

significance of de Beaumont's original story.

"A lot of people think fairy tales are just for the amusement of small children," says Nicholas Ruddick, a University of Regina English professor who teaches a class on fairy tales. "But they have a profound role to play in our culture."

"Fairy tales were originally folk tales which circulated among the peasantry, who were illiterate," says Ruddick. "They were told from generation to generation. The messages weren't intended to entertain small children, but instead to give a very unprivileged group of people a bit of advice about dangers they faced in life."

With the rise of adult literacy and the emergence of newspapers, books and other information sources, fairy tales were relegated to the realm of children. In the process, says Ruddick, their inherent meaning changed considerably: "If you're telling *Little Red Riding Hood* to a four-year-old, they're not going to understand its essential purpose so you have to change the tale to a warning for them to watch out for dangerous men in the woods—[but] that's not what it's about at all."

So what is *Little Red Riding Hood* about? Well, it's about sex. The red cloak is symbolic of menstruation, which begins when a girl hits puberty, and signals her impending transformation into a sexually mature female. The tale would've been told by a mother or grandmother to a pubescent girl as a means of warning her about the danger posed by predatory male sexuality—as represented by the wolf.

Because most tales address common human experiences and predicaments they recur, in slightly modified form, from culture to culture. Disney, the dominant purveyor of fairy tales today, has been criticized in some quarters for sanitizing the tales to make them palatable to mainstream audi-

THINGS ARE

Folk tales offered rules for living in a savage past

BY GREGORY BEATTY PHOTO BY DARROL HOFMEISTER

girl's happiness depends on winning a man's love. Again, says Ruddick, it's not the original folk tale that's at fault, but the more genteel fables that arose later among the middle class. Those tales, along with modern incarnations (like Hilary Duff's recent hit, *A Cinderella Story*), still carry great resonance in our culture, helping shape impressionable young minds, while at the same time providing adults with a convenient refuge from reality.

peasants, however, the tales weren't moral in the same way, says Ruddick. "What they essentially said was 'Okay, life is really hard. Learn how to survive as best you can.'" *Little Red Riding Hood*, for example, "teaches girls to rely on cunning to get out of difficult situations—not to behave morally. When the girl finds herself in bed with the wolf and suddenly realizes she's in danger she says 'Wait a minute, I have to go outside and take a pee.' The wolf lets her and she runs for her life."

Not only did fairy tales offer guidance to peasants, they also functioned as a form of social satire. "Very often in folk tales aristocrats are cast in very dangerous roles," says Ruddick. "In *Jack and the Beanstalk*, the giant is an aristocrat. You can tell from the description of his stately home Jack is the peasant boy who goes up the beanstalk and manages to steal a good living from him."

While most fairy tales contain a valuable moral lesson—in *Beauty and the Beast*, it's that a person's true worth depends on more than just their appearance—some cultural critics take umbrage at the outmoded values they propagate. Feminists, in particular, object to the proposition, as suggested in *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, that a

