



## ILLUSTRATION

NO PUBLISHER NOWADAYS WOULD DREAM of trying to sell a volume of fairy tales that was not accompanied by illustrations; indeed, one might be forgiven for thinking that the illustrator is sometimes of greater importance than the tales, which are chosen primarily as suitable vehicles for his or her artistic prowess. Indeed, the modern fairy-tale book consists, as often as not, of a single tale told primarily in pictures; the text has become a secondary consideration. It's an intriguing question, whether the inclusion of illustrations stifles the reader's imagination by imposing a visual representation upon it, or whether the pictures actually enhance the reader's imaginative response to the story. Clearly there are many factors involved, such as the age of the reader, the ability of the artist, and the meanings suggested by the illustrations. Yet even if we were able somehow to calculate relative values for such factors, how could we then compare the quality of the reader's response with and without the presence of illustrations? Calculations aside, there can be no question but that pictures add one more dimension to the various imaginative experiences of reading a tale, being read a tale, and being *told* a tale.

The origin of the fairy tale is oral, which accounts for its unique qualities: the emphasis upon action, the lack of physical detail, and the quick movement from one event to another—all ideally suited to the art of the storyteller. Furthermore, a tale can be told in many different ways, its impact upon the audience deriving from the intention, approach, and abilities of the teller. As we have seen, however, the evolution of the oral tale into printed text has all but obliterated the services of the storyteller, leaving room for the intercession of a new intermediary. Although without a teller there is no story, it can reasonably be argued that without an illustrator, the text is still there on the printed page, and yet, as Perry Nodelman points out in his instructive book *Words About Pictures*, our imaginations can

rarely achieve the vividness and specificity that can be found in a good illustration.<sup>1</sup> To achieve these qualities, both teller and illustrator must give something of themselves to the tale in order to infuse it with new life, since in its “basic” form, the tale leaves ample scope for the inventiveness of both contributors, as they work within the familiar framework of the story to create something new.

One significant challenge for the artist is the depiction of characters familiar in name but not in image; he or she has to presume to make explicit what is vague in the tales. For example, we are told no more than that Little Red Riding Hood is “a pretty little girl,” and the only thing we learn about Jack is that he “look[s] the proper sort of chap to sell cows”! Alternatively, the artist may choose to concentrate upon the setting of the tale, giving a specificity to time and place that is denied by the traditional beginning of “once upon a time.” Most important, however, is the interpretation of the events an illustration can provide. Indeed, the opportunity to expand and interpret has also been exploited by recorders of the tales, for as we noted earlier, Perrault and the Grimms were quite prepared to leave their mark on the tales in the process of making them more suitable for their respective audiences. There is, of course, no guarantee that the embellishment provided by teller or artist will necessarily enrich the tale; we all know how painful an experience it can be to listen to a flat, indifferent telling of a tale, or how disappointed we feel when confronted by illustrations that do little more than fill space on the page. However, as Nodelman points out, illustrators, like the storytellers before them, have the power to transform the tale into a rich and meaningful tapestry.

We are told that every picture tells a story; an illustration tells at least two, for not only does it provide a visual dimension for the story it accompanies, but it also reveals something of the assumptions and values of the artist and of the culture to which he or she belongs. In this sense, illustrators are no different from the storytellers or the fairy-tale compilers of the past who inevitably kept an eye on their audience, making sure their material was both suitable and satisfying. As a result, the pictures that accompany fairy tales are often as much of a mirror as are the tales themselves.

Thus the encounter between the text and the reader’s imagination is made more complex by the contribution of the illustrator, who imposes his or her particular vision and tone upon the narrative. Just how completely the understanding of a tale can be influenced by different artists’ interpretations will be demonstrated in the following pages: Though the words may remain the same (or similar), the pictures offer a different perspective. At the outset, we commented that no modern publisher

---

1 Perry Nodelman, *Words about Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children’s Picture Books* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1988).



Figure 1: *In the woods Little Red Riding Hood met old Father Wolf* (1867), Gustave Doré



Figure 2: *Little Red Riding Hood* (1995), Mireille Levert



Figure 3: "Outside the Forest is big." *The Girl in Red* (2012), Roberto Innocenti





Figure 4: Opening a Pathway to Briar Rose (1978), Michael Foreman