



# Told and Retold: Reinventing

Maybe you loved fairy tales as a kid but dismiss them or have never considered them as subjects for your children's writing projects. Fairy tales, though, are worthy precursors of *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, and the Harry Potter empire. Re-tales can help you break into publishing and lead to startling success. Gail Carson Levine won the Newbery Award with her Cinderella adaptation of *Ella Enchanted*, followed by a movie and DVD. Snow White gets ninja training in the movie *Snow White and the Huntsman*. In the television show "Grimm," a detective "sees" and then pursues dastardly fairy tale characters.

Legendary characters and their tales remain alive and plotting. Jack and his beanstalk adventures have inspired a spate of books and films to rival his proliferating stalk. Some movie versions: *Jack and the Beanstalk* (1952), *Jack and the Beanstalk* (1970), *Jack and the Beanstalk* (1990), *Beanstalk* (1994), *Jack and the Beanstalk: The Real Story* (2001), *Jack and the Beanstalk* (2010), *Jack the Giant Killer* (2013), *Jack the Giant Slayer* (2014). And I hear another account is in the works—from the point of view of the beanstalk.

Books of fairy tales re-detailed abound too. If you do a great version, your retold tale may become a classroom classic. Teachers recognize how revamped fairy tales can help them enliven their reading and writing lessons. As one said of Alvin Granowsky's take on the Jack and the beanstalk story, *Giants Have Feelings Too*, "We are going to use this version as well as others to teach point of view. . . . The kids are going to love this new spin on an old tale."

To show you how other old tales can be freshly recast, here's a comparison of aspects of the traditional *Jack and the Beanstalk* from Jennifer Greenway's *Classic Fairy Tale Treasury* and several other versions.

## Different Characters

Despite fairy tales' traditional and time-honored basic plots, authors have produced as many permutations as their imaginations and audacity can conjure up.

*Jack's mother.* Traditional: Jack's poor widowed mother shouts at him for trading the cow, their only possession, for a few beans. She calls him stupid but gets over it.

Variation: Val Biro in *Treasury of Children's Literature* shows Jack's mother taking it a little less lightly. "Beans? . . . You are an idiot! Nincompop! Dunderhead!"

*The Bean-Trader.* Traditional: He's a "strange little man . . . about four feet tall and dressed in a bright green suit".

Variations: In Biro, he's "a gnarled old man with twinkly eyes."

Steven Kellogg in *Jack and the Beanstalk* makes the old man into a wizard who gives Jack the beans and watches his adventures from a hot air balloon.

Andrew Lang (*The Red Fair Book*) depicts the bean-giver as a butcher.

*The Character Who Gives Jack the Backstory.* Traditional: At the entrance to the castle, the giant's wife warns Jack he could be the next breakfast meet for her husband.

Variations: In Lang, though, on the way to the castle Jack meets an odd woman with flowing hair wearing a "quilted red satin" pointed cap. She is the bearer of a complex subplot: a noble knight, his wife and children lived in the castle. The Giant killed the knight, but his wife and one child escaped. Jack's mother is that noblewoman, and Jack is the rightful heir of the castle.

## Personality Traits

Jack can possess as many different traits as authors can dream up. Children's writers don't have to be limited to one set of characteristics.

*Jack the Good Boy.* Traditional: Jack tries to help his mother, even though he makes an impulsive, flighty decision. But he later shows his resourcefulness and courage. In Lang, "Jack was a giddy, thoughtless boy, but very kindhearted and affectionate."

*Jack the Dangerously Curious.* In Ann Beneduce's saga *Jack and the Beanstalk*, Jack is too curious: "if he had one fault it was his curiosity. . . . He was always asking "'What if . . . ?' and 'Why?' and 'Where . . . ?'"

*Jack the Sharp-Witted Wiseguy.* Biro simultaneously gives children a mathematics lesson and shows us Jack's cleverness and sassiness. The gnarled old man asks, "I wonder if you know how many beans make five?" Jack replies instantly, "Two in each hand and one in your mouth."

## Plot Variations

As with personalities, so with plots. They vary extensively as authors take flow-etic license.

*Traditional:* Jack steals the golden egg-laying goose from the giant's castle and trades the eggs for food. Jack, his mother, and the goose live happily ever after.

*Multiple Hauls.* In both Lang and Biro,

# Classic Fairy Tales

by Noelle Sterne

Jack makes three trips to the castle: first he steals a golden-egg laying hen, then many bags of gold, and last a bejeweled singing harp. Having more than proved himself, as heir apparent he finally takes (re-takes) ownership of the castle.

*For Sports Fans.* Jack gets a sports update in A. J. Jacobs' take (*Fractured Fairy Tales*). He arrives in the city and joins the Boston Beavers, the chronically-losing baseball team. Jack eagerly keeps asking the coach when he will get to make a touchdown (Jack wasn't much of a baseball buff). Finally, in a game the Beavers are losing, as always, the coach puts him in and tells him to run to the outfield. Jack pulls a magic bean from his pocket, quickly plants it in center field and waters it. The bean instantly sprouts and grows into an immensely high and sturdy stalk.

Now the opposing slugger hits a homer, sure to win the game. But Jack jumps on the beanstalk and, just in time and wavering in the air, catches the enemy's high fly. With Jack's magic beans, the Beavers—now renamed the Boston Beans—continue to win game after game.

## Points of View (POV)

Generally a story is told from the POV of the main character—in our case Jack. But imaginative deviations can be fun, instructive, and outrageous.

*Traditional:* Jack sees his life as an adventure. We witness his daring, ingenuity, and pluckiness throughout.

*Speaking for the Minority.* In *Giants Have Feelings Too*, Alvin Granowsky tells the story from another POV, demonstrating empathy for the marginalized. The giant's wife laments, "I am sure that the rest of you people down below are very nice. But that boy, Jack, is something else. After I was so kind to him, he stole from us, and he hurt my husband. All because we are giants!"

*Speaking for the Elderly.* Raymond Briggs' sequel, *Jim and the Beanstalk*, shows Jim visiting the now-aged and infirm giant. He has weak eyes, bad teeth, and little hair. Like a budding and compassionate social worker, Jim gets him bifocals, false teeth, and a wig.

## Gender Switch: Jack the Girl

Children's authors tolerate no innovative limits—in several versions, Jack becomes a girl! Gender switches are excellent ways to illustrate

and dramatize role models.

*Jill.* In Denise Vega's *Jill and the Beanstalk* (in the Meadowbrook anthology *Newfangled Fairy Tales*), Jill, like Jack, sells her poor mother's cow for the magic beans and climbs up the beanstalk to a magnificent castle. Once there, though, she shows her courage and asks the giant for a tour of the castle. Ignoring the giant's outer threatening appearance, she gently counsels him to stop eating little boys, and he is surprisingly cooperative. Jill befriends the giant and his wife; they climb down the beanstalk with her and live peacefully among the people. In true feminist entrepreneurial fashion, Jill then gives tours of the castle and makes so much money she gets her mother needed medical attention and has the cottage repaired.

*Kate.* Equally spunky and daring, Kate in Mary Pope Osborne's *Kate and the Beanstalk* starts out in a Jack-like situation. When she sees the beans, which "shone like dark gold," she admits, like a possible shopaholic, "I don't think I can live without them." But learning of a noble family's inheritance, which the giant has stolen, helpful and kindhearted Kate immediately resolves to right the wrong. She doesn't know the victims are her own family (reminiscent of Lang and the odd woman's telling Jack of his inheritance).

Entering the castle, Kate shows her inventiveness by disguising herself twice. When she sees the enormous cooking duties of the giant's wife, Kate sympathetically offers to help her with the huge breakfast. Finally, after vanquishing the giant, Kate and her mother take rightful possession of the castle, and Kate offers the giant's wife, now a widow, employment as a cook for them.

## Writerly Ever After

You can revamp any fairy tale you choose in ingenious, funny, and even wild ways. Today, as Jack ascends, he might use an Ipad and certainly a cell phone to keep in touch with his mother on the ground at Command. Maybe he has an app called "Giant Hunters." Or blogs from the giant's castle ("A View from the Stalk").

When you try new twists on old tales, you'll stretch your creativity, challenge your writing boldness, and connect with and delight today's children. And your new-old tales will entice parents and teachers into buying your books and surprise editors into acceptance.

Author, editor, coach, and spiritual counselor, **Noelle Sterne** publishes widely in print and online venues, including *Author Magazine*, *Children's Book Insider*, *Funds for Writers*, *Inspire Me Today*, *Transformation Magazine*, *Unity Magazine*, *Writer's Digest*, and *The Writer*. With a Ph.D. from Columbia University, Noelle assists doctoral candidates in finishing their dissertations (finally). Her forthcoming handbook addresses students' largely overlooked but equally important non-academic difficulties: *Challenge in Writing Your Dissertation: Coping with the Emotional, Interpersonal, and Spiritual Struggles*. A chapter appears in the forthcoming book *Transform Your Life!* (August 2014). In Noelle's first book *Trust Your Life: Forgive Yourself and Go After Your Dreams* (Unity Books, 2011), she helps readers release regrets, re-label their past, and reach lifelong yearnings. Her radio interview on June 24, 2014, with Carla McClellan on *Vibrant Living* about the book is available for download: <http://www.unity.fm/program/VibrantLiving>  
Visit Noelle at [www.trustyourlifefornow.com](http://www.trustyourlifefornow.com).

# Children's Book Insider

The Newsletter for Children's Writers



## At Presstime:

### *Educational Publisher Creating Digital Classroom Library for Grades K-8*

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### *Two Agents Accepting Submissions*

**Renee Nyen** is an agent at KT Literary (<http://ktliterary.com>), representing middle grade and young adult authors. Seeking fiction of any genre, and is especially interested in historical YA about a lesser-known time in history. She loves characters that immediately capture her. Email a query letter with the first three pages of the manuscript pasted into the body of the email. Renee has said, "...an immediate turn-off for me is too much general language in your query letter, [such as] 'Judith's story is one of insurmountable odds, the meaning of life, the search for acceptance. It is an ode to overwhelming hope, devastating loss, friendship and self-discovery.' This tells me nothing unique about your book or your characters." Send queries to [reneequery@ktliterary.com](mailto:reneequery@ktliterary.com) and include "Query" in your subject line. Attempts to reply to queries within two weeks. If you're an author who is sending a new query, but who previously submitted a novel to the agency for which they requested chapters but ultimately declined, please do say so in your query letter. If Renee likes your query, she'll ask for the first five chapters and a complete synopsis.

**John Rudolph** is an agent with Dystel & Goderich Literary Management (<http://www.dystel.com>), representing authors of books for children and adults. In the children's area, he is looking for middle grade and young adult fiction, and picture book authors who also illustrate. Query with a concise letter that tells who you are, what your project is (a summary paragraph is good), and whether you have submitted this project to other agents simultaneously. Include a synopsis and full manuscript for a picture book, or first chapter of longer works. Queries can be emailed (chapters can be an attachment to the query email) to [jrudolph@dystel.com](mailto:jrudolph@dystel.com). Submissions can also be mailed with a self-addressed, stamped envelope to John Randolph, Dystel & Goderich Literary Management, One Union Square West, Suite 904, New York, NY 10003. Query letters can be single spaced; all chapters should be double spaced. Responds to queries in six to eight weeks.

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## Reinventing the Fairy Tale

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