



## *The Tortoise's Tale (The Monitor)*

"... we went to school in the sea. The Master was an old turtle-we used to call him Tortoise-"

"Why did you call him Tortoise, if he wasn't one?" Alice asked.

"We called him Tortoise, because he taught us," said the Mock Turtle



### **Madeleines and Danish Pastry: An Encounter with Hans Christian Andersen for International Children's Book Day**

Mary Beaty

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North Americans grandly see ourselves as seigneurs of the world; justified inhabitants of any clime which offers running water, air-conditioned supermarkets, television and Internet connections. Confident of English as the current lingua franca, we extend our living room to half the planet. As a holder of dual American and Canadian passports, I am a citizen of Everywhere and Nowhere--and regard my ancestry as irrelevant to my daily life. The question of cultural identity rarely arises.

Thus, when a shop-keeper in Florence inspected my visage and announced: "siete Danese", I corrected him politely; "per piacere, Signore, io sono Canadese". He lifted one eyebrow, and responded in French, "peut-être, Madame, mais vous soyez Danois, certainement". I pointedly paid the bill with a Bank of Montreal credit card and felt I had won the argument.

Revelation bided its time. A full decade later I made the rounds of a local folk festival, where I danced the limbo and ate jerk pork, attempted a little Greek at the ouzo bar and lectured the family tree huckster at the Harp of Tara. Then a towering redhead in a plastic Viking helmet lured me into the Copenhagen pavilion, where I encountered my Proustian moment. The tall, round, pink-cheeked women in floor-length aprons frying 'aebleskyvers', with their thin eyelashes, blotchy cheeks and substantial underarms, evoked multiple versions of my grandmother, Esther Henrietta Jensen, daughter of Hans Christian Jensen of Odense, Hans Andersen's birthplace.

Two thousand miles from my own birthplace I was immediately, uncomprehendingly, suddenly, HOME. I relaxed. I bought herring, and cherry jam. I examined doilies. I applauded the gentle, unathletic folk dances. In a daze of warmth, surrounded by soft voices and friendly, but unintrusive comradeship, I wandered into the Hans Andersen display; water-colours and sepia prints of thatched houses, small villages and storks, storks everywhere. The volunteer curators talked expertly and lovingly of Andersen's life and work, translating bits of stories in soft, unaccented English to make the tales I thought I knew so well, alive, specific, and oh so particular to that little country beside the sea.

That day changed my entire approach to literature. I finally understood that time and place are real things, and that attempts to repackage the specificity of art into our own cultural containers begins an inexorable path of transmutation until we claim only the simulacrum; three minute Shakespeare, Mozart on a synthesizer. Like Latin before it, English as global Esperanto subsumes each object it touches. We may fondly describe Andersen as "universal", but his actual stories do not survive this well-meaning appropriation.

Translation is only the beginning. Disney's Caribbean music and soppy sentiment for *The Little Mermaid* have nothing to do with the painful Psyche story of loss and sacrifice which so terrified me as



a child that I hid the book in the basement. Despite its accessible brevity, the arch irony of *The Princess and the Pea* remains too sophisticated for modern minds and is either reduced to parody or reworked by feminist reductionism. Parents are dismayed to discover that *The Ugly Duckling* is a LONG, complex, nuanced story, and so revert to the rags-to-riches cartoon--or to Danny Kaye's musical version, a "classic" for the video generation.

Other favourite stories present problems. *The Little Match Girl* and *The Fir Tree* are too sad for modern tastes. *The Tinderbox* is unabashedly violent, *Big Claus and Little Claus* disturbingly venal and *The Steadfast Tin Soldier* achingly painful. The comeuppance of the snotty princess in *The Swineherd* upsets the less detached wing of feminists. *The Nightingale* remains a good fable for the mechanistic universe, but *The Emperor's New Clothes* is frequently confused with Dr. Seuss. In the hinterland between disavowal and revisionism, the stories disappear.

It is not enough to retell the plot and get the uniforms right. I am now attempting to read *The Pea Pod* in my "baby" Danish. "There were five peas in one pod; they were green, and the pod was green, and so they believed all the world was green--in fact, could not be otherwise". This story of five destinies is related to a million other narratives, and though it is a literary tale, we could trace it in a tale-type index. But that won't find the heart of the matter. The story's life, in Andersen's voice, remains unique.

For just as Alice changes meaning and reference as it is translated and illustrated, and *Cinderella* and *Jack and the Beanstalk* bear witness to locality reinforcing the subtext, all stories are rooted in place, time, language. Finding the ghost of my grandmother in a school gymnasium does not permit me to claim any greater affinity with 19th century Denmark than the Italian shopkeeper, but it has provided a principle. I'll try to treat Hans Andersen's birthday-- and International Children's Book Day--less as a celebration of the universality of story plots than the particularity of culture. And of people. And of art. Tak.

[with thoughts of Anna Sophia Lauretsen, Hans Christian Jensen, Esther Henrietta and Dorothea Snouffer, from *The electric librarian*, Mary Theresa Donaher Roddy O'Holloran Hannon Beaty—whew!]

Mary Beaty

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### Links to Hans Christian Andersen

[Hans Christian Andersen](#) - An online archive of Andersen's stories, with cross-references to the Danish equivalents.

[Hans Andersen Museum, Odense](#)

[Portraits of Hans Christian Andersen](#) - Most of the 300 portraits in the Royal Danish Library.

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