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Born Wrong: A Modern Fairy Tale and an Investigation Into the Place of the "Fairy Gifts" Tale Type in Contemporary Life

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Born Wrong: A Modern Fairy Tale
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Abstract

In an effort to further my own goals in creative writing as well as investigate anthropological and folkloric questions on the relationship between fairy tales and “the real world”, I wrote a modern retelling of a classic fairy tale of the tale type “Fairy Gifts”. This tale simply marks an example of any fairy or folk tale that represents a rich resource into sources of cultural replication and validation. I hope to make the point that though these tales often involve magic, the issues that dominate the plot and characters are very real. Fairy tales do not often revolve around fairy gifts and Different humans arbitrarily, but arise from a societal need to understand difference and Otherness as well as to socialize members into the gift-giving and –receiving community.

Following research into this thesis, I included my version of this tale entitled “Born Wrong” and a short discussion on the choices I made through the lens of the interface between writing piece and audience, between plausibility and impossibility, and between academia and pragmatics. Some may believe fairies are utter fabrications or delusions created by primitive or child-like minds. Some may utilize them strictly as metaphor. And some understand the value of the place of quiet mystery that can only be seen from the corner of your eye.
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Introduction

From the concrete and glass jungle of the Philadelphia in the United States, a land of towering buildings and comparatively staggering wealth, a land of fast food and highways, a land of bachelor’s degrees and the Tea Party, I try to take a hard look at where we’ve gone wrong. Though religion widely thrives still in some ways in the Western world, where has our sense of awe gone? How does conceiving of a world without majesty and mystery affect the way we live and die? Fairy tales have become a thing of childhood, and childhood, a locked conception of time and space to be disposed of, but retain a level of nostalgia. Magic has been replaced by science, nature with machine. Western imperial culture has insidiously wriggled its long, creeping fingers into every pocket of the planet it can reach, motivating a global economy and outlook of moral imperatives. We becomes “civilized”, they becomes “primitive”. Daniel Quinn might use the terms “takers” and “leavers”.

In a society where myth and ritual still thrive, perhaps morphed in ways, but heavily present nonetheless, is the folktale still relevant? We don’t need stories around a small kitchen fire at night. We have electric light and television. We don’t need instructional songs and memory games. We have Wikipedia and Nintendo. We are so, so different than them. Or are we? Do fairy tales code important techniques for socialization and cultural understanding still critical for everyday life? Are they obsolete? Or, is it by deconstructing and reconstructing a classic fairy tale to make it relevant, that we, piece by piece, change the world? Can we, within all our constructions of “truth”, “reality”, and the cold, hard “facts”, realize and value magic? To bring magic back into the Western consciousness in an attempt to mold a healthier and more
balanced culture, we must first examine ways in which fairy tales directly intersect in the interests and practicality of society today.

"Fairy Gifts" is merely an example of some specific junctions; thus, making relevant connections that "logical" people can understand and validate. Yet, in the fairy tale, the relationships between the reader and the text, the uncertainty of the existence of magic, represent the liminal platform for exploring majesty, mystery, and magic.
Background Research and Methodology, or Fairy Gifts: A study in gifting and the Other

Fairy tales, though popularly relegated to the realm of children’s play, maintain a strong presence in the world of academics in terms of folklore, literature, and anthropology because they are much more than easily dismissed baubles of wonder. This paper investigates a specific type of fairy tale, the tale type of “Fairy Gifts”, in an effort to examine where the widespread variants of the tale intersect in very real ways with past and contemporary human society. A modern-day adaptation of this tale will follow the paper as a final product synthesized from the following research and data collection. The main ways, based on the strongest threads of the tale, that I will examine the background of the story are through gifting, Otherness, and the language choices meant to make distinctions between concepts in the tale. I hope to tie the gifting theme in this tale to the theories of Marcel Mauss, Georges Bataille, and insight of Louise Krasniewicz. Furthermore, I intend to use the works of Beth Frank, James C. Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson, Susan Schoon Eberly, and Rosemary Garland Thomson to discuss the inclusion of Otherness and “disability”. Following the modern fairy tale, I will also include a brief discussion of choices I made in my own adaptation and why I believe they are important in the world today.

The topic of this paper remains relevant straight up to modern day Western and non-Western society due to the fundamental themes that traverse all cultures including the Other in terms of people with differences, and gifting. A terminology needs to be addressed at this point though—tales about fairy gifts generally involve a human with a physical “disability”, a hunchback normally. Other types of fairy tales also deal with abnormal people such as tales of changelings, which reflect an attempt to explain or incorporate Otherness into an understandable in some way acceptable, condition by relating it to fairies. However, as I will address later in
the paper, the word “disabled”, and even the word “unhealthy”, does not do justice to the concept being discussed. As Sami Linton explains:

A project of cisability studies scholars and the disability rights movement has been to bring into sharp relief the processes by which disability has been imbued with the meaning(s) it has and to reassign a meaning that is consistent with a sociopolitical analysis of disability (Linton 1998).

As we discuss otherness and liminality, please accept the capitalized “Other” and “Different” to substitute for the inappropriate words. Thomson throws out words like “monstrosity”, “deformation”, and “crippledness” (as well as “disability”), but explains, “...the physically extraordinary figure these terms describe is as essential to the cultural project of American self-making as the varied throng of gendered, racial, ethnic, and sexual figures of otherness that support the privileged norm” (Thomson 1997, 5). The subject matter addressed in these tales is significant because language begets attitudes and stories beget culture. Though these tales often involve magic, the issues that dominate the plot and characters are very real. Fairy tales do not often revolve around fairy gifts and Different humans arbitrarily, but arise from a societal need to understand difference and Otherness as well as to socialize members into the gift-giving and -receiving community.

Fairy tales, a form of folktale, usually stem from older oral traditions that were later collected, many times altered, and published, most notably by the Grimm brothers, Charles Perrault, and Hans Christian Anderson. However, folklore continues to be passed down and the oral tales now are more painstakingly transcribed for accuracy. I found many versions of this tale type in a Folktext archive kept by Dr. D.L. Ashliman at the University of Pittsburgh under the Fairy Gifts heading, a variation of Aarne-Thompson tale type 503, Helpful Elves (most
commonly known for: “The Elves and the Shoemaker”). He has archived thirteen different stories (collected by various folklorists, anthropologists, and historians) from countries ranging from Scotland to Tibet. These tales on fairy gifts consistently specify gifts revolving around hunchbacks though, whereas “The Three Fays” from Sweden and “The Fairy Shilling” from Ireland (collected separately) deal with different gift matter. More modern writers have also adopted plot of the fairy gift such as in Charlotte Bronte’s “The Fairy Gift (“The Four Wishes”)) and in two different ways in the writing of children/teen author, Gail Carson Levine: *Ella Enchanted* where the gift is that of obedience, and *The Fairy’s Mistake*, based on Perrault’s fairy tale “Toads and Diamonds” included in Andrew Lang’s *Blue Fairy Book*.

There are several problems with the collection of folktales and the transition from oral tradition to material text. For instance, when the Grimm brothers and Perrault were transcribing these tales, they took liberties to insert or emphasize Christian themes, ideas, and morals, and minimize or exclude Pagan or un-Christian ideologies. Thus, many tales became distorted from their “original” forms, though even the term “original” is tricky to argue as it is the nature of oral tradition to change and vary with each telling. This consequence of word-of-mouth may be responsible for the myriad of versions we see today. However, for the purposes of this examination, the important aspect of these tales is that they continue into the present day in any form at all, proof that they are still culturally meaningful and that the motifs are still relevant to us as a society.

Fairy Gifts as a specific type of folktale contains a few key aspects that define it and repeat in the various versions of the tale. The basic structure of these tales involves a hunchback coming across a small group of fairies singing and/or dancing and joins in their song in a way they find pleasing. To reward him, they generally remove his hump. Often, this section of the
tale precedes a mirrored situation where another, less deserving, hunchback discovers the good fortune of the first and seeks to emulate it. However, this second hunchback's song does not please the fairies and they curse him by adding the first hunchback's hump to him as punishment. Even in this skeleton retelling, there are many societal implications at play. The first, most important, theme is right from the tale type title: gifts. There is always the movement of gifting from the magical being to the human, but also, always the reciprocity of the human gifting the magical being as well. We will examine this further in subsequent paragraphs because it is critical to theory on human relations because as Marcel Mauss writes, "prestations...are in theory voluntary, disinterested and spontaneous, but are in fact obligatory and interested" (Mauss 1967). Another theme in most of the tales in this collection is that of physical Otherness where a character is not Other as in fairy, but not quite "normal" human either, usually due to a disfiguring hunchback, or Kyphosis. Beth Franks argues that Different people (people with disabilities in her words) in fairy tales, "...reflect highly negative and stereotyping images, ones which imply problems attendant to disability are individual rather than cultural" (Franks 2001, 244), but the fact that this theme repeats in stories as it does implies that the phenomenon is, in fact, cultural.

Finally, in many, though not all, of the tales collected by Ashliman, there is an odd "days of the week theme" that stands out. In approximately half the stories apparently in this tale type, the mortal hunchback impresses the fairies by joining in their days of the week song and, usually, adding a day, whereas the second hunchback usually adds a second day to the melody and receives only a negative reaction from the fairies. However, there does not seem to be very much consistency in these days of the week lists. For instance, in "Billy Beg, Tom Beg, and the Fairies" from the Isle of Man, the fairies list all of the days of the week except for Sunday and
they laud the first hunchback for repeating their pattern and punish the second one for adding “Sunday” (Morrison 1908, 325). This exception could have to do with some themes of Christianity where Sunday is the Lord’s day, but this pattern does not repeat in the other tales. Like the two tales from Ireland (though their days of the week are in Irish), “The Fairies and the Humpback” from Scotland has fairies only repeating “Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday” and the first hunchback pleases them by adding “Thursday” and the second dismays them by adding “Friday”! (Ashliman 1998-2009) In the French version collected, the fairies only repeat “Monday, Tuesday” which the first hunchback repeats exactly, but when the second hunchback adds “Wednesday, Thursday” he is punished, and in Italy the fairies sing “Saturday and Sunday” and the hunchbacks add, respectively, “and Monday” and “and Tuesday” (Ashliman 1998-2009). Sophie Morrison notes, after collecting “Billy Beg, Tom Beg, and the Fairies”, that, “In Manx mythology fairies are antagonistic to the Christian faith, and cannot bear the sound of holy names” (Morrison 1908, 327), but, of course, this theory only works in specific cases and not regarding the other days of the week that seem to break the spell in other stories. Malcolm MacPhail indicates, in reference to another fairy tale, but relevant nonetheless, that Wednesday and Friday were considered sacred fast days, with Thursday being the day after the first fast (MacPhail 1897, 38'), which may also contribute to the choice of acceptable and taboo days of the week additions to the fairy songs. However, the inconsistent use of the “days of the week” theme is a bit of a mystery over all.

A note should be made on the nature of fairies in these tales. Within folklore academia, it is well-known that fairies (a broad term encapsulating many other names and terms for the Good Folk) are relatively dissimilar to, say, the fairy godmother of Disney’s Cinderella. Fairies in folklore are often mischievous and sometimes even malicious, particularly when dealing with
humans, and frequently engage in forms of gifting, barter, and riddling. However, fairies can also be benevolent and Rudolf Meyer describes, “Other helpers again [who] are the “fairies” which mediate between the circles of heaven and the earth and endow the child in the cradle with their gifts” (Meyer 1988, 40), referencing the Brier-Rose tale (Sleeping Beauty), another fairy gift situation. Outside of the “Disneyfication” of fairy tales, many contemporary authors and folklorists have been reinterpreting and reworking known fairy stories into reconstructed postmodern and subversive tales. This reawakening of old cultural norms through the lens of fairy tales is particularly popular with environmentalists and feminists such as Angela Carter.

The gifting seen in the “Fairy Gifts” tale type is significantly relevant beyond the moral of the story about greed or ambition. Gifting is an incredibly intricate and important aspect of human society and relations on an individual and group level. Marcel Mauss, drawing somewhat on the work of Bronislaw Malinowski, analyzed research showing gifting practices and patterns among various traditional peoples. Mauss explains, “…what they exchange is not exclusively goods and wealth, real and personal property, and things of economic value. They exchange rather courtesies, entertainments, ritual, military assistance, women, children, dances, and feasts; and fairs in which the market is but one element and the circulation of wealth but one part of a wide and enduring contract” (Mauss 1967), and, though the fairy gifts do not always retain economic value (though some do involve obtaining gold), there is an element of equitable value in magic, and I would argue, intangible gifts, that work equally as well in this model.

Furthermore, Mauss stresses the importance of reciprocity: one must gift in return with interest. The idea of intangible gifts continues in this fairy tale through this theory of reciprocity perfectly because, though it is subtle, the human does give the fairies a gift before receiving one in return. The pleasure the fairies take in the way the hunchback sings their song or follows through on his
promise or dances with them could certainly be seen as a gift, particularly for a group of beings know for living by their pleasure, without master. Proof of this comes when the second hunchback leaves an insincere and, in that, worthless gift and gets a negative gift in response. Thus, this simple storyline can be applied as a subtle set of cultural guidelines on the topic of total prestation, or perhaps partial since within the story we only see two sets of gifting, and the obligation to return gifts (Mauss 1967).

The description of these necessary structures facilitating human relations and human society existing within a folktale give lie to the childish façade of the fairy tale reputation. The folktales told over and over, particularly to children, but also among adults, represent a coded set of instructions on the way people behave, both toward the supernatural, toward the natural, and toward each other. Another level of gifting though takes place in the telling, or gifting, of the tale to an audience. When Meyer describes a relationship between children (at the age of 7) and fairies, he says, “One cannot give them [fairies] more delight than telling them of childhood. Thy accept this with great gratitude and in return inspire the human soul with fairy-tale images” (Meyer 1988, 50), paralleling the interaction between the gift of social and moral values imparted from story to child in exchange for the child giving life to the fairies of the story through imagination. Of course, the child does not have to necessarily truly believe in fairies, but for the values of the story to come through, the child must relinquish some grasp on the “reality” of his/her childhood and accept this tale as a model for being an active participant in a human social group. This idea mirrors those of Louise Krasniewicz as she discusses the gifting of horror movies. She explains how, “The price one pays for movie viewing is the price of living in communion with others—the viewer is exposed to socially condoned prescriptions about how society and individuals should ideally function,” and that, “The cinema is not only a gift itself,
but being inherently social, it also enacts gift-giving rituals within its narratives” (Krasniewicz 1992, 33). Storytelling, or even the reading of a book (though that seems like a private affair), is also inherently social as the audience communes with the presenter through some medium (be it speech, image, or text).

The gifting seen in the “Fairy Gifts” tale type is generally the gift of “lightening one’s load” so to speak. Even in the popular 503 tale type story “The Elves and the Shoemaker”, the elves help lighten the load of the poor, honest shoemaker by completing the shoes for which he laid out materials in the night. In the hunchback-centric tale derivation, the physical difference of the protagonist becomes important because the fairies lighten his load by literally removing his physical ailment. Thus, the Otherness of the character becomes a major theme in the story, as it often does in fairy tales, used as literal directives sometimes in the past (for instance, the harsh treatment of changelings, who may have been, medically, children who developed differently physically or mentally from the norm, as learned from folklore). Much of fairy belief, Susan Eberly discusses, seems to come from puzzling quandaries such as untimely death in young people, various epidemics and natural disasters, and the development of mentally or physically “unhealthy” people (Eberly 1988, 58). However, in this tale, the hunchback was simply a quality of the protagonist rather than something to be explained by magic; perhaps because Kyphosis was a common enough ailment due to the repetition and strain of everyday life (sometimes in the tales, the hunchback would be categorized as a smith of some sort, which aligns with this idea of a natural hunchback). So, in this case, more than being attached to a good or evil character to begin with (as many differences are in fairy tales) (Franks 1992, 251), the Otherness both furthers the plot and is used as a punishment. At the end of her study of the first one hundred Grimm’s fairy tales, Franks decided that, “The Grimms’ tales are not the source of the negative
portrait of disability, nor can they be credited with actively perpetrating stereotypes,” but that completing the investigation in the first place, “…seeks to make visible the invisible, give language to the unutterable, and make conscious the unconscious,” and culminating with the assertion that, “…invisible attitudes limit progress as potentially visible barriers” (Franks 1992, 255).

The physical Otherness in this folktale takes a practical stance in that Kyphosis is/was a legitimate problem that people suffered from that actually hindered their comfort and ability to act appropriately as an active member in society. And yet, Thomson argues that, “…the meanings attributed to extraordinary bodies reside not in inherent physical flaws, but in social relationships in which one group is legitimated by possessing valued physical characteristics and maintains its ascendancy and its self-identity by systematically imposing the role of cultural or corporeal inferiority on others” because “the ways that bodies interact with the socially engineered environment and conform to social expectations determine the varying degrees of disability or able-bodiedness, or extra-ordinariness or ordinariness” (Thomson 1997, 7). The fact that in the bulk of these widespread examples of the tale, the detail of the hunchback is brought to the attention of the audience illustrates a concrete social relationship between ordinary bodies and extraordinary bodies due to the way each character acquits himself in terms of conforming to social expectations or refusing to conform. When the “good” hunchback follows the protocol of gifting, he is rewarded by a normative form, but when the “bad” hunchback rejects his socially engineered environment’s expectations, he is punished with a socially negative Otherness.

The protagonist in the “Fairy Gift” tales is not always a hunchback though; sometimes, it is a simple, honest tailor, but the idea of removing the hump as a reward and putting it on as a punishment certainly implies an importance to the physical Otherness. However, the manner in
which the fairies would cut, or slice, the hump off and stick it on implied a certain distancing of the character to the hump, as though it was a foreign body to be moved among men. In a less gruesome way than the movie Halloween, this storyline does mimic some of the gifting in the movie of Krasniewicz’s study. She explains that, “Since ensuring the movement of all types of gifts through the proper channels is necessary for maintaining social order, the gift of bodily exchange must be carefully controlled by defining who or what can be exchanged and how this can be done,” which in turn defines the good and real community members (in comparison to the bad) by coding, “…what is socially acceptable and what is taboo in bodily exchanges” (Krasniewics 1992, 54).

The influence of folklore on practical, “real” life is incontrovertible. We can look at language as an example of the fluid movement of concepts between folk beliefs and stories, and dealing with other people in society. For instance, many terms and euphemisms for “disabled” people reference their place in the fairy realm as a way to highlight the difference between normative and Other. In this way, “terms for persons who are mentally retarded or physically disabled—the Irish Amadan (god’s fool), the moon-touched lunatic and the mooncalf, the oaf (from ON elvr or elf), or the person who has been (divinely or demonically) ‘touched’—reflect this belief in the special nature of such ‘different persons’” (Eberly 1988, 59). With language comes ways to conceive of, symbolize, process, and communicate thought, values, and culture, and so the role of folk and fairy tales in this way is crucial. Whether Westerners actually believe that a lunatic’s behavior is somehow related to a magical quality of the moon is less important than the continued usage of the word the reproduces connections between a natural phenomenon (or nature-based religious icon, such as a fairy) and a societally-determined Otherness.
Ultimately, the connections made between gifting and "disability" in fairy tales and specifically in "Fairy Gifts" furthers my thesis project by creating a dialogue between entertainment and utmost societal necessity. Folklore trickling through to the contemporary is important because it continues to secretly code the way we live and the way we think. Modern day adaptations of fairy tales make them more accessible to the people, especially the youth, of today. And, perhaps more importantly, postmodern and subversive takes on old tales have the power to change old-fashioned worldviews and oppressive value systems. This fairy tale in particular deals with an understanding of Otherness, a concept continually bumped up again in every aspect of life where people are expected to define the Other, to determine "Us" and "Them", and often use strict value systems by which to do so. The utilization of the physical body in this value system is also incredibly relevant as we struggle with the placement of people that the bulk of society deems "abnormal" now that science has replaced magic in our understanding of the world. Finally, the tale also deals with gifting, a glue of required reciprocity that holds human relations and human societies together through exchange and improvement. The exchange between magical beings and mortals can be representative of a necessary exchange with nature or an example of how to behave between humans. The obvious moral in the stories of two hunchbacks, one honest, one greedy, implies further value judgments on what it means to give and exchange gifts. Thus, though the fairy tale seems only like an innocent encapsulation of a story meant to inspire entertainment and understanding, it codes critical information to the readers, members of a society, and if you can manipulate that then you can change the world.
References


Born Wrong: A Modern Fairy Tale Adaptation

I was born with a crooked spine.

My parents, they didn't know what to do. Apparently, Scheuermann's disease runs in families, but mine wasn't expecting it. Mostly, we deal with it by pretending it doesn't exist—that I don't have a perpetual hunch to my posture, that I am not in chronic pain where my misshapen vertebra rub the wrong way, that I am not tired most of the time.

The kids at school recognize that I'm different though. Watching them joke around with each other, touch without thinking twice, I realize that I am deformed...I am literally formed wrong. Jeremy is different though. He's always been there for me. I mean, he teases me too, of course, and roughhouses with me, but I know he doesn't mean anything by it really. He punched Brian Greaves in the face once when he told me I should be "locked up in a sideshow".

"Hey, Crip, what's up?"

Typical Jeremy greeting on our regular walk to school. It's only a couple blocks, but even that makes the knot at the center of my back ache by the time we hit the front doors.

"Living the life of a monastic hermit, as you already know," I reply casually. "I finished another song last night though."

"Ooh, another of these so-called "songs", huh? How come I've never heard a single one?"

"I dunno... you wouldn't like them. You'd call me a freak."

"Well, you are." What a sweetheart, right?

"Oh, here's my Trig homework if you want to copy it." I make a peace offering.
“Nice,” he says, grabbing the proferred paper and stuffing it in his bag. “You’re the best.”

School is the worst because it literally hurts. I have a back brace and this gel pillow to sit on, but sitting still for so long in class still makes me stiff and uncomfortable. On top of that, people still stare at me. Constantly. As if we hadn’t been in school together since the first grade. At 17, I would have thought we would all be beyond this, adult-ish even. But no, of course, not with my luck. And staring isn’t the worst part. Which is how I find myself ducking behind the dumpster behind Down Home Diner, gasping for breath as quietly as possible, as footsteps thunder past.

I hold my chest and peer out from my hiding spot that smells of rust and bacon grease. Should I dare to shuffle my way back home now? Or will they come back around this way? Damn, I can’t believe this is my life.

I am about to creep out to the main road again when I hear a noise and freeze. But the sound floats down from above, from some window in the building above that I can’t crane my stunted neck to see. It’s...it’s some kind of music, but nothing I’ve ever heard before. I strain my ears.

_A day for the moon_

_And a day for Mars_

_Wednesday is a day for Mercury_

I shiver at the haunting melody. Is it a harp? And that voice! It’s a girl’s voice singing, but nothing like those of the girls in the school choir. It’s both older and younger at the same time. It’s...I mean, well, it’s beautiful. Shit. Jeremy’s right, I’m such a weirdo.
The song repeats.

_A day for the moon_

I begin to sing along, quietly. I can’t help it—even crouched behind a filthy box of garbage, the music is too entrancing not to join in.

_And a day for Mars_

I try a bit of harmony.

_Wednesday is a day for Mercury_

I finish the phrase without even thinking, without even realizing I don’t know the words.

_And Thursday, a day for Jupiter_

I don’t even realize my eyes are closed until a hesitant, “Hello?” breaks the silence.

They fly open and I curse silently. As smoothly as possible (which is to say, not smoothly at all) I slide out from my hiding place and, sticking close to the rough brick wall, navigate myself to the street. A mother with her three kids bustle past, her pity palpable as she tries not to look at me, as I blink in the sunlight. I had forgotten it was still the afternoon. I can smell the soup from the diner wafting its way though the rush hour crowd on the early spring air. Scampering awkwardly, I make it home just in time for dinner.

“You were home late today, Elliot,” my mom remarks over the spaghetti.

“I guess,” I reply shortly. I think my parents were too nervous to try for more kids after I came out the way I did. Compounded with unusual disabilities, guess who is a constant victim of their attention? That’s right: this guy. And, honestly, not to be ungrateful, but it is so annoying.

“There’s no need snap at your mother like that,” my dad admonishes. “Where were you? Something happening at school to stay late for?”
“Uh...yeah.” I speak to my meatballs. “Mr. Graham wanted to talk to me...umm...about my last English paper. I got an A on it.”

My mom smiles tremulously. “Well, that’s great, honey.”

We finish the meal in the same sad silence that has hung around our house since before I can remember. I’m used to it by now, really. I get it that I am a total reject and it’s, like, going to follow me the rest of my life. But, honestly, right now all I want to do is try to pick out the tune to that girl’s song on my guitar alone in my room.

The next day after school, I hurry to slide into my hiding spot again, out of sight of her window. This is definitely creepy, but I need to hear that song again to get it right. And this time I will be quiet I tell myself.

But, of course, I’m not. Within two verses of the song through the window I am inexplicably singing along, even stronger, just like before. Except this time, she doesn’t falter. In fact, she sings right along with the line I added as well! At some point I begin to hear a younger, higher voice thread through the melody, but don’t even wonder about it until after my back becomes too painful from standing in the same position for too long and I, regretfully, go home.

I don’t return directly after the blur that is school the next day, but wait until my parents fall asleep before sneaking carefully out of the house, my guitar in its special wheeled case in front of me.

Jeremy had been confused by me being a space case between classes.

“What is with you?” he hissed.

“Sorry, I guess I’m just distracted.”
“Well, I need you to outline that book we need to write about for History for me.”

“Uhh, the one on the Civil War?”

“I don’t know, whatever one we’re on. God, you are being so freakin’ weird.”

I shake my head as I find my spot in the dark. He was being a total jerk, but I mean, at least he wants to spend time with me. Sometimes. At least he looks me in the eye. Usually. But now isn’t the time to meditate on Jeremy. Now, I am taking my crippling creepiness to the next level and beginning the song myself. I hunch over on the case and close my eyes.

_A day for the moon_

_And a day for Mars_

_Wednesday is a day for Mercury_

_And Thursday, a day for Jupiter_

I stop singing for a second, but my fingers continue to pluck the strings. I listen nervously and finally a harp joins in. The voice that begins the verse again is that clear bell-like soprano I heard soaring above the duct the day before. I sing with her for who-knows-how-long. I can feel the night pressing against my closed eyelids and my fingers becoming sore. And just as suddenly as it began, the complementary music stops and the voice disappears. I sigh and open my eyes.

“Shit!” I exclaim, almost smashing my guitar as I scramble to my feet.

Not five feet away from me, a girl my own age or so sits eerily silent, wedged between the corner of the dumpster and the alleyway. Her knees are pulled up to her chin under her long nightgown and pieces of her long, blonde hair look silver where the moon slips between the buildings. She stands fluidly and smiles, but doesn’t blink.
“That was beautiful,” she says, and I realize immediately that she is the girl I had first heard singing from her window.

“Uhh... but you—what... I...” I respond cleverly and artfully.

“What are you called?” she asks.

Blushing under her intense gaze, I glance sharply and covertly up at her as I look at my feet, cursing my awkward hunch and the way my toes turn inward, making me even clumsier. She’s tall and willowy and her hair goes all the way down her back. She’s not pretty exactly, not in the immediately stunning way that Jeremy’s ex-girlfriend, Ellie Jacobson, is. But... there’s something about the sharpness of her cheekbones and the strange, exotic slant to her colorless eyes that is compelling. My “covert” glances have become abject staring without me realizing it.


“Elliot,” she repeats. Her speaking voice is normal enough, if a little low, but I can hear hints of her singing in the elongated vowels of her words. “Quick to give your name away.” She cocks her head and narrows her eyes, almost exactly like my mom’s cat when he’s making a decision. “I’m Anabel.”

“Er... I’m really sorry about coming here so late. I don’t know what I was thinking,” I mutter.

She smiles and responds, “I suppose you should come back tomorrow then. You could come up and meet Minnow.” She glances up toward the unseen window of her apartment where the owner of that sweet soprano is either listening intently or already asleep.

“You don’t... do you go to school?” I ask inane. She doesn’t ask me about my twisted body. Maybe she can’t see it in the dark.
“My sister and I are homeschooled.” She backs out from behind the dumpster gracefully.

“I’ll see you tomorrow…Elliot.”

I rush over to the eight-story apartment building across the way from the diner as fast as my legs would carry me after the last bell rang the next day. I call up, my voice breaking slightly. “Anabel?”

Her face appears briefly in a window on the third floor, her hair in a braid dangling over her shoulder, and then the buzzer on the door goes off and I let myself in.

Minnow, as it turns out, is an exact ten-year-old miniature replica of her sister. She stands next to me where I sit at the spare wooden kitchen table, watching me gravely.

“Are your parents home?” I ask.

Anabel shakes her head. “They are out a lot,” she replies noncommittally.

Her sister reaches out boldly and runs her small hand over my curving back. “Does it hurt?” she asks.

I shrug uncomfortably. “Sometimes. It depends on if I’ve been still for too long or moving for too long or if it’s raining outside.”

“Does it hurt right now?”

“Uhh…no, not really.” I mean I don’t want to seem like a wimp.

Anabel gives me that same penetrating look again from the other side of the kitchen.

“I’m going to make tea,” she declares. “Would you like some?”

“Sure, um, that’d be great,” I reply.

“I like the way you sing,” Minnow declares in that disconcerting, direct way. “Do you know other songs?”
I can’t help but smile my lopsided smile. “Yeah, I know some other songs.”

“Will you play them for me?”

“Now?” I ask, surprised. “I guess, but I left my guitar on the first floor landing.”

“I’ll get it,” she assures me, out the door like a flash in the corner of my eye.

Anabel sets a cup of tea in front of me, and another at the next spot over before seating herself. The liquid is a pale green and the steam curls up wetly into my face. It smells good.

“What kind of tea is this?” I ask.

“Oh, well…it’s my own brew. It should help you. It is good for muscle and bone pain.” She shrugs and lifts her own eggshell-thin and eggshell-colored teacup.

I think about all the attempts my parents have made to alleviate some of my discomfort caused by my hunched spine. Pain medication? Tried it. Back brace? Tried it. Medicinal tea? Tried it. So I know already that this is a kind, but useless effort. It would be rude to mention that though, and the tea smells so intriguing anyway that I just sort of smile, a grimace really, and take a sip of tea.

It’s hot and I can feel it trickle down to my stomach, tasting as good as it smells although the aftertaste is a little mossy and—holy cow. What is this stuff? I feel a sharp tension ooze out of my back as my bones slide into a more comfortable position and my shoulders slump in relaxation. My back doesn’t hurt at all! I feel as though I could stretch my spine for miles! I try to straighten up, but…oh, no, still hunched over. But I feel so…at ease, I guess. I’ve never really felt this way before. Did she- did she slip something into the tea?

I’m concentrating so hard on the way my body feels that I jump slightly when she asks, “Do you like it?”
“What the hell is this?” I blurt out, and immediately want to slap my hand across my mouth. But Anabel just smiles, her teeth straight and sharp-looking, and inclines her head toward my cup.

“Go ahead, finish it. My mom collects old and rare medicine books, and I’ve read all the ones on plant-lore a million times. It should be really good for you…it’s Kyphosis, right?”

“Wha—yeah, how’d you know that?” I’ve never met anyone who knew any terminology besides, like “that weirdo hunchback kid”. I gulp down the tea as the initial warmth begins to fade.

“Medicine books, remember? Do you—”

Minnow bursts back into the room, panting. “Got it,” she exclaims triumphantly. She throws herself into the chair across from me and leans forward. “Now you can play for us.”

I hesitate. I’ve never played any of my songs for anyone before. I’m not worried that they will laugh at me exactly, but my music is personal. It’s mine and I don’t need my parents or any doctors or the kids at school who look at me with pity to comfort me or anything. I can just…I can express myself as a person rather than as a deformity. The two girls, the prettiest girls who have ever even talked to me, look on wide-eyed and expectant. I guess I did intrude on their own personal song without even asking permission. Playing for them is the least I can do.

I take out my guitar and strum a little bit before plucking the opening notes of one of the first songs I ever wrote. I close my eyes because I can feel a hot flush creeping up my neck in the presence of an audience. Surprisingly, my mind quiets. These girls have shown me no judgment, no revulsion, no pity. The warmth of the tea makes me feel straighter, stronger. My voice, when I start singing, comes out a little hoarse and I cough, but don’t falter. This song is about aliens and isolation, about deserts and cages and dinosaur bones. But the melody, the one I
always felt so familiarly at the tips of my fingers ever since I was young, the easiest melody in
the world for me to play out in a simple song written when I was barely 11, that melody was all
about me. And it feels very private. I can feel that I’m still blushing, but I sing through it. After
all, their melody was intensely personal also, and I was totally creepy hanging out outside their
window.

I trail off into the final chord and finally open my eyes.

“That was lovely,” Anabel says immediately.

Minnow is beaming. “Play us another!”

The nervousness I was feeling vanishes. Never have people received me so positively or
made me feel so comfortable. It is kind of an incredible feeling…and I have to say, the attention
is pretty nice too.

I play a couple more songs before Minnow wants to sing the days of the week song again.
I spend the rest of the afternoon in their kitchen, drinking tea and showing Minnow how to make
the chords for their song. I realize I have never been happier. This is all so new and kind of
nerve-wracking, but I desperately hope I can continue this friendship.

Two days later, Anabel and I decide to take Minnow to the park. It’s a Saturday and the
chill in the air nips at my back. As we make our way to the duck pond, I see a familiar form on a
skateboard up the path.

“Hey, Jeremy!” I call.

“Dude!” he yelps, coming to a graceful stop and kicking his board up under his arm. I try
not to look too jealous. “Where have you been? I feel like I haven’t seen you all week. And
don’t we have a presentation Monday?”
“Uh, yeah, sorry,” I mutter. “Been kinda busy.”

He snorts. “Busy doing what? Playing your dumb guilt—” He cuts himself off, finally noticing Anabel. “Oh, hey…I’m Jeremy.” He runs his free hand through his hair and smiles at her in a way that makes me grind my teeth.

Her voice comes from just over my shoulder. “I’m…Ana. You are Elliot’s friend from school?”

I feel a small hand slip into mine, and a voice issues from chest-height. “I’m Minnow.” Her blonde hair glitters in the sun as she turns to look up at me. “Can we go to the pond now, Elliot?”

I look between Jeremy, who is looking at Anabel, and Anabel, who is looking at Minnow. “Um, sure. Let’s go,” I say.

We bring statee rosemary bread that the sisters had made the previous week with us to feed the ducks. The brown speckled birds crowded and rustled around our feet in a big, feathery mass.

“I’m glad you’ve been coming to our house,” Minnow says.

“Me too,” I reply, glancing toward the mouth of the path where it opens up into the pond area. Anabel and Jeremy still haven’t emerged.

“Elliot.” She jerks forward as if to put her hand on my knee, but then just throws some more crust down to our animal companions. “Does your back still hurt?”

Didn’t she just ask me that less than a week ago?

“I guess the cold makes me a little stiff, but.” I pause and think about it. The usual aches and moans that go along with getting out of bed in the morning haven’t been there since I went up to their kitchen that first time. “Huh, I guess not really.”
She nods and reaches out toward a duck that quacks angrily and quickly backs away when it realizes the hand has no food.

“Must be that tea your sister makes,” I tease.

She laughs, a hitching giggle that I am already used to hearing, even after so little time. “Oh, look!” She jumps up suddenly. “Ducklings!”

She pulls me by my shirt and as we chase the ducklings, I realize it’s not so much that my bones have re-shaped themselves, that the hump on my back has just disappeared as if sliced with a knife. It’s that I feel so normal, so comfortable in my own skin around these girls who like to hear me sing. Maybe I only ever felt like I was so different because I had grown up my entire life being told I was so different. Maybe my shape was just a less common version of regular variation like being tall or having big feet or having freckles.

I’m so lost in my thoughts that I don’t even remember where I am until a big, angry mallard nips my wrist for getting too close to the baby ducks. I scramble backwards, my hands in the mud. An amused snort carries over the squawking behind me.

Anabel is standing next to our bench, one white-blonde eyebrow arched. I can imagine the picture Minnow and I make, muddy among the ducks.

As I make my way toward her, I can feel my face wobble slightly. Jeremy had won her over just how he wins everyone over, and then it’s good-bye to the pathetic friend character...

“So,” Anabelle begins, “I met your, uh…friend, back there.”

I wince. Already she can’t believe that someone like Jeremy, so charming and, I don’t know, at peace with himself, could be friends with someone like me.

“What an ass,” she continues. Wait, what? “First, he completely disrespects you, which is entirely infuriating because anyone can clearly see he isn’t half of what you are. And then he
puts his face in mine and says something utterly stupid about my eyes being like mercury.” She is incensed. “...Which obviously reminded me of our song and so I sang your line about Thursday, and he has the nerve, the nerve, to touch my arm and say, “And Friday you can go out with me”! So, I...” She pauses at Minnow’s approach, eyes darting to her and away.

“So, you what?” I ask, moving closer. I feel this weird hot pressure filling my chest. I don’t know what it is, but it is uncomfortable in the most pleasing way.

“Well.” Her voice is softer now. “I slapped him. I didn’t even mean to! It just happened. Also...”

“Yes?” I say, touching her shoulder.

“A group of his friends saw the entire thing and as I left I heard them teasing him for being hit by a girl.” She looks like she doesn’t know whether to laugh or hit herself.

I’m close to her now and feel so awkward. I don’t know what to say. I mean, I don’t have any girl friends. How do I behave? What do I say? Good for you, turning down Jeremy? He’s a jerk even though he doesn’t seem like it at first? Suddenly, she throws her arms around my shoulders as if my hump doesn’t even phase her, as if it isn’t even there. I feel a pressure on my left and know that Minnow is hugging us both from the side also.

“Elliot,” Anabel says, head near my shoulder, “I don’t think you should hang out with him anymore. He is like a sickness inside your mind. You need to be rid of him.”

“Yeah, Elliot,” asserts Minnow, “You should hang out with us instead.”

“Well, uhh.” I untangle myself from their arms. “I see what you mean, but Jeremy is an old friend. He doesn’t mean harm except...well, I guess you are right. He does make me pretty miserable.”
“Yes, well, you are welcome in our house.” Anabel smiles and I stand up straighter.

“Any day of the week.”
Discussion

I wrote the story “Born Wrong” with the intention of aiming it toward teenagers and perhaps younger “tweens” as well. I believe that having a teen protagonist and a teen audience is important to the style, themes, and intention of the story and cultural resonances discussed in the research paper. Firstly, there are practical concerns. Children and teenagers have always been the cruelest bullies, but in the past five years, the level of hostility of the bullies and the level of engagement of the bullied seems to have increased with a particularly nasty twist of a publicized continuation of teen suicides due to this type of behavior. A direct and indirect reading of this piece clearly deals with themes of, not only physical “disability”, but also just being different in general. Whether children are teased for the way they look, the way they speak, their sexual orientation, or anything else, they still feel a similar sense of isolation, alienation, and loneliness. Folk beliefs and motifs can directly contribute to this sense of otherness and the fear and sadness that accompany it.

However, we are not in old rural Ireland and it is unacceptable at this juncture to torture a child because you think it may be a changeling due to some unusualness in its demeanor or appearance. I would take that a step further and say that if we are spending so much time digging to understand how culture is constructed and replicated in its myriad of ways, we should use that information toward the betterment of society. In the introduction, I briefly mentioned Daniel Quinn and I will return to his ideas in that he believes that to change the world, culturally, socially, environmentally, we do not need new programs, we need new mindsets. And it is the culture of a country, of a people, of even a single 8th grade classroom where we begin to see a change in mindsets and worldviews. Thus, I believe writing a narrative of this nature for teens is
important because they are the minds of the future that we want to begin to turn toward a healthier lifestyle and a more humanistic way of interacting with the people around them.

Coincidentally, writing for teens is also fun and, not only allows for, but demands a certain amount of dynamic drama, as well as a capacity for magic that can get lost as people throw themselves against the world for a long time. I hope to eventually have a collection of modern retellings of myths and fairy tales that I can potentially publish as a book of short stories in the future. This thesis allowed me to make steps toward this important personal and professional goal of mine.

Another point I would like to address in this forum is the existence of magic in this story. It seems kind of like a no-brainer that in a fairy tale there would be fairies, right? Or at least magic? I made the conscious choice to leave the existence of magic ambiguous in this story because I believe magic is a truly ambiguous part of reality. Most would claim not to believe in magic in real life, but I would have to ask them to expand their idea of what magic is. Is it the things in life that we don’t understand? Is it the super-natural, that which is so natural we have forgotten it was ever familiar? Or is it there, just beyond our vision, in every connection we make in the world, whether it be with other people, with the natural world, or with ourselves? Thus, it is up to the reader to actualize whether or not Anabel and Minnow are actually fairies, or if they are just the type of girls a teen reader could aspire to be. Does the tea actually begin to heal Elliot or is it the kindness served with it that heals a different kind of wound? I do not believe there is a wrong interpretation of the presence of magic, and of fairies, in this tale.

Lastly, I concluded the tale with a happy ending. And yet, it is not happy in the way the canonical version of the tale is usually portrayed (with the hunchback losing his hump). I wanted to subvert than ending and make the point that being “born wrong” is a value judgment
placed on people due to cultural norms and values, and thus, is a socially constructed delineation between us and them. Rather than simply reward the protagonist for being a “good guy”, I would undermine the idea that you need to conform to the standards of a culture that, quite frankly, could use a little revision of values and mindsets. Thus, I hope that my decisions when writing this fairy tale helped to empower youth, revise our understanding of a “happy ending”, and open some eyes a little more to the magic and mystery all around us.