

# Back from the dread

**Charlotte Wood** is surprised to revisit her favourite childhood fairy tale and find it just as powerful, if not as grim, as her memory of it.

**T**he fairy tale I remember most vividly from childhood – or at least I thought I did – was *The Girl Who Trod on the Loaf* by Hans Christian Andersen.

This little-known story concerns a girl – vain and haughty – who, though very poor, has a single pair of exquisite shoes. In my memory, the girl’s mother sends her with the family’s last sixpence to buy a loaf of bread – the last food they can expect before they starve. Returning with the loaf, the girl comes to a puddle. Faced with a choice between muddying her beautiful shoes or the betrayal of her mother, and death, she chooses the latter – putting the loaf of bread into the puddle to use as a stepping stone. But as her foot touches the loaf, she is dragged down, down through the terrible vortex of the puddle into a hellish underworld. And that’s where she remains, punished eternally for her vanity.

I was drawn to the pages of this story repeatedly and inexorably. It was the same compulsion which led me, in a recurring nightmare that lasted throughout my childhood, to the letterbox across the road from my house. In the dream, the opening of the letterbox was the signal for a horrific ritual in which I was snatched up by two vast, warring universes (unending, shapeless, dark and starry undulations of force and malevolent power, existing in a time and space somewhere far outside our planet). Each time, I was transformed into a tiny ball which the two universes threw to each other in a game of catch, increasing the distance between them each time they tossed me. The threat – utterly terrifying – was either in being destroyed by their malice as they threw and caught me, or disappearing into the infinite void between them if they dropped me.

Both the trip to the letterbox and my return to the pages of *The Girl Who Trod on the Loaf* had the same inevitable, dread-filled compulsion. In both cases I desired and feared the story to come; in both there was also exhilaration – in the sensation of flight as I was hurled through space in the dream, and in *The Girl’s* breathtaking act of self-assertion in the



story, in her possession of a pride so powerful she could risk annihilation because of it.

In both, my relief at the end was overwhelming.

When I found the fairy tale as an adult, I was surprised by two things – how short is the part in which the bread actually features in the story, and how long and detailed and gruesome is the description of the girl’s penance in hell, where she is forced to become a statue, her feet glued to the bread, and where punishments she visited upon others in life return to torture her. On earth she had pulled the wings off flies; in hell, a captive statue, she is doomed to endure those same wingless flies crawling over her face.

My memory of the relationship to her mother has also proven hazy. In the real story, the girl is raised by a wealthy family who feed and clothe her and try in vain to amend her “proud and arrogant” character. It is when they send her to visit her mother with a gift of bread that she

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commits her atrocity at the puddle. The story also has redemption. The Girl remains in hell for generations until one day an old woman on earth cries in pity for her – at which she suddenly becomes a bird and is magically released. I had no memory at all of this happy ending.

One friend’s adored favourite story was *Bluebeard* (if you cannot recall it, suffice to know the climax is the young wife’s discovery of the bloody corpses of her slaughtered predecessors in her husband’s locked chamber). Another’s favourite was a now-lost story involving a bear whose parents were killed. He remembers nothing else but this, and wanting the horror of it over and over again. None of us remembered the happy endings. And none recalled our parents being concerned by our gruesome tastes.

There was something else about both my fairy tale dread and that of the nightmare: their inexplicability to adults, their privacy.

Part of my dream’s power was the invisibility of my terror to anyone else. I was merely a speck, a plaything in a game, a tiny marble tossed back and forth by universes.

Perhaps some of the dream’s power remained with me on waking. Perhaps I feared the threat would leak out of the dream into real life if I could name it once daylight came. Regardless, I knew nobody could help me, nor prevent what was to come – after all, I was the one, each time, who chose to open the letterbox. Like *The Girl* with her bread, I had brought it on myself.

I wonder now if my dream is the reason I returned to that particular story time and again – the self-inflicted descent into her otherworld mirrored my ascension into mine.

And perhaps too, I was attracted to the strange, roiling structurelessness of Andersen’s fairy tale. Its bizarre logic, nonsensical turns, the almost endlessly repetitive aeons in hell and the sudden, severing ending echo the meandering formlessness of dreaming and waking.

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Whatever drew me to her, *The Girl* and I knew something dark and rich: that childhood contained unspeakable things.

Little Red Riding Hood, Peter Pan, Alice and countless other child heroes and heroines knew it, too. So did Max in *Where the Wild Things Are*, and his creator. As Maurice Sendak once said of his own vivid childhood: “I knew terrible things. But I knew I mustn’t let adults know I knew. It would scare them.” **GW**

## THE QUIZ

COMPILED BY KEVIN SCHLUTER & CINDY MACDONALD

1. What same name applies to a type of wind, helicopter and salmon?
2. Tennis player Andy Murray was raised in which Scottish town, which dominated world headlines in March 1996?
3. Who played therapist Dr Buddy Rydell in the 2003 movie *Anger Management*?
4. What is the answer to the song lyrics question, “Can you guess where I’m calling from?”
5. Elkhorns and staghorns are what type of plant?



6. Name the Englishman in Charles Dickens’s novel *A Tale of Two Cities* who saves another man’s life by taking his place at the guillotine.
7. What one-word computer term is formed from the words modulator-demodulator?
8. What is the shared surname of the characters played by Colin Firth (left) in TV’s *Pride and Prejudice*, and in the film *Bridget Jones’s Diary*?
9. Which is the more northerly, Broome or Cairns?

10. Name the character played by Elisabeth Moss in the TV series *Mad Men*.
11. If you had unusually high blood-sugar levels, would you be considered to be hypoglycaemic or hyperglycaemic?
12. In the upcoming film version of *Les Misérables*, who plays the role of Fantine?
13. In what year did Nelson Mandela become president of South Africa?
14. Which Canadian singer-songwriter wondered, *If You Could Read My Mind*?



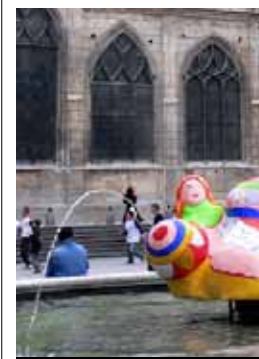
15. The kookaburra (left) is a member of which bird family?
16. Macau is a former colony of which European nation?
17. Name the three basic body parts of an insect.
18. In late September, who relinquished his title as the wealthiest young Australian for the first time since 2009?
19. Graves’ disease affects which part of the human body?
20. What is last word of the Holy Bible?

## GET IT?

BY BOB PICKERING

Use the sequence of pictures to guess the answer

### USE THIS TO SIGN



FOR SUDOKU, QUIZ ANSWERS AND GET IT? SOLUTION, SEE PAGE 45