



Enchanted Hunters: The Power of Stories in Childhood

By Maria Tatar

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Highly illuminating for parents, vital for students and book lovers alike, *Enchanted Hunters* transforms our understanding of why children should read.

Ever wondered why little children love listening to stories, why older ones get lost in certain books? In this enthralling work, Maria Tatar challenges many of our assumptions about childhood reading. Much as our culture pays lip service to the importance of literature, we rarely examine the creative and cognitive benefits of reading from infancy through adolescence. By exploring how beauty and horror operated in C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels, and many other narratives, Tatar provides a delightful work for parents, teachers, and general readers, not just examining how and what children read but also showing through vivid examples how literature transports and transforms children with its intoxicating, captivating, and occasionally terrifying energy. In the tradition of Bruno Bettelheim's landmark *The Uses of Enchantment*, Tatar's book is not only a compelling journey into the world of childhood but a trip back for adult readers as well. 30 illustrations

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Maria Tatar chairs the Program in Folklore and Mythology at Harvard University. She is the author of *Enchanted Hunters: The Power of Stories in Childhood*, *Off with Their Heads! Fairy Tales and the Culture of Childhood* and many other books on folklore and fairy stories. She is also the editor and translator of *The Annotated Hans Christian Andersen*, *The Annotated Brothers Grimm*, *The Annotated Classic Fairy Tales*, *The Annotated Peter Pan*, *The Classic Fairy Tales: A Norton Critical Edition* and *The Grimm Reader*. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

From The Washington Post

From The Washington Post's Book World/washingtonpost.com Reviewed by Michael Dirda Maria Tatar is the John L. Loeb Professor of Germanic Languages and Literatures at Harvard University. Many of us would expect the holder of such an august title to be an authority on, say, "The Nibelungenlied" or Goethe or the novels of Thomas Mann. In fact, Tatar may be our leading scholar of children's literature and of the fairy tale in particular. Two of her more recent books include "The Annotated Brothers Grimm" and "The Annotated Hans Christian Andersen." I want to stress that word "scholar." Early in her introduction to "Enchanted Hunters," Tatar writes that in her courses on children's literature, the students naively "insisted on magic, on the incandescent beauty of the stories, and on the Wordsworthian 'attendant gleams / Of soul-illumination' that accompanied their readings. By contrast, I was eager to break the spell, to demystify and disenchant, moving from reading for pleasure to reading for hidden meanings, symbolic codes, and narrative technique." So be warned: "Enchanted Hunters" is full of insights into "the power of stories in childhood," but its tone is often that of the seminar. Tatar conveniently summarizes her book's aims at the end of her introduction: "I will begin this volume, after a chapter on the origins of childhood stories, by examining the power surges that come with reading and by exploring how books can ignite the imagination. Literature for children enthralls and entrances in large part through the shock effects of beauty and horror. Those moments, in all their unstudied power, are what lure children into a world made up of letters, and they constitute the subject matter of chapters 2 and 3. The final two chapters look at the cognitive gains provided by literacy, showing that children learn, through stories, how to do things with words even as words do things to them. In these chapters, I take up the notion of reading as a process of discovery and explore how that process engages three dominant features in the emotional landscape of the child: boredom, wonder, and curiosity." Tatar then proceeds to a discussion of what it means to read at bedtime, starting with those long centuries of communal tale-telling around the hearth: "The light of the blazing fire combined with the dark, gloomy shadows by the hearth to transmit sharp contrasts, shaping the expectations of listeners and inspiring the tellers. It is no accident that fairy-tale worlds enact struggles between the powers of light and darkness and choreograph collisions between beauty and horror. The atmosphere in which they flourished rippled and flowed with those contrasts." Beauty and horror are central to fairy tales. Such narratives, Tatar writes, usually suggest wondrous beauty by highlighting "the production of radiance (light, glass, gold, and brilliant hues), an insistence on abstract adjectives ('exquisite,' 'lovely,' and 'enchanting'), and descriptions of rapturous contemplation." Everything beautiful "glitters, dazzles, and shines," chiefly because of "metals, ice, glass, mirrors, silver and gold." But if beauty is "abstractly luminous," horror is "depicted not only with detailed specificity but also with astonishing variety." Tatar lists a few of those fairy-tale horrors, sometimes toned down or eliminated in modern retellings: "In the Grimms' 'Snow White,' iron shoes are heated over a fire, and the evil stepmother is forced to dance to her death in 'red-hot iron shoes.' In Andersen's 'Little Match Girl,' we not only see the child 'huddled between two houses, with rosy cheeks and a smile on her lips,' but we also learn that she had 'frozen to death' and that the New Year is dawning on the 'frozen body of the little

girl, who was still holding matches in her hand.' In Andrew Lang's *Yellow Fairy Book*, the Sun-Hero fends off ferocious wolves night after night. Finally, his strength fails him. He falls asleep, and a crab crawls toward him and 'with its claws tore out his tongue.' The princess who lives at the top of the glass mountain in that same collection sits at the window of her castle, gazing out at 'the heap of corpses both of riders and horses' and at the 'many dying men' who lie in her courtyard, 'unable to go any further with their wounded limbs.' " Horror naturally leads Tatar into the subject of death. In Chapter 3 she discusses children's prayers, the Victorian ideal of a "beautiful death," and the boom 30 years ago in high trauma young-adult novels: "According to one count, more than two hundred books of fiction for children took up the theme of death in the 1970s and 1980s." Tatar shows that dealing with fear of the dark -- and, by extension, with the fear of extinction -- forms a major subtext of such picture book classics as Margaret Wise Brown and Clement Hurd's "Goodnight Moon" and Maurice Sendak's "In the Night Kitchen." Even more directly, death proves a major theme of E.B. White's "Charlotte's Web," beginning with its famous opening line: "Where's Papa going with that ax?" In her fourth chapter, "The Magic Art of the Great Humbug," Tatar addresses the power of curses, spells and charms to change reality (in fairy tales, at least), but also how books like L. Frank Baum's "The Wizard of Oz," Frances Hodgson Burnett's "The Secret Garden" and Norton Juster's "The Phantom Tollbooth" "champion the importance of learning how to do things with words, hinting that control over language conquers helplessness and vulnerability, leading to confidence and authority." In her final chapter, Tatar turns to the connected themes of boredom, curiosity and wonder. How many books, she notes, begin with kids complaining that they are bored with nothing to do? So many of our great children's classics -- she points to Lewis Carroll's "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," J.M. Barrie's "Peter Pan" and Dr. Seuss's "The Cat in the Hat" -- underscore that an engaged curiosity offers the cure for boredom. In its turn, curiosity will then lead to the discovery that the world is full of wonder, as Marco discovered in Dr. Seuss's "And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street." Tatar's evocative title, "Enchanted Hunters," derives from Nabokov's "Lolita," where the phrase forms one of the book's leitmotifs -- it is, for instance, the name of the hotel to which Humbert takes Lolita. But Tatar staunchly hopes to "reclaim" the term as a description of the child as reader, "curious, energetic, and enthralled." To show more precisely what she means, she concludes her book with a long appendix in which dozens of writers -- from Frederick Douglass and Walt Whitman to Rita Dove and Harold Bloom -- testify to the power of childhood reading. So, in the end, "Enchanted Hunters" paradoxically takes us right back to accounts of -- what else? -- magic, incandescent beauty and Wordsworthian gleams of "soul-illumination."

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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