

An Interview with Mary Melfi

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Mary Melfi is the author of sixteen works of fiction, poetry, drama and memoir, most recently *In the Backyard: Relearning the Art of Aging, Dying and Making Love* (Guernica Editions, 2018). In this interview, Melfi reflects on her eclectic career and the factors that led her to write a series of whimsical new fairy tales, a selection of which is published for the first time below. Her responses offer an irreverent and essential glimpse into the aesthetic and moral sensitivity that links the universal form of the folktale with the modern preoccupations of Italian-Canadian literature, and perhaps all literature.

These fairy tales mark a departure from 2018's deeply personal memoir, *In the Backyard*. Is there any connection? Are they a new direction, a return, an experiment?

Possibly all writing, creative or otherwise, is an attempt to bring order out of chaos. As such, any text, whether it be a memoir, a fairy tale or a scientific paper, is driven by the same need to explain why things are the way they are. To my mind things are a mess; it's my duty, as a thinking creature, to try to clean the mess up. To date no one has come up with "The Theory of Everything," and I doubt any one writer, let alone me, myself and I, could ever manage to make sense out of our nonsensical lives, but here I am trying so hard to do just that.

In my memoir *In the Backyard: Relearning the Art of Aging, Dying and Making Love*, which is, admittedly, deeply personal, I look for ways to grow old and like it. Of course, I don't find any. That's why I turn to my husband, a psychologist, for help. He does come to my aid, and he does try to help me master the art of aging—I do learn that the best way to deal with the problem (or any problem) is to focus outwards, not inwards—meaning, the best way to help yourself is to help someone else. That might have been the end of the story, but it wasn't. Things got complicated. My husband was diagnosed with terminal cancer, and then everything fell apart. Writing about the ensuing difficulties made the unbearable, bearable.

Words have a curative effect—they don't even have to be written down to have this power. Stories were being told long before the alpha-

bet was invented. Fairy tales belong to the oral tradition. Our cavemen kin figured out, what we figured out—fairy tales make the impossible, possible, and because they do, we take pleasure in their telling. For me, writing a memoir is no different than writing a fairy tale—I do it because it gives me the hope (or the illusion thereof) that whatever emotional wounds I have can be cleaned up, and then I can be like everyone else—happy, not all the time, but at least some of the time... In answer to your question—writing fairy tales is more of a return to a familiar form than a new direction or experiment. Once upon a time, long long ago, back in 1994, Doubleday Canada published my children’s fantasy novel, *Ubu, the Witch Who Would be Rich*.

How is writing a fairy tale different from (or similar to) the other forms of writing in your oeuvre—memoir, novel, poetry, play, children’s story? What attracted you to the form?

I write out of a need to find answers to the Big Questions. In my novel, *Via Roma* (Guernica Editions, 2015) the protagonist, Sophie Wolfe, asks: “Why do people die?” and “Where do they go after they die?” While the 28-year-old Sophie manages to come up with a few answers to those questions, I myself haven’t been as lucky.

The myth is that as one gets older, one gets wiser, but I find myself getting older, and less wise. It seems everyone I know in my age bracket also thinks of themselves as getting stupider and stupider, and not because they are suffering from dementia, but because life makes less and less sense over time. Essentially, writing, regardless of form, ends up being an escape from reality. (There are no answers.)

Nonetheless, writing a fairy tale for me is a lot more fun than writing a poem or a play or anything else. When I am writing a fairy tale I am entering another world, a better world, one in which everything makes sense—the wicked get their just desserts, and the good, well, the good can do whatever they please, provided, of course, they have a witch or a wizard in their corner. Anything seems possible. You don’t have to be born a princess to become one. Look at Cinderella—in a sixteenth-century French version of the tale, the young girl, nicknamed “Ass Hide,” marries up with “the help of little ants.”

Fairy tales are absolutely essential for our peace of mind. They certainly are for mine. Step into a fairy tale and you step into a world without borders. And without class—the rich and the poor have an equal chance to get what they want. The rules of harmony dominate. This is as close to Heaven as you can get (without dying first).

Were you inspired by any specific author, work or collection? I am thinking, for instance, of Calvino's observation of the "grace, wit and unity of design" of the Italian folktale. We could make that observation of your work as well. Do you see yourself as writing in, or otherwise belonging to, that tradition?

In my mid-20s I came across Italo Calvino's collection of *Italian Folktales* and I read the 600-page book from cover to cover. I was hooked. I fell in love with the form. I read the Grimm brothers' collection of German folktales around the same time. Was I inspired by them? How could I not be? These collections are as much a part of the West's literary heritage as is the Holy Bible. They are the Bible of Magic Land! Unfortunately, or fortunately, those tales weren't written by one individual, but by thousands. That's why they're so good. I don't know if any one author could ever match the wit and humour of the traditional folktales. Still, there are those wordsmiths, like this lady in question, who try their hand at it.

Your fairy tales are full of clever characters, often girls and women. How does the fairy tale form provide new ways to explore the themes of sex and power so common in your work?

Retelling classic fairy tales with a feminist twist is easy to do, and while at times I enjoy doing so, that's not where my real interests lie. Sure, girls shouldn't have to depend on their good looks to get the object of their affections, that's a given, but at the same time, what is even more important for me is that the poor outwit the rich.

In the classic folktales it is understood that life is really hard. You can't make it on your own—you need help from magical creatures. Having grown up poor, the daughter of Italian immigrants, I came to believe the same thing. My parents, who had made their living off the land in Italy, thought me rather naïve, as they imagined that compared to the hardships they had lived through, I had it easy living in Canada. Maybe they were right. I had no idea how hard life was for those who lived in the Italian countryside prior to World War II until I did research for my book, *Italy Revisited* (Guernica Editions, 2009). Only then, in my mid-40s, did I come to appreciate the fact that if you were born a peasant, you stayed a peasant. Unless, of course, a witch, a wizard or a saint came to your aid.

A prayer and a folktale are similar—both promise happily-ever-

after. Folktales are imbued with the Holy Spirit—optimism. They suggest that with a little cunning and a little help from Above, you got it made. As a youngster I believed that once you realized “The American Dream,” once you moved up in the world, got a bit of cash, you wouldn’t need a Genie or a Frog Prince to help you out. I was wrong. Life is really hard, regardless of what class you belong to.

Writing fairy tales definitely helps me explore the themes of sex and power—this woman of a certain age turns into a girl of an uncertain age who can do as she wills. Writing a fairy tale is akin to putting on a magic cloak—prior to wearing it, I’m invisible, I’m a ghost, dead to all concerned, but as soon as I step into Magic Land I am born again.