

Reviewed by Jan Susina

The Children’s Literature Association’s annual Anne Devereaux Jordan Award is given to an individual who has made significant contributions in scholarship and/or service to the field of children’s literature. At the 2019 ChLA Conference, the award went to Riitta Oittinen, partly in recognition for her extensive work as a translator of English-language children’s texts into Finnish. In choosing Oittinen, the first translator and translation scholar to receive this award, ChLA was both recognizing her individual contributions and reaffirming the importance of translation as a vital, although sometimes overlooked and even controversial, form of children’s literature scholarship.

Another important area that is sometimes given short shrift in terms of scholarship is the historical recovery and bringing back into print of significant older children’s texts, accompanied by scholarly scaffolding. Thanks to Google Books and various digital archives, access to once difficult to obtain children’s titles is increasingly available to scholars. But books, especially children’s books, are more than literary works; they are also aesthetic objects of print culture.

Important series such as the New York Review Children’s Collection and Princeton University’s Oddly Modern Fairy Tales are reissuing compelling older children’s books in print editions. When I teach my version of the history of children’s literature course, I am grateful to publishers such as Dover and Broadview Press for offering historical children’s books in affordable paperback editions. My own research on nineteenth-century literary fairy tales has greatly benefitted from reprinted anthologies such as Jonathan Cott’s Beyond the Looking Glass: Extraordinary Works of Fairy & Fantasy, Michael Patrick Hearn’s The Victorian Fairy Tale Book, Nina Auerbach and U. C. Knoepflmacher’s Forbidden Journeys: Fairy Tales and Fantasies by Victorian Women Writers, Mark West’s Before Oz: Juvenile Fantasy Stories from Nineteenth-Century America, and Jack Zipes’s Victorian Fairy Tales: The Revolt of the Fairies and Elves. For those who do not have convenient access to special collections dedicated to children’s books, facsimile editions, such as those reprinted in The Bodley Head’s Osborne Collection of Early Children’s Books or Garland’s Classics of Children’s Literature, are invaluable.

Zipes has contributed to this area of historical recovery of children’s texts with two newly translated literary fairy tales, one from Germany and the other from Russia. Pyotr Yershov’s Fearless Ivan and His Faithful Horse Double-Hump is the better known of the two tales. First published in 1834, it quickly became a popular story for children and adults and was eventually recognized as a classic of Russian chil-
dren’s literature. Inspired by the verse folktales of Alexander Pushkin, Yer-
shov published The Little Humpbacked Horse, which features Foolish Ivan, a
well-known figure of Russian folklore. Foolish Ivan is the Russian equivalent
of Jack in the English Jack tales. In Zipes’s translation, Ivan Petrovich is
the foolish but kind-hearted third son who succeeds in various seem-
ingly impossible tasks and eventually marries the Heavenly Princess, thanks
to the guidance of his faithful little horse. Zipes acknowledges that he has
taken “a good deal of poetic license” (Yershov 87) in translating and trans-
forming Yershov’s poem into a prose fairy tale, while retaining its oral style.
Kornei Chukovsky, the famous writer of Russian nonsense poetry and sto-
ries for children, praised Yershov’s The Little Humpbacked Horse as “a work
of genius” in his study of children’s language, Two to Five (1933), and
singled out Yershov’s skillful capturing of the colloquial speech of common
people (Yershov 81). The tale became so popular that it quickly appeared
in multiple chapbook editions and re-entered the Russian oral tradition
as a folktale. Part of its appeal is that it pokes fun at the ruling classes, par-
cipularly the Tsar—“Tyrants cannot be trusted nor their whims” (Yershov 70).
After the Russian Revolution of 1917, The Little Humpbacked Horse was el-
evated as a classic of Russian children’s literature. The story was subsequently
turned into a play, a ballet, and an animated film. So popular was The Little Humpbacked Horse that it also
inspired a series of postcards by well-
known Russian artists. Zipes, who has
previously published Tales of Wonder:
Retelling Fairy Tales Through Picture Postcards, uses a number of these col-
orful postcards drawn in the folk-art tradition to illustrate his edition of
this popular Russian children’s story.

While Yershov’s story is well
known, Christian Bärmann’s The Gi-
ant Ohl and Tiny Tim (1918) is more
obscure. As Zipes notes, “Bärmann’s
work appears to have escaped the
eyes of scholars of children’s literature
and fairy tales throughout the world”
(Bärmann 87). Bärmann even lacks an
entry in the comprehensive The Ox-
ford Companion to Fairy Tales, which
was edited by Zipes. Bärmann is both
author and illustrator of the story, and
this edition features forty of his color
illustrations. In some ways The Giant
Ohl and Tiny Tim is a precursor to
Roald Dahl’s The BFG (1982). Ohl is a
friendly, but lonely, giant who desires
to live among humans. Knowing the
importance of good first impressions,
Ohl visits the village of Heide, where
he inadvertently terrifies the inhab-
habitants with his size and clumsiness.
The only person willing to befriend
him is Tiny Tim, who realizes that
Ohl is both kind and a hard worker.
Ohl reveals his true character when
he manages to defeat Death and save
Tiny Tim and the rest of the village
from the epidemic that breaks out in
the countryside. Bärmann’s illustra-
tions have a slightly haunted look; he
was greatly affected and disturbed by
the violence of World War I. Despite
their grotesque overtones, the illustra-
tions effectively frame the story and
are reminiscent of the work of EVB
(Eleanor Vere Boyle), the Victorian il-
lustrator of Sarah Austin’s 1868 trans-
lation of Friederich Wilhelm Carove’s
The Story Without an End, and whose quirky illustrations to Beauty and the Beast feature a walrus-like Beast. Bärmann’s The Giant Ohl and Tiny Tim would fit well in Lynne Vallone’s examination of children’s fascination with unusual bodies, real and literary, in her Big & Small: A Cultural History of Extraordinary Bodies.

Both of these translations by Zipes are useful contributions to the growing body of overlooked literary fairy tales reappearing in print. For those interested in examining children’s literature from a more global perspective, these literary fairy tales make for useful companions to the more frequently used stories from the English tradition.

Works Cited


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Reviewed by Anurima Chanda

The title of this book can be quite misleading. It might give one the impression that it is like any other book of translated literature, in which the translator, Sanjay Sircar, has carefully selected two priceless fantasy fictions from the Bengal Renaissance and has made them available (along with annotations) to a larger audience in English. In reality, nothing could be farther from the truth. This collection, preceded by a befitting foreword by Peter Hunt, is much more than just the translation and annotation of two much-loved tales (composed by Rabindranath Tagore’s illustrious nephews, Abanindranath and Gaganendranath, respectively) from the land of Bengali into English. In addition to the exhaustive preface by Sitcar himself, both of the actual translations in the book come equipped with hundred-page-long introductions that touch upon a wide gamut of areas that fall within the purview of the tales and their translations. These