * *

There was in my congregation at least one woman who remembered my stories and retold them when the times were right. Often I never wrote them down, feeling that they had served their purpose in the oral presentation. But Mary Ellen Phillips remembered. And Mary Ellen Phillips told them whenever she saw fit.

One day, nearly a year after I'd told "Lily" to the children, Mary Ellen came into my office with a tale of her own.

She had a niece, she told me, sixteen years old, the victim of a crippling disease. Rachel, who lived a great distance away from us, was confined to a wheelchair. In the course of several visitations, Mary Ellen had told Rachel the "Lily" story.

Recently Mary Ellen's sister had begged her please to come out for her daughter's sake. Rachel was grieving. She would neither eat nor speak with her family. She stayed in bed all day long, and the mother was at her wit's end.

Mary Ellen went, though she had no idea what she could do.

Rachel had loved a boy, also a teenager, also a quadriplegic, also bound to a wheelchair. One afternoon the boy's mother had wheeled him outside to take the air. She had parked the wheelchair on their back sidewalk facing away from the house, and had set the wheel lock.

But had not set it tight enough.

For after she had returned into the house, the chair began to roll downhill. It gathered speed. It hit a rut and slowly tipped over forward. This was the mildest of accidents. Yet when he landed facedown, something against the boy's windpipe shut off the air. And he suffocated to death.

This had been Rachel's beloved. His death was inexplicable. And horrid in her heart.

Mary Ellen told me that she arrived at her sister's house helpless, with no idea what to say or to do. She went into Rachel's bedroom. She sat down on Rachel's bed and looked at her. The child's lips were bitten and white.

But then it was Rachel herself who said, "Tell me 'Lily.'"

This request revived Mary Ellen. She had something to do, something to say to her niece. She told the tale all over again.

"Haw!" Rachel laughed with bitterness at Marigold. And "Haw!" at Bean Plant's pleading for life.

Later that same day, Rachel asked to hear "Lily" again.

And again.

Something within her needed the fairy tale, the way we sometimes crave salt, not understanding why.

But the child herself was not yet ready.

Until the next to the last day of Mary Ellen's visitation.

"Tell me 'Lily,'" Rachel demanded once more.

And this time, just as Bean Plant and Marigold were kissed by winter, Rachel burst into tears. She bowed her head and cried and cried. Finally, she had been ready to enter the story at the sixth level, personally and completely. And those deaths were not different—were in no way separate—from the death of her boyfriend.

* * *

Several years ago Mary Ellen Phillips hearkened back to that experience for me and added a postscript: that Rachel had since made the tale her own. That now she used it when others around her suffered the death of somebody dear.

When a story works, it becomes its own thing. It travels. It doesn't need its original author anymore.

But it *does* want a teller still.

And a child in need.