

Vous écoutez Imaginary Worlds, une émission sur la façon dont nous les créons et pourquoi nous suspendons notre incrédulité. Je suis Eric Molinsky.

Those of you who subscribe to the show's newsletter, you know that I'm learning French – or trying to. I had to look up some of those words. To help me learn, I've been watching American movies in French, with English subtitles. And I thought it would be fun to watch the Disney cartoons that take place in France in French – like *The Aristocats*, which I actually think is kind of a better movie in French.

CLIP: Everyone Want to be a Cat (in French)

Beauty and the Beast is great in French.

CLIP: Be Our Guest (in French)

I also watched Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty.

CLIP: Sleeping Beauty montage (in French)

Now I saw *Sleeping Beauty* when I was studying animation a long time ago. And back then, I was only focusing on the animation. This time, I was struck by the story.

The film has been criticized for having a passive protagonist. But I realized that *Sleeping Beauty* or *Briar Rose* or *Aurora* isn't really the protagonist. She doesn't have a lot of dialogue or screen time. For much of the movie, she's either a baby, or asleep. The real protagonists are her fairy godmothers: Merryweather, Flora and Fauna.

They temporarily suspend their powers to protect this girl. At first, it's a tactical choice. They know Maleficent could never imagine them doing something so good as making a self-sacrifice for someone they barely know. But they learn to love *Aurora* and that love makes them more human. In fact, the story becomes a proxy war between the good fairies and Maleficent. In the final battle, the prince has no dialogue. The fairies just hand him weapons and tell him what to do. They're kind of badass.

Gail Carson Levine wrote *Ella Enchanted*, which was one of her many novels that reimagine fairy tales with a modern perspective. And she agrees:

GAIL: In fairy tales they're all, very often the main characters are pawns. They just move where the story wants them to go. And all the agency belongs to the magical creatures. And sometimes the villains.

I came away with a newfound respect for fairy godmothers. And I started to wonder, have we not given them enough respect? I mean, why don't we put them in the same category of other mentor characters like Gandalf, Dumbledore or Yoda? And where did this archetype of the fairy godmother come from?

To answer that, we need to stick with our French theme and go to France in the late 17th century. Jeana Jorgensen teaches fairy tales and folklore at Butler University.

JEANA: There was a vogue in the court of Louis the XIV during his reign for writing fairytales, like intellectual, educated people would write fairytales and present them to one another at salons, along with poetry, music and so on. That's really where we see the figure of the fairy godmother emerging.

The term fairytale comes from a writer known as Madame D'Aulnoy. I assume they called her Madame D'Aulnoy because her full name is actually very long. Madame D'Aulnoy came up with the term *conte de fée* or fairy tales. She was part of a group of women in these writing salons. And their stories had:

JEANA: Fairy godmothers all over the place, good fairies, bad fairies, fairies all over the place. They played a lot of the supporting roles in the story who would be, you know, helper figures, sometimes antagonists and so on, that in other folk tale and fairy tale traditions across the world. You wouldn't necessarily have a fairy; you might have a sorcerers or an ogre or someone else fulfilling the same structural role in the story. So really, we can, we can blame this one on France.

Years ago I did an episode called Don't Mess with The Fairies which focused on fairies in British and Irish culture. And those fairies were not into helping people – quite the opposite. But in the fairy tales that Madame D'Aulnoy and her colleagues were writing:

ABIGAIL: They had a lot of fairies and fairy godmothers within their tales. And these fairies were very powerful women. And so, in a way, they acted as stand-ins for the female writers who were creating this literary fairy tale genre.

That is Abigail Fine. She is a PhD student. Jeana recommended we get in touch with her because Abigail is writing her dissertation on fairy godmothers. She has an encyclopedic knowledge of this subject.

Abigail says these writers were not only using fairy godmothers as stand-ins for themselves, they were part of a larger culture war.

ABIGAIL: And so, there is this big thing happening in France at the time called the battle between the ancients and moderns. Mostly men in this era were saying like, we can never exceed or excel, uh, the ancient literature. And women were saying, yes, we can. They're the moderns. Um, and they're saying, we can do this because there are very few women represented in classical ancient literature.

They did have a male writer on their side, Charles Perrault.

ABIGAIL: He was one of the few men who were doing literary fairy tales in this milieu at the time.

If his name sounds familiar it's because Charles Perrault wrote the definitive version of Cinderella. And like many folk tales, Cinderella had been told in different ways in different cultures around the world for a long time. But Perrault set the template that we know today, and this story had a fairy godmother.

Madame D'Aulnoy and other female writers like Catherine Bernard were just as popular as Perrault. But his stories prevailed over time. He had the advantages of being a male writer, and he was well established in the royal court.

JEANA: The women had more scandalous lives. They were definitely being more socially transgressive by participating in written literature and so on.

And Jeana says, in terms of his stories:

JEANA: They were also very compact. Like Perrault stories are like short and a lot of the tales by the female contemporary like D'Aulnoy and Bernard and so on. They're long, they're convoluted, complex, like tons of like very eloquent description, a bit of like sarcasm and snark here and there. They don't have morals at the end. They don't all have happy endings. So stylistically they're quite different as well.

Hmm. But then in terms of the fairy godmother, is he still the one though that gets the credit?

JEANA: I don't know that anyone like, thinks about this often enough to say who gets the credit.

<laugh>

JEANA: Like in the general public, um. I mean, yeah, like D'Aulnoy and Perrault were basically writing at the same time for the most part. And she has fairy godmothers, and he has fairy godmothers. So they, it just kind of sort of like contemporaneous thing that everybody was, it was, it was in the air, everybody was writing it at the time.

These writers were also drawing on something else in the air. Today, we understand the concept of a godmother in terms of religious education or extended family. But in 17th century France – especially high society -- the fairy godmother was reflecting a very specific role for older women.

JEANA: For social advancement you needed a godmother or a patroness or a patron or someone who could help you navigate the social world as an up and coming young person. And that role ended up merging with that of the fairy and in some cases, witch and midwife. Like there was this whole sense of female figures who had some kind of power, sometimes otherworldly, sometimes medicinal, and it just kind of got all rolled into to one thing such that fairies became, um, someone that you would look up to and ask for help.

Abigail says this is the same role that male mentors typically play in the hero's journey. Like in Perrault's version of Cinderella:

ABIGAIL: Cinderella, when the fairy godmother shows up, is so distraught that she can barely speak. And of course, in France at this time, conversation is a big part of how you show that you are civilized, *civilit e*. The fairy godmother really guides Cinderella along. It's not, she does just give her things. Um, but she sort of makes Cinderella think like, what could we use for coachman? Oh, let me go get these lizards. Um, and then the first time that Cinderella really strongly uses her voice is when she is advocating for getting her ball gown.

Here is the actress Aliza Pearl reading from the Perrault tale.

The fairy then said to Cinderella, "Well, you see here an equipage fit to go to the ball with; are you not pleased with it?"

"Oh, yes," she cried; "but must I go in these nasty rags?"

Her godmother then touched her with her wand, and, at the same instant, her clothes turned into cloth of gold and silver, all beset with jewels. This done, she gave her a pair of glass slippers, the prettiest in the whole world.

ABIGAIL: The whole thing you can read as sort of the fairy godmother guiding her towards thinking for herself, towards creative problem solving and towards being able to use her voice.

Jeana thinks that's gotten lost in translation today.

JEANA: I feel like some of the invisibility of fairy godmothers as mentor figures might be due to how American and Western culture in general doesn't have a lot of use for older women. Like they're just kind of like set aside, disregarded a little bit. So yeah, I do think that the fairy godmother could be an older mentor role. And, and again, like in in 17th century of France, my sense is that the actual godmother or the social patroness, she would have done that. She would've had a very important advisory role for any younger women under her care.

There's another reason why the fairy godmother doesn't quite get that level of cultural respect. A lot of people have argued she helps the protagonists too much.

Gail Carson Levine thinks that made sense in the 17th century. Imagine you're not in high society. You don't have access to a patroness. And then you read fairy tales like Cinderella.

GAIL: They reflect a time when people didn't have a whole lot of agency. And so, when you have a problem that you can't figure out, like you're starving, that you can't figure out how to solve, the fairy sweeps in.

But today, wishing for a fairy godmother might send the wrong message.

GAIL: And when you wish upon a star, you don't do the work. When you give the characters agency, things start to happen.

Abigail says the fairy godmother has gotten swept up in a backlash against damsel-in-distress stories.

ABIGAIL: And it seems like the fairy godmother becomes an extension of that. If she's not waiting for the prince to rescue her, then she's just sitting around waiting for a fairy godmother and she does nothing and she doesn't lift a finger to help herself.

That hasn't stopped people from telling stories with fairy godmothers. In fact, there have been a lot of retellings of Cinderella and other classic tales, which take into account this criticism. In fact they have given the fairy godmother her own magic makeover.

BREAK

I think for a lot of people, when you say fairy godmother, the first thing they might think of is the character from the 1950 Disney film Cinderella. And for good reason. Abigail says, there weren't a lot of depictions of fairy godmothers in the movies before then.

ABIGAIL: Then the fairy godmother sort of solidifies as this elderly woman who is kindly maybe a little bit, uh, absent-minded and nonsense language-y, bippiti-boppiti-boo.

FAIRY GODMOTHER: What in the world did I do with that magic wand, I was sure...

CINDERELLA: Magic wand?

FAIRY GODMOTHER: That's strange. I always...

CINDERELLA: Why then, you must be....

FAIRY GODMOTHER: Your fairy godmother? Of course.

And that's how the character stayed in the popular imagination for decades.

One of the first major reinterpretations came in 1997 with the novel *Ella Enchanted* by Gail Carson Levine. It's a reimagining of Cinderella, now called Ella. And when she was a kid, Gail loved fairy tales like Cinderella.

GAIL: You know, I was a romantic even then. The prince picked this schlub of a girl out of nowhere and loved her. She didn't do anything to earn that love. And I didn't see how a prince would love me unless he could discern something that nobody else could see. So, I was very drawn to them for, I think now, looking back for that reason.

Yeah, I mean that's where the fairy godmother comes in as well, because it's sort of like, okay, well the prince can't see the inner you, but let's just fix up a few things that will allow the prince to get past his class snobbery to see you.

GAIL: Exactly. Yeah. Yeah. So, I think that's, you know, I was eight years old, what Prince, you know, it wasn't so I loved them. I loved them.

Jump ahead several decades. She's starting her career writing children's books. And she decides to go back and look at those fairy tales she loved as a kid. What she found was.... weird.

GAIL: You know, like the prince and Snow White falls in love with Snow White when he thinks she's dead.

But that opens up a world of narrative possibilities.

GAIL: I love fooling around with the illogic in fairytales.

And when she re-read Cinderella for the first time as an adult.

GAIL: I didn't understand Cinderella. I didn't understand why she's so kind and sweet to the, that stepfamily that's nothing but mean to her. You know, I couldn't imagine her as anything but saccharin and false. So, I needed some reason that I could like her.

So, in her novel, Ella Enchanted, a fairy named Lucinda shows up and casts a spell on Ella when she's a baby to make her compliant. Lucinda's intentions are good. Ella is a fussy baby and she's trying to help Ella's mother. But after Ella's mother dies, this spell of obedience becomes a curse because anyone can tell Ella what to do. This is from the 2004 film version with Anne Hathaway. Ella is trying to get through a school lesson.

HATTIE: Just admit you're stupid and don't know what you're talking about.

ELLA: I'm stupid and I don't know what I'm talking about.

TEACHER: Ella?

ELLA: In conclusion....

HATTIE: Hold your tongue, Ella.

TEACHER: Ella!

<kids laugh>

But if Lucinda's spell is the cause of Ella's problems, Gail needed to create another fairy godmother to help her. That's how she came up with the character of Mandy. Unlike Lucinda, Mandy doesn't just suddenly appear out of nowhere. She is actually the family cook who had been keeping her fairy powers a secret until Ella needed her.

GAIL: Ella has no help. Once her mother dies, there's nobody. So, Mandy can be in her corner. And Lucinda is so crazy that she couldn't be the fairy godmother. She couldn't be the support and I wanted her to have somebody.

Mandy can't take on Lucinda -- otherwise the story would be a battle of the fairies and Ella wouldn't be an active protagonist.

GAIL: That's why I made up the idea of small magic and big magic. And actually, it's something I love because there are obviously unseen consequences of every act. Mandy uses it to make her cooking better and to make healing soup. And the fairies make these trifles that do little magical things that are charming, but they don't step in and right the ship or, um, end a drought. That's the example that Mandy uses.

"We don't do big magic. Lucinda's the only one. It's too dangerous."

Here is Aliza Pearl reading from the book.

"What's dangerous about ending a storm?"

"Maybe nothing, maybe something. Use your imagination."

I thought. "The grass needs rain. The crops need rain."

"More," Mandy said.

"Maybe a bandit was going to rob someone, and he isn't doing it because of the weather."

"That's right. Or maybe I'd start a drought, and then I'd have to fix that because I started it. And then maybe the rain I sent would knock down a branch and smash in the roof of a house, and I'd have to fix that too."

"That wouldn't be your fault. The owners should have built a stronger roof."

"Maybe, maybe not. Or maybe I'd cause a flood and people would be killed. That's the problem with big magic. I only do little magic. Good cooking, my curing soup, my tonic."

"When Lucinda cast the spell on me, was that big magic?"

“Of course, it was. The numskull!” Mandy scoured a pot so hard that it clattered and banged against the copper sink.

“Tell me how to break the spell. Please, Mandy.”

“I don’t know how. I only know it can be done.”

A lot of modern interpretations have gone even further in exploring whether fairy godmothers are careless with their powers.

In Disney’s live action film, Maleficent, the three fairies from Sleeping Beauty are depicted as selfish and incompetent.

FLITTLE: You’re cheating.

THISTLEWIT: I saw that.

FLITTLE: We’re starting again.

KNOTGRASS: Suit yourself. Greedy, bloated goat!

(Laughter)

Maleficent ends up blurring the line between witch and fairy.

BRIAR ROSE: I know who you are.

MALEFICENT: Do you?

AURORA: You’re my fairy godmother!

In some versions, the fairy godmother is the actual villain – like in Shrek 2.

FAIRY GODMOTHER: If you remember, I helped you with your happily ever after, and I can take it away just as easily. And I can take it away just as easily. Is that what you want?

KING: No.

FAIRY GODMOTHER: Good boy.

Jeana Jorgensen likes stories about evil fairy godmothers.

JEANA: Yeah, the first thing that interests me is that the fairy godmother that gets enough of a backstory and a personality to be a villain in the first place that she gets to have a, a vendetta or a goal or something like that, that again, we, we don't see that in traditional fairytales as often as show up, test the protagonist to offer magical aid or maybe punish the antagonists if they're being selfish and terrible and then they go on

their way. So, the fact that we're getting an insight into the psychology of a character that's very rarely explored, I find that really interesting.

In contemporary novels, there have been a lot of dark fairy godmothers – like the novel *Cinderella is Dead* by Kalynn Bayron. To explain why this character is so unique, I have to give away a major spoiler. So if you don't want to know what it is, you can skip ahead a few minutes.

The novel takes place 200 years after Cinderella's death. The kingdom has become a dystopian world kind of like *The Handmaid's Tale*. The character of Amina seems to be playing the role of the fairy godmother to our heroine, Sophia. In fact, Amina claims that she was Cinderella's fairy godmother years earlier. Now she's helping Sophia confront the king to convince him to change the laws so Sophia can marry a woman instead of a man. Here's Abigail:

ABIGAIL: So, the protagonist is working with the fairy godmother to try to take down the king, and then in the end, you find out that the fairy godmother is in fact the king's biological mother and is working with him against the protagonist and this whole thing has been a setup. And I find that really fascinating because it's this idea that the fairy godmother engendered the patriarchy, like, quite literally is the mother of this patriarchal society.

Traditionally, the fairy godmother uses her powers to make the heroine into the wife of the king and the mother of a royal line – assuming that's what she wants, and that will make her happy.

ABIGAIL: The fairy godmother can either be this really feminist icon, uh, who's helping another woman who's helping somebody out of an abusive situation, or you could read her as somebody who is taking a woman and putting her back into a very heteronormative, patriarchal household structure.

In this selection from the book, Sophia and a character named Constance -- who is a descendant from one of Cinderella's stepsisters -- confront the king together. His name is King Manford. And to their surprise, Amina shows up.

The king waltzes over and plants a kiss on the top of Amina's head. "Oh, Mother, you never were a very good liar."

Mother.

No.

It can't be true.

"You've been working with him the entire time," Constance says.

"I didn't have to do much," Amina says. "You were already planning to come back to Lille. I just gave you a little push." She turns to Manford. "I must admit the things you said to me when you came to visit stung a little."

He puts his hand over his heart. "My temper got the better of me. I'm sorry about that, Mother, truly."

He doesn't sound sorry at all, but he smiles at her like he adores her, and my stomach turns over.

All this time, I thought her hesitancy was because she was ashamed, fearful. But it was a lie. Like the Cinderella story. Like the ball. Like everything.

Amina turns to her son. "Your impatience nearly ruined everything. Showing up like that. I told you I'd deliver her to you, but you didn't want to wait."

And that's not the only book to challenge the traditional norms.

Kissing the Witch by Emma Donahue is a collection of 13 interlocking fairy tales, starting with Cinderella. Once again, in order to explain what's groundbreaking about this story, I have to give away a big spoiler alert. So you can skip ahead a little bit if you don't want to know anything.

This version of the fairy godmother is good, just like the original tale. At first she follows all the traditional rules.

ABIGAIL: The fairy godmother sends her to three balls, which is more customary for early Cinderellas what happens. And after the last one, the prince is proposing to the protagonist and she's like, what am I doing? I don't want to be with the prince. I've realized actually who I love is this woman that's been helping me. And she runs out and the fairy godmother is like, oh, what are, what are you doing here? You've got your prince, right? You've got what you want. And she's like, no, no, I want you.

I had got the story all wrong. How could I not have noticed she was beautiful? I reached out.

I could hear surprise on her breath. "What about the shoe?" she asked.

"It was digging into my heel," I told her.

"What about the prince?" she asked.

"He'll find someone to fit, if he looks long enough."

"What about me?" she asked very low. "I'm old enough to be your mother."

"You're not my mother," I said. "I'm old enough to know that."

I threw the other shoe into the brambles, where it hung, glinting.

So, then she took me home, or I took her home, or we were both somehow taken to the closest thing.

Even if writers stick with the classic version of Cinderella where she gets her conventional ending, the Fairy Godmother doesn't have to be conventional.

In contemporary novels, there have been fairy godmother characters who are male, queer-coded or transgender. And in the live action Disney remake of Cinderella from 2021, the fairy godmother or The Fab G is played by Billy Porter.

FAB G: Let's not ruin this incredibly magical moment with reason. Do you want to go to that ball and meet a bunch of rich people who will change your life?

CINDERELLA: Yes, I was just crying and singing about it, like, two minutes ago.

FAB G: Okay so that would be an affirmative?

CINDERELLA: Yes.

FAB G: I can't hear you.

CINDERELLA: Yes!

FAB G: Like you mean it.

CINDERELLA: Yes!!

FAB G: Then go you shall!

At a certain point, after all these recontextualized versions of the fairy godmother, I began to wonder, do we even need this character anymore. Is she too problematic to keep in her traditional version?

Abigail and Jeana think she still works, even without the makeovers.

ABIGAIL: Something that I actually really like about the character is that she doesn't really have a motivation for helping Cinderella besides just like seeing somebody who needs some help, which I think is a pretty interesting and almost revolutionary idea that you can just help somebody for helping them for, for the sake of helping them. And particularly when it is a female relationship.

JEANA: One of the reasons why fairytales sometimes get dinged as overly patriarchal is that they show a lot of competition between women. Then the godmother figure, she is one of cooperation and warmth and mentorship and guidance.

Without realizing it, Gail found herself in that position just by writing Ella Enchanted.

GAIL: In a way, I was a fairy godmother for one girl who did all the work. I got a letter from a young woman who wrote to me and told me that at the time she read Ella, uh, she was diagnosed with Tourette's. She decided to use Ella and consider the Tourette's her curse. She worked so hard that people can't tell she has Tourette's. And I thought that this girl would've done something else, but I was really happy to be the medium for that, that was handy at the time. And what an achievement, it's really great. So it's great to know that I've had an effect.

To me, the story of the fairy godmother is not just a story of a mentor but also a guardian, a caregiver, somebody who understands that anyone can become part of your family if they really care about you.

That's it for this week, thanks for listening. Special thanks to Abigail Fine, Jeana Jorgensen, Gail Carson Levine and Aliza Pearl who did the readings. I'll put a list of all the books we mentioned, and ones we didn't mention, in the show notes. If you liked this episode, you should check out my 2021 episode This Ain't No Fairy Tale which was about the Brothers Grimm.

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CINDERELLA: They're glass? Any way you can make them more comfortable?

FAB G: No.

CINDERELLA: But you're magic.

FAB G: Women's shoes are what they are. Even magic has its limits.

CINDERELLA: Hmm. <walks> Ow. Ow.