

The Rose and the Beast: Fairy Tales Retold. By Francesca Lia Block. New York: Harper Collins, 2000. 229 pp.

Readers who admire Francesca Lia Block's series of five stunning contemporary fairy-tale novels, beginning with *Weetzie Bat* (1989) and which have been subsequently collected under the cumulative title of *Dangerous Angels* (1998), will probably be disappointed with this most recent collection of short stories. While these nine fairy tales have some of the magic realism and quirky poetic language that have made Block's slender novels so popular with adolescents and adult readers, they are surprisingly flat and much less inspired or innovative than her previous work. The nine tales that Block chooses to revise are the Grimms' "Snow White," "Little Red Riding Hood," and "Snow White and Rose Red"; Andersen's "Thumbelina" and "The Snow Queen"; Perrault's "Cinderella," "Sleeping Beauty," and "Bluebeard"; and de Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast." As she has done with her previous novels, Block blends the landscape and culture of contemporary Los Angeles with fairy-tale motifs. One of the chief problems with this collection is that, while these stories are clearly fairy tales retold, they are the most literal reworkings of fairy tales that Block has published to date. The structure and characters of the original tales tend to overpower Block's attempt to revise them and give them new life and meaning. This sort of thing has been done before and better by Angela Carter in *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979), and by Emma Donoghue in *Kissing the Witch: Old Tales in New Skins* (1997).

What is distinctive about Block's retellings is that they are extremely stripped down and, one might suggest, bare-bone revisions of the originals. Block has reduced each fairy tale to one-word titles, generally of only four or five letters. These nine words—"Snow," "Tiny," "Glass," "Charm," "Wolf," "Rose," "Bones," "Beast," and "Ice"—form a mysterious talismanic list that is reproduced on the front of the book. Block must have taken pains with the sequence so that one reads from Snow to Ice, and she provides the mysterious sequence: Tiny Glass Charm. This minimalist approach is replicated in the storytelling as well with barely a hundred words on a page. White space tends to dominate the page design. More bones than text. I suspect these miniature fairy tales reveal the influence of modernist poets that Block admires. But while sometimes less is more, on this occasion, less is simply less. Block is consciously creating what might be considered anorexic versions of the fairy tales in that these thin versions are decidedly contemporary and feminist in their tone, and all of her

female narrators must struggle within a decidedly hostile environment. The fairy-tale world is the same dangerous, sexualized, and media-saturated environment which Mary Pipher in *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (1994) has termed a “girl-poisoning culture.”

Unlike William Thackeray’s *The Rose and the Ring* (1855), the comic literary fairy tale that gently mocks fairy conventions and characters and whose title this collection evokes, Block’s fairy tales have a consistently dark and violent edge. In “Wolf,” the adolescent protagonist has been sexually abused by her stepfather, and after fleeing to the house of her grandmother—who is now a wise woman who runs a junk shop in the desert—she confronts and blows the villain away with a shotgun, thanks to a previous shooting lesson by grandmother. In “Charm,” Sleeping Beauty no longer pricks her finger on a spindle, but nods to sleep by way of a heroin needle.

While the book’s title derives from the two tales “Rose” and “Beast,” both of which reveal the female protagonist’s disappointment with romantic love with a male character, it is the story that comes between these tales, “Bones,” which is Block’s reworking of “Bluebeard,” that significantly provides the key to the collection. Like most of the other stories in the collection, “Bones” makes clear Block’s belief in the power of fairy tales and the need to rewrite them from a female perspective. Derrick Blue is a major band promoter and club owner, while the protagonist narrator is a young woman drawn to Los Angeles in search of fame. Derrick Blue has consciously remade himself in the image of Bluebeard, and the fairy tale has “become a metaphor for his life.” Derrick Blue uses fairy tales to help lure and destroy other young woman, just as he attempts to do with the protagonist. But after hearing the singing of the bones of Blue’s previous victims buried beneath his house, she decides to rewrite the story of “Bluebeard,” just as Block has. Without the help of others, the protagonist slays the villain and flees the house. Block has heard the singing bones of the female victims of the original fairy tales and feels the obligation to write their stories. These revisions of fairy tales reveal the bones and blood of the originals. Block’s fairy tales are carefully revised in order to empower and give their young female protagonists a voice.

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