Writing in "A Fairy Story Landscape": Fairy Tales and Contemporary Australian Fiction

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Fairy tales are everywhere in Australian fiction. Some of the most beloved characters in Australian literature are compared by their authors to fairy-tale heroes and heroines. Murray Bail has written a novel, *Eucalyptus* (1998), which borrows its very structure from a classic fairy-tale plotline—a father's elaborate test of his daughter's suitors. Janette Turner Hospital's *Charades* (1989), as the name of its title character suggests, is narrated by a modern-day Shahrazad (the heroine of *The Arabian Nights*). Peter Carey has imagined a society in *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* (1994) where fairy tales have replaced the Christian narrative as a source of spiritual guidance. Fairy tales have illuminated Australian mysteries, suspense and science fiction. While it is clear, however, that fairy tales have for some time fired the imaginations of Australian fiction writers, there has been little exploration of this interest in published criticism. Folklore studies in Australia have focused instead on the ballads, legends and tall tales that have comprised a significant part of the country's literary and social history.

The frequent appearance of fairy-tale motifs in contemporary Australian novels presents an intriguing postmodern challenge to realism which, as Delys Bird observes, has been "a dominant influence in Australian literature since its beginnings" (25). References to fairy tales in Australian fiction also permit one to speculate on the impact of an increasingly cosmopolitan spectrum of writers and artists on Australia's culture, and to consider the role of religion in a determinedly secular society. I shall briefly review these three explanations for the Australian interest in fairy tales before I go on to explore what I believe to be the strongest explanation of all: the enduring legacy of Australia's history as a settler colony which invests the landscape with strangeness for many protagonists, and turns them into insatiable travellers. These last points are well illustrated by the fiction

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of Bail, Hospital and Carey, which will therefore provide the focus of my argument.

Fiction writers are most likely to draw upon fairy tales when they are framing, in writing, a subject that generates anxiety in their culture. When we describe something as "like a fairy tale," we are identifying, after all, its distance from real life; disappointment is at the heart of the simile, a suspicion that the subject under discussion—whether it be an unlikely marriage or a sudden rise to stardom in professional sports—will prove ephemeral. In the course of my research, I have seen how British writers since the Second World War have used fairy tales to chart the movement of lonely characters into communities, describing a retreat from the fractured modern world into improved relationships with family and friends and lovers. The movement of the isolated hero into a community is, after all, a central motif of fairy tales (something that is made clear by the fact that so many fairy tales end in marriage). In A. S. Byatt's novel *Babel Tower* (1996) for example, Frederica Potter, struggling through a bitter divorce, is assured that "Princes and princesses are what we all are in our minds [. . .] [we are] in a fairy tale" (319). She pastes cut-out sections of fairy tales and bits of her divorce papers into a journal that chronicles her humiliations during the trial. In Canadian fiction over the last fifty years, meanwhile, fairy tales have most often been employed in connection with the famous Canadian preoccupation with identity—the result of Canada's origins as a British colony and its sometimes uncomfortable relationship with a powerful southern neighbour. This is likely why Canadian fiction writers, when they refer to fairy tales, tend to focus on the theme of metamorphosis which is also central to those stories. In Margaret Atwood's *The Robber Bride* (1993) for example, shape-changing characterizes the wicked Zenia, who steals and abandons the husbands of women who had thought they were happily married. Compared throughout the novel to the villains of fairy tales, Zenia is transformed through plastic surgery, through characters' changing conceptions of her, and through her surprising reappearance following the news of her death.

If fiction writers typically draw upon fairy tales to illuminate those things that they are afraid of—or are afraid of losing—it is interesting that Australian writers so often use fairy tales to describe geography. In Rodney Hall's novel *The Second Bridegroom* (1991), an escaped convict associates the tangled forests of New South Wales in the 1830s with the heroic quests of fairy tales: "Dwarfs and giants will of course be met with and sacrifices fed, as they are in fairy tales. This place is open to those clean dangers gone from our modern world since pleasures began to be made in factories" (129). In Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000), outlaw Ned Kelly is astonished by a view of the "high wild country" of the Great Dividing Range where his gang is headed, seeing it as "a fairy story landscape" (124–25). In David Malouf's *The Conversations at Curlow Creek* (1996), Michael Adair, a lawman in 1827 New South Wales, associates the country with the tale of "Sleeping Beauty" (or Rip Van Winkle), remembering "stories he had been told, old folk-

tales, of men who had lain down and fallen asleep under a familiar hedge or on the shady side of a rock, and when they woke discovered that half their lifetime, had passed, forty years. You could wake up here, he thought [. . .] and find whole centuries had elapsed, and how would you ever know it?" (8). In each case, it is Australia itself, rather than the fragile shelter of relationships, or the tricky business of personal identity, that has inspired a comparison to fairy tales.

One is always tempted to identify a postmodernist impulse in a writer's borrowing from fairy tales, whatever the writer's nationality; the shiftiness of those narratives and their association with folktales—an older, oral form of storytelling—makes them attractive to fiction writers interested in exploring postmodern challenges to realism. The fact that creativity is a characteristic of many fairy-tale heroes could also account for the appeal that this brand of intertextuality holds for writers; as American folklorist Jack Zipes observed in *Breaking the Magic Spell* (1979), the fairy-tale hero is often a seamstress or a tailor, "who has numerous adventures and encounters with the supernatural in pursuit of a 'new world' where he will be able to develop and enjoy his talents" (34–35). Australian writing has been linking fairy tales and artistry since Henry Handel Richardson's *The Getting of Wisdom* (1910); in Richardson's novel, Laura Rambotham learns that lying, or telling fairy tales, is inappropriate in real life but desirable in fiction. Australian authors using fairy tales to describe the work of artistic protagonists might be signalling resistance to the long tradition of realism in Australian fiction that derives from the importance of "giv[ing] a voice to the colonial experience" (Bird 25). In Beverley Farmer's story "Place of Birth" (*Home Time* 1985), the narrator, Bell, a writer living in a small town in Greece with her Greek husband and his family, reads her niece's books of fairy tales while she debates whether or not to return to Australia. In Barbara Hanrahan's *Kewpie Doll* (1984), the narrator, who imagined herself as a fairy-tale princess when she was a child, sees herself as "into the fairy tale at last" when she gains admission to technical school and begins to develop her talents as an illustrator (62). Architecture preoccupies the two central characters of Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988)—a novel, as we shall see later, that is rich in allusions to fairy tales.

Alternatively, references to fairy tales in contemporary Australian fiction might be seen as symptomatic of what Bruce Bennett has called "the general shake-up of Australian cultural values and attitudes" since the 1960s (262). As Bennett points out, in the decades since the Vietnam War the drive towards an independent sense of nationhood in Australia has been complicated and to some degree compromised by North American and Asian cultural and economic pressures. If Australia figures as a fairy-tale landscape in recent fiction, this may simply reflect an awareness that—like Aladdin's vanishing palace in *The Arabian Nights*—the nation and its literature have become increasingly difficult to pin down. Furthermore, the Aboriginal presence in the Australian landscape may contribute

to its presentation by white writers as a fairy-tale setting. When Australian fiction writers, using fairy tales, describe the landscape as divorced from reality, they might be signalling anxiety about their own connection with the land which had already seen tens of thousands of years of occupation when Captain James Cook "found" it in 1770. As Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker) writes in her poem, "The Past," "a thousand thousand camp fires in the forest / Are in my blood" (99). Associations that white writers make between Australia and fairy tales are interestingly positioned against the intimate connection with the land which has long been a prominent feature of Australian Aboriginal art, and which has fuelled Aboriginal land claims in Australia since the 1970s.

This prompts consideration of yet another explanation for the interest in fairy tales demonstrated by contemporary Australian fiction writers. With nationhood becoming an unreliable place to invest one's faith, and with the erosion over the last fifty years of traditional belief systems—largely the result, in Australia as it has been elsewhere, of the Second World War and its attendant horrors—it is little wonder that Australians have been searching for something else to believe in. Susan Lever has observed that, "In a thoroughly secular, firmly materialist society such as Australia, it may be unsurprising that writers continue to seek out the sacred or the spiritual through their art—and that readers want them to do so" (329). Lever identifies Malouf, Farmer and Helen Garner as examples of Australian writers who began their career as realists, but who have since been "gradually moving to speculate about a metaphysical or spiritual dimension beyond the parameters of the observed material world" (329). In contemporary Australian fiction, as in British fiction since the war, fairy tales offer a powerful, more humanistic alternative to conventional belief systems. Carey's novel *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* describes an imaginary island country, Efica, where animal heroes from folktales—such as Bruder Duck and Bruder Mouse—are worshipped as religious figures because of the tradition that they were present at the birth of Christ. (It is interesting, however, that this belief system has no clear advantages over organized religion: secret police in Efica hunt down anyone who expresses unpopular political views.)

But it is Australia's history as a settler colony, geographically far removed from the European origins of most of its early arrivals, which likely accounts more than anything else for the anxiety about landscape that characterizes references to fairy tales in Australian fiction. The examples that I cite above of characters associating Australia with a fairy-tale setting appear in novels dealing with the early history of settlement in the country. Having arrived only recently from Ireland, it is not surprising that Malouf's Michael Adair has difficulty seeing Australia as a continuation of the real world, imagining it, rather, as a place born out of dreams. The themes of departure and arrival that Freudian child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim identified in fairy tales carry an equal significance in contemporary

Australian fiction. Bettelheim observed, in *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976), "The fairy tale begins with the hero at the mercy of those who think little of him and his abilities, who mistreat him and even threaten his life" (127). The heroes of fairy tales are often orphans, or third sons with no inheritance; tailors barely able to keep themselves fed; or discharged soldiers looking for something new to attract their loyalty. By the end of the tale, the hero has typically married a princess and become king, although it is important to note that this almost always occurs in a kingdom distant from where he originated. Like the convicts and settlers that populate Australian novels set in an earlier time, the fairy-tale hero, encountering success in a new world, almost never returns home.

If protagonists arriving in Australia early in its history see it as a fairy-tale landscape, Australian fiction set in the present day is similarly populated by insatiable travellers, and they are just as likely to draw comparison to the heroes of fairy tales. In his formalist study *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp identified as the "seeker-hero" the fairy-tale protagonist who takes it upon himself to make a journey, or who is hired or solicited to travel. Propp's terminology is useful, for in Australian novels, the "seeker-hero" is a central figure. Australian fiction departs from the fairy tale, however, in that Australian protagonists are less likely to be in search of a specific person or thing than a more intangible sense of belonging. They are also less likely than fairy-tale heroes to find what they are looking for—or, if they do find it, to be satisfied with their discovery. Elizabeth Perkins has famously identified as "the colonial dilemma" the tension that exists in Australian colonial-era writings between optimism about the new land and the inevitable later acknowledgement of its failure to live up to settlers' expectations (148). References to fairy tales in the fiction of Bail, Hospital and Carey make clear this engagement of optimism with disappointment in contemporary Australian literature.

In Bail's novel *Eucalyptus*, geography becomes a fairy tale. The plot is built around a central motif of fairy tales—the elaborate test of a suitor for the hand of a princess. In this case, however, the test involves landscape, and a distinctly Australian feature of it: the suitor of Holland's daughter Ellen must correctly identify every one of the hundreds of species of eucalyptus in his orchard. At nineteen years old, Ellen is a marvel of passivity, apparently perfectly willing to be manipulated by her father and her lover in turn. She ends up marrying someone other than the man her father intends for her, although this man, a mysterious drifter, has also performed the test—more casually, while walking with Ellen through her father's groves. Like many heroes of modern Australian fiction, the man who marries Ellen is a wanderer, belonging nowhere. It appears that he has been sleeping in the orchard, and we never learn his name. He woos her, like Shakespeare's Othello woos Desdemona, with stories about the outside world, set in great cities, deserts and distant lands (though it is never clear whether or not he

has actually travelled). Perhaps, also like Desdemona, Ellen finds the storyteller diverting and feels that her choices are limited, although she is not exactly inflamed with passion for him. In fact, at the end of the novel, she narrowly escapes from an illness that has consumed her days in a "disappointed, severe sort of sleep" (242). The disappointment at work in the novel might be said to belong more properly to the reader than it does to the protagonists; while Bail's conclusion features all the elements of the classic fairy-tale ending, it leaves one with a vague sense of unease.

Disappointment awaits a whole cast of "seeker-heroes" in Hospital's novel *Oyster* (1996). The novel takes place in Outer Maroo, an isolated opal-mining Outback town in southwestern Queensland, hermetically sealed like the small towns in numerous other Australian novels: travellers have a way of disappearing, the postmistress throws out the mail, and the gas station will not sell anyone enough fuel to make it to the next town. However, fairy tales are at work even in this grim setting. Mercy Given, the preacher's daughter, dreams of escape, although her journey is only imaginary at first; she savours a forbidden library—the art books and novels that she obtained from Susanna Rover, a rebellious visiting teacher who was murdered by the townspeople after asking too many questions. Mercy keeps the books hidden down a mineshaft on the opal seam known as Aladdin's Rush. Whenever she reads Miss Rover's journal, the words rise "like a genie" to grant her wishes (70). Other characters trapped in the town similarly identify with the heroes of *The Arabian Nights*. Nick Makarios, a Greek Australian searching in Outer Maroo for his son who was absorbed by a local cult, imagines that using the right idiom or accent will win acceptance from small-town Australians suspicious of foreigners: "like the right caress of Aladdin's magic lamp. Open sesame, they say" (105). The enigmatic storekeeper, Jess, who was raised by gypsies, remembers her mother's profanities when social workers came calling as "magic words [. . .] open sesames [. . .] like scimitars, like flaming swords" (143). She also dreams of escaping the oppression of the town to enjoy once more the social freedoms that she associates with her childhood. By the end of the novel, Mercy, Nick and Jess have been spared destruction by a raging fire ignited by the cult in the opal shafts, but as flames rush towards the town, the reader is left in suspense as to whether Mercy will make it down the highway to Brisbane in a stolen truck, or how well Nick, her passenger, will come to terms with his knowledge of his son's death. In a way they have both found what they were looking for—escape, for Mercy, and a kind of reconnection, for Nick—but it may not be worth having after all. Optimism and disappointment are inextricable in Hospital's narrative.

I have already cited Carey's *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* as an example of the association between fairy tales and faith. This novel also serves as an illustration of Carey's interest in seeker-heroes, for it ends with the main characters leaving Efica in a ship to build a new life elsewhere. Carey's novel *Oscar and Lucinda*, which won the Booker Prize in 1988, similarly explores the relationship between

fairy tales and religion, and similarly dissolves their tantalizing connection in disappointment. And once more, the novel is populated by insatiable travellers. Oscar emigrates to New South Wales from England in the 1860s to work as a missionary. A devout man, but an incurable gambler, he becomes obsessed with a scheme to transport a glass church down the river from Sydney to the town of Boat Harbour. The project will unite all the disparate elements of Oscar's wandering life: his faith, his gambling, his love of glass and his love for Lucinda—the equally eccentric owner of the Sydney glassworks and a fellow compulsive gambler. Fairy tales are linked with geography throughout: the view of the Bellinger estuary, above which Oscar intends to build his church, appears to him as "an illustration to a fairy tale" (473). But the primary reason for Oscar's journey from England to New South Wales has been his acute sense of himself as an outsider. His friend Wardley-Fish, who calls Oscar the Odd Bodd, confirms for him: "You belong no more here than you belong anywhere [. . .] you must realize, you do not fit [. . .]. You are wonderful. You are perfectly unique" (187). Oscar does not see the advantages of eccentricity and social awkwardness, but feels himself to be "a sad and ugly creature in a fairy tale, one for ever exiled from the light and compelled to skulk, pale, big-eyed, sweat-shiny in the dark steel nether regions" (249). Oscar's brief affair with Lucinda does make him feel for a time "like a man in a fairy story who is granted his wishes" (396). But Carey's novel, which ends with Oscar drowning at age twenty-five, sucked into the river by the sinking glass church, does not ultimately reward its hero's search for a place of belonging. That the grim ending comes as something of a shock to the reader swept up in the romance illustrates the marriage of optimism and disappointment in the novel.

One of the most intriguing dimensions of fairy tales is their flexibility, as is evidenced by their long history of being shaped and rewritten and reinterpreted in order to transmit messages or disseminate ideologies. Fairy tales have been a favourite instrument of advertisers in communicating the desirability of their products, as in a recent magazine advertising campaign by high-end French handbag maker Louis Vuitton, which shows Cinderella aided in her journey of self-discovery by her possession of stylish luggage. Fairy tales have been rewritten by feminists to empower marginal characters, and they have been used in wartime as political propaganda. Fairy tales have been transformed into erotica, as in "Red Hot Riding Hood," one of American Tex Avery's campy, erotic cartoons of the 1940s. The malleability of fairy tales poses certain challenges for the literary historian looking for a definitive reading of a particular tale. But it also means that fiction writers have many options available to them when they choose to engage in this particularly enigmatic variety of intertextuality.

It is clear that fairy tales are taken seriously by Australian fiction writers, although their application in the literature is often charged with ambivalence. In Tim Winton's novel *Cloudstreet* (1991) and Hanrahan's novel *The Frangipani Gardens*

(1980), characters who embraced fairy tales as children reject their lessons as adults. But Hall joins folklore with history when he writes in *The Second Bridegroom* that "however important our history is to us our fairytales go deeper [. . .] what we decide to do becomes history, but those actions going beyond choice fall into the pattern of the fables we are told" (67). In this essay, I have explored the keen interest in fairy tales that is demonstrated by contemporary Australian fiction writers, and their distinctive use of those narratives to describe landscape, where Canadian writers are more likely to draw upon fairy tales in addressing questions of personal identity, and British writers are more apt to approach them as a model for strengthening communities. The tension that exists in Australia between old and new, between white and Aboriginal attitudes to the nation, and the desire, even in a resolutely secular society, for alternatives to conventional religious practice offer intriguing explanations for the Australian engagement with fairy tales. Most intriguing of all, however, is the way in which fairy tales have served to illuminate what Thea Astley calls, in her novel *It's Raining in Mango* (1989), "the tension between landscape and flesh" in contemporary Australian fiction (72).

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