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Crafting Baba Yaga from the Australian landscape: An interview with Lorena Carrington

Abstract:

The Australian fairy-tale tradition is as much about art as literature. This interview engages with how one artist physically draws upon the Australian landscape to retell iconic imagery from European fairy tale and folklore and how she sees her work in relation to contemporary writers. Australian fairy tale is in open negotiation with the history of the landscape and finding the stuff of fairy tale in the rocks, leaves, bones and debris of the landscape allows Carrington to craft work that engages with old European traditions while connecting to Australia's material presence and looking forward to our innovative future in the genre.

Biographical notes:

Rebecca-Anne Do Rozario has been teaching fairy tales and speculative literature at Monash University for the last ten years. She has published research on Disney princesses, Wizard Rock, Australian fairy tales, picture books and other subjects in a wide variety of publications including *Children's Literature*, *Musicology Australia* and *Marvels & Tales*. She has also published fiction, including 'The death of Glinda, the good witch' in *Aurealis*. She has a chapter on Australian fairy tales in the forthcoming Routledge collection, *Fairy tale world*, and her book on fashion in the fairy-tale tradition will be published by Palgrave.

Lorena Carrington is a photographic artist and illustrator. She exhibits regularly and contributes creative work to arts and literary festivals. Her works are held in Australian and international collections. Her photographic artworks interpret fairy tales, responding to a tradition of silhouettes in fairy-tale illustration. These she produces by photographing many separate elements and combining them in detailed montages. She writes about fairy tales and the creative process at thebonelantern.com, and you can view her work at lorenacarrington.com. You can find her on Twitter at @Lorena_C. *Vasilisa the wise and other tales of brave young women*, written by Kate Forsyth and illustrated by Lorena, is due out from Serenity Press in December 2017.

Keywords:

Creative writing – Fairy tale – Illustration – Baba Yaga

RD: Danielle Wood's story, 'The Blackaby Road', published in this special issue of *TEXT*, was inspired by your work, 'Baba Yaga's house' (http://www.thestylefile.com/ illustrator/lorena-carrington#image-663). What aspects of the Baba Yaga tale were you drawn to in creating the work?

LC: I have always loved the Baba Yaga stories. In my younger years, it was the thrill of her wicked treatment of young visitors, her chicken-legged house, the bones of children on full display around the small clearing in her deep dark forest. Now I probably empathise with her a little more! Her representation ranges from Wicked Witch (a la Hansel & Gretel) to Mother Earth, controller of the winds and protector of the natural world. In life there is very little pure evil; the idea of an enemy comes from a need to protect our own, from the idea of the Other. I don't see Baba Yaga as being necessarily wicked; she is protecting her forest and home from the blundering humans who keep turning up on her doorstep. That's what I love about Danielle's representation of her in 'The Blackaby Road'. She is a protector of animals, saving them from human destruction. After a car kills a mother wallaby, the old woman walks down to the road from her house, and retreats from sight at the appearance of another car, before pulling

a joey from its dead mother's pouch. Here it is clear: her world is not ours, as ours is not for her.

> The way back to the house on legs is steep. She takes long steps, breathes deep. Inside her clothes the joey chiaks softly to its mother. Are you there?
>
> 'Chk, chk,' the woman replies. (Wood 2017)

My illustration shows two children approaching the Baba Yaga's house. The trees loom black and the house creaks with menace, creeping forward on its chicken legs, but the sky behind has an evening glow, and warm light spills from the house. Will they be welcomed or turned into soup? I love the Baba Yaga tales for their brilliant darkness and moral ambiguity, and that's what I aimed to portray in the image. Her house is animalistic, perched on its chicken legs. She is quite literally at home in the wild animal world, as is Danielle's woman on the hill.

RD: There's a rich history of interconnectedness between literary fairy tale and illustration in Australia. Illustration has always been important, even iconic: Ida Rentoul Outhwaite's ethereal fairies, May Gibbs's gumnut babies, Shaun Tan's surreal creatures, and even Norman Lindsay's cheeky puddings (Do Rozario 2011). Michelle J Smith, for instance, talks about the work of illustrators like Outhwaite as 'constitut[ing] an attempt to render Southern landscapes and fauna familiar, friendly and aesthetically appealing, in contrast with realist depictions of their dangers' (2015: 193). As an illustrator, how do you think about your work in Australian fairy tale and your relationship to other writers and artists in the genre?

LC: We all respond to the landscape in different ways. Outhwaite superimposed an Englishness over the Australian landscape, while Gibbs created a more obvious reflection of the landscape she was working in. The Banksia Men are instantly recognisable (and terrifying), as are her gumnut skirts and scribbly gum backgrounds. Lindsay reflected a larrikin humour, drawing from the ramshackle and knockabout nature of mining settlements. Tan brings a contemporary awareness, and a lot more sensitivity to his response to the landscape and culture he's working within. All these artists lived in the Australian landscape, but we can see over time (from Outhwaite to Tan) a pulling away from a European and English literary tradition, and a growing consciousness of Australian stories.

Rosemary Ross Johnston spoke about the Australian landscape as a very physical manifestation of the literary 'faraway land' in early Australian writing.

> Distance is the stuff of fairy tale… it is part of the construction of fairy land. Australia was far from being a fairyland to most of its early white inhabitants (it was hell to many); but it appeared just as far away, just as remote from the 'real world' (Old World), just as much a place where, maybe, for some at least, anything could happen, where fortunes could be made, where the disenfranchised could achieve agency and reveal, like Cinderella, their true worth. (2004: 961)

She goes on to discuss the power of the landscape over the refiguring of children's literature in Australia. Our landscape changed children's literature immensely, and its influence fascinates me. Having grown up in this landscape, it can be difficult for my mind's eye to move away from my own experiences when reading fairy tales, and,

working in a photographic medium, it is my own landscape that I turn to when I need a looming tree or forest path.

For me the landscape is both setting and medium. I construct most of my work out of parts of it, so they are inextricably tied together. I twist strands of story together with the bits and pieces of plant, earth and bone I find in my backyard, which was once a mined-out creek, and the bush around my house. It is a gathering and weaving of many threads, as is the genre of the Australian fairy tale. We draw from literary traditions and our own sense of place in landscape, history and culture. As a relatively unexplored genre, there is a huge amount of depth to be plumbed in its meaning and potential, and I feel an immense privilege to be working among historical and contemporary writers and artists as we push and develop the form.

RD: The striking thing about your photographic artwork is its representation of physical elements of the Australian rural landscape in images reconstructing European fairy tales. While there are fairy tales anchored in the Australian landscape, I think most Australians are still more likely to think first of European fairy tales. I find the reconstitution of those tales through bits of Australian stone, leaf and bark intriguing. How do you approach the blending of the Australian landscape with European tales in your process?

LC: I have a growing interest in the way European cultural and narrative history influenced nineteenth-century Australian fantasy writing, and how that contrasts with our response to working creatively in the Australian landscape today. In illustration, I often work with European tales and place them, physically at least, in the Australian landscape. This bush is my home, and the branches of gum trees and wattle will always be tangled up with oak and fir in my imagining of fairy tales. My work always starts with what the landscape gives me. I collect small treasures – leaves, stones, animal bones – and photograph them, then file them into digital folders ready to draw from. When I go out into the bush with my camera, I rarely take in the wide view. You'll usually find me on my belly, photographing tiny details of fungi or lichen, pushing the background into a deep blur.

I am very conscious of how I use Australian elements in my work. While my local landscape feels very much like my home, it is of course the original home of the Dja Dja Wurrung people, who had been here for many thousands of years before I stomped in with my camera. Tragically, they would hardly recognise their land now. Many people tramped across it before me, and it has been ravaged by mining, farming and introduced species. The bush we know now is nothing like how it was 200 years ago. It makes the idea of the 'Australian landscape' a complicated one; the landscape is a corrupted, remnant version of what it once was, so what is it that we're identifying with? A place imbued with stories and spiritual meaning for many thousands of years, or a landscaped pillaged and scarred over a couple of centuries? It is stratified with deep tragedy, desperate hope and ever-changing life, but still so beautiful.

RD: Yes, Johnston's assertion about 'a complex Australian poetics of space and distance' in Australian children's literature is reflected in your work, in the way you produce those dichotomies and layers (2004: 961). Your mother is also an artist who

works with the Australian landscape, producing very bold images. What challenges do you see for artists in engaging with the imagery of the Australian landscape?

LC: Yes, my mother Jenny Carrington works a lot in the landscape, and treats it much more as a pure subject than I do. She aims to strip the idea of art down to its purest form, and look deeply into what so many artists view as a backdrop. She says, 'I think we've got past looking for superficial beauty in landscape, and need to look at the enduring and changing nature of our planet. Geological forms and the thin surface of life. It is a place to be part of and feel at home in, not just something to view as a pretty image or something to exploit.'

And therein lies part of the challenge. Our landscape is far more than what we see on the surface. How can we engage with it meaningfully without truly understanding its history or living ecosystem?

My own view of the landscape is very much tied up with story. I think the literary side of me is constantly seeking a narrative. Walking through the bush near our house, I often find myself wondering who was here before me, and what they felt and thought walking the same path; an hour ago, last month, several thousand years ago.

I am often asked why I don't use Aboriginal stories in my work, and my answer is simple and very clear. They are not my stories to tell. I must respond to my own world, and bring the stories I want to tell into it, but I am always conscious of that fact that I'm bringing them into a place that has many thousands of years' worth of stories already embedded in it. I call a small part of this storied landscape my own because I grew up within it, and I offer my stories to it, but they will always be tiny weeds at the edge of a deep and rich forest of dreaming.

RD: You have an active interest in fairy-tale scholarship. How do you critically engage with fairy tale and how does this inform your work?

LC: I grew up in a house filled with academics (though my father was an independent scholar, not formally attached to a university), and my partner was also an academic for many years, so I've always been surrounded by that world. So much so that I know I don't want to be in it! Having watched my father engage in intellectual thought and discussion with the freedom of independence was a huge influence.

I read a lot, and wade through academic papers. It also helps enormously to talk to other people in the field. They have expanded my realm of thinking in so many ways. Twitter has been hugely helpful in finding 'my' people, as has gate crashing symposiums and conferences. Don't ever think you won't be welcome at a conference just because you don't walk the hallowed halls!

It is very easy to live in your own little bubble of interest when you're focused on your own reading. An academic scholar is forced to re-evaluate their own theories and thought processes all the time. Left to your own devices, it's very easy to reach for low-hanging fruit and read only what ties in with your own interests. I certainly don't claim to have a particularly wide or deep knowledge of fairy-tale scholarship, but what helps me, I think, is being constantly open to other people's ideas and giving them space among my own notions.

My interest is in early incarnations of fairy tales, and their transformations over the years; how social expectations around gender roles, femininity and class change them. I am also interested in metamorphosis and quest tales, and their potential as metaphors for the transformation and challenges of adolescence. My research began with delving back to find 'lost' tales with active female protagonists. I wanted to read my daughters fairy tales in which girls and women solved their own problems, rather than relying on dippy Prince Charming every time. The research has turned into a body of work developed over several years. And happily that research has also turned into a book. I connected with Australian author Kate Forsyth a couple of years ago, and we realised we were on almost identical paths in our research. We joined forces to produce *Vasilisa the wise & other tales of brave young women*, a collection of seven tales rewritten by Kate and illustrated by myself. It will be published by Serenity Press in early 2018.

RD: Are there particular scholarly pieces that have helped you to form or evolve your approach to fairy tale in your work?

LC: Marina Warner's books *From the beast to the blonde* (1995) and *Once upon a time* (2014) have a permanent position on my desk, as does *Fearless girls, wise women and beloved sisters* (2000), by Kathleen Ragan. I've been reading Belinda Calderone's thesis *Mothers, monsters and midwives: The evolution of motherhood in European fairy tales* (2015), which has been helpful in my exploration of women's roles in fairy tales.

Most recently, the Australian Fairy Tale Society Conference themed around the Fairy Tale in the Australian Landscape has made me think more deeply about the relationship between story and place. I think it's very important to hear people talk about their approaches. I get a lot out of discussions and hearing people talk about what drives their critical thinking: it sparks ideas, not just in my own research, but in the artwork I create, too. We don't do anything in a vacuum, and by sharing ideas, thoughts and approaches with others, we extend our creative and analytical range.

RD: You've also been developing your creative writing. Many Australian fairy-tale tellers, including May Gibbs and Shaun Tan, have worked as both artists and writers. How do you see these approaches as complementing each other in your fairy-tale work?

LC: The dangerous thing about doing both is that you can start to feel like you should be writing when you're making artwork, then vice versa, and nothing gets done! It's a procrastination pendulum, swinging from one thing to the other.

I don't want to tell a whole story with my illustrations, or show too clearly what I see in the text. So much of the thrill of reading is in creating imagery in your mind. I want to add to and inspire the reader's imagination, not overwhelm it with my own ideas. That's where the silhouette is a useful device, since it is never certain which side of it you are looking at: you can create the mood and shape of a scene, but the details and expressions are up to the viewer to imagine.

The best thing about doing both illustration and writing is that you can use one to feed the other, both in general and in specific projects. An illustrator usually works around a completed text, but writing and illustrating something yourself means that you can weave both together. It's a very satisfying process.

RD: Are there things that you can do in one medium that you can't really optimise in the other?

LC: Absolutely. An illustration can capture an essential feeling immediately. A good writer can do the same in a few sentences, but the reader still has to purposefully engage with the text. Once a writer captures their reader, however, they have the luxury of all those words. They can fill in details, delve inside the mind of the characters, tell the reader as much or as little as they choose. Reading is a purposeful act; it's something you sink into willingly. You give your time to it, and are (one hopes!) rewarded with a rich, detailed and intoxicating experience.

Illustration is immediate. You can explore the image and look for detail, but the first impression is the strongest. I purposefully leave a lot unsaid in my images, and try to leave space for memory and imagination. People often have a very personal response to them. They are taken back to an essential feeling they remember from childhood; it's often something quite visceral. That's when I know I'm doing something right.

RD: The figure of the young girl features in so much of your fairy-tale work. Scholars like Marina Warner have spoken of the 'girly' reputation of fairy tale. Do you feel that there is something feminine in fairy tale that you are drawing upon in your work?

LC: I think there are a couple of ways to look at that. Our popular contemporary idea of the classic fairy tale is often limited to the princess tale, which I see as coming from many years of selective exclusion, and conservative expectations of a woman's place in society. On the other hand, fairy tales are in many ways a feminine form. For thousands of years, tales have been passed down through the generations by mostly women. In a patriarchal society, women were often the ones who held the stories. And those stories were important. They entertained. They warned of dangers, educated children, and wove the threads of history. They sparked the imagination and taught us, through their wondrous and fantastical impossibilities, how to be human.

To be 'girly' has become an insult, which only demonstrates the ingrained idea that feminine is lesser than masculine. Which is narrow-minded balderdash, obviously. Fairy tales have great power for everyone, which is why I find the "Aw, how sweet" reaction I often get in response to telling people I work with fairy tales so frustrating.

My work definitely draws on the feminine aspects of fairy tales. The main characters in my work are my daughters; almost all the figures in my fairy-tale work are. They are always the active participants in their own stories, and this is very important for me to keep demonstrating, for both my own daughters and anyone who sees my work. No matter who you are, you are the main character in your own story, and there is no-one better suited to fight your fights, lead your adventures and find your happily-ever-after.

I love and applaud the popularity of contemporary feminist retellings of fairy tales (Rapunzel's hair-based ninja skills come to mind), but right now that is not what my work is about. There are already so many fairy tales about smart and independent women; stories that have always been there, but we have forgotten about them. Whether through the popularity of writers with a male perspective (Grimm, Andersen, etc.), societal expectations, or even a cultural predilection for princess tales, so many incredible stories of female bravery, wisdom and accomplishment have slipped into the

archives and out of public recognition. Fairy tales are such an important part of a child's connection to their literary heritage, and we absolutely must make available stories that reflect their own aspirations and experiences, no matter their gender identity.

RD: Children themselves figure far less prominently in fairy tale than might be generally supposed, although there are many famous child figures like Hansel and Gretel, Little Red Riding Hood, Thumbelina and the Little Match Girl. What draws you in particular to representing the child in your own fairy-tale imagery?

LC: That's true. There is, however, a strong focus on youth, and many tales also tell of the journey between childhood and adulthood. Stories like Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty portray the protagonists as childlike figures at the beginning, but by the end they are women of marriageable age. Fairy tales have only been intended for children in the past few hundred years. Before then, they were told to the whole family; some tales serving as lessons for children, others for teenagers, and some as what we would see as having very adult themes. Little Red Riding Hood being forced into bed with the wolf, and the impregnation of Sleeping Beauty and Rapunzel, for example!

My use of the child in my work stems very directly from the fact that my daughters are available to be photographed. They were young when I started photographing them for my work, and I was often exploring younger tales and the idea of the child alone in the fairy-tale landscape and all that conjures up: freedom, imagination, real world dangers as fantastical monsters just out of frame…

Now that they are older, my interest has been moving to tales that speak to the transformation of adolescence. As my children change, so does the lens through which I view fairy tales. Once upon a time, the big bad wolf really was just that. Now, straying from the narrow path through the woods means much more. A youth who strays from their prescribed path against the will of their elders is not just getting lost amongst the trees. They are rebelling, exploring, taking risks and forging their own journey. There's no denying the link between that journey and the transformative journey of the adolescent.

RD: There is a lot of discussion about transformation in fairy tales, particularly those involving the maiden, mother and crone, and as Sarah A Appleton notes, 'the majority of the tales relate the transformation from childhood to adult' (2008: 4). How do you draw inspiration from your daughters and their own transformations from childhood to adulthood, as well as your own negotiation of motherhood?

LC: The fairy-tale works so well as a metaphor for the transformative journey of teenage-hood. There is an innocence, a loss of it, and finally a newfound maturity. Fingers are pricked and blood is drawn; a long sleep transforms child into adult (and in some cases a mother). A path is travelled and foes battled, and the previously innocent hero or heroine emerges victorious (and usually, infuriatingly, married). They are safe stories, but full of what a parent fears for their child: gothic angst, danger and transformation. All are hallmarks of adolescence, and, I would argue, that is what many fairy tales are about in the first place.

Working with fairy tales is a way for me to welcome the many changes and challenges as my daughters head down the winding path of adolescence. The idea of stepping back

and letting them find their own way is no longer quite as fearsome. The path may be riddled with stones, overhung by branches and populated by wolves, but they are capable of forging their own stories from this adventure.

And this knowledge in turn informs my work. Every time I photograph them in silhouette, I see small changes in them as they grow. A tilt of the head, or a straightening of the back: I see their fearlessness in the images I make with them, and it inspires the next image, and the next, and the next.

As for my own transformation from Mother to Crone … I may need to do a bit more reading up. Another day.

RD: Silhouettes are quite popular in fairy-tale illustration. However, where papercuts and drawings tend to have clean edges, the use of photography in your artwork gives fuzzy, textured qualities to your edges that make them more, for want of a better word, organic. What draws you to the silhouette and how do you try to push out the potential of the technique in its representation of fairy tale?

LC: There's no doubt that I'm heavily influenced by the silhouette work of artists like Arthur Rackham and Ida Rentoul Outhwaite. I love how visually striking the form is, and how much is left to the imagination of the viewer. Technically, it's great fun to put an image together. I photograph all the elements individually: leaves, twigs, bones, etc. on a light box, and people against a studio backdrop, then piece them together later in Photoshop. It's like a jigsaw puzzle sometimes. I once photographed and digitally pieced together a whole fox skeleton! That final image is made from 76 separate photographs.

I don't want my photographic work to approximate realism – they are obviously constructed images – but I also try very hard for them not to look contrived. It's a fine line! Sometimes I wish I could whip out a pen and draw what I see in my mind, but oddly enough there's a lot of freedom in the restriction that photography provides. I don't have to make that bear look exactly like a bear – it can be an obvious tangle of twigs and leaves that look a bit like a bear, and that adds a whole new dimension to the image. I can draw out new meaning from the tamed wildness of detritus from the forest floor, and the girl's taming of the bear in his forest home.

A sense of depth is important to me, too, which is where I try to push at the limits of the silhouette technique. I use a rich depth of colour in the background, as well as a variation in focus to draw viewers in past the skin of the image. Sometimes parts of the silhouette sink into the background, or I let other details edge forward. Photography allows for a great sense of ambiguity, while still keeping the structure of the image grounded in reality.

RD: Your work displays strong contrasts between dark and light, black and soft, nebulous blues and greens. Fairy tales also operate in strong contrasts of light and dark, good and evil, youth and old age. Do you find that the contrasts are part of the appeal of the genre?

LC: I think those contrasts are vital to the genre of fairy tales. As much as Jungian theory often makes me want to throw things across the room, fairy tales do use archetypes. They are built around symbols, motifs and predictable patterns of

behaviour, so it follows that they also have a very black and white system of human representation. Those extremes appeal to something deep within us. I think our instinct is to feel in extremes. It's up to our more rational intellectual thought to view the greys in between. As small children we feel those extremes of emotions so strongly, and perhaps that's why fairy tales have the power to tap deep back into our childhood brains.

In my artwork, I work hard to balance the contrasts between dark and light, sinister and lyrical, but it's interesting how different people view the same images. I get a pretty even balance of people describing my work as dark and terrifying and 'Oh! So whimsical!'. I think that says more about their own relationship to fairy tales, and tells me that I must have found a good balance.

RD: You have a range of artworks that are quite dark with their skeletons, bone bridges and skull lanterns, yet there is a quirky delight in these works, too. Fairy tales often tackle the subject of death. How do you think about those themes, particularly in photographing and reproducing these delicate remains?

LC: One particular work of mine, *Le danse macabre*, was made in the shadow of a near death in our family. The work shows the dance between life (a small girl) and death (a marionette-like skeleton made from sticks and bones). It's impossible to tell who holds the power. Death looms over life, yet she dances joyfully, twirling the awkward creature into a waltz.

I photograph death often. Usually long-dried-out bones and crumbling leaves, but sometimes the newly stilled as well. If a bird flies into our window and deals itself a fatal blow, I pick up its tiny body, rest it on the lightbox and photograph it in its interrupted flight. Then, yes, I take it outside and give it a proper burial. This act has been described as macabre, but we are so used to letting the idea of death waver at the periphery of our lives. It's the monster under the bed that only loses its edge of terror when faced squarely, and acknowledged as crucial to our existence. Without death, there is no life.

It all comes back to the idea of balance, and I do enjoy finding a delight in life amongst the detritus of death. Which is something a lot of fairy tales do, too. Life and death are part of an eternal dance: sometimes it's a funeral march, sometimes it's a jig, but there's no way to cut in on such close dance partners.

RD: What would you like to see in the future for Australian fairy tale?

LC: I'm very excited by the huge variety of contemporary retellings by Australian authors: Margo Lanagan, Danielle Wood, Sophie Masson, Kate Forsyth … I could go on. I'd love to see this genre further grow and flourish, alongside a stronger focus on the fairy tales we may have lost along the way. There is still huge relevance in stories that were tucked aside to make room for the Cinderellas and Sleeping Beauties of the fairy-tale world. Stories of independent girls and compassionate boys; stories that reflect the depth of humanity in the human history that wasn't necessarily written by the rich and victorious.

I would love for fairy tales to have more respect as a genre in our general community. They have so much to give to all of us, but so often when I tell someone I work with

fairy tales, I can see them subtly rolling their eyes. It's frustrating, and I probably tie myself up in knots trying to describe how very important they are!

Fairy tales have forever explored the relationship between life and death, good and evil, joy and fear, and help us to discover all that lies in between. And that, I think, is one of the most important things fairy tales can do for us. They show us that without darkness, there is no light. They lead us through life, give us emotional touchstones, and help us find parallels in our own experiences. They are vital, and will be with us forever.

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