

Discovering the Wonderland in Story

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“Alice in Wonderland” is on the big screen. Thinking of taking your child to see it during the March Break? Your child just might get more out of this wonderland than you think.

An anecdote is told of a woman who envisioned her child becoming a renowned scientist. She approached Einstein and asked him, “What should I do to increase the intelligence of my child?” Einstein hesitated before replying, “Read him fairy tales.” The woman thinking him to be facetious laughed and said, “Very well, suppose I have read him fairy tales; then what?” Einstein’s response? “Read him more fairy tales.”

What value could these seemingly silly, even bizarre, tales have in our children’s lives? Einstein understood the power of fairy tales. Fairy tales are filled with imagination and problem solving. Imagination and problem solving are the basis for every scientific theory or discovery ever made.

Fairy tales help children think about possibilities that are beyond their own experiences. The prince trapped in the body of a frog requires an enormous leap of imagination. A child’s experience will inform him as to what a frog looks like, possibly feels like, how it moves and where it lives, but a child cannot know from experience what it is like to live inside the body of an amphibian.

Fairy tales encourage children to think about solutions to problems that they have never before encountered. How can the Three Little Pigs build a house safe enough to withstand the gale-force “puffs” of the Big Bad Wolf? How can Hansel and Gretel survive the dangerous but near-sighted wicked witch? How can Rapunzel escape from the top of that tall, unreachable tower? Fairy tales stimulate children to apply logic to situations that are brand new.

The influence of fairy tales has been felt worldwide for centuries. The Grimm brothers, Jacob and Wilhelm, by profession were linguists rather than storytellers. Their compilation of Grimm’s Fairy Tales in the 1800’s began as a research project. They were studying a principle they called ‘Grimm’s Law.’ This law showed that sounds in one language correspond to specific, consistent sounds in other languages. Through their work they discovered that fairy tales were pervasive in all countries throughout the world. The story of Cinderella, for instance, has a least 700 variations. The earliest written version of Cinderella is the Chinese tale of Yeh-hsien, dating back to the ninth century.

Throughout the centuries and world, fairy tales have borne influence. Einstein’s Theory of Relativity was only possible because he could blend logic, problem solving and imagination to understand time and space in a whole new way. The telling of fairy tales helps children experience innovative thinking – thinking that may stimulate our future scientists, theorists and philosophers.

So what about going to the theatre this March break? Seeing “Alice in Wonderland”, reading the Irish folktale “Jamie O’Rourke and the Big Potato” by Tomie dePaola, or telling “Rumpelstiltskin” are fun to do, and stimulating to young children’s problem solving and thinking skills.