

WRITING MAGIC

Creating Stories That Fly



GAIL CARSON LEVINE



Collins

An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

2006

CHAPTER 27



Fiddling with Fairy Tales

FAIRY TALES ARE DEEP. Powerful. Many—"Beauty and the Beast" and "The Frog Prince," for example—are about being loved. In my opinion, "Hansel and Gretel" is about abandonment, while "Snow White" is about jealousy and "Cinderella" is about being unappreciated.

When you retell fairy tales, you tap into that depth and power. There's the richness of the magic, too: cloaks of invisibility, seven-league boots, purses that fill themselves, tablecloths that set themselves and provide food endlessly. In a fairy tale titled "The Goose Girl," there's even a dead horse's head that talks.

When fairy tales are told traditionally, the magic flashes by. You put on a cloak of invisibility, and *poof!* you're invisible. The fairy tale never says what it feels like to be invisible or whether you can see yourself or if anyone can hear you.

In fairy tales people get turned into stone, into trees, into

frogs, into deer. Well, what's that like? Does the transformation hurt? If someone gets turned into a frog, does she want to eat insects, or does she still like hamburgers?

I love to imagine in full what these magical events feel like and how they work. In *For Biddle's Sake*, one of the Princess Tales, I gloried in writing about how it might feel to turn into a toad and what it might be like to be a person in a toad's body.

The neat thing about fairy tales is that you're free to imagine them any way you like. Your elf doesn't have to have pointy ears. She can have big, hairy ones or the tiniest ears imaginable, just puffs of skin around a pinprick of a hole. And your giant can be gigantic only in comparison to a mosquito.

Most fairy tales are old, so old that nobody owns them anymore. They're no longer protected by copyright, so you can play around with them. If you think Cinderella should have seven stepsisters, so be it. If you decide that the queen in "Snow White" wants to know who has the longest neck of all, go right ahead.

When I'm choosing a fairy tale to revamp, I look either for something that annoys me or for mysteries and leaps of logic.

In "The Princess and the Pea," for example, the king and queen are looking for a "true princess" for the prince, their pride and joy, to marry. So what do they come up

with as a test of her princess essence?

It's a leap of logic and a mystery. What are the king and queen thinking? When the true princess becomes a queen and has life-and-death power over her subjects, will a pea-under-mattresses sensitivity help her make wise decisions?

I don't think so.

That's what got me writing *The Princess Test*, another of my Princess Tales.

Love at first sight appears in lots of fairy tales, as well as in thousands of books and movies. In fairy tales the prince usually falls for the maiden because she's pretty and sweet, and she usually falls for him because he's handsome and a prince. That's not good enough.

When I wrote *Ella Enchanted*, I had to deal with the love between the prince and Cinderella. It didn't make sense to me that they'd be so nuts about each other after dancing together a few times. That's why I made Ella and Char meet long before the balls.

There are plenty of fairy tales I haven't touched so far. But even if I have, or another author has, you can write your own version.