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“Fairytale Reanimation and Wonder Wanted for a Better Future”

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Abstract

Among genres of the fantastic, fairy tales are set apart in their traditional and most popular versions by the hope they seek to elicit through magical transformations and expectation of happy endings. Their success testifies to their paradoxical functions as *pathways showing the route to a ready-made adult life* but also *imaginative solutions to problems experienced by those who are small, vulnerable, or different*. The proliferation of adaptations in the contemporary fairytale web signals the need to revitalize fictions in danger of losing their appeal as generators of hope. We consider two fairy-tale adaptations—a graphic novel and a feature film—and their wondrous reanimating strategies, specifically revitalizing the genre’s crossover appeal and recognizing relations across differences. Our approach recognizes that fairy tales can open up possibilities for being and acting in the world that are not confined to socially sanctioned paths.

Keywords: fairy tale, adaptation, reanimation, *Paddington*, *The Magic Fish*

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Fairytales Reanimation and Wonder Wanted for Better Futures¹

THE FAIRY TALE'S long history of shapeshifting across time and space is suggested by its multiple designations as tale of magic, *Märchen*, wonder tale; evidenced in its varied formulations, uses, and audiences across media; and extended by adaptation and cross-pollination with other traditional genres (e.g., animal tales and legends), literary genres (e.g., children's literature and young-adult fantasy), and popular-culture genres (e.g., fantasy film and horror).² While examining the presence and impact of fairy tales and wonder tales across the planet has made genre definitions increasingly fraught, we recognize and are interested in how and why contemporary storytellers across media are claiming new possibilities for the wondrous by juxtaposing and/or connecting it with other genres of the fantastic and their investment in alternative futures.

The fairy tale or wonder tale—along with narrative forms or genres ranging from science fiction and magic realism to horror, utopia, and dystopia—operates in the fantastic as a general mode of expression that is not mimetic or confined to realism (see “Fantastic” 1997). What sets the fairy tale in its traditional as well as most popular versions apart

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²For an explanation of conventional understandings of the term fairy tale see “What Do We Mean by Fairy Tales?” (n.d.). In our use of both “fairy tale” and “wonder tale” we draw attention to the fairy tale as *one* of several wonder genres across cultures and to how wonder, as much as magic, activates personal and social change in the genre (Bacchilega 2013).

from these other genres is the hope fairy tales seek to elicit through magical transformations and expectation of happy endings. In fact, their success since the nineteenth century as children's literature testifies to their paradoxical function as, on the one hand, pathways showing the route to a ready-made adult life and, on the other, imaginative solutions to problems experienced by those who are small, vulnerable, or different.

But do fairy tales still fulfil this dual role in today's media, specifically in children's, young-adult, and family entertainment? Far from confirming the genre's everlasting popularity, the proliferation of adaptations in the contemporary fairy-tale web (see Bacchilega 2013) has signalled the need to revitalize fictions in danger of losing their appeal as generators of hope. Distinguishing what drives these efforts matters: is it the philosophical and emotional power of the fairy tale that needs revitalization? or its socializing tendencies? or merely its commercial appeal? And for whom are any or all of these concerns at stake? We consider two fairy-tale explorations across media—the graphic novel *The Magic Fish* by Trung Le Nguyen (2020) and the feature film *Paddington* (Paul King 2014; UK, France, USA, China)—and their wondrous reanimating strategies, specifically revitalizing the genre's crossover appeal and recognizing relations across differences.

While not classic fairy tale per se, *Paddington* shares its sense of wonder, as well as specific elements like talking animals, polarised characters, and focus on the strengths of unpromising characters facing tests in an unfamiliar environment found in that genre (and of course, also in others). It also offers a useful lesson in creative animation that evokes fairy-tale possibility in a medium where fairy tales play an important role that however goes unrecognized by film industry categories such as “family” or “fantasy.”³ We draw examples from two different visual media, and we chose them to show how the need for reanimating fairy tales for better futures crosses not only media and form, but also countries and cultures. Indeed our examples, implicating UK, USA, and also Canada, China, France, and Vietnam, show that moves to reanimate fairy tales are international and transnational impulses. Further, creators range across gender and ethnoracial identity. We have also chosen these texts because we

³For more on fairy-tale film see Zipes (2011), Zipes, Greenhill, and Magnus-Johnston (2016) and the *International Fairy Tale Filmography* (<http://iftf.uwinnipeg.ca/>).

personally find them compelling—we love them because they touched us as well as taught us. And while they are by no means the only such examples, we see them as revitalizing the philosophical and emotional power of the wondrous as well as its socializing tendencies in ways that are not dictated by profit but nevertheless contribute to their economic appeal. As such, they renew the fairy tale’s promise of hope and enact progressive aspects of the fantastic.

Theorizing Fairy-Tale Reanimation within the Fantastic

Our approach in investigating these reanimations is to recognize that fairy tales modulate in specific ways the “what if?” that generates all genres of the fantastic and that, rather than teaching us lessons, they can work *to open up possibilities* for being and acting in the world that are not confined to socially sanctioned paths. We further recognize how central to the fantastic the “speculative” is because, as Angela Carter once said, it is “the fiction of asking ‘what if?’ It’s a system of continuing inquiry” (quoted in Katsavos 1994, 14), and because it “deliberately depart[s] from imitating consensus reality” of everyday experience (Oziewicz 2016). Among the many genres of the fantastic (including horror, fantasy, science fiction, and dystopia), then, we identify the fairy tale as developing “what if?” questions into propositions in the optative mood (Warner 1994, xx). The optative grammatically expresses hope or desire and its favourable outcome, and narratively embodies a commitment to the imagination and its transformative potential.⁴ If “in a fantastic cultural work, the artist pretends that things known to be impossible are not only possible but real, which creates mental space redefining—or pretending to redefine—the impossible,” this is a “sleight of mind, altering the categories of the not-real” (Miéville 2002, 45).⁵ We want to, by focusing

⁴The optative mood “is easily identifiable in languages such as ancient Greek, Sanskrit, German, and Navajo. In the English language, its function is taken by ‘may . . .,’ ‘let’s,’ or ‘would that . . .’ expressions and by some types of subjunctives. It may help to think of the optative mood as opposite of the imprecative mood, with curses positing an unfavorable outcome; grammars inform us that both are volitive moods that express the speaker’s desire for or commitment to having something happen or not” (Bacchilega 2013, 207).

⁵As Jack Zipes also puts it, fantasy (broadly conceived as speculative fiction) depends “on its proposition, what it proposes, as an alternative to the existing state of things and how artfully it gives form to the negation of existing conditions” (2009, 80).

on reanimation in contemporary tales, foreground how the fairy tale's make believe does not simply result in suspension of disbelief but is sustained by wanting—needing—to believe in alternatives to the real.

Unlike in Disneyfied Euro-North American culture, folktales and fairy tales were not traditionally considered primarily for children, but were intergenerational.⁶ Thus, the fantastic was not simply relegated to (presumed) mere entertainment and escape, but was part of cultural formations of proper actions and behaviours and of potentially transformative resources for the oppressed or marginalized. An unpromising hero's or heroine's triumph demonstrated the powers of the weak; children over adults, servants over masters, workers over employers, women over men, and so on. Some of these "lessons" or resources were deliberately absented from the dumbed down versions which in the 20th century were wrongly presumed to be of interest to children (see Zipes 2012 on childism), wherein a moralizing didacticism came to replace the empowering force of the tales' "what if?" scenarios.

But progressive ideas continued to hide in plain sight and couldn't be censored entirely, thus becoming available for critical and transgressive readings (see Turner and Greenhill 2012), even in preachy fairy tales created expressly for children. Even conventional Disney films can offer unexpected scope for alternative, resistant, wild meaning. For example, *The Little Mermaid* (Ron Clements and John Musker 1989; USA) has given solace and joy to those who imagine or seek alternative embodiments, including queer and transgender folks (see Frasl 2018; Hurley 2014; Spencer 2014). And it can suggest a desirably disabled world (Sebring and Greenhill 2020) with alternatives to the erroneous presumption that disability is a life (or death) sentence (Barounis 2016).⁷

Dismissal of fiction in general, and fantasy and fairy tales in particular, as necessarily harmless paradoxically allows make believe to code progressive, even utopian ideas into a range of contexts, and (more conventionally in adult material) to explore the consequences

⁶For a sensitive ethnographic account of traditional narration in Tuscany see Falassi (1980); see also Best, Lovelace, and Greenhill (2019, 3–20).

⁷For merfolk and water deities from Africa and their lore in the Caribbean and the Americas, see Bacchilega and Brown (2019).

of a world that is decidedly dystopian.⁸ Let us be absolutely clear. Audiences don't mindlessly absorb messages within the materials they read, view, or otherwise engage with. Messages encoded in a text by its creators may not necessarily and invariably be identical or even close to those actually decoded by the audience, as discussed extensively by Stuart Hall (1991). We know that audiences, including child audiences, can approach the texts they encounter with active critical faculties.

And fictional texts offer a location for audiences to insert themselves in the action, not only in the most obvious ones offered (e.g., Indigenous folks identifying with Indigenous characters; girls with girl characters; and so on), but also in locations apparently instantiating other identities. For example, we remember as girls sometimes tracing ourselves as male and as non-human animals in the stories we read (as discussed in Greenhill 2008). But just because people *can* identify with characters who are not like them doesn't take away from the importance of having multiple identities available to include the widest possible range of audiences (see Collier, Lumadue, and Wooten 2009; Lamari and Greenhill 2021).

Nor are we asserting that the change that can be engendered by reanimation will always be unidirectional and permanent. Just like all learning, progressive ideas must be nurtured and developed constantly, which for us makes fairy-tale reanimations all the more important. We also contend that progressive messages can be paralleled with (but also obscured and overshadowed by) problematic ones. Thus, for example, the stop-motion animation *Kubo and the Two Strings* (Travis Knight 2016; USA, Japan), though visually stunning and otherwise quite culturally sensitive, whitewashed its primary characters' voices, failing to take the opportunity to cast Asian actors in important roles (discussed in Greenhill 2020, 58-64).

Our use of "animation" is both literal and figurative, allowing in both cases for extension beyond live action and the representation of the unreal—some of which may be unreal in the sense of beyond

⁸In Jo Radner and Susan Lanser's terms, coding is "a set of signals—words, forms, behaviors, signifiers of some kind—that protect the creator from the consequences of openly expressing particular messages" (1993, 3). Where it may be dangerous, difficult, or problematic (including economically) to overtly present progressive viewpoints, trivialisation—"employment of form, mode, or genre that the dominant culture considers unimportant, innocuous, or irrelevant ... likely to be discounted or overlooked" (19)—can be a valuable tactic. Fairy tales are too often dismissed as having just those inessential, unimportant qualities.

the known or natural world, but also unreal in the sense that our current social and cultural world does not allow it. We thus draw on examples where animation and drawn visuals offer counterparts to the real world—quite literally in the case of *Paddington*, where live action and CGI animation combined develop a sense of the uncanny but also realistic unreal interjections. Whether a filmic strategy or more figuratively a revitalizing of the fairy tale’s transformative potential, reanimation involves both image and word as well as that “sleight of mind” identified by China Miéville (2002) that troubles the relationship between what is normalized as real or unreal.

As already noted, part of providing cognitive access to alternatives to consensus reality is today’s reanimation of wonder in fairy-tale traditions (see Bacchilega and Orme 2021). Connecting to nonhuman-centred ways of being and knowing and turning away from ready-made and increasingly consumerist magic, wonder can creatively actualize scenarios that offer to break the status quo apart and invite us to see/feel/think alternative futures for new generations. Both texts we discuss cultivate wonder by visually and thematically showing the interconnectedness of life and also by encouraging audiences to inhabit the world more humbly. The boundaries between realism and the fantastic are blurred when storyworlds are made visible as imagined by individual narrators and impact readers’ imaginations in the graphic novel and when “real” objects become animated—and vice-versa—in live-action settings and emotionally charged music crosses diegetic lines in the film. Furthermore, while reanimating the connection of humans with water and waterbeings (the ocean, fish, monstrous as well as generous merpeople), *The Magic Fish* enacts intergenerational fluidity in its storytelling; and *Paddington* revitalizes the potential for forming relations across differences that do not demand the assimilation of the Other.

Reanimating Intergenerational Storytelling

Because the Disneyfication of fairy tales has capitalized on romance to perpetuate capitalist heteronormativity and has aimed its construal of family entertainment at nuclear (white) families, we are interested in how revitalizing fairy tales involves making alternative uses of the genre’s crossover potential and appeals to intergenerationality. Traditionally, intergenerational storytelling involves more than

entertainment and less than didacticism: as culturally-specific and situational performances, fairy tales in oral contexts communicate knowledge, expectations, resources, and options—coding, in wondrous setting and action, experiences that may otherwise be difficult to address directly or otherwise. And while the storytelling session is not necessarily triggered by a conflict or crisis, the fairy tale recognizes that conflict, feelings of unfairness, and painful experiences play a part in children’s lives and family life, and in response offers options and hope.

The Magic Fish, written and illustrated by Trung Le Nguyen, who also goes by Trungles, offers just these processes; it reanimates the fairy tale’s intergenerational storytelling dynamics and does so, more specifically, in a transnational framework and immigrant context. In this 2020 graphic novel, Tiến, a 13-year-old kid in the 1990s American Midwest, struggles with coming out to his family, while Tiến’s mother Helen, a refugee who grew up in post-war Vietnam, struggles to communicate in English. They are each marked as “Cinderella” (ATU 510A) characters: Tiến via his patched jacket and Helen through the loss of her mother and mother tongue. Furthermore, the transformation of both characters takes place through their different but shared experiences of reading, watching, listening to, and adapting fairy tales from different cultures. In an unpaginated appendix to the graphic novel titled “Between Words and Images,” Trungles writes about loving the idea that a fairy tale could have “its own lineage” and “move from one region to another,” where “it would change clothes.” And we love how in tracing a tale’s movement across borders he also draws, literally and figuratively, new intergenerational storytelling experiences.

At the start of *The Magic Fish*, Tiến’s mother and Tiến communicate using different languages, with angle brackets signalling when her words in the speech bubble are in Vietnamese. Helen’s English-language commentary in an early caption explains how when Tiến was very young, they started borrowing library books for his enjoyment and “to help bolster [her] language skills” (4). They switched from picture books to books with no pictures as Tiến grew older, but they “always circled back to fairy tales” (6) possibly because “fairy tales . . . can change almost like costumes” (5). This transformation is visually *and* culturally played out in Trungles’s art. Throughout the volume, the fairy-tale characters’ clothes and surroundings are

culturally marked by the visual imagination of a specific reader or teller. At the same time, visual motifs⁹ and images (like the “fish dress” in “Tám Cám” and the mermaid’s fishtail in the third fairy tale) echoing each other suggest the fluidity of these borders and of visual imaginings of costume in relation to embodied identity.

Within the graphic novel, a soft colour palette of peaches, yellows, and blues helps to differentiate the representation of Tiến’s and his mother’s world from that of memories and fairy tales respectively, and to move easily among them. Three stories are adapted verbally and visually as part of the process of transforming Tiến, Helen, and their relationship. Two retold and revised are “relatives of the Cinderella fairy tale” (Nguyen 2020): in the one titled “Tattercoats,” the heroine leaves the home where she suffers abuse and neglect; the other, “Tám Cám,” is often referred to as the Vietnamese “Cinderella” and in it a magic fish is the heroine’s donor.

Trungles articulates with precision the visual esthetics of these tales in *The Magic Fish*. Tiến reads “Tattercoats” out loud to his parents from a pictureless book at the same time that its images in the graphic novel build on Tiến’s experience “of stories and images popularized by the toys and cartoons in the mid-to-late 1990s.” The style is thus shaped by “Western sensibilities of princess stories.” In contrast, “Tám Cám” is told by Helen’s aunt who never left Vietnam: in it “buildings and apartments are reminiscent of a French colonial style” (Nguyen 2020) and the magic fish gives Tám an áo dài, the modern Vietnamese national dress that is nevertheless inflected by layers of colonization. The third tale retold and transformed in *The Magic Fish* is Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Mermaid,”¹⁰ but Trungles’s visual rendition features mermaids wearing áo giao lĩnh, cross-collared Vietnamese robes worn by pre-19th-century aristocrats, and they are the daughters of a water-dragon “mighty king” (188). Unlike the Andersen tale, this “Little Mermaid” has a happy ending that also talks back to Disney’s filmic adaptation. Each tale is thus visualized and retold in ways that exceed authoritative or printed texts, thus making new possibilities available for readers as well.

⁹The older female donor—Alera’s aunt, Tám’s mother via the magic fish, and the “ancient mermaid who knew many secret things” (199)—in each of the three fairy tales has a strong visual connection with water. While peaches are a visual motif linking “Tattercoats” and “Tám Cám,” the image of spilt blood recurs in “Tám Cám” and “The Little Mermaid.”

¹⁰The excellent scholarship on the author and this tale is too numerous to detail, but see for example Bom, Bøggild, and Frandsen (2019); “Hidden” (2006); and Holbek (1990).

The plot of “Tattercoats” in Trungles’s graphic novel is, as the author states, closer to the Grimms’ “Allerleirauh” or “All-Kinds-of-Fur” than it is to the homonymous British tale.¹¹ In the “Tattercoats” that Tién reads to/retells his mother and later his parents, the protagonist Alera runs away to escape a forced marriage, wearing an “enchanted coat of many furs” (25) and a magical ring that sings to its owner. Like the Grimm heroine, Alera becomes a servant in another kingdom, attends three royal balls magnificently attired, and is happily united with her prince in the end. However, the tattered coat is not Alera’s only disguise: when Prince Maxwell first sees her she is wearing overalls and her long hair is gathered under a baker boy hat, and Maxwell hears only the first syllable of her name.¹² Part of the prince’s challenge after he falls in love with Alera at the ball will be to recognize that Al and Alera are one and have “been here with [him] the entire time” (112). The tale has a happy ending in which love—the mother’s and aunt’s love for Alera, the baker’s comforting affection, *and* the romantic love that Alera and Maxwell share—care, and recognition triumph. And the emotional impact of this storytelling is sensitively depicted in *The Magic Fish*.

We wish to emphasize this very rich text’s nuanced exploration of how the exchange of wondrous stories in *The Magic Fish*’s immigrant context enacts cross-cultural adaptation as an intergenerational resource. Fairy tales provide a language across generations to express the potentially disempowering and empowering aspects of experiencing and sharing one’s difference with loved ones. The family’s enjoyment of the “Tattercoats” story that Tién reads aloud suggests they all cheer for Alera’s refusal to submit to a forced marriage, her feeling supported

¹¹“Tattercoats” and the Grimms’ “Allerleirauh” or “All-Kinds-of-Fur” are versions of ATU 510B, the “Cinderella” tale type titled “Peau d’Asne” [sic] (Donkey Skin) in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther index. Unlike Cinderella in the better known ATU 510A tale type, the motherless princess in Charles Perrault’s “Donkey Skin” flees from her father the king and his incestuous desire to marry her. While there is no lost slipper, in the end the heroine marries the prince, and her royal status is reinstated. See Goldberg (1997), Jorgensen (2012), and Duggan (2013) for excellent analyses of this tale type. Trungles’s selection of the “Tattercoats” title is significant because this version does not include the threat of incest. Is this possibly working to make the graphic novel more child-friendly? Since child abuse in the family is later represented in the Vietnamese “Cinderella” tale, and cannibalism, murder, gay-bashing, and other forms of violence are also present in *The Magic Fish*, we do not think so. Other traumas—including colonization, war, and homophobia—are at the heart of Trungles’s adaptation.

¹²Sex/gender cross dressing is relatively uncommon in traditional versions of fairy tales (Greenhill and Anderson-Grégoire 2014), though found fairly frequently in traditional ballads (Greenhill 1995).

by her mother and aunt, and her finding love on her own terms. This is a successful story of migration as well as a migrant tale (from Europe to the United States) that does not however involve Tiến's Vietnamese-American family experience specifically, or his journey as a Vietnamese-American teenager in love with his school friend Julian. When Tiến's mother returns to Vietnam after her mother's death and her aunt tells her "Tấm Cám" to remind her of "our Cinderella" (131), Helen responds tearfully by admitting she had forgotten it: "<My past and present selves speak two different languages>," she says, "<It feels like I died on that boat. And I'm still stuck in the middle of the ocean>." She concludes in appropriately separate speech bubbles, "<Far away from my mother . . .>," "<and far away from my son>" (176). Her aunt then completes the story of "Tấm Cám," combining horror and revenge, and also providing a happy ending where the memory of cruelty and loss fades away. Then she winks at Helen, insisting that stories and "<things change>," and the old Vietnamese "Tấm Cám" has in their storytelling exchange come to belong to them: "<And now the story is ours. Yours and mine>" (184).

This second, specifically culturally grounded fairy-tale exchange enables Helen's own participation in intergenerational storytelling in the final section of *The Magic Fish*. Having returned home, Helen and Tiến start a new book with "The Little Mermaid" story, and she tells him she has been summoned to a meeting at Tiến's school. Unbeknownst to her, following a school dance where Tiến and Julian danced together, a priest has been "counseling" Tiến, telling him that "All the parents I've counseled described the heartbreak of their children coming out . . . like a death in the family" (172). So Helen ends up hearing about Tiến's secret not from him—as he never knew the Vietnamese words for coming out or being gay—but from disapproving school and church authorities; on the way back home she and her son share not a single word, in English or Vietnamese. Once home, she picks up the book and enunciating in English completes her reading of "The Little Mermaid" for Tiến: the mute mermaid has become a wonderfully accomplished ballet dancer but has not conquered the prince's heart; nevertheless, she finds her place in the human world and achieves her happy ending when Bertha—costumed as her prince in the Ondine ballet—declares her love for her and she finds her voice to say "yes" (227).

In "Between Words and Pictures," Trungles describes Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" as "a story of immigration" where the mermaid

tragically fails to transition into a new world. But as reimagined by Helen, it is not a tragic story, and its queer happy ending “recognizes her son’s desire for a different narrative,” one that breaks from oppressively gendered traditions and begins to articulate new relationships. The ending of Tién’s and Helen’s “Little Mermaid” storied exchange is a tearful affirmation of their love for each other, in which her patching his well-worn jacket as well as new endings to a worn-out story are a sign of care. Fairy tales have had a transformative role in bringing this affirmation about: Tién’s sexual identification as gay is no longer unstoried or inevitably tragic; and with him Helen, who exercised her freedom to tell the mermaid’s story differently, can also begin to live their immigrant lives according to a different story.¹³

Expanding on Carter’s reference to stories as the “invisible luggage” (1990, xiv) migrants carry, exchange, and adapt, Marina Warner specifies how fantastic narratives cross national borders with some ease as they “migrate on soft feet,” and “borders are invisible to them, no matter how ferociously they are policed by cultural purists” (2014, xv). In tracing this migration, Trungles’s *The Magic Fish* grapples with contemporary issues of sexuality, migration, and cultural adaptation, and reanimates the power of fairy tales not as once-upon-a-time authoritative or nostalgic narratives, but as verbal performances *and* visualizations that, across time and space borders, can renew intergenerational relations as well as open up to new permutations of “what if?”

Recognizing and Developing Family and Community Relations

The family film *Paddington* (Paul King 2014; UK, France, USA, China) invokes the fairy tale’s intersection of realism and fantasy, as well as its thematic focus on powers of the weak. Based on children’s books published starting in 1958 by English writer Michael Bond, it concerns a young Peruvian bear sent to London.¹⁴ In the books (as in the film):

¹³Trungles specifies that “the mermaid is a stand-in for Helen’s experiences, a woman who wanted to escape to another world and manages to make it there at the cost of her ability to communicate.” Considering that the figure of the mermaid is currently associated with queer and transgender subjects, we also see Tién’s inability to communicate about his sexuality in Vietnamese as well as his fear of being unloved by his mother because they are “from two different sides of the world” (177) as echoing Andersen’s heroine’s predicament.

¹⁴See Matej Laš’s excellent summary of the books and their links to immigration (2018, 58–60).

Paddington is presented as a “role-model” migrant. He speaks fluent English, he is extremely polite, and this politeness could be perceived even as stereotypically British. He always addresses people as “Mr”, “Mrs” and “Miss”, and only very rarely by their first names. He is also kind-hearted, but not to the point of being a simpleton—he is not afraid to express his disapproval to those who are dishonest. His more comical characteristic consists of innocently getting into trouble, but he does everything he can to put things right. (Laš 2018, 59)

The film follows the CGI orphan bear Paddington (voiced by Ben Whishaw), who leaves “Darkest Peru” after an earthquake destroys his home and kills his uncle Pastuzo (voiced by Michael Gambon), and his aunt Lucy (voiced by Imelda Staunton) moves into the Home for Retired Bears. Explorer geographer Montgomery Clyde (played by Tim Downie) had assured Pastuzo and Lucy that they would receive a warm welcome in London, but when Paddington arrives he finds otherwise. Fortunately, he encounters the Brown family, risk analyst father Henry (played by Hugh Bonneville), adventure-story illustrator mother Mary (played by Sally Hawkins), their children Judy (played by Madeleine Harris) and Jonathan (played by Samuel Joslin), and their “old relative” Mrs. Bird (played by Julie Walters). Despite the suspicions and machinations of neighbour Mr. Curry (played by Peter Capaldi) and the geographer’s taxidermist daughter Millicent (played by Nicole Kidman), and thanks to helper figure Mr. Gruber (played by Jim Broadbent), the bear eventually makes a home with the Browns.

The film’s tone is sardonic and comic with respect to British colonial eccentricities, as when the explorer explains that he brought only the necessities on his trip to Peru, which include a “modest timepiece” (a grandfather clock) and a “travel piano,” or when the geographers deny that bears could be civilized because they do not speak English, drink tea, play cricket, or do the crossword. But the film doesn’t remain exclusively in the domain of apparently benign quirks. Colonialism and imperialism, and their sinister sequelae of racism, xenophobia, and Othering become important themes. *Paddington* encourages viewers to see immigrants in terms of their own needs and wants, rather than expecting them to assimilate. And it asserts that newcomers benefit the receiving culture in myriad ways, as the Browns do from Paddington’s presence as part of their family.

The film, which was financially and critically successful enough to have a sequel (*Paddington 2*, Paul King 2017; UK, France, USA, China, Canada), uses juxtapositions of realism and animation to foreground its theme of Britain's history of immigration and the need to welcome Others. The examples we discuss involve two types of realism-animation intersections: some animate real settings and objects to bring forward themes around emotion and connection; others intersperse uncanny shots of calypso band D'Lime featuring Tobago Crusoe as a Greek-chorus-like commentary on Paddington's experiences and feelings in diegetic music. We address these two types of junctures in the order they appear.

The film's meta-mediated quality begins at the outset. A whirring projector displays a black-and-white newsreel-like documentary of the geographer's trip to "Darkest Peru." He meets the bears who take away the gun with which he intends to "collect" them as "specimens" and save him from a scorpion. The British explorer introduces them to marmalade and a snow globe of London, and finds they can learn English. On his departure, he promises "If you ever make it to London, you can be sure of a very warm welcome." Years later, after Paddington initially finds anything but a warm welcome, and the Browns decide to take him home for the night, comes the calypso band's first appearance, and as film theorist Neil Archer notes, it "offers an audio-visual reiteration of Caribbean immigration . . . King has said he wanted to use this music because of its upbeat attitude to the realities of the immigrant experience" (2020). In shots from the taxi ride to the Browns' home are famous London tourist sights—St. Paul's Cathedral, the Underground, Big Ben, the London Eye, Tower Bridge—accompanied by the song "London is the Place for Me." On the beginning of the final line, repeating the title, the band appears in the storyworld—guitar, bass, drums, trumpet, and piano, playing at night on the rainy sidewalk, facing the camera. The light hearted attitude of this sequence mirrors that of the opening newsreel, but also connects Paddington's emotions to those of actual immigrants.

The bear's hopes for a home, however, are quickly dashed. He learns in an exchange with the adult Browns:

Mrs. Brown: When a young person comes to this country, I'm afraid they don't just move in with the first people they meet.

Mr. Brown: You need a proper guardian.

Paddington: What's that?

Mrs. Brown: It's a grown-up who takes you into their home and looks after you ...

Paddington: But not you.

Mr. Brown: No. We don't do that.

Paddington's expectations, based on the explorer's explanations to Aunt Lucy and Uncle Pastuzo, reflect the Englishman's upper-class White experience as well as a less bureaucratic time. The contrast is underlined as Paddington overhears Mr. Brown saying "That animal is going straight to the authorities." The camera moves in on a lighted dollhouse to the attic where the bear has been sent to sleep for the night. As more dollhouse rooms illuminate, it becomes animated and the front opens to reveal a miniature of the actual Brown home—crucially this animation shows only the three lower living floors, not the attic to which Paddington has been banished.

Mr. Brown expresses suspicion of foreign Others, especially those of colour; though Paddington speaks with an upper-class English accent, he is a *brown* bear. The ideas are most clearly articulated by Mr. Curry, whose comments are all too familiar for immigrants addressed by White Britons. "You must be a long way from home," he says. Assured that Paddington won't be staying, he says "Just as well. Don't want to be kept up by any of your loud jungle music." Extra-diegetic calypso begins as the Browns and Paddington walk to the Underground; when they pass the band playing on the sidewalk, Paddington politely raises his hat.

But rather than taking him to the authorities, Mrs. Brown brings the bear to her friend's antique shop. "The toy train that daily brings Mr Gruber his eleven o'clock cup of tea ... recall[s] Mr Gruber's childhood flight from the Nazis ... [and] indicates how the film neatly and poignantly bridges these two worlds: a fantasy ... highlighted as a form of refuge from terrible realities" (Archer 2020, 219). As Paddington looks into the toy train, it shows the young Gruber meeting a great aunt at the station (they shake hands). As in the dollhouse animation, the scene shows the gap between hopes and expectations and the reality Gruber finds, summed up in his words, "a home is more than a roof over your head." As Archer points out, even in Gruber's "nostalgic bubble" (219) of a shop, the *Paddington* films "underscore the way national space, and especially *metropolitan* space,

is already transnational ... constructed via decades of immigrant and refugee experience" (218).

The calypso band's presence serves to comment on Paddington's shattered expectations as a brown immigrant. After he overhears Mr. Brown saying "This house just isn't the place for a bear," Paddington sadly leaves as the mournful extradiegetic calypso music begins. The bear walks through the neighbourhood and under a bridge in the rain, and, as he plods sadly by them, the band sings Tobago and D'Lime's "Blow Wind Blow" mourning the cold of London, playing in an entranceway. As the music continues, Paddington walks up to the gate of Buckingham Palace. When a friendly Foot Guard lets him shelter inside his box and shares his meal, the tune changes to "Rule Britannia." However, the music returns to the previous melancholy notes as the new guard orders Paddington out, saying "Bloody bears!" With close ups of Paddington's sad face and wet fur, the song resumes with expression of regret at leaving home, and the wish to return. Paddington settles onto an outside bench, closing his eyes to sleep. "The music's frequent plaintiveness ... with its lyrics lamenting London's icy weather and less-than-warm welcome, combines with images of Paddington's temporary homelessness and rejection, bringing out the figurative 'coldness' of the capital city, especially for those living marginally within its rainy streets" (Archer 2020, 217).

Animations express another disjuncture—between the stiff-upper-lipped Mr. Brown's feeling that Paddington does not belong with them, and the rest of the family's sorrow that the bear has gone. To the sound of wind, a mural of an apple tree on the house wall sheds its blossoms, leaving the bare branches. It offers a visual counterpart to the bereft family.

In the concluding confrontation, Millicent demands at gunpoint that the Browns hand Paddington over to her. But they don't cooperate.

Mrs. Brown: No. We won't do that. He's family.

Millicent: Family? You aren't even the same species ...

Mr. Brown: It is true. And when I first met Paddington I wanted nothing to do with him. But my wonderful wife ... she opened her heart to him, and so did my incredible children. And now I have too ... It doesn't matter that he comes from the other side of the world, or that he's a different species. Or that he has a worrying marmalade habit. We love Paddington. And that makes him family! And families stick together!

An exchange of offers of self-sacrifice follow, but in the end, as in fairy tales, the small and weak triumph; Paddington has the fairy-tale unpromising male hero's ability to use his environment to trick his adversaries. He earns the love of those who represent mainstream culture but this triumph is not a story of assimilation; the main transformation is in the most powerful individual in the family, Mr. Brown, who learns from Paddington, rather than the bear needing to try to change to fit in. And by implication, the film shows the impossibility of immigrants magically becoming something they never were—allegedly proper White Britons. Paddington can't stop being a bear—and shouldn't stop being a bear!—and his experience underlines the problems with the expectation that newcomers to Britain can become identical with the mainstream.

The film concludes with Mr. Brown returning to the house with an animation of the apple tree on the house wall blooming. The dollhouse, its attic now lighted, shows all the Brown family, and the camera moves into each room to demonstrate how each individual's life has improved because of Paddington. It ends with the young bear, still in the attic, which now features cheerful lighting and decoration. He writes to his Aunt Lucy, "I really do feel at home. I will never be like other people, but that's all right. Because I am a bear." In the final scene the Browns and Paddington play outdoors in the snow, as the calypso band sings about people from different locations laughing together. Again the band appears, this time set up between an old fashioned lamp standard and a bright red telephone box.

Ultimately, this is a fairy tale, especially in the sense that Paddington gets an unequivocal happy ending in a home where he is fully appreciated. But a *Guardian* article begins by sardonically noting that

an immigration lawyer pointed out that, under current UK law, Paddington would most likely be deported back to Peru or held in a detention centre. Since he was not fleeing persecution, the little bear would be refused asylum, nor would the Home Office believe he was a minor, owing to his lack of paperwork. (Rose 2017)

The piece's conclusion is equally sardonic, and pessimistic about the value of fantasy:

maybe we tell children these feelgood stories not for their benefit but for our own. We know the reality is crushingly grim, but we want to believe in something rosier, like we did when we were children. It might make for a better world one day, but let's not kid ourselves. (Rose 2017)

Of course it is a heavy burden to put on one children's film to change the world, but clearly *Paddington* works hard to encode messages that foster inclusion and justice. While it is not without issues of concern—the actors are almost exclusively White and there is an uncomfortable transgender representation—family and community eventually work together to support the young immigrant bear, and crucially at least one initially racist exclusionist character, Mr. Curry, has a change of heart and becomes a friend and supporter. A small, weak character flourishes because he retains a positive attitude, while continuing to maintain his own standards and ideals. Those who are already on board with inclusion stay firm, and of the main characters only Millicent Clyde stays problematic. The weapons of the weak—resilience, forbearance, and kindness—are transformative resources that need not be rejected or found lacking in the grim, but not unchangeable reality. Uncanny animation and other wondrous effects support the film's progressive ideas about immigration and inclusion as necessary in real life; “Many of the ‘tricks’ associated with a sense of the uncanny . . . convey the sense of an ordinary world rendered extraordinary through perfectly ordinary mechanisms” (Jervis 2008, 28). When the ordinary world becomes extraordinary, new possibilities ensue for making what was hitherto precluded commonplace.

The Fairy Tale's “What If?” and the Possibilities of Media

We return in our conclusion to consider how these new fairy tales relate to the fantastic and play out specific media affordances. Whereas fairy tales are shapeshifters across time, space, and media, they consistently among genres of the fantastic mobilize hope and, thanks to their consistent mix of the ordinary with the otherworldly or extraordinary, offer both social norms and departures from them as resources for the weak. While this worldbuilding that is both realistic and fantastic is usually seen as demanding suspension of disbelief, we argue that the

fairy tale's "what if?" signals wanting to believe that alternatives to consensus reality are possible. We posit that in fairy tales disturbing emotions and real-life conflicts are channeled not to produce unease or horror (as in other fantastic genres), but to enact—through magic and wonder—desirable transformations and possibilities for the disempowered in the story world as well as to encourage imagining better futures in audiences. Whereas both magic and wonder are active in fairy-tale worlds, wonder is also activated in fairy-tale reception as audiences are invited to redefine reality as more than what is commonly perceived and as other than expected, and to glimpse at the possibilities this thinking and seeing "otherwise"¹⁵ makes available.

Our examples—a graphic novel and film that channel homophobia, racism, and rejection as experienced by immigrants in different societies into fairy-tale mode—rely on wonder (and on the somewhat related feeling of the uncanny) as it offers hope to those who may very well feel excluded from the Disneyfied fairy tale that dominates mass media entertainment and privileges heterosexual romance and racialized capitalist ethos. As our discussion details, to counter Disneyfication, *The Magic Fish* and *Paddington* revitalize the fairy tale's crossover appeal and recognize relations across differences by juxtaposing status quo reality with wondrous "what ifs?" How fairy-tale reanimation works in these two examples obviously depends on their different media, both of which however offer verbal and visual languages to encode/decode the fantastic.

Some theorists see the visual and the audiovisual as inevitably fixing fairy tales' hitherto malleable form, but also as "crippling to the kind of imaginative exercise usually required of the reader by almost any magical narrative" (Tiffin 2009, 182). This model simultaneously presumes very restrictive limitations to visual/pictorial media and an openness to written media that don't necessarily reflect individual or collective reactions to them. And the proliferation of different versions from the American corporate mainstream—live action remakes, TV spinoffs, and even the plethora of marketed products—implicitly encourages the idea that variation, not uniformity, prevails.

We counter that optical magic or wonder and the optical uncanny have more open results. "Cinema's obsession with special effects

¹⁵See Daniel Heath Justice (2018) for a powerful discussion of how this thinking "otherwise" is a moral imperative in Indigenous wonder tales.

aspires to create a technological optical simulacrum torn between realistic appearance and believability and uncanny effects” (Gunning 2008, 86). Tom Gunning argues for “the slumbering uncanny power of cinema, its ability to animate the inert, to make the impossible occur before our eyes and, like so many modern optical devices, to summon up fantasies of a mode of vision beyond ordinary sight” (87). *Paddington*’s many reanimations—incorporating CGI into its ongoing live action (also a current Disney strategy) and, as discussed, animating objects and offering diegetic musical commentary that bring attention to its own worldbuilding technologies—offer opportunities for audience imaginative engagement. Similarly, *The Magic Fish*’s offering three different contexts, each colour coded, two of which directly invoke an everyday reality, and within the blue fairy-tale world three distinct narratives, encourages multiplicity in reader interpretation. Far from saying “this is the story,” these texts offer alternatives which specifically show the relevance of imagination and wonder in the quotidian. Of course we affirm that the specific affordances of media differ. Watching a movie in a theatre is not the same as reading a graphic novel. But we hope to have shown that when reanimation involves both image and word, its powers to redefine reality are not debilitated, but heightened.

Film as shown in theatres can be immersive and collective like oral storytelling, while reading is often a solitary experience. When an audience views *Paddington*, they together experience a celebration of welcoming that is *collective*, like listening to a traditional storyteller. And *The Magic Fish*, as graphic novel, provides multiple examples of how a narrator’s visual recoding of a wonder tale is part of its individual retellings but also how each reimagining emerges from different but collective visual experiences across cultures. Media differences aren’t better and worse; each has benefits and drawbacks. And here we focus on the benefits including appeal to a broad range of audiences and crossover to new areas of discourse. Both example texts model the benefits of inclusive and welcoming communities that recognise the connectedness of humans with their environments. And they deploy the fairy tale not as an anodyne solution to simple problems, but part of a necessary array of diverse and hopeful modes to approach a complex world.

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