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Performing Femininity

Unhappily ever after: modern fairy tales of motherhood by Danielle Wood

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We can blame the Brothers Grimm for stepmothers getting a bad rap. Mothers were frequently cruel to their offspring in fairytales until the Grimms decided in the process of collecting oral tales and transforming them for child readers that biological mothers could no longer be demonised. Wicked inclinations and a lack of feminine nurturing became the preserve of stepmothers, while “real” mothers were often saintly in death.

In her new collection of short stories, Mothers Grimm, Danielle Wood loosely rewrites four of the Grimms’ tales to confront modern myths and expectations about motherhood. There are no models of maternal perfection in her tales, which riff on Rapunzel, Hansel and Gretel, Briar Rose and The Goose Girl.

In The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories (1979), Angela Carter famously restored power and cunning to various fairy tale heroines. Yet the outcomes of the stories that comprise Mothers Grimm are much more ambiguous. They reflect a world in which the bold hopes of second-wave feminism have dissolved into postfeminist uncertainty – there are no sword-wielding grandmothers here.

Familiar settings of dark woods and grand palaces are replaced by yoga classes, childcare centres, and the family home. The first tale, “Lettuce” (the name Rapunzel actually refers to a kind of lettuce) begins with reference to “a species of Arnott’s biscuit called the Orange Slice”.

Wood found that it was easy to relocate some of the key fairy tale tropes into the contemporary and the quotidian. “Archetypes are endlessly renewable,” she says. “The wonderful thing about them is that you can so easily feed them Orange Slices and make them go to pregnancy yoga classes.”
Fairy tales are currently enjoying a revival in major films such as Malificent, Frozen, and Mirror, Mirror and in TV series including Once Upon a Time and Grimm. Wood sees their potential to be repurposed as limitless: “I don’t think we’ll ever exhaust the capacity of fairy tales to be reinvented and re-told. Fairy tales are a bit like a trick mirror: you look into them and they can be made to reflect all kinds of new versions of ourselves.”

In “Cottage”, the heartless abandonment of children in the forest becomes a modern-day dilemma about working mothers and the anxieties surrounding leaving children in the care of others. While “Lettuce” gradually exposes that the beautiful, poised mother-to-be who appears perfect has much to hide.

As Wood explains, the “good mother” myth encourages some women to strive to project the illusion of faultlessness, while others feel painfully aware of their shortcomings. “Even if you put the Vicks Mum and the Dettol Mum to one side,” she says, “there are an awful lot of real life women who manage to project the myth and maybe some of them would tell you that they’re actually living it. But most of us mere mortals are awake at 2am worrying about whether or not we’re doing a good enough job.”

“Sleep” tells of the kind of mother who will always be presumed to be doing a bad job: the teen mum. After first enduring the disappointment of her family, Liv struggles with the otherworldly states induced by sleepless nights, with a tragic outcome.

“Nag” is perhaps the most confronting of all the tales. Motherhood on an isolated, dusty farm — on which life can quickly be extinguished — prompts a troubling refrain from a horse: “If your mother could see you now, her heart would break in two.”

The most trying aspects of mothering occur in private and have tended to remain closely kept secrets. Mothers Grimm offers the reader a glimpse of the hidden conflicts of domestic life and the ways in which strong women work to hold things together.

“[M]aybe it will provoke a bit of thinking about the way women pass judgements on each other,” Wood suggests of her collection, “and the way an intensely consumerist, materialist society like ours can create the kind of painful, isolating situations that some of my characters face.”

Yet Wood consistently pierces the most horrific aspects of these stories of motherhood stripped bare with humour. For instance, “Sleep” begins with the epigraph: “You reach womanhood and although there may not be a spindle, there will still be blood, a curse, and some little prick.”
Wood is a lecturer in creative writing at the University of Tasmania. She has also delved into fairy tale studies at international conferences, and has been involved in events run by the newly established Australian Fairy Tale Society and the Monash Fairy Tale Salon.

Mothers Grimm is part of the growth of both scholarly and literary engagements with the fairy tale tradition in Australia. Early attempts to situate fairy tales in Australia awkwardly transplanted gossamer fairies into the bush, but we’re at last finding our own enchanted, if slightly disturbing, voice.

*Mothers Grimm will be published by Allen & Unwin on 27 August 2014.*