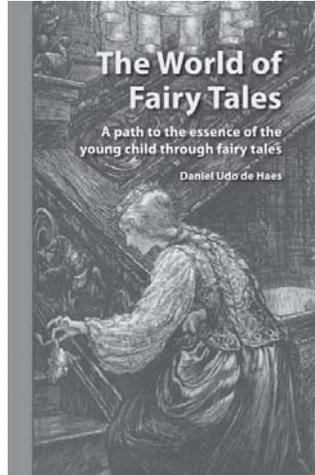


# Book Review

## ***The World of Fairy Tales: A path to the essence of the young child through fairy tales***

by Daniel Udo de Haes,  
translated by Barbara Mees  
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Reviewed by Jill Taplan



I was delighted to see this publication become available because I have an earlier book by this author, *The Creative Word* (WECAN 2015), which focuses on the developmental path of two- to four-year-olds through the spoken word. In this previous book, de Haes explains very clearly how the child under three does not need the fairy tale world because the everyday world is still full of magic and surprise. The child's task is to meet that world through stories of everyday objects and activities. Who needs a magic porridge pot when the pot in your own kitchen performs such magic on the ingredients which are added to it, producing delicious porridge from dry oats and liquid! Now we have a book from de Haes which covers the next phase of early childhood through the medium of fairy tales.

Daniel Udo de Haes (1899–1986) wrote his books after retiring from a career as a primary school teacher and curative teacher; they were first published in Dutch some decades ago. WECAN has taken the step of translating and publishing them in English because he brings a timeless wisdom in which, as in the writings of Helmut von K ugelgen or Jorgan Smit, we can still find inspiration. In *The World of Fairy Tales*, de Haes explains why fairy tales are important to the development of the young child (from age four to around eight), through a discussion of their deeper meaning.

There are two lectures by Rudolf Steiner that refer to the deeper meanings and interpretations of fairy tales. In "The Poetry and Meaning of Fairy Tales," Steiner acknowledges that we might find the activity of interpreting of fairy tales akin to tearing apart a beautiful flower. We lose the beauty of the whole

by examining the parts. But, Steiner suggests, if we approach the tales with sensitivity as we look for deeper meaning, rather than focusing on a superficial analysis, we will only enhance our appreciation of them. De Haes exemplifies this sensitive approach and gives insights into some favorite and some less well-known tales, within the context of child development.

De Haes makes clear that the older child in kindergarten lives in two worlds, her knowledge of spirituality fading as her connection with the everyday world is strengthening. Fairy tales bridge those worlds because they provide images of extraordinary, eternal, spiritual truths in plain picture-building terms:

*The young child is in a transitional phase from the non-figurative, spiritual world to the figurative earthly world. It is his "task" to recognize the living spirit in earthly objects. Fairy tales help him with this task. They describe the spirit and the development of the spirit figuratively in characters and actions, and guide the child into our figurative world (p. 129).*

Every true fairy tale contains, through images, an aspect of the journey of every human soul as it searches to develop itself into a fitting garment for the higher spiritual "I," that part of each of us that carries the spiritual blueprint for what we have the potential to become. De Haes sees this journey in terms of the biblical image of the fall of humankind, our exclusion from paradise, and our redemption through our own free actions in the world:

The development of mankind can be seen as one large happening. Each human life reflects this development in its own way, by following its own destiny, its own path in the extensive fabric of this phenomenon.

*The fairy tales reflect this development in their own language of images. Each fairy tale has its own specific character, language and motifs (p.109).*

As Steiner noted, we should approach the interpretation of fairy tales with caution and not “tear the flower to pieces.” Every tale has layers of meaning and each adult will make his own connection. The intention is certainly not to give rigid rules for what each fairy tale or fairy tale motif might mean. De Haes encourages us to try to understand the background to the tales which we tell the children, but not to see this understanding as a necessity. Knowing that each tale has a deeper meaning, even if you are still waiting for the tale to reveal it to you, is sufficient. He encourages us to live in the fairy tale atmosphere and not to allow background knowledge to come between us and the children. My own image for this is that, when we tell a well-loved tale, we lay it down at the children’s feet, without drama or sentiment, but with our respectful admiration, so that each child may pick it up in the way that means most to her at that moment. This enables us to tell fairy tales to mixed-age groups and to understand the value of repetition of tales over days or weeks, giving each child fresh opportunities to unconsciously transform and digest the imagery.

This book gives, in addition to revelations about a selection of fairy tales, a useful explanation for teachers and parents of the value to children in this age range (kindergarten to second grade) of experiencing the fairy tales. Nowadays these tales are often rejected as irrelevant or too full of stereotypes and antiquated language to be told to young children, so it is vital that their importance as “soul milk” for the growing child is understood. In their gentle way, they build resilience in the young child for the challenges to come in later life. Every soul will meet evil and struggle to defeat it. The greedy wolf, the evil witch, the cunning tailor, the clumsy bear exist in all of us. When the young child is becoming aware of these unpleasant parts of the soul, she needs to know that this is a universal human predicament, not just an individual experience. These darker aspects of self

can be defeated through one’s own inner strength and with the help of the unexpected encounters and relationships that life brings us. Meeting the battle of good and evil in image form gives each child the opportunity to unconsciously understand that there is always hope for a better future:

*Fairy tales endow the child with an unparalleled, concealed treasure of spiritual germ cells so that the soul can bear the spiritual blossoms when the time is right (p. 50).*

De Haes includes some ideas for engaging children who may not come to the fairy tale world easily because of their exposure to other forms of stories which have lacked meaning and truthfulness. This is becoming even more relevant as we encounter children who have little experience of stories coming to them without animated pictures. These children need to exercise their “picture-forming muscles,” and the heart of early childhood, from age three to five, is when they have the most potential for development, the time of the most active and creative imagination. Fairy tales become even more important in how we can work to balance current trends in society and culture. Their universality rises above cultural distinctions and their messages of spiritual truth in imagery are even more necessary to support the children of the twenty-first century as they climb off our shoulders and go to meet the unknown future which we are bequeathing to them. ♦

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#### Resources:

- Steiner, Rudolf. “The Interpretation of Fairy Tales,” Lecture, Berlin, December 1908. See, e.g., Rudolf Steiner, *The World of Fairy Tales*, (Great Barrington, MA: SteinerBooks, 2013).
- Steiner, Rudolf. “The poetry and meaning of fairy tales.” Lecture, Berlin, February 1913. See, e.g., Rudolf Steiner, Ruth Pusch, ed., *The Poetry and Meaning of Fairy Tales* (Spring Valley, NY: Mercury Press, 1989).