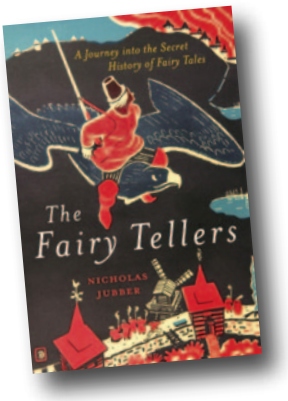

A review of

The Fairy Tellers

Paul Quinn

I first became aware of Nicholas Jubber just after last Christmas (2021) when he was quoted by the Mail Online during the debacle following Jon Stewart's suggestion (quickly withdrawn) that J.K. Rowling's use of goblins as bankers in the Harry Potter series was anti-Semitic. Jubber was described as an 'author and literature expert'. Presumably Jubber's then forthcoming book *The Fairy Tellers* suggested an expertise in the subject of fairy tales and thus authority to comment on the Stewart/Rowling story. *The Fairy Tellers* is described on its front cover as 'A journey into the secret history of fairy tales'. The blurb promises a 'far-ranging quest' in which Nicholas Jubber will unearth 'the lives of the dreamers who made our most beloved fairy tales'. The reader will 'discover a fresh perspective on some of our most frequently told tales'. It all sounds terribly exciting as we journey around Europe and the Middle East in search of Giambattista Basile, Hanna Diyab, Gabrielle-Suzanne de Villeneuve, Dortchen Wild, Ivan Khudiakov, Somadeva, and Hans Christian Andersen.

However, after reading *The Fairy Tellers*, it is difficult to make the case that Jubber's expertise in literature includes the fairy tale. Indeed, there are turns of phrase in this book which are so awful as to challenge the idea that Jubber is even an author, beyond the fact that one of his books is sitting on my desk. Clichés lurk, like trolls in a Norwegian wood: Basile 'spent most of his career hanging on [his sister Adriana's] coat-tails' (36); Walt Disney 'started milking the tales of the Grimms' (48); Hanna Diyab's decision to leave Paris is, of course, the moment '[t]he die had been cast' (82). Jubber has adopted a casual, 'chatty' style which I assume is meant to suggest a storyteller recounting a tale. Instead, for this reader at least, it adds to the book's irritation. In a synopsis of Basile's 'The Flea', we find 'to be fair to him, he gives it his best shot' (41) – casual and clichéd in the same sentence. Two lines later, we read about Princess Fiona (in *Shrek*), 'coupl[ing] up for a genuine ogre-princess love match' (41). Basile is also described as 'sticking it to the Spaniards' (21). Jubber's chosen authors – or those previously marginalised or forgotten figures who have been suggested to Jubber by other people's research – are inevitably referred to by their first names; canonical authors, like Charles Perrault, are

called by their surnames. It is part of Jubber's technique to foreground the 'lost' figures and their work at the expense of the more familiar fairy-tale authors. This focus on 'forgotten' or marginalised figures makes Andersen's inclusion seem odd.

This is a deeply frustrating book. I assume the original premise of the book was to connect the various storytellers under discussion to geographical locations. That in itself is an interesting idea and Jubber is an award-winning travel writer. However, the discussion of place never really moves beyond the pedestrian and the speculative. I note that some of the fulsome reviews included on the dustjacket are from other authors interested in place. It is difficult to imagine similar praise from people working on fairy tales. By his own admission, Jubber is not an expert on the subject. Rather his return to the fairy tale as an adult is a familiar one – the parent reading the fairy tale to a child reconnects with the parent's own past as an audience for fairy tales but with an adult's awareness that there is more to the tale than just a story for children. What we have in Jubber is an author and parent who has become aware of 'the secret history of fairy tales'. One of Jubber's reviewers describes *The Fairy Tellers* as being 'rigorously researched', and it is clear that Jubber has read a lot; there is little evidence of original research on Jubber's part but he is thoroughly engaged with the ongoing critical work of recovering and returning to public awareness overlooked, forgotten and marginalised figures in the history of the fairy tale. But, in order to foreground these previously hidden figures, Jubber has had to employ some questionable techniques.

To establish the importance of female fairy tale writers in late 17th- and 18th-century France – notably Villeneuve – Jubber has to reduce the achievements of Charles Perrault. Jubber describes Perrault as having:

> listened to their [female storytellers of the salons] tales and carved them to the bones, grafting pithy morals on to the endings and including scenes of church rituals … to please the authorities. The tales were easy for children to follow and the parents believed they were morally nourishing. Ergo: instant bestseller. (104)

No-one who has read Perrault carefully will accept this judgement. Jubber has missed or ignores the very pointed turn in the moral of 'Red Riding Hood', which directs the reader to the threat of male sexual violence in towns and cities. Like Andrew Lang before him, Jubber has missed the point of the deeply satirical ending of 'Hop o' My Thumb' and the sophisticated use of a narrative voice which challenges its own account of Hop's career at court. Jubber sees conspiracy in the suppression of female fairy-tale writers in 17th- and 18th-century France but never moves beyond linking the authors' suppression to their gender, and thus ignores the very specific cultural and political backdrop (105ff).

In the chapter on Hanna Diyab there is recognition that 'Galland did much to colour in the details' of 'Aladdin' (77), and there is grudging acknowledgement of the 'literary achievement' of Galland in 'embellish[ing] and fine-tun[ing]' Diyab's tales (96). Ruth Bottigheimer's work on the complex relationship and interplay between Diyab's tales and French fairy tales – particularly 'Aladdin' – is ignored. The ongoing focus in fairy-tale studies on figures like Diyab, Dortchen Wild, Jane Wilde, and Leonora Lang is a necessary corrective to the previous Euro-centric and phallocentric history of the fairy tale, but Jubber's technique is disingenuous.

In the chapter on Dortchen Wild, Jubber is at pains to establish that she was the source for '[m]ore than a dozen of the tales (and possibly as many as twenty) … nearly a fifth of the first volume, including many that would become iconic' (144). We are not told which of the iconic tales were by Wilde. Jubber then states, 'Of the eighty-six tales printed in the first volume of *Children's and Household Tale*s, more than fifty were narrated by young women under the age of twenty-five' (144). This is all to challenge the 'load of cobblers' (144) that the Grimms wandered the forests and villages of the German states collecting stories from 'dying crones and herdsmen' (144). Jubber's problem is this 'revelation' about the true sources of the Grimms' tales is not news, even to his general reader. It also ignores the huge increase in the number of tales in the subsequent editions of *Kinder- und Hausmärchen.* Jubber's use of sources around this topic is questionable. He cites the 1811 'Appeal to all Friends of Old German Poetry and History' as evidence of the Grimms constructing their own myth about their methodology and desire 'to save and collect all the existing songs and tales that can be found among the common German peasantry' (148). However, on consulting Jubber's source for this – Jack Zipes' *The Brothers Grimm* (1988) – we find the 1811 Appeal was never sent and what Jubber has quoted is actually from the 1815 *Circular Letter Concerned with the Collection of Folk Poetry.* It should also be stated at this point that Jubber's research is very difficult to follow. The book lacks references and Jubber's 'Sources and Further Reading' reads like the footnotes and bibliography of a new undergraduate who is yet to fully grasp referencing. But a careful tracing through those notes reveals some problematic use of sources, as in the case of the letters of 1811 and 1815.

A similar awkward use of secondary sources, or omission of information, or misreading, is apparent in Jubber's strange claim that Basile was killed during the eruption of Vesuvius in 1631. Jubber states on p.59 that Baile 'was murdered by a mountain'. On p.46 he describes Basile as 'the little fellow labouring under the raging mountain when it sent down its murderous ash shower', with the subsequent paragraph opening with the awkward line 'Although the volcano did take his life, fortunately his writings weren't reduced to ash' (46). This is all very odd, because on the same page we read of Basile catching a 'fatal infection'. On p.45 Jubber writes, 'Two hundred and three years earlier [than Andersen's account of the 1834 eruption

of Vesuvius which opens the chapter] Vesuvius added Giambattista to its long list of victims. In a ferocious eruption in 1631, spumes of lava and smoke blasted out of the cone.' Jubber then quotes from 'a contemporary chronicler' (45), but what he quotes is actually an account of a plague-like infection which struck Naples in 1632. It is quite clear that the quotation is describing events *after* the eruption:

> the scourges of the conflagration were scarcely extinguished when the just God, perceiving that [the Neapolitans] were not yet repentant, sent another chastisement, namely a disease of the throat which … carried off numbers of people in a short space of time … Among these were many notable people … [including] Giovan Battista Basile, one of the leading poets of our time. (45)

Jubber's notes the name of the 'contemporary chronicler' as Aggiunta Bucca, writing in February 1632, quoted by Croce and Penzer in their edition of *The Pentamerone* (305). Nancy Canepa, in the introduction to her recent translation of *The Tale of Tales* (2016), gives a very clear account of Basile's death during the flu epidemic of 1632 (Canepa, xxxix–xl). Jubber, who as far as I can see fails to give the year of Basile's death, has included Canepa's edition of the text in his bibliography (321). It is therefore difficult to account for Jubber's claim that Basile was 'murdered by the mountain' when he clearly was not.

The chapter on Basile also contains two further silly errors: I cannot find a translation of the Book of Judith which described Holofernes as a giant (34, 35) and Tony Soprano was not born in Avellino (37). To suggest that Tony Soprano was born anywhere other than the United States of America is to fundamentally misunderstand *The Sopranos*.

The great pity of *The Fairy Tellers* is that there are other writers – inside the academy and beyond – who have spent years working on the figures discussed by Jubber, who are responsible for the reassessment of those figures and the canonical authors of fairy tales who have challenged a male-centric, overly simplistic idea of the transmission and transformation of oral tales into literary ones, who could have written a better version of this book. We see again the tension between academic books and those for a general reader. The problem is the general reader who reads Jubber's book may accept his flawed account of the fairy tale and replace one myth of the writing of fairy tales with another.

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