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CREATIVE WRITING TECHNIQUES: FABULIST FICTION

Study Guide



A Guide to Creative Writing: Fairy Tales and Fabulism

By Megan Baxter, Interlochen Online Course Instructor

This guide, excerpted from the four-week Interlochen Online course “Creative Writing Techniques: Fabulist Fiction” by Megan Baxter, explores elements of fairy tales—both old and new—and how to write fabulist stories influenced by them.

Fairy tales are some of the earliest stories we learn as children. They spark our imagination, teach valuable lessons, and frighten us. Witches, princesses, knights, and monsters—they stick with us, and become archetypes and inspirations. Think of the incredible success of storytellers at Disney and Pixar or the international appeal of Studio Ghibli. Fairy tales teach us a lot about plot, character, and the essential quality of story-telling itself.

The fiction genre “fabulism” draws inspiration from the language and tone of fairy tales. So what is fabulism? In many ways it defies definition. It doesn’t break the rules, so much as it knows no rules. It borrows. It reimagines, dressing up the past and beaming down the future. **Fabulism is the weaving of fantasy, myth, futurism, and surrealism into a contemporary fictional world.**

Let’s learn how to use, modify, and mimic the voice of fairy tales to create reimagined fantastic worlds in our fiction.

The Function and Voice of Fairy Tales

Fairy tales are ancient forms of storytelling. Before widespread literacy and access to printed text, oral traditions were the only way to pass stories from person to person, village to village, and generation to generation. Sometimes the stories we know as fairy tales started from folk traditions but then proceeded in wholly original ways, such as the work of Hans Christian Anderson, author of *The Little Mermaid*, *The Snow Queen*, and *The Princess and the Pea*.

Figure 1: *Little Red Riding Hood meets the Wolf*, from *The Brothers Grimm*



WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE...?

What fairy tale were you the most drawn to as a child?

Why?

Was it the character?

The plot?

The world-building?

How has that story followed you?

Do you think of its morals, or see echoes of it in other forms of media, like movies or music?

Why do these stories even exist? Why do they matter in today's world? Fairy tales, folk tales, and fables have one thing in common. They are instructional. They teach lessons through story. They show the belief systems, customs, and worldviews of their cultures of origin.

The structure and tone in fairy tales are similar across a range of stories. They are typically:

- **Concise**, to aid in understanding and memorization
- **Straightforward**, so that a child can easily comprehend
- **Authoritative**, to give power to the lessons contained within the narrative
- **Distant**, to create a sense of universality rather than personal connection
- **Third-person**, in an omniscient voice

In addition to similarities in tone, fairy tales often contain:

- Archetypes such as the sweet princess, the evil witch, or the brave hero
- Reappearing characters like Brer Rabbit, Coyote, and Baba Yaga
- A lack of character development or flattened characters
- Simplified setting, such as a village, forest, or castle
- Two opposing forces such as good vs. evil, rich vs. poor, pure vs. corrupt
- A “take-away” or lesson—for instance “slow and steady wins the race” from the Tortoise and the Hare
- A sense of timelessness or a setting deep in the past, almost never the present

Elements of Fairy Tales in Fabulist Fiction

Fairy tales offer potent symbolism—but fabulist writers don't adopt them outright. Rather, they borrow elements of fairy tales and repurpose them with a twist. For example, instead of the list of typical fairy tale plot structures, you might find fabulist stories with the following storylines:

- A character finds something magical but uses it for ordinary purposes.
- A character falls in love with something unexpected, like a plant, and they live happily ever after.
- A magical being is captured and stripped of its power and becomes commonplace.

Language and Tone Adaptations

When fabulist writers take their cue from fairy tales, they often use the sly, all-knowing tone of these forms, playing with the very idea of narration and the authority given to the third person. This is just one example of how fabulist writing borrows and adapts tone and language from fairy tales and fables. You may also find:

- Playful use of arcane/old-fashioned language
- Unusual formalities between characters or manners from a different time period
- Humor and sarcasm
- Imaginary languages and words given as fact, rather than world-building details as in high fantasy

Contemporary Myth-Making

Just like Hans Christian Anderson crafting his original fairy tales from bits and pieces of older narratives, fabulist fiction writers can create modern myths and legends of their own. Some of these may be based on real people, or they could be a way in which we view a real person as something mythical or legendary.

These two pictures illustrate this idea.

Figure 2: Beyonce



Photo: KEVIN WINTER/GETTY IMAGES

Figure 3: Michael Jordan



*Photo: Jacobus Rentmeester in LIFE magazine
1984 Olympics Special Issue*

You can see the singer Beyoncé portrayed in a goddess-like outfit that evokes ancient Greece and Rome as well as the gilded halos found in the Christian art of the Middle Ages. In the second image, basketball player Michael Jordan jumps towards the hoop in one of his signature moves, which seems to render him weightless or gifted with supernatural powers of flight.

You might see ancient deities in these images of these two modern celebrities, or maybe you see that we have fit these two people into pre-existing archetypes to describe their immense talent. Either way, this form of contemporary myth-making gives power, magic, and extraordinary abilities to new characters.

Contemporary myth-making draws its impact from modern society, its ideals, and morals. It doesn't always have to be fixed to a specific person, but instead, can be applied to a trend or idea. There are countless ways that we tell stories about the world that we live in and these change over time. One hundred fifty years ago, the concept of "manifest destiny" fueled American westward expansion. Fifteen years ago the term YOLO described a particular frame of mind. Today, there are influencers and trendsetters, dogs who model human clothing; folks looking to live their best life, find their forever home, detox, and disconnect; van culture; sneaker culture; and plant mom culture. All of these have unique mythologies, specific but at the same time vague and symbolic, representing the ever-shifting world of modern fairy tales:

- Having the right shoes brings joy and success.
- A woman travels the wilds in her tiny magical house.
- A dog makes his owner rich by wearing his turtlenecks.
- Finding the magic potion cures all ills.

Don't these sound like fairy tales?

Reading Fabulism

Now let's look at an example of fabulism that borrows elements from fairy tales. Read the fabulist story "Wolves" by Bud Smith www.smokelong.com/stories/wolves/

"Wolves" is a great example of borrowing a fairy-tale tone, without any images or characters. The voice in "Wolves" is distant, abstract, and seems to be trying to convey a message, even if the reader isn't necessarily sure of what that message is. Sometimes the voice seems close to the characters, detailing their every move, and other times it seems to zoom out so far as to reduce them to points on a map where everything is flattened into simple nouns like forest, or city.

Now, It's Your Turn to Create

Write a story using the structure and tone of a traditional fairy tale. You could:

- Reimagine a fairy tale and rewrite into the modern world.
- Use voice to create the tone of a fairy tale.
- Create your own myths and legends structured around the plots of traditional stories.

Be as wild as you wish.

Instructor Bio



Meet the Course Instructor

MEGAN BAXTER

Megan Baxter holds an MFA in Creative Nonfiction from Vermont College of the Fine Arts and a BFA in Poetry from Goddard College. In 2004, when she graduated from Interlochen Arts Academy as a Creative Writing Major, Baxter was honored as a Presidential Scholar in the Arts. Baxter's first book *The Coolest Monsters, A Collection of Essays* was published in 2018 by Texas Review Press. Her memoir *Farm Girl* was released in 2021 from Green Writers Press. Baxter is pleased to announce that her essay

collection *The Body (Electric)* will be published by Mad Creek Books from Ohio State Press as part of their 21st Century Essay Series. Baxter has won numerous national awards including a Pushcart Prize. Her work has been listed in *The Best American Essays of 2019*. Recent publications included pieces in *The Threepenny Review*, *Hotel Amerika*, *The Florida Review*, and *Creative Nonfiction Magazine*. Baxter serves as a mentor to young writers and loves developing cross-genre and innovative creative writing pedagogy for her workshops and classes. Baxter lives in New Hampshire where she loves walking her dogs, running, and cooking with local foods. She teaches writing at Colby-Sawyer College.

Learn more techniques for writing fabulist fiction, and connect with peers from around the world who are also interested in creative writing, by taking the four-week “**Creative Writing Techniques: Fabulist Fiction**” course developed by Megan Baxter.

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