

**Ashes to Ashes**

*Cinder* and the remains of fairy tales

by

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*For my family.*

*Here's to happily ever after.*



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## Abstract

The fairy tale of Cinderella often begins with a young girl in deep despair. The story of this author and Cinderella begins much the same way. My tale with Cinderella is paradigmatic of the personal, affective, and culturally significant relationships formed between fairy tales and their readers that I will explore through this thesis. But how and why can these stories be told and retold so variously over the centuries and still remain not only relevant but also entertaining, compelling, and recognizable? It's because fairy tales have strong bones.

When I say "bones," I mean many things. The elements within the fairy tales that I call "bones" can be structural, functional, personal, or cultural. Most importantly, the bones of a fairy tale are what we remember and what we seek to understand. In my first chapter, I will weave together theory and personal narrative to demonstrate the process my theory of fairy tale bones considers.

In my second chapter, I will further define my theory of fairy tale bones and how they are at work in stories and culture at large. I will also compare my own theory of fairy tale bones with the theories of those such as Vladimir Propp, Antti Aarne, Stith Thompson, and Hans-Jörg Uther. Unlike earlier approaches, my theory is not a formalist or structuralist way of classifying tales; it's an attempt to understand our connection and interactions with them, an exploration of how tales engage memory and motivate our return.

In my third chapter, I will take a deep dive into my central example: *Cinder* by Marissa Meyer. I will examine how gender, agency, nostalgia, and dystopia reflect and affect the modern young reader looking for understanding in familiar female-centered tales. This text is emblematic of 21st century retellings, and it illustrates how the story of Cinderella continues to be a medium for young people – especially young girls – to share and examine cultural knowledge.

Finally, I will conclude with an example of how people interact with fairy tales in the technological age of the 21st century by interviewing my friend who posted a viral YouTube video about the show *Once Upon a Time*, a blending and retelling of many fairy tale narratives.

By looking at the personal and cultural history intertwined with iterations of contemporary fairy tale retellings, I show that the existence of remembered bones within fairy tales not only allows us to retell stories but actually compels us to.

**Keywords:** Fairy tales, folklore, Cinder, Cinderella, retellings, collective memory, cultural knowledge.



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### Short Titles

- C Meyer, Marissa. *Cinder*. 1st ed., New York: Feiwel and Friends, 2012.
- M Paradiž, Valerie. *Clever Maids: The Secret History of the Grimm Fairy Tales*. 1st ed., New York: Basic, 2005.
- S Gould, Joan. *Spinning Straw into Gold: What Fairy Tales Reveal about the Transformations in a Woman's Life*. New York City: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2006.

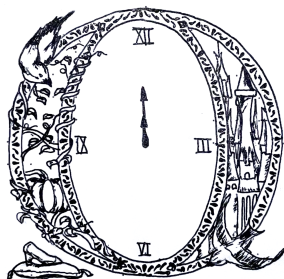


## Chapter 1

### Once Upon A Time

You must always remember this: Have courage and be kind.

Disney's *Cinderella* (2015)



Once upon a time, there was a little girl with two sisters, and they each got to pick one princess. That's the way it goes with sisters. You can share clothes and noses and secrets, but not favorite Disney princesses. Luckily, we claimed ours without bloodshed. My big sister chose Jasmine – a fiery heroine who knew she would one day fly if only given the opportunity. My little sister chose Snow White – a young, rosy-cheeked girl with a penchant for dramatic swoons. And I chose Cinderella – a dreamer. Cinderella, as I well knew by then, had two terribly cruel and nasty stepsisters. Despite what the photographic evidence implies,<sup>1</sup> I have never related to that part of Cinderella's story. Growing up with my sisters was [a wish](#)<sup>2</sup> my tiny little heart was granted over and over.

My tale with Cinderella is paradigmatic of the personal affective and culturally significant relationships formed between fairy tales and their readers that I will explore through this thesis. Though I begin with my own experience, I am simply one of many fairy tale readers. Cinderella is a spanning tale, crossing time and space, and for those reasons, she is exemplary of the genre's endurance.

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<sup>1</sup> See following page

<sup>2</sup> Ilene Woods, "A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes," uploaded February 5, 2015, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1i8XVQ2pswg>.

Throughout the years, I embodied the story of Cinderella in different ways. In the beginning, I was enamored. My mother has a photograph that appears without a doubt in every photo collage, birthday memory, Christmas slideshow, and funny story featuring me. The image in question is a moment of catastrophic despair. I sit on the floor surrounded by stuffed animals, a fallen soldier among her comrades with a crumpled, tear-streaked face, downy hair, and a pouty bottom lip red as blood.<sup>3</sup> In my hands, I hold the seminal text of my youth: Walt Disney's *Cinderella: A Little Nugget Book*. It is the moment when Cinderella's stepsisters tear her mother's pink, bow-topped dress to shreds. I am not yet two years old.<sup>4</sup>



The stories we encounter in childhood affect us more deeply than any others, and throughout our lives we may seek out these stories again and again in various forms. Jane Yolen explains that the stories of our youth provide a framework for our individual belief systems. The language of fairy tales

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix A.

<sup>4</sup> This photo set began as a placeholder. Both me and my mom remember the specific picture of despair that I describe above, one with actual tears and no awareness of the camera. However, neither of us can find it. Far from feeling disheartened at this fact, I find myself in a strange position where the elusive nature of the original moment works out in my favor. Both of the pictures we managed to find are clear parodies. On the left, I make an exaggerated pout as I examine the scene in question. On the right, my older sister and I (dressed in matching ensembles – like I said, sisters can share a lot as long as it isn't their favorite princesses) hold demure pouts for the camera. Neither photo is candid. What my mother and I discovered was not the original affective moment, but the impact of that remembered moment.

helps deliver this framework through symbolic and metaphoric language which children understand “almost viscerally.”<sup>5</sup> But how and why can these stories be told and retold so variously over the centuries and still remain not only relevant but also entertaining, compelling, and recognizable? It’s because fairy tales have strong bones.

When I say “bones,” I mean many things. The elements within the fairy tales that I call “bones” can be structural, functional, personal, or cultural. Most importantly, the bones of a fairy tale are what we remember and what we seek to understand. Memory and who is remembering are two elements of these bones that layer my understanding of fairy tale bones as well. That is not to say that one set of bones always makes the same story. Not at all. In fact these bones can be plucked from their stories to make something new at every turning. Bones may be present in fairy tales as the primal human experience of a monstrous guardian or recognizable motifs like a lost shoe. By looking at the storytelling history that evolved into the literary fairy tale and analyzing contemporary fairy tale retellings, I show that the existence of remembered bones within fairy tales not only allows us to retell stories but actually compels us to.

In experiencing that first emotional reaction to Cinderella, I discovered an affective bone. At a mere 21 months, I opened my Little Nugget Book for the first time, and, for the first time, I cried for Cinderella. But I also cheered for her. In the weeks following that first encounter, I parodied my own reaction to the story, sticking out my bottom lip alongside my older sister as we remembered a little girl who only days earlier sat brokenhearted on the living room carpet. The emotional effect of my personal experience with the story compelled me to return to it over and over. This bone derives from a personal

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<sup>5</sup> Jane Yolen, *Touch Magic: Fantasy, Faerie & Folklore in the Literature of Childhood* (Little Rock: August House, 2000), 17.

experience, but I am not the only one who may have an emotional resonance with a moment from Cinderella or any other fairy tale. While the specific reaction differs among readers and tales, emotional responses create fairy tale bones that draw us in. Myself and so many other children find “the most meaningful themes” in the stories of our early years. These stories “that we can’t forget – change their names and settings over the centuries while their meaning remains intact.”<sup>6</sup>

In my first chapter, I will further define my theory of fairy tale bones and how they are at work in stories and culture at large. I will also lay out the work of previous fairy tale theorists such as Vladimir Propp, Antti Aarne, Stith Thompson, and Hans-Jörg Uther, who have categorized fairy and folk tales in attempts to provide an overarching taxonomy. Though these systems are useful, they differ significantly from my theory of bones. These systems arose in the 20th century following a fascination with taxonomy and the science of classification in the 19th century. My thesis is not a formalist or structuralist way of classifying tales; it’s an attempt to understand our connection and interactions with them. Far from simply identifying patterns, I am interested in how tales engage memory and motivate our return. I am going deep into the layers of what I call the bones of the fairy tale and how these bones call to us as readers.

In this thesis, I explore the fairy tale as an object of scholarship as well as something deeply personal, because, after all, no fairy tale is purely literature or purely memory. I have purposely entangled them. For many of us, a “singular” fairy tale exists with us through several points in our lifetime, condensing all of those into one narrative object. My interactions with the Cinderella fairy tale

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<sup>6</sup> Joan Gould *Spinning Straw into Gold: What Fairy Tales Reveal About the Transformations in a Woman’s Life* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2006), 406.

have all happened at distinct moments in my life, but they accumulate to form the palimpsest of memory and emotion that I associate with “Cinderella” as a whole.

The discovery of fairy tale bones drove my relationship with literature and enacted my own creation of a palimpsest: I was a curious young paleontologist. Historically, a palimpsest refers to manuscripts on parchment or other materials which have been effaced or partially erased with new manuscripts overwritten on the same material.<sup>7</sup> Metaphorically, we can apply this definition to the fairy tale as being “a multilayered record.”<sup>8</sup> Zipes says, “Clearly, though one may interpret ‘Cinderella’ in other ways, its primary theme concerns child abandonment and abuse.”<sup>9</sup> Zipes identifies one bone, but there are plenty more. I – as a definitively not-abandoned, not-abused two year old – may have found the theme pinpointed by Zipes unfamiliar and striking, but that alone was not the primary theme for me. Gould puts it quite nicely when she says, “Ten women who say that ‘Cinderella’ is their favorite story may be thinking of ten different aspects.”<sup>10</sup> The fact that I and many others have loved Cinderella so much for so long from so early means that the bones are surer and deeper and perhaps... infinite. While the number of remembered fairy tale bones is potentially infinite, the reinforcement of certain bones in culturally powerful examples increases the visibility of these bones, making them more prominent in the collective memory and more recognizable across iterations. Bones are created through each personal interaction with a tale, but they can also be created en masse when one version of a tale is disseminated across culture.

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<sup>7</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, “palimpsest” “palimpsest, n., sense 2.a”.

<sup>8</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, “palimpsest” “palimpsest, n., sense 2.b”.

<sup>9</sup> Jack Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick: the Evolution and Relevance of a Genre*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 115.

<sup>10</sup> *S*, 406.

Fairy tale bones facilitate these accumulating “conversations” between the stories, the impact of remembered moments, and new configurations of tales in contemporary retellings. “Paradoxical wonders and contradictory concepts,” says Maria Tatar, “have kept stories alive by inviting us to puzzle out their terms.”<sup>11</sup> The genre called fairy tales is “constantly in the process of defining and redefining itself.”<sup>12</sup> As readers, we seek out familiar tales because we seek to understand things about the stories and ourselves. The literary fairy tale developed from oral traditions that manifested across continents. Oral storytelling traditions are only preserved through repetition, thus the retelling of fairy tales follows as an act of preservation. The oral folktale present in Africa,<sup>13</sup> East Asia, the Middle East,<sup>14</sup> and Central Europe “transformed itself and [has] been transformed”<sup>15</sup> into the literary fairy tale. Fairy tales are “stories that are at their core deceptively simple and simply deceptive,”<sup>16</sup> so the cultural and artistic act of [storytelling](#) has developed in tandem with the multiplicity inherent within the fairy tale genre. What I mean to say is, fairy tales are retold not only to preserve but also to remain relevant.

Zipes would suggest that fairy tales themselves are memetic and can be regarded as living structures. The spread of the fairy tale depends upon the external and environmental factors as well as the meme itself, which can be any of the bits and pieces retained (plotlines, archetypes, emotions, characters, symbolic language) and then interpreted, adopted, and reproduced to further develop a community and culture. The memetic fairy tale pattern that Zipes describes is made relevant and stable

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<sup>11</sup> Maria Tatar, “Introduction: Recovering a Cultural Tradition” in *The Annotated African American Folktales* (New York: Livertight Publishing, 2018), lxxviii.

<sup>12</sup> Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick*, 24.

<sup>13</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Maria Tatar, *The Annotated African American Folktales* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> Paulo Lemos Horta and Yasmine Seale, *The Annotated Arabian Nights: Tales from 1001 Nights* (Liveright Publishing, 2021).

<sup>15</sup> Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick*, xi.

<sup>16</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Maria Tatar, *The Annotated African American Folktales*, 469.

through its cultural and literary currency as a format for replication. So not only are fairy tales built for retelling, they are also tied to the survival of community. As cultural palimpsests, fairy tales provided ever growing arenas upon which storytellers could expand their collective cultural knowledge using familiar “bones” structured in new ways.

I have talked of the multiplicity within a single fairy tale – each reader relates to something different from every other reader, and then, on top of that, an individual may experience something new with each story encounter. That multiplicity flourishes with each retelling as authors and readers build up the collective knowledge associated with each fairy tale, and perhaps with the individual bones inside each mutable story. A missing fur shoe becomes a glass slipper becomes a metal cyborg foot. Multiplicity adds to collective knowledge and is entangled with nostalgia in the fairy tale. Nostalgia as Svetlana Boym defines it “characterizes one’s relationship to the past, to the imagined community, to home, [and] to one’s own self-perception.”<sup>17</sup> Nostalgia creates cultural intimacy based on common social contexts, something all communities seek whether they live within war-torn Europe or the digital world of the 21st century. I believe fairy tales use what Boym terms “reflective nostalgia” which situates them in the “field of self-conscious exploration of longing.”<sup>18</sup> Instead of seeking an absolute truth from the past, reflective nostalgia suggests flexibility and relishes contradictions of memory. Fairy tales, and specifically the bones within them, allow the past to be opened for imagination and to continuously create new collective memories surrounding these tales. New storytelling trends in the 21st century can always harken back to the culture of nostalgia present within fairy tales and their

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<sup>17</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 41.

<sup>18</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, xvii.

bones. Collective memory is a playground of multiple individual recollections, and these recollections inform our developing understanding of the world through fairy tales. And it is these recollections that make use of and are compelled by fairy tale bones. The bones of these stories live within us as well:

“Story is one of the most serious intruders into the heart.”<sup>19</sup>



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<sup>19</sup> Yolen, *Touch Magic*, 25.



Now that we have wandered in the woods of history, form, and theory, let us return to the tear-stained carpet of a Victorian style house in Michigan 20 years ago where I was remaking the tale of Cinderella in every aspect of my life. At this point, I had probably seen Walt Disney's 1950 adaptation of *Cinderella* more times than the number of months I had been alive. For me, the experience of loving and knowing the story of Cinderella informed the way I acted out life. From single-minded obsession to a need for consumption, I gradually evolved into more imaginative ways of embodying the tale. Around the same time I was discovering vicarious grief, my family made the voyage to the land where dreams come true in California: Disneyland. All I wanted, all I needed, was to meet Cinderella in person. I am told I was elated.<sup>20</sup>



When I turned two, I helped my mother frost a cake with a bell-shaped base and a hole in the top. With a plastic doll and blue frosting, we constructed an edible replica of my favorite character. When I turned three, we did it again, me and my sugar Cinderella. I loved her so much that I wished nothing more than to consume her.

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<sup>20</sup> More of this magical experience can be found in Appendix A.

I was so eager to relate to Cinderella that I wore my clothes to rags. From Cinderella nightgowns, Cinderella pajama sets, Cinderella costume dresses, and Cinderella graphic t-shirts, I composed variations on a theme of my fairy tale. As I grew, so too did the dresses. The first Halloween costume handed down from my older sister became my uniform. Every consecutive Halloween until I was 4, gardening, daily wear, formal wear, work, and play featured a Cinderella dress.



When I was lucky enough to get my one and only Build-A-Bear stuffed animal, I dressed it in a Cinderella costume complete with little shoes to lose at midnight. Not only my own body but the bodies of everything around me became part of my Cinderella story: “We never grew up in the first place,” Joan Gould writes in *Spinning Straw*, “we only clothed ourselves in magic ballgowns that turned to rags at midnight. Transformations may not be reversible, but they need to be constantly renewed.”<sup>21</sup> I still have that bear in a bin, in a box, in a closet, in a room, in a house where I used to live.

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<sup>21</sup> *S*, 84.



Then, I did what children do best: I played. Kate Bernheimer introduces the idea of embodiment through play in a collection of 24 personal essays from renowned female writers on their favorite fairy tales. “Many contributors,” she tells us, “said that when they learned to read and take in the details of these stories and their heroines’ attributes, they began to experience their own lives as stories and themselves as characters. They would often model themselves after what they gleaned; they began to play the part.”<sup>22</sup> In my ragged nightgown or one of many iterations of the costume, I began to play the part. My little sister and I cast ourselves as the main character in the daily toils of Aschenputtel, Cendrillon, and Cinderella. We are both Cinderella; the universe expands to make it so. But there is one key component missing: the persecutor. I am four years old brandishing a child sized kitchen broom in my chubby fists at the woman I know to be my beloved mother, and I command, “Momma! You have to say ‘Cinderella! Sweep the floor!’” From behind the camera, the stern and lilting voice of my mother concedes. “Cinderella,” she calls, a perfect imitation of an evil stepmother I have never met. “Sweep the floor and mop the kitchen!” She is brilliant. In the role of Horrid Lady of the

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<sup>22</sup> Kate Bernheimer, *Mirror, Mirror On the Wall: Women Writers Explore their Favorite Fairy Tales* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), xx.

Manor, she transcends. The world I created for us to inhabit in these moments was not one I drew from any kind of experience. Gould writes, “If ‘Cinderella’ is the best-known fairy tale in the Western world... that’s because all of us, male and female, have known despair – and will again, several times in a lifetime.”<sup>23</sup>

What did I know of despair?

Perhaps I knew of it in other ways. Appetite can often manifest as despair. As a young girl chronically frustrated by the unfairness Cinderella faced, my appetite for stories that explained and overcame that cruelty grew and grew: “She is pure appetite.”<sup>24</sup> I desired stories to feed the appetite that arose from encountering an affective bone, and despair exists right alongside that endless desire. Each time I got what I was hungry for (a story, a redemption arc, a sharp pang of sadness for a girl in a ripped gown), I also found the bitter aftertaste of despair. Returning to fairy tale bones is compelled by a desire to understand and re-experience things we remember, but maybe I felt a sort of despair at knowing that no amount of time spent with these bones would truly lead me to understand why Cinderella’s stepsisters needed to take every bit of happiness from her. Encounters of desire and despair – also known as appetite – are formative for many of us as young children. Children’s author Maurice Sendak epitomized beloved appetite for millions of young readers in 1963: “But the Wild Things cried, ‘Oh please don’t go – we’ll eat you up – we love you so!’”<sup>25</sup> We often seek to understand these bones through repeated encounters, either with one form of the tale over and over, or by seeking out new forms which resurrect the bones for us in curiouser and curiouser ways.

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<sup>23</sup> *S*, 39.

<sup>24</sup> Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick*, 225.

<sup>25</sup> Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), unpaginated.

And when we return, we don't always do it in the same way. The bones of fairy tales compel us to return not only as listeners but also as storytellers because they are built for retelling and remixing. Jim Ridolfo and Dànielle N. DeVoss developed the concept of recomposition and remixing to examine situations in which “composers anticipate and strategize future third-party remixing of their compositions as part of a larger and complex rhetorical strategy that plays out across physical and digital spaces.”<sup>26</sup> Fairy tales are composed for recomposition, and this can mean adaptations over different types of media or remixing within the tale itself. For example, *The Arabian Nights* employ a frame structure of continuous cliffhangers to help the narrator survive, and this structure encourages storytellers to remix and elaborate on the tales.<sup>27</sup> As one reads or listens to *The Arabian Nights*, we are interpolated as a listener of Scheherzade's stories. The frame tale positions us – the listener – alongside Shahryar in control of the fate of Scheherazade – the teller. Listeners are drawn in by the endless adventure, but these listeners can also turn into storytellers who remix the tales as a way of interacting with the moments that are most impactful for them. In this way, we interact with the tale as a metafiction, transitioning between listener and teller and engaging with the story as both the fickle king who desires entertainment and the clever woman who desires survival. The fairy tale listener is invited to engage with fairy tales and their bones as both a listener and a teller. We have a very active engagement with fairy tale bones.

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<sup>26</sup> Jim Ridolfo and Dànielle DeVoss, “Composing for Recomposition: Rhetorical Velocity and Delivery,” *Kairos*, last modified January 15, 2009, [https://kairos.technorhetoric.net/13.2/topoi/ridolfo\\_devoss/intro.html](https://kairos.technorhetoric.net/13.2/topoi/ridolfo_devoss/intro.html)

<sup>27</sup> Paulo Lemos Horta, “Introduction” in *The Annotated Arabian Nights: Tales from 1001 Nights* (Liveright Publishing, 2021).

Historically, fairy tale tellers were mainly women. “Fairy tales are female lore by and large,” Gould says, “handed down from one generation to the next.”<sup>28</sup> From Giambattista Basile to Charles Perrault to Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, almost every famous male European tale collector or author owes their collections to women storytellers.<sup>29</sup> Authors and folktale collectors displayed a trend of attributing their stories to nameless female masses, encouraging a misguided sentiment that these tales originated from women of the lower peasant class. The Grimm brothers especially desired to harness naturpoesie (folk poetry)<sup>30</sup> – tales stemming from the soul of the entire community – in their anthology. This is but a façade. By “hiding the identities of their most crucial collaborators,” the Grimm brothers legitimized the literary fairy tale within broader European publishing without crediting the women who contributed “more than half of the 210 fairy tales included in the Grimm anthologies.”<sup>31</sup> And these women were not elderly spinsters and peasants – as the Grimm brothers and Perrault insinuate<sup>32</sup> – they were educated ladies.<sup>33</sup> The practice of storytelling around this time period is gendered, particularly in the Western world. The women within the circles frequented by the Grimm brothers researched and retold these tales – in part because male scholars failed to take such material seriously and also because the act of storytelling constituted a large part of how women sought to understand the world. In literary salons and social circles, educated, middle to upper class women told each other stories for entertainment and to comment on their shared experiences.<sup>34</sup> While writing and

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<sup>28</sup> *S*, xix.

<sup>29</sup> Valerie Paradiž *Clever Maids: The Secret History of the Grimm Fairy Tales* (Basic Books, 2005), xiv.

<sup>30</sup> *M*, 61.

<sup>31</sup> *M*, xi.

<sup>32</sup> *M*, 97.

<sup>33</sup> Four main families of women contributed their knowledge and voice to the Grimm fairy tale collections: the Wilds, the Hassenpflugs, the von Haxthausens, and the von Droste-Hülshoffs. (*M*, xi)

<sup>34</sup> *M*, 54.

academia were reserved for men of a certain race and class, storytelling pervaded all of the circles outside of this elite. In this way, women controlled massive cultural influence without any credit or respect. We see this trend continue, and it is why women continue to tell stories and hold cultural influence today. Just as I sat in a circle of my closest, plushiest companions to explore my appetites, women have gathered for centuries to talk of their own desires and despairs through fairy tales. In most of the stories within the Grimm's anthologies, "women's work is present everywhere. Fairy tales, as a rule, were all about common life."<sup>35</sup> From the women who told and retold stories during the Grimm brothers's lifetimes to the women who tell and retell stories today, fairy tales are particularly resonant for young women across time. Though one could argue that many fairy tales barely feature women, let alone female characters with a name or favorable personas, the majority of globally popular tales center around female stories. Cinderella, her step-family, and her fairy godmother make up the core cast of her fairy tale. This is a story all about women. Cinderella explores the trials and transitions of girlhood and womanhood, providing a space for female readers to explore these themes. Her tale is firmly entrenched in aspects of the female experience, and the story centers around her and the other women around her. The use of fairy tale bones in contemporary fairy tale retellings speaks to women across time and space particularly because those bones have been passed amongst women for centuries. The fairy tale as a genre, format, and art is a firmly established element of women's lore.



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<sup>35</sup> *M*, 125

As a young girl, I would come to know the despairs and desires of women in fairy tales as I continued to grow, experiencing women's lore in different affective stages as I began to learn more about the bones I sought to understand. Perhaps I knew enough of despair at an early age to relate to a young girl in a torn pink dress, and that girl has appeared in fairy tale iterations across the globe from further back than we can recall. One story of Cinderella surfaced in ninth century China as the tale of Yeh-Shen, a young girl with very small feet who encounters a magical fish. The tale came to life in the Middle East and South America, then traveled up through Europe in the 17th century where it encountered the French court.<sup>36</sup> Prior to the globally popularized Disney adaptation of 1950, the power of print drastically altered the way previously disconnected communities would encounter fairy tales. If one variant of a tale had been written down, audiences separated by time and space could hear the same version, which thus imbued it with an unprecedented authority.<sup>37</sup> Charles Perrault published his version of *Cendrillon* in 1697 and forever popularized three elements that would come to inspire Disney's animated tale over 250 years later:

1. The Fairy Godmother
2. The midnight warning
3. The glass slipper<sup>38</sup>

These are examples of some fairy tale bones that have been so thoroughly reinforced and remembered that they present a relatable affective instance for most people familiar with the Cinderella tale. They have been fossilized in our collective memory first through print and then through evolving mediums

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<sup>36</sup> This combines information from Jane Yolen, and the Oxford Companions for both Children's Literature and Fairy Tales.

<sup>37</sup> Yolen, *Touch Magic*, 23.

<sup>38</sup> Funnily enough, this was probably a mistranslation. *Verre*, the French word for glass, sounds identical to *vair*, the word for fur.



as time went on. We have been using bones over centuries to develop strong palimpsests of cultural knowledge to create even more complex frameworks around the canon of western fairy tales which relate most strongly to the postmodern era of retellings around which I grew up.

Growing up as a young girl, reading fairy tales as women's lore informed my perception of being a woman. As I discussed earlier, the genre has historic ties to female storytellers and listeners. In this way, fairy tales discourse is often gendered, inviting us to contemplate the ways in which female-centered fairy tales have shaped our cultural perception of women as well. Yolen says that the Disney adaptation "set a new pattern for Cinderella: a helpless, hapless, pitiable, useless heroine who has to be saved time and time again by the talking mice and birds because she is 'off in a world of dreams.'" She refers to this animated film as "emotional pap."<sup>39</sup> But Yolen also says this: "The magical story is not a microscope but a mirror, not a drop of water but a well. It is not simply one thing or two, but a multitude. It is at once lucid and opaque. It accepts both dark and light, speaks to youth and old age."<sup>40</sup> Tales can emphasize the helpless or the hardy heroine. With fairy tales as a mirror, regardless of what they contain, the reader will find a reflection of themselves in some aspect. With endless readers, there are endless truths of identification within fairy tales. They can present a mirror onto which we can project our own individual transformations and uncertainties, so the truth of a fairy tale is that it contains all, and Yolen contradicts herself by asserting that one version of this expansive tale is purely negative when a one dimensional fairy tale is non-existent. I would ask Yolen to confront a little girl so confident in her love for Disney's Cinderella that she ate, slept, and dreamt that tale, and tell her that

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<sup>39</sup> Yolen, *Touch Magic*, 35-36.

<sup>40</sup> Yolen, *Touch Magic*, 32.

her love for such “emotional pap” is something to pity. Pop culture YouTuber ModernGurlz notes in her deep dive into the Disney heroine, “Besides being kind and caring – traits that practically all Disney princesses possess – she was also strong willed and surprisingly sarcastic.” She also reminds us that “a large part of Disney’s marketing for the film pushed the idea that Cinderella could be anyone.”<sup>41</sup> And anyone could be Cinderella.<sup>42</sup>

These bones remained in my affective memory from my time as a young mop-wielding actress to a pre-teen with even more ways of telling and experiencing this fairy tale. While my second chapter will focus on a broad range of texts critiquing and analyzing fairy tales, in my third chapter I will take a deep dive into my central example: *Cinder* by Marissa Meyer, the first installment in her sci-fi-fantasy dystopian series *The Lunar Chronicles*. As a Cinderella retelling, *Cinder* compels me to revisit its bones. I will examine how gender, agency, nostalgia, and dystopia reflect and affect the modern young reader looking for understanding in familiar female-centered tales. This text is emblematic of 21st century retellings. Marissa Meyer published *Cinder* in 2012, and her reconstruction of fairy tale bones within this novel reflects how the story of Cinderella continues to be a medium for young people – especially young girls – to share and examine cultural knowledge. I chose this specific retelling for a few reasons. For one, the novel spans genres and forms the tale for a young adult audience. Examining the intention behind and the effects of those changes reveals how fairy tale bones gain purchase with an adolescent

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<sup>41</sup> ModernGurlz “the evolution of the princess formula & the girlbossification of disney,” uploaded July 10, 2022, YouTube video, 15:20, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZcKiW7dlao0>.

<sup>42</sup> While Disney implies that anyone can be a princess like Cinderella, they don’t often display it. For the first 55 years after releasing *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, Disney films equated princesses with Whiteness. Jasmine was the first princess of color in over half a century, but, given that the movie is named after the male lead, we might even say that Disney didn’t feature a non-White princess until 1995 with *Pocahontas*. Then again, it might not be safe to say they favorably portrayed a non-White princess until they released *Mulan* in 1998.

and teen audience in new ways. Secondly, this book series is important to me. By analyzing this narrative as it relates to gender, oral tradition, cultural nostalgia, collective knowledge, the power of the reader, adaptive storytelling, the fairy tale as women's lore, and more, we come to see how lively the bones of fairy tales are.



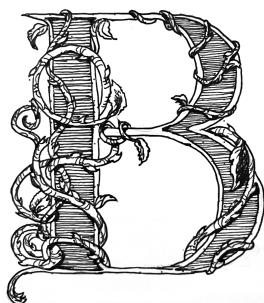
In my very early youth, fairy tales came to me via movies, picture books, and other easily digestible media formats catered to preliterate children. My siblings and I played Pretty, Pretty Princess on the bedroom floor and colored in oversized coloring books featuring an early Disney Princess lineup. As I grew older and began reading books with more than 150 words, my explorations into written fairy tales deepened. My parents had an impressive collection of books displayed in our house at one point, including a red clothbound edition of *Grimms' Tales for Young and Old: The Complete Stories*. As the only voracious reader out of my five siblings, I quickly stole the brick sized tome away to my room and spent days on end jumping back and forth between tales of little tailors, gruesome giants, hideous witches, and beautiful princesses. I must confess to you, that fairy tale collection never made it back onto the shelves downstairs. It must have been magic.

## Chapter 2

### The Bones

That old fossil, those old bones, walk again, and sing and dance and speak with a new tongue.

Jane Yolen



Behind every fairy tale, you will find its bones. Or perhaps I should say beneath it.

I developed the term “bones” as a result of both intentional and unintentional seeking. By that I mean the figure of “fairy tale bones” began as an explanatory concept that I adopted after encountering it multiple times in the fairy tale scholarship I was reading. Many authors and scholars before me have compared the elements of fairy tales to bones in some way. It wasn’t until I noticed this pattern that I began to seek out the idea of fairy tale bones intentionally. I discovered that while many writers take a liking to that turn of phrase,<sup>43</sup> no one explains it. We all seemed to agree on the existence of fairy tale bones but not on what they are, how they work, or why they remain. I have set off into the woods and returned, and here is what I found.

The nature of fairy tales is additive and repetitive. Developing from oral storytelling culture as a mode of commentary and cultural connection, the literary fairy tale has never been a static type of story. Scholars across time and space have developed theories about this repetition to examine both the stories themselves and the way we tell them. Vladimir Propp, Antti Aarne, Stith Thompson, Hans-Jörg

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<sup>43</sup> More than this, the idea of bones permeates my discussions with peers and non-scholars as well.

Uther, Alan Dundes, and Jack Zipes are the main theorists with whom I am concerned, as their studies deal in the specific mechanics of repetition present across fairy tales and fairy tale variants. Propp, Aarne, Thompson, and Uther all developed classification systems for understanding fairy and folk tales in the early to mid 20th century.<sup>44</sup> Zipes, on the other hand, focused not on classifying tales through their repeated elements but on why those repeated elements create a branch of storytelling that has lasted into the 21st century. All of the theorists mentioned identify a certain unit within fairy tales, the examination of which has been useful as I build my own theory of bones. Because my thesis is interested in discovering how fairy tale bones manifest and why they remain, all of these approaches have been instrumental in my understanding of fairy tales and their bones.

To understand the path that I took to come to my own theory of fairy tale bones, it is helpful to trace the history of fairy tale classifications chronologically. Let us begin in the early 20th century with Aarne, Thompson, and Uther and their “tale-types.” The Aarne-Thompson-Uther (ATU) tale-type index sorts tales into their “types” based on existing motifs, themes, or plot points, highlighting the repeated elements across tales. The act of indexing draws our attention to connections across fairy tales separated by time and geography. Antti Aarne developed the initial method in 1910, Stith Thompson revised it in 1928 and then again in 1961, and Hans-Jörg Uther revised it once again in 2004.<sup>45</sup> The tales are subdivided into seven plot categories which correspond to a range of numbers sort of like the Dewey Decimal catalog system. Tales are then categorized by motif or theme and

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<sup>44</sup> The distinction between folk or fairy tales is irrelevant for the most part, as these systems do not differentiate tales based on origin or dissemination so much as repeated content and form. These terms seem to have been used interchangeably, but for clarity, I will refer to them only as fairy tales.

<sup>45</sup> “Library Research Guide for Folklore and Mythology,” Harvard Library, last updated July 28, 2023, [https://guides.library.harvard.edu/folk\\_and\\_myth/indices#:~:text=The%20Aarne%2DThompson%2DUther%20tale,tale%2Dtypes%20300%20to%20749](https://guides.library.harvard.edu/folk_and_myth/indices#:~:text=The%20Aarne%2DThompson%2DUther%20tale,tale%2Dtypes%20300%20to%20749).

sub-type. Thus, every tale could theoretically be labeled and sorted into one of 2,400 “type” categories.<sup>46</sup> This indexing system is most interested in identifying tales and less so in understanding their elements, but it is predicated on the existence of repeated moments, motifs, characters, etc. Its cross-cultural potential reveals how ubiquitous and enduring these repeated elements are.

In 1928, Vladimir Propp developed his own system using the term “functions” to describe how one fairy tale is built over and over again. Propp was more interested in the interactions of elements within the tales whereas the ATU index looks at static pieces. Propp examines how elements of one tale could appear across iterations, resulting in tales that were not just similar but actually holistically the same. The ATU index sorts the elements within stories while Propp’s morphology sorts whole tales. Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* classifies tales based on their formal, structural features which he called “functions.” Propp defines his functions as “an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action.”<sup>47</sup> Propp emphasizes that functions are parts of the plot or action independent from any particular character. What defines a function is not who performs it but rather its consequence within the story. Marked by their consistency, the functions offer a unique endurance to the fairy tale genre because of their propensity for transference: “components of one tale can, without any alteration whatsoever, be transferred to another.”<sup>48</sup> The existence of such strong features allows for experimentation, leading to the multiplicity inherent in

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<sup>46</sup> The names of these categories were drawn from sweeping categories that were already considered to be traditional genres of folklore in the early 20th century. Uther’s revision includes 7 broad categories: Animal Tales, Tales of Magic, Religious Tales, Realistic Tales, Tales of the Stupid Ogre, Anecdotes & Jokes, and Formula Tales. Previously, Thompson’s 1961 revision had the following categories: Animal Tales, Ordinary Folk-Tales, Jokes and Anecdotes, Formula Tales, and Unclassified Tales.

<sup>47</sup> Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (University of Texas Press, 1968), 21.

<sup>48</sup> Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 7.

singular (or seemingly singular) tales. Propp maintains that you can classify a tale by its functions because they are constant across each iteration. Though the number of functions is limited, “the number of personages or characters able to act them out is almost infinite.”<sup>49</sup> Since the motivations and aims of a character can be separated from the function they carry out, it also allows for characters to be replaced because their attributes and identities do not necessarily alter their functions (i.e. gender, appearance, status, etc.).<sup>50</sup>

Alan Dundes followed Propp in 1964 with another formalist approach to fairy tale units. He found that fairy tale scholarship lacked sufficient consideration of non-European tales, especially Native American folktales. In “The Morphology of North American Indian Folktales,” Dundes takes stock of folktale theorists before him and their methods of classification, compiling a list of what he calls their “units.” Dundes uses the term “unit” to refer to any descriptive small category within the larger fairy tale. Examples of folk and fairy tale units include plot, elements, functions, motifs, themes, episodes, and types. Units construct tales but they also distinguish them. Dundes does not so much imply a new unit as he does assert the fact that fairy tales must be studied via their smaller parts. As with ATU and Propp, his morphology strips tales down into their building blocks in order to classify them.

Finally, Jack Zipes focuses on what he calls the “fairy tale meme” not to classify tales but to determine why this particular branch of storytelling sticks. Broadly, a meme is a moment that can be

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<sup>49</sup> Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 21.

<sup>50</sup> In 2020, Disney announced their live action adaptation of *The Little Mermaid* with Halle Bailey in the title role. The announcement was met with racist backlash and even a #NotMyAriel trend on Twitter. With the movie’s release in 2023, Bailey is only the third Black Disney princess in almost 3 decades. The lack of media diversity highlights a continuing systemic problem in Hollywood. As Propp notes, regardless of what the character looks like, the fairy tale retains its functions.

imitated and replicated in ways that are personal or collective. As I touched on in my introduction, Zipes explains that “fairy tale memes” are “living structures” that want “to be understood in a particular relevant way.”<sup>51</sup> A “fairy tale meme” stimulates the individual and collective brain, which means the bits and pieces retained (plotlines, archetypes, emotions, characters, symbolic language) can be interpreted, adopted, and reproduced to further develop a community and culture.

Now we come to the present day where my own position as a theorist of fairy tales comes at the end of more than a century of such theorizing. The previous section outlines a series of analogues for my fairy tale bones. These scholars did their work classifying, and now I am doing my work exploring and wondering. Not classifying. These theories and classifications helped me to form a clearer idea of fairy tale bones, but they are not the same. All of the theorists up to this point study the parts of fairy tales separate from the people who tell them. Aside from Zipes, none of the previous classification systems take into account the cumulative process of telling and retelling fairy tales and the ways in which that process shapes the pieces of story onto which we hold tight. These are the bones. Put simply, the bones of fairy tales are the things we remember and the things we do not yet understand.

Propp, Aarne, Uther, Thompson, Zipes, and Dundes, as well as a myriad of other scholars, have all ripped at the seams of fairy tales and folklore to examine their parts. Theirs is an exercise in dissection and distillation. They see the tales themselves as definitive, separable things with definable, separable parts. While Dundes may push against the idea of studying folklore scientifically, his qualm lies in the type of scientific approach: “Admittedly, the scientific aspect of the study is that of social science rather than that of natural science. This is necessitated by the fact that the materials under

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<sup>51</sup> Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick*, 6-7.



consideration do not lend themselves to laboratory experimentation. They can, however, be subjected to close observation and abstract analysis.”<sup>52</sup> Close observation and abstract analysis. Why observe the fairy tale when you can explore it across time and culture and genre? Why deal in the abstract when the experience of reading and remembering tales is visceral and sure? Instead of attempting to essentialize fairy tales to make them easier to break down into parts, I am embracing the fullness of each tale as it appears across time and culture. By calling them bones, I am in no way suggesting that we burn away the flesh of any tale to see what remains. There is no need to distill a tale in order to find the bones. In fact, in order to see the bones of fairy tales, you often need to look for the layers<sup>53</sup> of story and culture surrounding them.<sup>54</sup> The bones that last the longest are those that can adapt to new surroundings.<sup>55</sup>

Though I have separated the bones into potential categories, I am not interested in classification like Propp or Aarne.<sup>56</sup> Instead, I am interested in impact: the highly sentimental and deeply interconnected elements of fairy tales that defy the strict classification or definition attempted by everyone from Aarne to Zipes. The bones of fairy tales remain with us because of their impact on us at each encounter. Every bone, regardless of where it fits, is a bone because of its personal or cultural impact. Additionally, though I have named these categories and even previously named some bones, I

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<sup>52</sup> Alan Dundes, “The Morphology of North American Indian Folktales.” *FF Communications*, 81, no. 195. (1964).

<sup>53</sup> All of the figures I use to encompass fairy tale bones have to do with layers, accrued meaning, and sediments upon sediments. They suggest variables instead of certainties, inquiry instead of one truth.

<sup>54</sup> To use a figure offered by my advisor, fairy tale bones are like the rings on a tree. The way I see this, you can examine the accumulated years around a tale and its bones, and no ring in the trunk is more vital to the tree than any other, just like no tale retelling has truer bones than any other. But, just like with a fairy tale, when you try and examine it by taking it apart, you kill the tree.

<sup>55</sup> Goldfish are particularly adept at surviving in new surroundings. If released from the confines of a fishbowl, they can tolerate high levels of salt and ammonia, grow up to the size of a Cornish hen, and travel over 140 miles in a year.

<sup>56</sup> In her book *Atlas of AI*, researcher Kate Crawford highlights the incongruent attempts to categorize emotions: “But if we look at how emotions came to be taxonomized—neatly ordered and labeled—we see that questions are lying in wait at every corner.” (156)

am not interested in definitions like Zipes or Dundes. Contrary to the history of systematic analysis I outlined above, defining the different bones within a story is not as important as the fact that such bones exist. What I mean is, we have affective attachments to fairy tales, and so when I talk about things we remember, things we seek to understand, and things that compel us to return, I am speaking about bones that are not only personal but also incredibly dense with cultural meaning. This is what the other scholars miss. The bones of fairy tales manifest through personal life encounters as well as repeated occurrences across stories. The origins of my thesis are personal and historic because bones are personal and historic. Fairy tale bones are mobile and versatile. They can change function and appearance. No matter how it manifests in a story, the most important part of a bone remains: the affective impact. In a way, this is personal, but it can also be global and cultural, spanning time and groups and locations. We meet these bones once upon a time and time again.

When it comes to the theory of fairy tale bones, the rules are different. Bones are strong but dynamic. They can change function and be repurposed. They can be disguised. The bones which compel me to return to a story may not compel another reader. In fact, they may not exist for someone else at all. This ambiguity and humanity is what other scholars miss. They draw distinctions between the personal and the academic approach to fairy tales, polishing the grains of fairy tale theories as if these stories can be extracted from the people who remember them.<sup>57</sup> The ways in which we as human storytellers and listeners interact with fairy tales ultimately escape classification. Whether the mermaid loses her voice, bears the knife-like pain that comes with walking on her new feet, or both, the listener

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<sup>57</sup> Much like how the Grimm brothers tried to separate their stories from the people who told them, these theorists ignore the relationship between tellers, listeners, and the story itself.

can feel the impact of the bone as it rests within these changes. What I am proposing through the theory of fairy tale bones is not another “minimal unit”, as Dundes elaborates upon in his morphology. A bone is not a unit of a story but a marker of storytelling impact.

How does one identify impact? It’s quite simple really. The impact is what remains. What remains is what we remember. Like a geological palimpsest,<sup>58</sup> the impact of a story reveals itself with time. Over generations and iterations of tales such as Cinderella, the bones are those things which have withstood endless repetitions. To distinguish this from the many units proposed by earlier theorists, I must emphasize that bones can be personally impactful – characterizing an individual’s relationship and return to fairy tales – or communally impactful – manifesting as globally recognizable references and stories. A bone derived from collective memory exists because it impacted enough of the collective, thus compelling the collective to return to it. As I mentioned before, the compulsion to return can be linked to nostalgia, a term often associated with childhood, memory, and emotions. If the relationship between individual and collective remembrance expresses itself through nostalgia, then the relationship between individual and collective impact expresses itself through fairy tale bones. “One remembers best what is colored by emotion,” Boym tells us.<sup>59</sup> Culture is created in the spaces where we form “shared affinities,” and those shared affinities – common landmarks of everyday life and shared frameworks of individual memories – create collective memory.<sup>60</sup> You see, there is no singular

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<sup>58</sup> A geological or geographical palimpsest is defined as “a structure characterized by superimposed features produced at two or more distinct periods.”

<sup>59</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 52.

<sup>60</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 53.

definition of a bone because they are both collective and individual. There is merely the assertion of their existence. Their impact. Fairy tales record that impact.<sup>61</sup>

Sometimes you cannot recognize just how strong the impact of a bone is until you see it in full color. I came face to face with this impact when I encountered *The Singing Bones*, illustrated by Shaun Tan with an introduction by Neil Gaiman. This book combines short passages from Grimms' fairy tales alongside photographs of carvings done by Tan to accompany each tale. In his introduction, Gaiman says the sculptures in the images "do not look like moments of the stories: instead, they feel like the stories themselves."<sup>62</sup> Fairy tale bones are often synonymous with the feeling of the stories themselves, since these bones reside in readers and their emotional responses to the tales. In describing his artistic response, Shaun Tan characterizes his own relationship with fairy tales as one that is primarily visual. Collective and individual memory is often created through visual culture, especially following popular media such as Disney films.<sup>63</sup> The impact of visual media cannot be overstated, and the impact these sculptures had on me was academically and personally profound. However, it wasn't until I read Tan's description of his artistic process that I felt something stir deep in my bones:

I was much inspired by Inuit stone carvings and pre-Columbian clay figurines... The result is a kind of fossilized narrative, worn by multiple 'retellings' into a comfortable shape that often fits nicely in the hand... Faces and gestures are abbreviated, just like the characters in the tales themselves. The concept of a thing becomes more important

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<sup>61</sup> "Folklore is a lively fossil that refuses to die." – Charles Potter

<sup>62</sup> Neil Gaiman, "Introduction," in *The Singing Bones*, illustrated by Shaun Tan (New York: Arthur A. Levine Books, 2016), 3.

<sup>63</sup> Prefacing a collection of essays in "The Psychosocial Implications of Disney Movies," Lauren Dundes asserts that these films "simultaneously mirror societal trends and reshape them." (ix)

than a detailed likeness... What matters above all else are the hard bones of the story, and I wanted many of these objects to appear as if they've emerged from an imaginary archaeological dig, and then been sparingly illuminated as so many museum objects are, as if a flashlight beam has passed momentarily over some odd objects resting in the dark galleries of our collective subconscious.<sup>64</sup>



Next to a short excerpt of the tale of Snow White, we see a long, open-mouthed, blood red face with a spiky crown of the same hue perched on top of the head. This is what we see, but, given the bones that have been repeated throughout layers of culture, we know much more. This is the evil queen and she has been eroded with jealousy and hatred. Her face is smooth. Flawless. But not the fairest of them all. The collective subconscious formulates the long standing bones which populate fairy tale retellings

<sup>64</sup> Shaun Tan, "Afterword," in *The Singing Bones*, 166.

over the years. That subconscious – personal and collective – harbors both the things we remember and the things we do not yet understand.<sup>65</sup> Moments of emotional impact remain with us even if they aren't always on the forefront of our consciousness, and things we call into question likewise stay somewhere in our minds because they are unresolved. Deep in the subconscious, the bones are buried until a new encounter reawakens them. Deep memories evoked by contradictions and emotions pull us back to the fairy tales in which we first encountered the affective moments of impact. The compulsion to return to bones can be seen across culturally significant bodies of storytelling. Beyond the popular European canon of fairy tales, Maria Tatar presents the legacy of African American folktales as “narratives alive with social energy constantly turning into new versions of themselves as they are repurposed for different audiences.”<sup>66</sup> Fairy tales and folktales “present us with the great counterfactuals”<sup>67</sup> and “paradoxical wonders and contradictory concepts” all of which “have kept stories alive by inviting us to puzzle out their terms,” leaving us “with a breathless desire to engage in conversation.”<sup>68</sup> The theory of bones exists across cultures of fairy and folk tales to motivate return and retelling, compelling humans to be in conversation with things that are contradictory or interesting to us. Bones oftentimes express ideas about the fantastic which appeal to us precisely because of their

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<sup>65</sup> C. G. Jung develops the idea of the collective unconscious as something that resides on a deeper level beneath the personal unconscious. The collective contents and modes of behavior are “present in every one of us” (4), and they are comprised of archetypes which he equates to “universal images” (5). Essentially, these archetypes are something we all possess within our deep collective unconscious, and they take on personal meaning and shape as we project them onto nature, stories, and individual experiences. Projection is a necessary part of the process of realizing the archetype, and Jung says the archetypes of the collective unconscious are buried deep within all of us waiting to be reawakened. Furthermore, the archetypes of the collective unconscious require more “elaboration,” compelling us to find ways to return to images in the collective unconscious which are “less understandable” (5).

<sup>66</sup> Maria Tatar, “Introduction: Recovering a Cultural Tradition” in *The Annotated African American Folktales* (New York: Livertight Publishing, 2018), lvi.

<sup>67</sup> Tatar, “Introduction: Recovering a Cultural Tradition,” lviii.

<sup>68</sup> Tatar, “Introduction: Recovering a Cultural Tradition,” lxxviii.

improbability and mystery. We seek to understand ourselves, our worlds, and the stories. We want to understand the paradoxical and contradictory bones, or we just want to understand how these stories are forming our own worldview, so we return to the tales and create retellings in order to participate in that compelling conversation. Thus the bones we find and form pull us back to fairy tales again and again<sup>69</sup>. Shaun Tan returns to fairy tales because “there’s such a strange mix of irrationality and logic.”<sup>70</sup> Propp built his morphology precisely because of a desire to understand fairy tales, a desire which compels us to re-experience the things that we remember but don’t yet comprehend. It is why fairy tales speak so strongly to children and those in stages of transformation or uncertainty. It is why the fairy tales we hear as children stay with us: “What we learn as children shapes our worldview so profoundly because, when we are small, we are still in the process of figuring out who we are and what we believe.”<sup>71</sup>

But it does not just matter *that* fairy tales compel us to return. It also matters *how*. Fairy tales are remarkable because of the ingrained way they allow us to return to them, recontextualize them, and retell them endlessly. Tatar comments on the structural tactic which intrigued Tan of simplifying characters down to their bare actions or traits which motivated storytellers to “fill in the gaps and create textured richness.”<sup>72</sup> This basic tenet of fairy tale construction motivated historic retellings and

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<sup>69</sup> In his theory of affects, Silvan S. Tomkins claims that motivation is governed by both affect and drives. While drives are controlled by primarily biological needs like hunger, affect governs human motivation and behavior using positive and negative feelings. However, the affective system is highly ambiguous, and we may not know why we experience certain emotions and motivations nor how to remedy them. Once again, we are compelled by the desire to understand things which are innate but endlessly variable or complex. On an emotional and psychological level, affect empowers and drives us even if we do not understand how or why.

<sup>70</sup> Tan, *The Singing Bones*, 165.

<sup>71</sup> Philip Nel, *Was the Cat in the Hat Black?: The Hidden Racism of Children’s Literature and the Need for Diverse Books* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 16.

<sup>72</sup> Tatar, “Introduction: Recovering a Cultural Tradition,” lxxix.

continues to enable contemporary authors to recompose the tales and their bones. Fairy tales encourage authors to add more to the bones through retellings, which also means that modern fairy tale retellings are often anything but minimal. A friend of mine recently told me she enjoys the density of relationships explored in fairy tale retellings because the older versions (in this case Grimms' fairy tales) struck her as sparse.<sup>73</sup> Retellings grow in the gaps between the bones. Gaiman praises Tan's sculptures which contain "only the details that you need to know in order for the story to work."<sup>74</sup> Fairy tales contain inherent multiplicity precisely because of their perceived simplicity. Fairy tales may contain bones that existed before the story itself (abandonment, all-consuming love, happy endings) but came to impact larger audiences through the medium of storytelling. But they can also be formed as we continue to interact with and retell fairy tales.<sup>75</sup>

Each of the previously mentioned theorists uses an overarching, categorizing methodology. In some ways, my approach is similar in that it requires a broad look at similar elements across versions of fairy tales. However, my category of fairy tale bones is at the same time categorically different. Because I am diverging from the systems these theorists created, my methodology requires a new tactic: personal narrative. Fairy tale bones form and flourish in the emotional responses of every person who encounters them. They are unavoidably personal. By approaching fairy tales as multilayered records, I must look at my own palimpsestic reaction to fairy tales over the years. A bone is a place where personal

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<sup>73</sup> From a conversation with my friend on January 14, 2024. This same friend also writes fairy tale retellings because she says they have preexisting importance and history. The creative arts – like storytelling – are the only things that hold human identity and the progression of culture. For her and many others, reading and retelling fairy tales is an act of understanding the past and how these tales informed and formed culture.

<sup>74</sup> Gaiman, "Introduction," 2.

<sup>75</sup> Charles Perrault created new bones with his printed version of *Cendrillon*, and Disney picked up, re-emphasized, and modified these bones in our collective memory.



history and cultural histories meet. In all the concrete moments of my childhood, adolescence, and burgeoning adulthood, I find the concrete bones of fairy tales. What Shaun Tan carves and Neil Gaiman marvels at are the solid fragments of fairy tale impact unearthed from our personal histories. To show you not only that the bones of fairy tales exist but how they manifest, I must have proof. And I don't mean scientific evidence. The ways in which my experience reveals my relationship with fairy tale bones works as a kind of theory *and* proof – and that goes for each of you as well. We have authority.

In my next chapter, I will examine another record of someone's experience with fairy tale bones. *Cinder* has helped me see how bones are used by author Marissa Meyer. Meyer is doing as a creative writer what I have been doing as a creative reader since my infancy: interacting with the story and its bones. Her modern take on a classic tale reveals how the bones have lasted over centuries by being reused and repurposed. In doing so, Meyer also influences the collective memory surrounding these bones, adding a new layer of cultural meaning to lost shoes and midnight balls. I'm not making a transhistorical argument about all people's experiences with fairy tales ever, but mine alone is still solid proof for my argument. 20 years ago, on a couch in Farmington Hills, Michigan, a small girl excavated some proof between the cardboard pages of an abridged version of Disney's 1950 *Cinderella*. Eleven years later, that same girl dug up some more proof at the theatrical release of Disney's 2015 *Cinderella*. Each year, I read and watched and played and dug and dug and dug. I have over two decades of proof, but collectively, we have several millennia.

## Chapter 3

### Cinder

Little Red Riding Hood. Let's start the story a different way. "It was dark inside the wolf."

Margaret Atwood

A deformed cyborg with a missing foot.

A Lunar with a stolen identity.

A mechanic with no one to run to, nowhere to go.

*Cinder*



inderella. Let's start the story a different way: "The screw through Cinder's ankle had rusted."<sup>76</sup>



### Genre Interlude

Up to this point, I have been tracing the bones from collective and personal memory within reiterations of the Cinderella story. These reiterations must also be contextualized upon their larger stage: the genre of young adult fiction. Particularly, young adult fiction featuring and marketed to young girls. Fairy tales map the developmental trajectories of youth by allowing "children to absorb stories of the essential transformations that lie ahead in their lives."<sup>77</sup> Retellings of fairy tales –

<sup>76</sup> Marissa Meyer, *Cinder* (New York: Feiwel and Friends, 2012), 3.

<sup>77</sup> *S*, 26.

especially Cinderella – use the same bones to explore stories of transformation alongside the complex emotional, physical, and intellectual transformation of adolescence into early adulthood which is further impacted by gender and sexuality. YA fiction is a fairly recent phenomenon. Prior to the mid-20th century, children were expected to read literary classics once they grew out of children's specific literature. The first instance of a popular novel for young adults came when S. E. Hinton – a teenager herself – published *The Outsiders* in 1967. Authors like Judy Blume followed with more teen-centered narratives in the 70s, but publishers only began commissioning young adult literature around the 80s. The novels predating the 2000s are primarily associated with realism, but young adult fantasy grew as a popular genre later on.<sup>78</sup> Within the last 20 years, young adult literature featuring girls has seen an incredible popularity and diversification, inspired – I believe – by the children who came of age in the 21st century.<sup>79</sup> Fairy tale retellings exist as an extension or mirror of reader transformations, and recasting Cinderella in a young adult sci-fi-fantasy novel calls to modern female readers in the most confusing period of transformation: girlhood.<sup>80</sup> Fairy tales reveal “the underlying truth. To be fully alive and aware of our human fate, we must do our best to wake up to the transformations ... of our lives.”<sup>81</sup> While readers follow Cinderella's transformation arc in a new setting, they can once again

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<sup>78</sup> There is a generational aspect of the development of YA fantasy in the 90s which coincided with the growth of the internet.

<sup>79</sup> From *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature*, edited by Daniel Hahn: “Because much young adult fiction focuses on the experience and perspective of teenagers themselves as protagonists, it is unsurprising that these readers' concerns, and the sense of boundary-testing, self-determination, and experimentation that defines so much teen experience, are reflected in the books” (647-48).

<sup>80</sup> I am using “girlhood” as a collective term to refer to the time between about 11-24 years old. While this may seem like a vague and generous bracket, girlhood to me does not have a hard beginning or end point. In fact, it is this very ambiguity which defines much of the anxieties and revelations of growing up. Girlhood does not end in becoming a woman. Some feel girlhood does not end at all. Cinder's transformation pushes back against the idea that adolescence must end with traditional markers of womanhood such as marriage or a sexual awakening.

<sup>81</sup> *S*, xvii.

revisit moments of transformation in their own lives and try to understand them through the returning fairy tale bones in this narrative.

*Cinder* can also be categorized under another YA genre category: dystopian fiction. The popularity and relevance of dystopian literature for young adults is attributed to "teenagers' growing ability to think about abstract ideas such as government, power, and freedom. Dystopian fiction can, therefore, communicate with young readers about current issues and their fears for their environment, and allow them a space to reflect upon their society and its future."<sup>82</sup> Young adult dystopian fiction combines the teenager's uncertainties about their individual progress through adolescence into adulthood with abstract contemplations on the uncertainties about society's future as a whole. Just as YA dystopian fiction stages a protagonist's awakening to the horrors and hypocrisies of their world, so too do these stories provide a stage for the reader's awakening to aspects of our world. However, *Cinder* diverges from this formula slightly because of its fairy tale bones. In addition to discovering the horrors of her dystopian world, Cinder discovers new facets of herself. The fairy tale bones are used to build a telling in a new genre, but they still harken to those deep affective relationships we have with ourselves and these stories. Because we seek out the bones we do not yet understand, setting retellings in contexts that tackle political, social, and futuristic uncertainties strengthen the continued relevance of these bones. The bones in *Cinder* are made newly memorable according to the forms and appearances of genres such as dystopian fiction, and these enable the Cinderella story and its bones to be developed in ways that meet the needs of consumers of contemporary culture.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Hahn, *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature*, 177.

<sup>83</sup> Italian literary historian Franco Moretti views the novel as a genre of media that keeps evolving because it meets the needs of society. We can approach bones the same way as moments of story that evolve over time to meet new cultural and personal needs.

Young adult dystopian fantasies – and YA lit in general – tend to allegorize adolescent rites of passage as defined by anthropology and the theorist Victor Turner.<sup>84</sup> There are many moments when one may experience a rite of passage, but the transition between adolescence and adulthood is perhaps the first grand rite of passage we experience. These story arcs – often categorized as coming-of-age stories – are prevalent in YA narratives. Turner specifically developed his theory about the middle stage in the rite of passage: liminality. Liminality, as Turner defines it, is associated with a lack of status and therefore a lack of power and duties. Adolescence is also a middle period in between more concrete life stages of childhood and adulthood, and it can thus be understood as a liminal phase. To exist in a liminal phase means existing without a function in society, according to Turner. Following the separation that initiates the rite of passage, the adolescent must remain apart from any concrete social role as they traverse liminality. An important factor of a rite of passage, however, is its end point. A rite of passage has finally passed when one re-aggregates into society, finds a new social role, and adopts the customs and responsibilities that come with that role. The end point is not only expected but also empowering, because the rite of passage structure links re-aggregation into society with a return of the power that one loses during liminality. For Turner, liminality equates to invisibility, and only by re-aggregating into society can one gain back that visibility. As we will see, *Cinder* does not equate liminality with invisibility. Our cyborg Cinderella embraces liminality. We meet Cinder in the thick of her social displacement during the rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood. Liminality is associated with a lack of status and therefore a lack of definition and constructs. As a teenage girl,

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<sup>84</sup> Arnold van Gennep first built the idea of a rite of passage as a series of phases that begins with a de-positioning, moves into a period of liminality, and ends with re-aggregation into society.

Cinder still exists firmly in her liminal phase, as Turner would define it. Her bionic and biological hybridity is one of the most prominent indicators of her ability to cross social categories and remain undefined.<sup>85</sup> For readers returning to these fairy tale bones, they see a princess who evades an ending. Similarly, young readers are not finished transforming, and fairy tale readers are never finished looking for answers to those affective bones.

Fairy tale bones in *Cinder* can be understood in the context of Cinder's persistent liminality. The framework of YA genre norms helps to illuminate the contemporary uses of the bones that persist for each reader and culture as a whole. We see bones such as loss and abandonment, the outsider status, the ashes, the dress, and the shoe in a new generic and historical context. These contexts add layers to the remembered bones of Cinderella while also revealing what made them memorable in the first place.



### **Loss and Abandonment**

The Grimm brothers lead with loss in their tale of Aschenputtel or Cinderella. The young girl – not yet called Cinderella – loses her mother to sickness. Before she dies, the mother implores her daughter to be “good and pious,” promising to watch over her from heaven. No matter what she faces in this story, Cinderella is always true to the mother that she lost. She is good and pious. Loss frames the story, and mourning motivates Cinderella's life from then on. In this section, I will use the terms loss, abandonment, abuse, and neglect. These terms are by no means interchangeable, nor do they all

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<sup>85</sup> Though I am not developing a full reading of the texts from the perspective of the lens of queer theory, gender studies, or disability studies, terms and ideas from these disciplines are extremely helpful in discussing my theory of bones as it applies to *Cinder*. The material absolutely invites readings from these perspectives, but, in the space I have, I will be developing my theory of bones. I will borrow from these discourses where appropriate, noting that the relevance of fairy tale bones extends across studies and intersections of identities.

apply to the same events in *Cinder*. However, these terms all relate to each other as manifestations of affective bones within the Cinderella fairy tale that form the initial conditions from which the Cinderella character must find escape – whether that be through inner transformations, outer transformations, new relationships, or inner strength.

To begin, this character is intimate with parental loss. The novel splits her life into two phases of before and after. Before is the accident that killed her birth parents, prompted cyborg surgery, and wiped all her early memories. After that comes the adoption of a new name, a new family, and a new reality of total and inescapable neglect. After the caring man who adopted her died from a plague sweeping the planet, Cinder's adoptive mother made it clear that she was unwanted. All this to say, the emotional impact present in this version of Cinderella is updated but not unfamiliar. Like the Disney story that first impacted me as a child, Cinder is a part of a four person family unit: her adoptive mother Adri and her two sisters Pearl and Peony. Pearl and Adri take on a familiar antagonizing role. Their abuse is frequent, targeted, and uncontained. Like the stepmother who set an impossible task of lentils and ashes to prevent Cinderella from going to the ball,<sup>86</sup> Adri and Pearl take pleasure in denying Cinder everything they can. It would seem they perceive it as their moral duty to remind Cinder of the totality of her exclusion. In the home and in the marketplace, Cinder must always be reminded of her inferiority. Cinder is continuously abandoned by her guardian by being refused not only an opportunity to go to the ball, but also love, support, and even humanity: “You are *not* human, Cinder. It's about time you realized that.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> In the Grimms' version of “Aschenputtel,” the stepmother tells Cinderella she can go to the ball only after she picks all the lentils out from the ashes in the fireplace. In answer to her tears, every bird nearby rushes in to peck, peck, peck away the lentils, and Cinderella does in fact make it to the ball that night.

<sup>87</sup> C, 280.

While other versions of Cinderella have their fairy godmother to provide some solace, comfort, or even escape, Cinder has her android sidekick Iko and her younger sister Peony. Peony expresses nothing but love and care for Cinder, especially at home where her mother and sister revel in frequent disgust. Near the beginning of the story, Peony contracts the deadly plague, and Cinder watches as Peony is “carted away, curling up like a child on the gurney.”<sup>88</sup> Although it is Peony who is carried off like an infant, Cinder feels just as powerless. She cannot save her sister. Abandonment in this story takes on a new skin, but the engine of Cinder’s narrative is in part the mourning of her sister Peony. Parental neglect exists in multiple ways, but the loss of her stepsister hurts more. The relationships Cinder cultivates with Peony and her android sidekick Iko shield against the disdain everyone else projects. Both of these relationships develop with someone whom we might consider Cinder’s peer, highlighting the powerful role of support amongst teens with people their own age. Cinder may fit in the domestic role of the neglected child from the beginning, but it is not until the moment of Peony’s death that the neglect becomes unbearable. The momentum of this abandonment initiates her fairy tale transformation into a heroine with determination and desire to change her situation. After Peony’s death, Cinder spends every night fixing up an old car that, “if she were lucky, would carry her at least into the next province. It would be a bumpy ride. It would be a stinky ride. But she would be free. No – *they* would be free. Her and Iko’s personality chip and Peony’s ID chip. They were going to escape together, like she’d always said they would.”<sup>89</sup> Loss here is impermanent. Cinder connects her sister and her android friend to their identities in part by their little chips. The core of the person is separate

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<sup>88</sup> C, 57.

<sup>89</sup> C, 286-87.



from the body, thus persistent liminality informs the bones of loss and abandonment from the Cinderella fairy tale. It is not just Cinder who has a malleable body and identity, so do her peers.<sup>90</sup> So do the readers. If one bone of Cinderella is abandonment and despair, this retelling notices that explicitly and in a new context. Both the reality of losing her sister and the threat of losing her android friend Iko enliven the fairy tale bones of loss and abandonment with 21st century relevance. Instead of losing a parental figure (often but not always the mother), Cinder loses something different: a friend and peer.



### The Outcast

In Perrault's tale, the wedding between Cinderella's father and his new wife is barely over before the stepmother makes an outcast of Cinderella. Enraged by her stepdaughter's goodness and beauty, the stepmother casts her from the family circle and heaps vile chores upon her, creating a new, inferior servant role for Cinderella. An outcast in her own home, Cinderella is no longer an equal participant in family life.

Cinder's status as an outcast in perpetual liminality depends upon a class system that looks down on cyborgs – a category marked by physical differences. With this context, Cinder's suffering becomes broader and more distinct than the intra-family exclusion of older, familiar versions. She is a marked and "stareable body,"<sup>91</sup> so her liminal experience diverges from traditional Cinderella tales.

<sup>90</sup> Once again, the idea of a malleable visible and invisible identity is one that relates to queer theory, gender studies, and disability theory. All of these perspectives inform my reading of *Cinder*.

<sup>91</sup> The "stareable body" is a term coined by Rosemarie Garland-Thompson to describe how many bodies are marked as stareable through physical or internal markers (disability, queerness, race), and how a culture of staring creates a culture of display and changes the way we embody physical spaces and our identities.

Instead of separating from society and becoming invisible as a household servant, Cinder is a highly visible and public person. As a mechanic, she is a skilled and independent worker not beholden to domestic chore life. As a cyborg, she is constantly subject to stares and judgment. Cinder faces ostracization at the hands of Adri, Pearl, the human citizens of New Beijing, and the royal government: “The fewer people who knew she was a cyborg, the better. She was sure she’d go mad if *all* the market shopkeepers looked at her with the same disdain Chang Sacha did.”<sup>92</sup> All of the looks directed at Cinder carry negativity. This attention is – at minimum – highly uncomfortable. The public nature of Cinder’s identity as a worker and a young cyborg girl magnifies her visibility across the novel and for the reader. Instead of the ball being the first moment the main character faces public gazing, Cinder sits as a perpetually observed character. In this way, the context of exclusion hinges on more than just the domestic relationship dynamic, and its importance as a memorable bone of the tale emerges with more force.

Memetic texts such as fairy tales experience renewed relevancy as their bones are reconfigured for a particular audience at a particular historical moment.<sup>93</sup> Cinder begins this story with more agency and visibility, so her experience of neglect and abuse plays to a contemporary audience who relates to both the emotions and the social positioning of the marked outcast. Teenagers of the 21st century come of age in an interconnected world that increases their visibility. The internet makes the individual

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<sup>92</sup> C, 10.

<sup>93</sup> Fantasy author Sarah J. Maas wrote her debut novel *The Throne of Glass* in part because she was inspired to answer the question “What would happen if Cinderella were an assassin?” While this may have been the initial compulsion, one [reviewer](#) felt the end result could no longer be considered a Cinderella tale because it lacked the key elements such as a fairy godmother, evil stepsisters, and identifying piece of clothing. For this reviewer, these are the bones of Cinderella, and they were not present in the groundwork. As she puts it, “If you have to explicitly state your connection to a fairy tale, then you’re doing something wrong.” However, [Maas](#) herself admitted in an interview that she would not describe her novel as a Cinderella retelling but rather an epic fantasy in its own right with “hints” of the “heart and spirit” of the Cinderella tale. In returning to the bones of the Cinderella tale, it seems Maas found there were questions the old bones could not answer.

more viewable and vulnerable, and it also provides easily accessible content for teenagers to view. While Perrault tells of Cinderella's developmental voyage from a domestic or private space into a public space, Meyer begins and ends her story with Cinder in the public space. Cinder's private struggles align with her public struggles. Her inner dialogue reveals her anxieties about acceptance and visibility, and her discomfort in her surroundings. The bones of the Cinderella tale are rooted in these struggles; readers return to the tale because the formative emotional impact and continued relevance of struggles such as these require time and practice to understand.



### **The Ashes**

In Disney's 2015 adaptation, the step sisters christen Cinderella with her new title over breakfast. "I've got a new name for her!" Drisella cries, "Cinder-wench." "Oh, Dirty Ella," Anastasia amends. "Cinder Ella!" Drisella announces with glee, "That's what we'll call you." Within seconds of appearing smudged with ashes in the morning, Ella disappears and becomes Cinderella. The ashes obscure her identity in more ways than one, and, in order to find her happy ending, she must return to an Ella without the cinders. Cleanliness and purity mark the beginning and the end of Cinderella's liminal phase in traditional versions of the tale. Cinder, on the other hand, comes to find her identity by embracing the ashes – both visible and invisible – and she does so without necessarily achieving an endpoint to her liminality. The visible ashes, grease stains, and cyborg metal mark her body as different, and the invisible ashes of her neglected home life and social ostracization mark her internally. All of the

physical and internal markers of difference or perceived inferiority end up building her strongest identity by the end of the novel.

The traditional ashes or cinders of the Cinderella fairy tale denote a space apart both physically and socially. Cinderella's place by the hearth marks her in servitude within the household dynamic. Her place is not at the breakfast table with the other daughters but by the fire, in the kitchen, or away in the attic. Ashes mark Cinderella's identity as inferior and her body as unclean. Yet for the traditional Cinderella character, ashes can be washed away and with them any enforcement of separation or inferiority. In *Cinder*, ashes are rewritten to reflect the ways in which markers of difference manifest and inform identities in contemporary society. Like Perrault, Grimm, and Disney, this Cinderella story needs a rise to power and an escape from an abusive situation. However, the ways in which Cinder finds power and escapes show how the bones of her fairy tale fit into the modern young adult genre. Ashes in Cinderella stories work in multiple ways, and I will be exploring them as analogues of impurity or difference as well as their invisible implications of the body itself as impure. In doing so, I will look at the various ways in which ashes, markings, and smudging appear in *Cinder* and the ways in which this diverges from and converges with traditional Cinderella tales to re-emphasize the fairy tale bones.

Invisible markers of ash can transform the body into something unfamiliar and impure. When Cinder is presented with her body scans in the research lab, she is confronted with the known – the visible ashes – and the unknown – invisible ashes. The “things she had known” and the “things she had expected” bring an almost familiar discomfort. But “the metal vertebrae along her spine, or the four metal ribs” shock her. Once on display, the invisible cyborg ashes force Cinder to critically re-examine

her body as an object. Seeing more of herself actually defamiliarizes her from her own body. And what she concludes from this examination is that she is “36.28 percent not human.”<sup>94</sup> She expresses her identity in terms of what she sees as her deficiencies. Her impurities. Seeing these once invisible ashes not only makes her feel like more of a cyborg, it also makes her feel like less of a human and less of a valuable, welcome, and pure person. Her body becomes unfamiliar and unclean territory. The fire and ash that obscures her past also carries into her present. She is called Cinder not just because her real name is unknown but because that mystery marks her as dirty in some way. This version removes the feminizing diminutive of “Ella,” leaving just the cinders.<sup>95</sup> Is she an outcast or a savior? A villain or a heroine? A princess or a mechanic? Cinder does not end the novel by rising *from* the ashes. She rises *into* them.



### The Ball

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<sup>94</sup> C, 82.

<sup>95</sup> One of the things *Cinder* offers is an opening up of the protagonist. Cinder can function as a site of identification for multiple identities. I am reading from the perspective of someone going through girlhood specifically, but *Cinder* invites readings from other identities as well. It opens the Cinderella narrative in ways that we are also opening our social limits of conventional gender, sexuality, and ability categories.

“The king is giving a festival,” Cinderella sings in *Into the Woods*. “I wish to go to the Festival. And the ball,” she adds. Sondheim’s Cinderella wants this “more than anything.”<sup>96</sup> What is the ball to Cinderella? It is a night out of the ashes. The moment of visible transformation present across many Cinderella iterations happens at the ball. In *Cinder*, the ball actually reinforces that visible transformation is not the only way out of neglect. Cinder’s realization of her inherent worth does not necessarily deal with the literal erasure of ashes or markers of difference. In fact it is quite the opposite. By reorienting the way we think about ashes as something to clean off, *Cinder* effectively transforms ashes into markers of specialness and power. Thus, instead of rising out of the ashes, Cinder develops her appreciation of her visible and invisible markers of difference and rises into her ashes as indicators of her power.

Cinder tends to think of herself as “[a] girl. A machine. A freak.”<sup>97</sup> Although there are moments when the desire to be noticed outside of her oppressed identity intersects with a desire to be noticed romantically – “Cinder started at that simple word – pretty.”<sup>98</sup> – Cinder’s rise into the ashes depends much more upon her internal transformations and coming of age narrative than it does with her appearance. In young adult novels – particularly those in dystopian settings – young characters turn to activism as a result of their transformations or to enact larger social transformations. Cinder responds to the injustices she faces as a result of her appearance, identity, youth, etc. by embracing

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<sup>96</sup> “Prologue: Into the Woods” from *Into the Woods*, Composed by Stephen Sondheim. Walt Disney Studios, 2014. The full lyrics may be found here: “Prologue: Into the Woods,” Genius, accessed March 7, 2024, <https://genius.com/Original-broadway-cast-of-into-the-woods-prologue-into-the-woods-lyrics>. A full video of the song can be found here: DisneyMusicVEVO, “Prologue: Into the Woods (From “Into the Woods”) (Audio),” uploaded Jan 5, 2015, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrDU8DcT9IU>.

<sup>97</sup> C, 126.

<sup>98</sup> C, 162.

activism in order to attain the recognition she feels is being denied. Instead of working towards re-aggregation to attain social power, Cinder uses activism to derive power from larger social and personal changes. Because she does not have the guarantee of re-aggregation, Cinder finds a way to achieve power within her persistent liminality.

The way Cinder feels about the ball – to go or not to go and why – evolves in a parallel with her embrace of her own identity and her desire for activism. At first, Cinder treats the ball and her exclusion from it with general disinterest. Once she meets the prince, however, Cinder experiences one of her first moments of acceptance, and she begins to believe that someone could like her as a girl and a cyborg. She now desires to go to the ball which Adri forbade her to attend. As the political and personal stakes increase throughout the novel, the ball transitions into an arena where Cinder must fend off a potential war. More dire than Adri's proscription is the wrath of the Lunar queen, and Cinder's desire to attend the ball out of pleasure is replaced by a political urgency. If Cinder fails to make it to the ball, the queen "would take over the Commonwealth. She would wage war on... the whole planet." [sic]<sup>99</sup> The fate of the planet rests on Cinder's attendance at the ball – quite a shift from earlier versions. It is a moment of plot importance but also character importance for Cinder. As the antagonist shifts from Cinder's stepmother to an interplanetary tyrant, Cinder's role also shifts. She comes face to face with the queen who very much wants her dead, and her body initiates a "resistance procedure" against the queen's power: bioelectric manipulation otherwise known as glamour. To resist the manipulation, Cinder's body reacts. A heat tears through her as if "her body was trying to expel the cyborg parts," burning and burning until she is left feeling "[d]ifferent. Powerful. On fire." When

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<sup>99</sup> C, 323.

she looks down, she sees that “her left glove had started to melt, forming patches of gooey, silky skin on her white-hot metal hand.”<sup>100</sup> She quite literally burns with power. This Cinderella arrives at the ball in grease-stained gloves to cover her markers of difference, but when she is at her most powerful, those markers of difference come into view. Cinder rises into her cyborg, Lunar, party-crashing ashes with a surge of power as her body resists manipulation. It is not a coincidence that the moment Cinder gains her Lunar power, she also gains power over her body again. It is not only a familiar home, it is a powerful one too. Cinder no longer harbors disinterest; the ball represents her rise to power as a character in control of the narrative and in control of her self. Moreover, this power arises wholly unrelated to romantic attention. Cinder gains a sense of worthiness that refutes her perceived social and personal inferiority. She must come to understand that her worthiness was inherent from the start, and her role as a public activist at the ball contrasts with earlier versions of Cinderella who seek a different kind of transformation when they escape their domestic situation. Furthermore, Cinder’s moment of greatest power and defiance against the queen initiates a transformation that puts all of her ashes on display as markers of difference *and* power.

Meyer reconfigures ashes as symbols of power, using the fairy tale bones to convey a message to teenagers in a state of liminality who feel marked in some way. Turner explains that the “first phase (of separation) comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a ‘state’), or from both.”<sup>101</sup> When the Cinderella character goes into the ashes, she also becomes unfixed from her family

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<sup>100</sup> C, 363-64.

<sup>101</sup> Victor Turner, “Liminality and Communitas” in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. (London: Taylor and Francis, 2017), 94.



group and social position. Liminality exists as an intermediary phase in other Cinderella stories, as the main character de-aggregates from her secure daughter role and becomes a powerless domestic servant instead. Only with an escape from the ashes can these Cinderella's escape liminality. Much like these Cinderellas, Cinder loses her power and status when her new family adopts her, and she continues to evade the social structure as she grows into a public worker and eventually becomes a public figure. However, Cinder never needs to escape her ashes. Her Cinderella iteration still adheres to the affective bones of rising into power, but she does this by more firmly embracing markers of difference. The defining characteristic of the liminal phase of a rite of passage is a lack of power, but Cinder finds power without cleaning off her visible ashes. They only become more visible and more powerful as she develops.



### **The Dress**

“Wait!” Cinderella cries, running down the stairs in a pink dress, just in time to leave with her stepmother and stepsisters for the ball. “Isn’t it lovely?” she asks. “Do you like it? Do you think it will do?” “Thief!” they call her. Thief. Thief. Thief. An accusation for every rip and tear.<sup>102</sup> Out of the visible ashes, Cinderella is still marked by her invisible ash and dirt. This scene highlights the parallel aspects of the ashes as visible things which mark Cinderella’s body and clothes and the invisible ashes which make the body itself impure.

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<sup>102</sup> Walt Disney, *Cinderella*, 1950

Cinder's inferiority must be made visible via different types of ashes and markers, and visible ashes are often imparted to compound the invisible ashes. In Disney's animated film, the stepsisters tear Cinderella's dress to mark her invisible ashes on her body once again. They do so with a gentle provocation and permission from their mother. Cinder's sister Pearl acts with this same goal in mind when she visits Cinder at her mechanic's stall. The prince, smitten with Cinder, asks her to the ball and brings her a pair of silk gloves as a gift and incentive. Pearl, inflamed by jealousy, flings them into the dirt and upends a toolbox on top:

[Cinder] turned the box right-side up but ignored the loose parts, reaching instead for the gloves at the bottom of the pile. They were caked with dirt and dust, but it was the bits of smeared grease that made her heart sink. Cinder draped them over her knee and tried to smooth the wrinkles from the silk, only smearing the oil. They were beautiful. The most beautiful things she'd ever owned.

But if there was one thing she knew from years as a mechanic, it was that some stains never came out.<sup>103</sup>

20 years ago, I cried for Cinderella. I cried for Cinder too.

Though Cinder's stained gloves represent a similarly downtrodden young girl, stains do not disempower our Cinderella. The beauty of the gloves quickly fades, but their importance to Cinder as a token of affection and possibility remains. While the grease stains discolor the gloves, they don't destroy them, a very apt comparison for Cinder's own grease stains. Her grease stains mark her passion

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<sup>103</sup> C, 301.

for the mechanical work she adores. When we are told, "Cinder lowered herself into the dirt,"<sup>104</sup> we also understand that the dirt is where she does her best work. In previous fairy tale iterations, Cinderella perceives visible ash as a marker of inferiority just like her stepsisters or stepmother. Though she may not believe her self worth to be determined by her appearance, her perception of visible markers of difference often aligns with the greater social perception, and so the only way to rise from the ashes is to remove those markers of inferior difference. Cinder does not need to remove the markers of difference because they are not unjust markers of inferiority. She is unjustly abused, but not because her appearance does not match her worth. Her appearance reflects her identity, it is the social perception of that identity which must change. She comes to treasure the visible and invisible stains which mark her identity. Covered in ashes and grease, Cinder is markedly different for something other than her uncontrollable cyborg appearance. As we have seen, Cinder does not leave the ashes behind her when she goes to the ball.

The crushed and stained silk gloves return later as she scrambles together her attack plan for the royal ball. In preparing for a physical transformation, we see how Cinder has transformed into a self-assured young adult. Instead of marveling at the luxury of the gloves, Cinder thinks, "The silk gloves felt too fine, too delicate, too flimsy, and she was worried she might snag them on some poorly placed screw. At least they too were covered in grease smudges, completing the affront. She was a walking disaster and she knew it. She'd be lucky if they let her into the ball at all."<sup>105</sup> All of the bodily coverings here are simultaneously too much and not enough. They are "too fine" and thus not true to

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<sup>104</sup> *C*, 44.

<sup>105</sup> *C*, 324-25.

Cinder's real economic status. They are "too delicate" and thus not compatible with her daily mechanic work. They are "too flimsy" and thus not strong enough for the task of saving the world Cinder has ahead of her. But mostly, they are not enough Cinder. Clothes have a power. They can elevate and they can cover, but for Cinder, they cover what is powerful to her. While other Cinderellas find a release and joy in unfamiliar clothing,<sup>106</sup> Cinder feels discomfort. This was a dress made for Peony to wear to the ball before her untimely death. Cinder saved it as an act of love, and though she wears it to the ball in order to fit in,<sup>107</sup> the dress does not really fit. It wasn't made for her, but more than that, it represents Peony's dreams more than Cinder's. Everything Cinder wears to the ball does not fit, her "old foot... the small, rusted thing she'd woken up with after her operation when she was a confused, unloved eleven-year-old girl" is her only option, and it just so happens to be "small enough to fit into Pearl's boots."<sup>108</sup> Peony's dress. Her old foot. Pearl's boots. Stained gloves. They are all inaccurate markers of her identity. Like the foot that was small enough to fit into someone else's shoes, Cinder has outgrown these perceptions of her identity. She contains far too many multitudes to fit into Pearl's ever so limited shoes. The same discomfort that was once reserved for her ostracized body now arises when she covers that body. The dress is a symbol of social elevation, but that elevation only exists within a society in which Cinder no longer wants any role. She does not feel at home in the outfit because at that point she is more at home in her body and doesn't need that cover or status.

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<sup>106</sup>Jetlag Productions's 1994 *Cinderella* asks, "How can I go to such an elegant affair in these wretched rags?"

<sup>107</sup> Disney's 1997 movie musical *Cinderella* starring Brandy imparts the importance of Cinderella's dress by distinguishing her with a color scheme. While the other guests wear dark blues, greens, and purples, Cinderella arrives in a dress so pale blue it's almost silver. Her dress elevates her while also marking her as special. With the help of a sparkling new dress – and Whitney Houston – the impossible becomes possible and Cinderella frees herself from the ashes and the rags.

<sup>108</sup> *C*, 324.

She has experienced an inner transformation that rejects the social conventions which mark her body as stareable, and she now feels secure enough to feel most comfortable in her body as a home, not the way her body appears to others as a display.<sup>109</sup> Cinder has a moment on the staircase of the grand ball, but she is a stained, stareable spectacle instead of a bejeweled newcomer. And yet this moment of public humiliation is the same bone from earlier Cinderella stories. It just so happens that, in this version, Cinder does not need a disguise of finery or public allure to realize she is important. Cinder depends upon an inner and psychological transformation instead of an external one. The outfit Cinder dons for the royal ball does not represent her ideal or perfect appearance, and it also does not conform to high class standards of dress. Cinder arrives and leaves the ball in ashes, but they are not a sign of her disempowerment. Quite the contrary.



### The Shoe

When Yeh Shen prays to the bones of her magic fish,<sup>110</sup> it gifts her with slippers of pure gold. These slippers provide the magic that dresses her in silk robes and jewelry, for when she loses one in her escape from the kingdom, the rest of the ensemble falls away. Yeh Shen's slippers reveal to us, to the prince, and to the rest of the characters a beautiful exterior that matches Yeh Shen's beautiful interior. The slippers free her from the ashes of her misery and her perceived inferiority at home. At the end, the perfect fit of the shoe identifies her as remarkable, and she becomes the king's perfect bride.

<sup>109</sup> This is a quintessential marker of any transformation, girlhood or otherwise. In her book *The Body is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self Love*, activist and poet Sonya Renee Taylor tells us that in order to break down systems of oppression which thrive off of our perception of differences as harmful, we must embrace the transformative power of radical self love.

<sup>110</sup> "Time went by, and Yeh Shen, who was often left alone, took comfort in speaking to the bones of her fish." Like Yeh Shen, we too take comfort in conversing with the bones of things we connect to – namely, fairy tales.

One of the most memorable bones from Cinderella is her shoe. In this story, Cinder's shoe does not matter nearly as much as what is inside of it: her metal foot. Cinder's story begins and ends with a foot, and it is no coincidence that the foot both contains and frees her. We are first introduced to the Cinder in a moment of violence and rust with a screw through the ankle. Cinder's body is a site of remembered violence, but also a site of unbounded capability. All efforts to contain Cinder into one category, identity, or state of disempowerment fail. To ensure that Cinder cannot attend the emperor's royal ball, Adri removes Cinder's new cyborg foot. This move works to physically contain Cinder, but it also acts as a reminder of her social containment as a devalued member of society and of her family unit. As with previous iterations, our princess is stuck. However, unlike Cinderella's failed entrapment by the prince in the Grimms' version, who spreads pitch on the stairs to trap the runaway girl of mystery, Cinder's inability to escape her situation does not stem from love. Who is trapping and why changes dramatically. Losing her foot is not going to help Cinder find love – at least not yet. The loss of the foot, though a reference to the shoe motifs,<sup>111</sup> is even more fundamentally a bone that represents the antagonist's efforts to contain or limit the Cinderella character. The return of the shoe – or foot – assures the reader that these efforts to disempower our heroine always fail. Held within the shoe are layers of affective culture repeated over several iterations of the Cinderella tale.<sup>112</sup> The bones here are so recognizable yet so different. The causes, effects, and actions around the bones may all be recomposed,

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<sup>111</sup> Perrault introduced a shoe of glass. Yeh Shen wore a shoe of pure gold. Brandy donned a quintessentially 90s plastic pump in the 1997 movie musical. The Grimm brothers described a shoe twice soaked through with blood before it was returned to the foot of Aschenputtel.

<sup>112</sup> Shari Benstock and Suzanne Ferris examine the shoe as a physical manifestation of desire in Cinderella. However, this is “desire of an entirely different sort [which] is at work for the women in the tale” (11). Even outside of the context of this fairy tale, “[t]he moment of trying on shoes directly or indirectly recalls Cinderella's trial by shoes” (59). The cultural and collective memory which hinges on desire and despair congregates around this fairy tale bone.

yet I could dig them up and so could you. The bones of desire, hindered desire, loss, and recovery.

What makes the moment with Cinder's metal foot a bone in this story is not the fact that it anatomically resembles Perrault's glass slipper or Yeh Shen's silk ones, but the fact that it reappears.

Culture as a whole has remembered the ways in which people have tried to contain or free Cinderella and the ways in which Cinderella loses and recovers aspects of her identity – oftentimes with a shoe.

Marissa Meyer clearly remembers this too, and she felt compelled to return to it in her retelling in order to understand its relevance in a new context.

The pattern of loss and recovery is a fairy tale bone within Cinderella that reveals itself through the shoe motif. However, what Cinder recovers at the end is not a return to society to close out her liminal phase. It's quite the opposite, in fact. By the end of the novel, Cinder sits in a jail cell after crashing the royal ball to save the new young emperor from the clutches of the visiting Lunar queen. Her social, political, and personal ostracization hits a peak as she is shunned from Earthen society as a Lunar and a cyborg, marked as a threat to the crown, and firmly dismissed by her family and potential romantic partner. Cinder is quite thoroughly alone. She is also quite thoroughly free. Free from her family, free from the expectations of her society as a cyborg, and free from the invisible ashes that marked her identity as inferior or unchangeable. In the jail cell, Cinder receives one final gift: "Dr. Erland reached into the bag and pulled out a metal hand and metal foot, both gleaming beneath the bright lights."<sup>113</sup> These appendages are the key to her freedom, but also importantly markers of her retained difference. Her liminality. With her custom cyborg parts out in the open, Cinder displays her inner transformation on the outside. She is marked by the cyborg ashes, and we now see how Cinder

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<sup>113</sup> *C*, 377.

has reframed the ashes as not only necessary to her physical and emotional embodiment but also as elements of power. “I am not worth starting a war over,” she insists. Dr. Erland counters, “‘Actually, you are.’”<sup>114</sup> Over the course of the novel, Cinder gains self-worth which is mirrored in her much vaster worth on the global stage as a political savior and the true heir to the Lunar throne. The reader spends almost 400 pages waiting for Cinder to achieve the same sense of value that we already attribute to her as an empathetic and relatable main character. Now, she realizes she is not only worth respect and love, she’s even worth a war.

Furthermore, the cyborg gifts come from a fellow Lunar refugee, Dr. Erland. Erland could be compared to a fairy godmother figure in the way he facilitates visible and invisible transformations for Cinder. He enlightens her to her status as a Lunar refugee, effectively transforming her perception of her identity, and he also provides new technology that transforms her physically. However, Erland’s contributions merely motivate the transformations that Cinder experiences. Erland reveals Cinder’s identity as a refugee in the same breath that he confesses his own refugee status, grounding him in a liminal and powerless identity far removed from the magical fairy godmother.<sup>115</sup> Dr. Erland gifts her the physical upgrades, but it’s Cinder who puts them to work in tandem with all of the transformations we have witnessed over the course of the novel. By the end, Cinder knows that “[s]he could be anyone. *Become* anyone.”<sup>116</sup> <sup>117</sup> Though her story deconstructs the rite of passage of traditional

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<sup>114</sup> *C*, 378-79.

<sup>115</sup> Dystopia leans into social partitioning, enhancing the kinds of displacement and oppression within each alternate reality. That partitioning necessarily introduces the abstraction of the person displaced or kept out. The refugee appears in most young adult dystopias because of their role as a byproduct of tragedy. As a covert Lunar citizen on Earth, Cinder is also a refugee. Her Cinderella-ness is multiplied by her existence within more and more bodies of exclusion or neglect.

<sup>116</sup> *C*, 387.

<sup>117</sup> In the Rodgers and Hammerstein’s stage musical, Cinderella sings, “In my own little corner, in my own little chair, I can be whatever I want to be. On the wings of my fancy I can fly through the air, and the world will open its arms to me.”



Cinderella tales by remaining in liminality, she too gains a new understanding of her identity in a way that allows her to achieve freedom, power, and activism all while retaining her grease stains.

Where we find the most comfort and connection within the Cinderella tale is its assertion that we are not alone. *Cinder* casts this into relief with each encounter with liminality. As her sister, Peony is a peer in similar stages of girlhood. As an android, Iko is a mix of mechanics and humanity that reflects Cinder's biological hybridity as a cyborg. As a Lunar refugee, Dr. Erland lives as a familiar type of outcast. Each moment of comfort and identification comes from a lateral connection, and these connections populate the liminal space that Cinder explores throughout the novel. She continues to relate to identities that are mutable and developing. In every moment that Cinder questions or devalues her own identity, there is a reader on the other end doing the very same, and as Cinder begins to accept the facets of her visible and invisible self as constantly changing, so too can the reader. The contemporary reader has an identity, but they don't know quite what it is yet, and because of *Cinder*, they don't have to. Cinder ends the novel unmoored. She is a refugee, a cyborg, a teenager, an escaped convict, and she is all alone. Far from viewing her situation as desperate, the reader sees themselves mirrored in Cinder's uncertain status. The reader finds comfort because they do not experience a re-aggregation by proxy, instead they feel identification with their current state of identity flux. Of becoming.



### **The Princess**

The story places the reader in intimate relation to Cinder and all the deeply affective bones of her tale in a few ways. She is the main character in her YA novel, automatically positioning her and the young adult reader in similar states of liminality and narrative focus. She is also the Cinderella character, meaning that regardless of any insistence by herself or other characters, she is extraordinary. Though not always the case in Cinderella stories, Cinder is already a princess. It takes the entirety of the novel for Cinder to discover this fact, and she continues to deny it until almost the last page. “No,” she insists. “I can’t. I can’t be a queen or a princess or – I’m nobody. I’m a cyborg!”<sup>118</sup> For her, the ability to hold a title conflates with the nature of her understood identity. “Cyborg” overpowers her whole perception. She actually refutes her royal lineage because she “can’t be” anything other than what she inherently is: a cyborg and a nobody. The language of “can” or “am” tells the reader how Cinder still understands her identity as inherently marked and singular. Until, finally, she sees the whole picture. It takes right up until the last page, but Cinder feels a “strange new electricity... thrumming beneath her skin, telling her she wasn’t a cyborg anymore. She was Lunar now.”<sup>119</sup> The power surging through her represents an empowerment that comes from her multilayered identity. Though she says she is not a cyborg anymore, the assertion indicates more that she isn’t *just* a cyborg anymore. She is also a Lunar and a princess and a powerful actor in this global plot.

Though she might not feel pride in this fact at the beginning, Cinder’s power is connected to her otherness. We as readers know this from the beginning, so we simply watch as Cinder comes to that same conclusion. We know she is “the best mechanic in the city” from the start, though “she’d never

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<sup>118</sup> C, 384.

<sup>119</sup> C, 386.

broadcast the reason."<sup>120</sup> Regardless of whether or not this Cinderella iteration featured a cyborg, the main character finds an escape from the relentless abuse of their current situation by discovering how they are special and uncontainable. How they always have been – with or without attention from the prince. Cinder comes to realize that she is special not only because of how her difference compares to others, but because of how her self perception changes over time. She thinks of herself differently. Her transformation here is linked to her own reflection on her internal qualities, not a fairy godmother. Once again, the divergences from the “traditional” transformation arc of Cinderella reveals the deeper fairy tale bones present across all iterations. These bones stay with us and the stories even if they appear to be transformed themselves.

This scene in which she discovers her identity as a Lunar princess provides a clear picture of the transformation Cinder has experienced in regards to her own cyborg body. In the research lab on her very first visit with Dr. Erland, Cinder sees “her heart, her brain, her intestines, her muscles, her blue veins. Her control panel, her synthetic hand and leg, wires that trailed from the base of her skull all the way down her spine and out to her prosthetic limbs.” The moments when Cinder acknowledges her differences intertwine with her perception of her cyborg body, thus her specialness cannot be separated from her existence at a physical border site of skin, bone, and bionics. The cyborg identity functions as an allegory to enhance the pre-existing connections between young girls and transformation. A girl going through adolescence “without any choice, either too soon or too late to suit her” can relate to that out of body experience and homeless feeling. Cinder never chose to change the skin she is in, and so the moments in the novel where she notices or is forced to notice her body come with some shock

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<sup>120</sup> C, 10.

and anger. How can she occupy both the perceived identity of various onlookers and the lived identity she remembers? How can she reconcile the exclusion caused by her visible and invisible ashes and the growing certainty that these ashes do not make her dirty or impure?

Teenagers in the heat of their transformations can often feel like they have been tampered with. When you no longer understand your emotions, your thoughts, or your new anxieties and feelings, your body feels foreign and a little dirty. Cinder's nature as a cyborg allows the story to examine the idea of the foreign-feeling body through her foreign technological body parts. For Cinder – like so many other young girls in the beginning of adolescence – her body is not a home. At 16, she is reminded over and over that her body was remade: “Cinder pressed her hand against her chest. Her heart. Her brain. Her nervous system. What hadn't been tampered with?”<sup>121</sup> These alterations occurred following a presumed hovercraft accident when she was eleven years old. The sole survivor, Cinder woke to find herself in an unrecognizable body with no memory of her past or her process of transformation.

As a young reader unsure of your own emotions and the transformations within you, relating to a cyborg body is an effective narrative tool through which vicarious analysis can happen. After an encounter with the charming prince, “Cinder leaned back against the chair, gripping its arms to quell her shaking. Her mind was replaying the conversation while her retina scanner informed her that her body was producing mass amounts of endorphins and she should try to calm down.”<sup>122</sup> Utilizing technology – a largely unfamiliar element of this futuristic retelling which requires plenty of

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<sup>121</sup> C, 117.

<sup>122</sup> C, 166.

explanation for the average reader – allows for deep “character embodiment”: the reader embodies the emotions and experiences of the fictional character as the character themselves is exploring what it means to exist in their own body. Because the reader already turns to the fairy tale to understand things about themselves, the fairy tale told through science fiction allows bones to be re-examined, re-experienced, and understood in new ways. Cinder examines herself and her surroundings via their innards – their technological bones. Like a child or young adult reader returning to familiar stories to try and work out their wiring, Cinder looks to the bones to understand.

For theorist Donna Haraway, the cyborg is at the center of an irony “about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true.”<sup>123</sup> This irony informs politics and feminism, and it informs Cinder’s identity within the novel and as a character resurging from fairy tale bones. However, I want to again emphasize that while her identity as a cyborg uniquely informs her story of exclusion, it does not solely define her character. Cinder is a cyborg, a princess, and an emotionally resilient girl with a determination that is just as strong as the bones of her fairy tale. That is what makes her most special, and that is what draws her out of her fears of exclusion by the end, though no doubt also empowered by an acceptance of all the physical and social markers that she once viewed as invincible barriers. And that is what draws us back to Cinderella tales time and time again. We remember how she grew and we seek to find that same growth in our own lives, to break free of social and personal barriers just like Cinderella.




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<sup>123</sup> Donna Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 149.

In 2014, I was firmly convinced that I had outgrown the school library. Every shelf was familiar, I'd left no page unturned. Aside from the book of complete Grimms' fairy tales, my family had shelves full of picture books, fictionalized historical diaries of young girls like Princess Anastasia, hand-me-down required reading, and award winning classics like *Charlotte's Web*, but the collection had been static for a while. I, however, read on. This new school had different rules from my elementary school the previous year, and I'd been allowed to check out up to three books at a time. At that rate, the school library never stood a chance. Ever since I first got my hands on the little Cinderella board book, I could not be satiated, and I searched high and low for unfamiliar titles that I didn't have at home. It was at this point that I became a menace to my mother. Moving beyond what my home and school had to offer, I begged for trips to the local public library where I first discovered a book with a cover that showed a red glass slipper and a metal ankle. I needed no other convincing. I read *Cinder* in two days. Like I had done to the blue frosted cake of my youth, I devoured this Cinderella. What began between the red covers of Grimms' fairy tales spurred me to dig until I found the bright red shoe of *Cinder*. I was ravenous for these stories, always seeking out fairy tales so I could feel that sharp reverberation of hitting a bone. *Cinder* represents a moment in my literary journey that mirrors the internal and external transformations of adolescence. Yearning for characters and stories that explored the anxieties of my newfound pre-adulthood, I clung to young adult literature that told me I was not alone.

## Chapter 4

### Happily Ever After

Let me explain. No, there is too much. Let me sum up.

Rob Reiner's *The Princess Bride* (1987)



torytellers across mediums converse with fairy tale bones through their own retellings, using them to form stories that engage with topics such as gender fluidity, diverse identity, cultural background, and, yes, romance. These are not new elements in the larger conversations amongst the bones; they are simply being rekindled and recast by clever hands. Fairy tale bones have much to tell us through the things we remember and the things we do not yet understand. They tell us that we are not alone. They tell us that we are not static. They tell us that we are magical and powerful.

*Cinder* is an example of a broader trend within the 21st century iterations of fairy tales that use bones and all of their cultural and personal impact to tell stories that reach audiences in new ways. The ways in which *Cinder* diverges from other traditional iterations of Cinderella shows us how the bones within the tale are newly relevant, but not new. *Cinder* is a fairy tale for the contemporary reader, and the bones we find within call to that reader. Every new retelling uses these bones that we remember and seek to understand to pull us into new conversations through new mediums and in new contexts. The bones compel us to return.

Fairy tale bones have experienced a new kind of retelling via the technological age. My friend Ava knows this firsthand. In 2023, she sat down to rewatch one of her favorite TV shows *Once Upon a Time* and make a video about everything that happens in the first season. Literally. Her YouTube video is entitled “everything that happened in once upon a time season 1 (ouat family tree explained),”<sup>124</sup> and it’s over two and a half hours long with more than 150,000 views, last I checked. Due to popular demand, she followed up with a season 2 recap video later that year. Ava’s relationship with this show and her desire to interact with it online shows two things. For one, her relationship with fairy tale bones developed from childhood and informed her viewing of *OUAT*, and that relationship continued to develop in the time between her returns to this show. Ava’s story reveals the dynamic nature of fairy tale bones as we develop a larger personal and collective knowledge about aspects such as race, gender, sexuality, and ethics. Secondly, creating a YouTube commentary on a television adaptation of a collection of fairy tales underscores the layering effect that creates and informs fairy tale bones. Online, she was able to converse with a global community of *Once Upon a Time* fans much like a digital age version of the oral storytelling cultures the Grimm brothers sought to record.

Though she first watched the show in 2014 when she was almost 13 years old, it premiered in 2011, right in the thick of fairy tale retellings such as *Cinder*. Originally intended for adult audiences, the show unintentionally drew in a younger crowd of viewers such as Ava because of the immediate connection between fairy tale characters and children’s media such as Disney movies. When I asked her about her first encounter with the show, she said she tuned in because she had heard Anna and Elsa

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<sup>124</sup> This video follows the recent long form video trend otherwise known as “the breakdown”: an in-depth run through of major points from popular media such as TV shows. Popularized and pioneered by YouTuber Mike’s Mic, these videos often center around nostalgic early 2000s shows such as *Glee* and *Gossip Girl*. No one had yet attempted a *OUAT* video.



would be in the newest season. Prior to *OUAT*, Ava told me she loved Disney animated princess movies as well as the Barbie series of retellings. She remembers being drawn in by magic, talking animals, and princesses. Or, more accurately, female-centered narratives. Her love for Disney compelled her to seek out fairy tales because she wanted to find stories about girls. Disney centered women as the focal point of the narrative, and as a young girl, Ava wanted to see herself as a Disney princess because she wanted to be at the center of the narrative. Ava viewed her exploration into fairy tales through affective phases. “Disney really defined fairy tales for me.” The discovery of Grimm fairy tale versions was jarring, but she viewed them as “another set entirely,” not necessarily the true or correct tale. She describes them as being parallel versions.

*Once Upon A Time* reworks the bones from fairy tales and folklore into a series of interconnected narratives that span from the characters’ “original” time periods into the modern day. *OUAT* is set in Storybrooke, a town in which fairy tale characters are trapped outside of their stories without any memory of their fairy tale pasts or the ability to leave. Each character represents a traditional fairy tale figure (Snow White, Belle, The Evil Queen, Rumplestiltskin), but they also have a modernized counterpart that represents the core nature of that character across our collective memory. In Storybrooke, Snow White becomes Mary Margaraet Blanchard, a schoolteacher with a soft spot for animals. Her character and her plot line stem from the reworked bones of her own fairy tale, but she also interacts with the bones of countless other tales, creating brand new records of impact across these stories. Much darker and less sanitized than the Disney movies, the stories collected by the Grimm brothers were most akin to the first seasons of *OUAT*. “They needed the drama,” Ava explains. “The implications of sex, crime, and murder that aren’t in Disney were meant to appeal to adults.” So why

use fairy tales in the first place? Well, making an adult show about fairy tales is – to Ava at least – essentially making a show about hope and finding a happily ever after. It was marketed to adults and drew in children unintentionally, a familiar outcome of fairy tale media. The massive popularity of the show was due in part to the nostalgia of fairy tale bones across cultural memory, but it also relied on that compulsion to return to bones we do not yet understand. On top of that, the characters themselves forget the tales they come from, thus they too seek to understand things about their stories and their fairy tale bones. *OUAT* took familiar bones and reconfigured them in entirely new ways, adding layers of collective understanding through the plotlines and character arcs on the show. Then, Ava added some more.

Ava's video explores the remembered and the recomposed fairy tale bones within the show, but by adding her own commentary and sharing it in a publicly accessible space online, she augments our collective memory surrounding these bones. Ava wasn't consciously tracking "fairy tale bones," but she kept track of big plot points such as family trees, timelines, and odd romantic relationships. Though she was drawn to a show that reworked the bones of familiar female-centered narratives, she noticed the issues with the plethora of fairy tale retellings and adaptations that depict only thin, white, straight, able-bodied women as the main character. In her video, Ava made a point to call out the facets she felt were problematic and a reflection of heteronormative ideals. For example, Rumplestiltskin is an anti-semitic stereotype and he has a toxic relationship with Belle. Their storyline incorporates recognizable collective bones of "Beauty and the Beast," wherein Rumplestiltskin is cursed with a physical deformation as retribution, and the relationship with Belle helps him recognize his faults and complete an internal transformation. Or, as Ava puts it, "Rumple becomes the Dark One. In

parentheses, I put (slay).”<sup>125</sup> The bones of the fairy tales within these episodes were often used to reinforce normative characters or stories, and Ava recognized that during her rewatch nine years later. The bones of one of Ava’s favorite fairy tales *The Little Mermaid* appears in a storyline in season 2. Although there isn’t an Ariel character in *OUAT*, Ava describes the character Anton, a beanstalk dwelling giant: “He lives at the top of the beanstalk in the giant palace. You know, like the story Jack and the Beanstalk. But, in true little mermaid fashion, he wants to be where the people are. He wants to see the humans that live, like, on the ground. Because he’s fascinated by all of these human relics, all of these things.”<sup>126</sup> When I asked her about what she would consider the bones of *The Little Mermaid* tale, she listed curiosity, love for the human world, and a willingness to sacrifice everything in order to try something new. All of these can be found in Anton the giant’s story. Ava recognized the bones that developed from her own relationship with *The Little Mermaid* even though they looked completely different in this episode. Drawn to the fairy tale TV show for its familiar female-centered narratives and drawn back again as an adult by a desire to look deeper, Ava has entered into conversation with these fairy tale bones over and over.

In a postmodern digital era, Ava’s interactions with fairy tales reflect the dynamic quality of fairy tales bones. When I asked her who she made the video for, she simply said, “People like me.” People who like fairy tales. People who love *Once Upon a Time*. People who watched *Tangled* and then checked out every copy of Rapunzel at their local library. People who sat in the theater grinning from ear to ear as Halle Bailey sang “Part of Your World.” Young girls. Old girls. People who are neither of

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<sup>125</sup> Ava’s Reads, “everything that happened in once upon a time season 1 (ouat family tree explained),” uploaded March 14, 2023, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A814yGwTso0>, (1:06:32).

<sup>126</sup> Ava’s Reads, “everything that happened in once upon a time season 2! (ouat family tree explained! again!),” uploaded Nov. 9, 2023, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVksR5Mi0pE>, (1:32:18).

those things. Ava's thoughts mirrored the majority of fairy tale scholarship I have read about the importance of fairy tales as women's lore and their continued relevance as cultural stories. As I talked with her, I saw the bones of her own experience with fairy tales surfacing. Like many others, Ava was compelled to return to the fairy tales bones that she remembered and those that she sought to understand, and she continued to be in conversation with them in new ways to learn what they had to tell her.

Fairy tale bones tell us that we will return. You know. Ever after.



I am less than two years old holding one board book from what the Disney company calls a “chubby, friendly series,” and I am crying at my first discovery of the deep unfriendliness of the stepsisters. I am three years old, and I have frosting in my hair and [the dust of the stars in my eyes](#)<sup>127</sup> from a party held just for me. I am four years old calling out to my mother to be crueler in our little fantasy. I am five years old, sitting on the brown carpet of my Sitti's living room watching my favorite VHS tape from 1994 play over and over. I see Cinderella, and, with her brown hair, she looks a little more like me.<sup>128</sup> I am six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, twenty-two, and I am watching *Ella Enchanted* (2004), *Rodgers and Hammerstein's Cinderella* (1957), *Cinderella* (1994), *A Cinderella*

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<sup>127</sup> Santino Fontana, “Ten Minutes Ago,” uploaded August 10, 2017, YouTube video, 0:46, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rVY3nV21Ixs>.

<sup>128</sup> Directed by Toshiyuki Hiruma and Takashi Masunaga, this film was released straight to VHS by Jetlag Productions in 1994. Animated in Japan and South Korea, this company also adapted several other popular fairy tales including Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, and Little Red Riding Hood. When my grandmother passed away, my sister and I got her copy of *Cinderella* on tape.

*Story* (2004), *Another Cinderella Story* (2008), *A Cinderella Story: Once Upon A Song* (2011), *Rodgers and Hammerstein's Cinderella* (1997), *Ever After* (1998), *Disney's Cinderella* (2015).

I am a little girl perched on my father's knee as he sings his tune of nonsense to the daughter of a Lebanese and Italian household. If you recognize the [melody](#),<sup>129</sup> feel free to sing along.

*Pasta e fagioli*

*Magic tabbouleh*

*Bibbidi-bobbidi-boo*

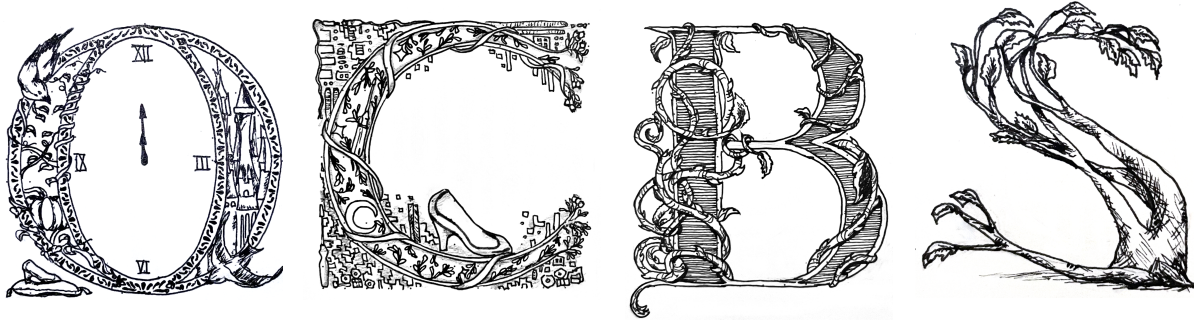
*Put 'em together and what have you got?*

*Bibbidi-bobbidi-boo!*

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<sup>129</sup> Disney UK, "DISNEY SING-ALONGS | Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo - Cinderella Lyric Video | Official Disney UK," uploaded July 27, 2019, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3QeYtv1OPs>.

### A note on the illustrations



Each chapter begins with an illuminated letter variously inspired by the illustrations of Chris Riddell, Ernest Shepard, Sarah Kipin, and Shel Silverstein. In between, the chapters themselves are separated by floral decals of the Red Bearberry plant. In the spirit of traditional medieval manuscripts, I drew and inked text decorations. In the spirit of the 21st century, I scanned and uploaded them onto the digital file to decorate my thesis. I remember the opening fairy tale book sequences from early Disney movies such as *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (copies of which can now be purchased through Disney's official website). Nothing makes a book feel like a magical fairy tale quite like illuminated letters. In a way, these illustrations once more reveal the impact of fairy tales on my life.



## Appendix A

This is *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*,<sup>130</sup> also commonly known as Kinnikinnick or Red Bearberry. This particular plant is 75 years old, originally collected in Norway by Louis H. Jordal, and apparently is now extinct in Delaware. None of that is very important to my point, but I figured you might find it interesting.

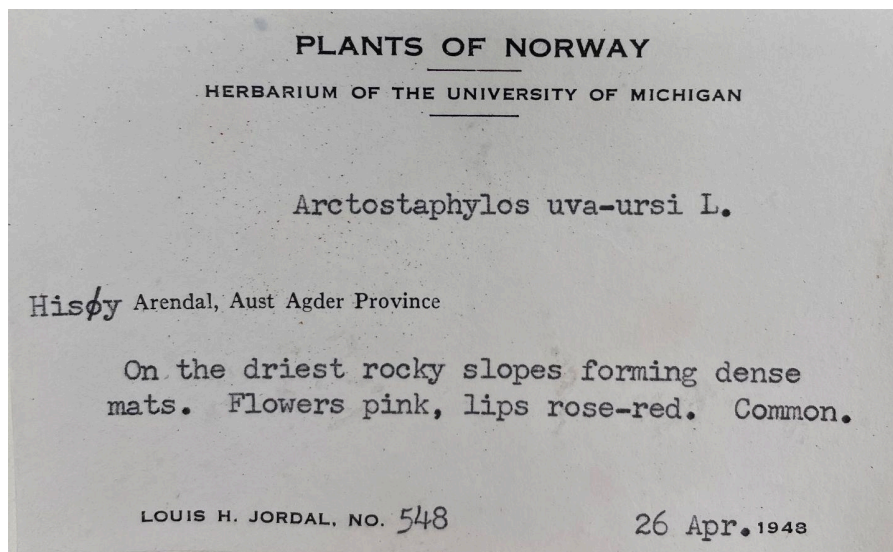


Red Bearberry has small, teardrop-shaped evergreen leaves and bell-shaped flowers that ripen into red berries.

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<sup>130</sup> Photo from personal archive, specimen courtesy of the University of Michigan Herbarium.

What is important, however, is the label. On the official typewritten label of this specimen, Jordal gives the following description: “Flowers pink, lips rose-red.”



The term “lips” is a technical descriptor for that distinct curl at the petal’s edge. The label itself and my encounter with it felt straight out of a fairy tale, and it only got more delightful when I looked up the specimen later. The specimen I showed before is very old, very dry, and very brown. Here’s a photo of the plant which better illustrates what Jordal so precisely termed the “lips” which any evil queen might envy.<sup>131</sup>



<sup>131</sup> Terry Glase. *Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*. Photograph. Wildflower Center Digital Library. June 20, 2013. [https://www.wildflower.org/gallery/result.php?id\\_image=35120](https://www.wildflower.org/gallery/result.php?id_image=35120).



## Appendix B

In my search for the original photo sequence described in the introduction, I watched various home videos from around that time period. My mom organized the CDs by year, labeling each disc to indicate the contents. I dug around in the bins searching for “Cinderella.” And though I didn’t find exactly what I was looking for, I certainly found Cinderella. The videos captured the full moment of me and my two older siblings meeting Cinderella. In the photo from the first section, I actually cropped out my siblings standing on either side of Cinderella’s voluminous skirts. These moments from the video, however, are just me and her.



Later on in that same video, I met another fairy tale figure: the fairy godmother. Though I didn’t spend any time alone on her lap – my siblings are perched just out of frame – I think I can say it certainly felt like it was only me and her in the world.



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