FOLK TALES AND FAIRY TALES: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

The answer to that is: not much. I could write a book on what makes a folk tale a folk tale or a fairy tale a fairy tale, but I won't do that (lucky you!). Some experts say that fairy tales are simply a sub-genre of folk tales and are different only in that they involve magic and/or fantastic creatures. That's a bit of an oversimplification, but without more instruction about the structure and elements of each story, it will do for now. There is more to know about the structure of these stories, but if I teach you everything now, you'll have nothing left to learn in high school, and that would be a bad thing!

To make things even more confusing, these days, many books are written that cross genres, so you may find elements of a folk tale in a fantasy novel or a mystery. You may find elements of or characters from fairy tales in contemporary fiction, updated for a modern audience. This new approach to storytelling keeps literature alive and is something to celebrate even if it sometimes blurs the lines between genres and makes it hard to give you easy definitions.

Folk tales:

To be a true folk tale, a story must have its origins in what we call the oral tradition. This means the story was first passed down orally by storytellers. Along the way it may have had things added or subtracted as each storyteller made it his or her own. It eventually was written down, which is why you're able to read it in a book now, but it wasn't written down first. For example, Paul Bunyan reads like a folk tale and has many folk tale elements in it, but it is not a true folk tale because it was a written story to begin with and not something passed down through the generations orally.

Folk tales are instructive. They caution readers/listeners about the consequences of certain kinds of behaviors or attitudes.

Characters are not complex. Instead they are stereotypes: the thief, the liar, the clever youth, the evil stepmother, etc.

Even when written down, they are sometimes told in a way that sounds like the spoken word: directly addressing the reader, use of dialect or slang, etc.
The structure may be repetitive. Things that happen in threes are common. Repetition of lines is also common and would have been helpful to whoever was memorizing and telling a story in the oral tradition.

**Fairy tales:**

Surprise! Fairy tales often don't have any fairies in them at all. In terms of the kinds of human characters the stories are peopled with or the structure of the stories themselves, there isn't much difference between folk tales and fairy tales. But the presence of witches, dragons, trolls, magic spells, or other magical elements help distinguish fairy tales from folk tales.

Both folk tales and fairy tales may involve a character learning an important lesson. Both may put the heroes in mortal danger. Like folk tales, fairy tales may serve as cautionary tales to teach their listeners what not to do.

Some fairy tales have roots in the oral tradition, but others, called literary fairy tales, were made up and written down, so technically, these are not folk tales. However, they may share many of the same traits as fairy tales from the folk tale tradition.

Like folk tales, fairy tales in their original forms often have less than happy endings. Because the stories were invented to be instructive and cautionary, they often feature a main character who suffers for his or her failure to do things the "right" way. Little Red Riding Hood talks to a stranger in the woods and gets eaten by a wolf. In the original story, that’s the end of her. No woodcutter comes along to save her. In the original version of Cinderella, the wicked stepsisters cut off their toes to try to fit their feet into the glass slipper, and then on the way back to the castle after Cindy and the prince are reunited, birds come along and peck out the stepsisters' eyes! Ouch! Folk tales and fairy tales are meant to disturb you and teach you to be careful. They may entertain you, but on the other hand, they may scare you. In Irish folklore, fairies are not like Tinkerbell. They have a dark and dangerous side and can make you very sorry if you cross them. The modern, cleaned up versions of fairy tales you may have read as a youngster may be very different from the original versions of these stories. But I won't go into that here because I want you to be able to sleep at night!

**Legends:**
Legends are stories told about a person or a place. This person may be a real person or a character based on a real person. Legends may be rooted in oral tradition but embellished through the generations by storytellers and writers. For example, the stories of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table are legends. They are based on someone who might have actually lived but who was probably not much like the King Arthur in our stories. Arthurian legend has its roots in Britain, but lots of the stories of his knights actually came from French traditions. It all gets very complicated, doesn’t it?

For this book promotion, you may read legends, and we will consider them a subset of folktales even if that is not exactly accurate. Legends make good reading, and reading is what the library is all about!

Enjoy your reading!

Ms. Garrison