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Hanseldec and Greteldum

BY NOW I'VE BEATEN YOU SEVERELY about the head and shoulders with the notion that all literature grows out of other literature. We're dealing in this case, however, with a pretty loose category, which could include novels, stories, plays, poems, songs, operas, films, television, commercials, and possibly a variety of newer or not-yet-invented electronic media we haven't even seen. So let's try being a writer for a moment. You want to borrow from some source to add a bit of flesh to the bare bones of your story. Who ya gonna call?

Actually, *Ghostbusters* is not a bad answer. In the short run. Will people in a hundred years, though, be conversant with film comedy of the 1980s? Maybe not. But they will get it right now. If you want topical resonance, current film or tele-

vision may work fine, although the frame of reference as well as the staying power may be a little limited. But let's think in terms of slightly more canonical sources. The "literary canon," by the way, is a master list of works that everyone pretends doesn't exist (the list, not the works) but that we all know matters in some important way. A great deal of argument goes into what—and more important who—is in the canon, which is to say, whose work gets studied in college courses. This being America and not France, there is no academy that actually sets a list of canonical texts. The selection is more de facto. When I was in school, the canon was very white and male. Virginia Woolf, for example, was the only modern British woman writer who made the cut at a lot of schools. Nowadays, she'll likely be joined by Dorothy Richardson, Mina Loy, Stevie Smith, Edith Sitwell, or any number of others. The list of "great writers" or "great works" is fairly fluid. But back to the problem of literary borrowing.

So, among "traditional" works, from whom should you borrow? Homer? Half of the people who will read that name think of the guy who says "D'oh!" Have you read *The Iliad* lately? Do they read Homer in Homer, Michigan? Do they care about Troy in Troy, Ohio? In the eighteenth century, Homer was a sure bet, although you were more likely to read him in translation than in Greek. But not now, not if you want most of your readers to get the reference. (That's not a reason not to cite Homer, by the way, only a caution that not everyone will get the message.) Shakespeare, then? After all, he's been the gold standard for allusion for four hundred years and still is. On the other hand, there's the highbrow issue—he may turn off some readers who feel you're trying too hard. Plus, his quotes are like eligible persons of the other sex: all the good ones are taken. Maybe something from the twentieth century. James Joyce? Definitely a problem—so much complexity. T. S. Eliot? He's all quotes from elsewhere to begin with. One

of the problems with the diversification of the canon is that modern writers can't assume a common body of knowledge on the part of their readers. What readers know varies so much more than it once did. So what can the writer use for parallels, analogies, plot structures, references, that most of his readers will know?

Kiddie lit.

Yep. *Alice in Wonderland*. *Treasure Island*. The Narnia novels. *The Wind in the Willows* and *The Cat in the Hat*. *Goodnight Moon*. We may not know Shylock, but we all know Sam I Am. Fairy tales, too, although only the major ones. Slavic folktales, those darlings of the Russian formalist critics of the 1920s, don't have a lot of currency in Paducah. But thanks to Disney, they know "Snow White" from Vladivostok to Valdosta, "Sleeping Beauty" from Sligo to Salinas. An added bonus here is the lack of ambiguity in fairy tales. While we may not know quite what to think about Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia or the fate of Laertes, we're pretty darned sure what we think about the evil stepmother or Rumpelstiltskin. We kind of like the idea of Prince Charming or the healing power of tears.

Of all the fairy tales available to the writer, there's one that has more drawing power than any other, at least in the late twentieth century: "Hansel and Gretel." Every age has its own favorite stories, but the story of children lost and far from home has a universal appeal. For the age of anxiety, the age when Blind Faith sang "Can't Find My Way Home," the age of not just Lost Boys but lost generations, "H&G" has to be the preferred story. And it is. The tale shows up in a variety of ways in a host of stories from the sixties on. Robert Coover has a story called "The Gingerbread House" (1969) whose innovation is that the two children aren't called Hansel and Gretel. The story makes use of our knowledge of the original story by employing signs we'll recognize as standing in for the parts we're familiar with: since we already know the story

from the arrival at the gingerbread house till the shove into the oven, Coover doesn't mention it. The witch, for example, as the story progresses is metonymically transformed into the black rags she wears, as if we're just catching her out of the corner of our eye (metonymy is the rhetorical device in which a thing is used to name another thing with which it is closely associated, as when "Washington" is used to represent the federal government's position on an issue). We don't see her attack the children directly; rather, she kills the doves that eat the bread crumbs. In some ways, this act is even more menacing; it's as if she is erasing the only memory of the children's way home. When, at the end of the tale, the boy and girl arrive at the gingerbread house, we only get a glimpse of the black rags flapping in the breeze. We're made to reevaluate what we know of this story, of the degree to which we take its elements for granted. By stopping the story where the drama normally kicks in, with the children innocently transgressing against the witch's property, Coover forces us to see how our responses— anxiety, trepidation, excitement—are conditioned by our previous encounters with the original fairy tale. See, he suggests, you don't need the story because you have already internalized it so completely. That's one thing writers can do with readerly knowledge of source texts, in this case fairy tales. They can mess around with the stories and turn them upside down. Angela Carter does that in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), a collection of stories that tear the roof off old, sexist fairy tales to create subversive, feminist revisions. She upends our expectations about the story of Bluebeard, or Puss-in-Boots, or Little Red Riding Hood to make us see the sexism inherent in those stories and, by extension, in the culture that embraced them.

But that's not the only way to use old stories. Coover and Carter put the emphasis on the old story itself, while most writers are going to dredge up pieces of the old tale to shore up aspects of their own narratives without placing the focus on

fessor, "prior text," since everything is a text) to add depth and texture to your story, to bring out a theme, to lend irony to a statement, to play with readers' deeply ingrained knowledge of fairy tales. So use as much or as little as you want. In fact, you may invoke the whole story simply by a single small reference.

Why? Because fairy tales, like Shakespeare, the Bible, mythology, and all other writing and telling, belong to the one big story, and because, since we were old enough to be read to or propped up in front of a television, we've been living on that story, and on its fairy variants. Once you've seen Bugs Bunny or Daffy Duck in a version of one of the classics, you pretty much own it as part of your consciousness. In fact, it will be hard to read the Brothers Grimm and not think Brothers Warner.

Doesn't that work out to be sort of ironic?

Absolutely. That's one of the best side effects of borrowing from any prior text. Irony, in various guises, drives a great deal of fiction and poetry, even when the work isn't overtly ironic or when the irony is subtle. Let's face it, these two clandestine lovers are hardly babes in the woods. But maybe they are. Socially out of their depth in this part of town. Morally misguided, perhaps. Lost and in danger. Ironically, their symbols of power—BMW, Rolex watch, money, expensive clothes—don't help them a bit and actually make them more vulnerable. Finding their way and avoiding the witch may be as hard for them as for the two pint-sized venturers of the original. So they don't have to push anyone into an oven, or leave a trail of crumbs, or break off and eat any of the siding. And they are probably far from innocent. Whenever fairy tales and their simplistic worldview crop up in connection with our complicated and morally ambiguous world, you can almost certainly plan on irony.

In the age of existentialism and thereafter, the story of lost children has been all the rage. Coover. Carter. John Barth. Tim

"Hansel and Gretel" or "Rapunzel." Okay, let's assume you're the writer. You have a young couple, maybe not children, and certainly not the children of the woodsman, and definitely not brother and sister. Let's say you have a pair of young lovers, and for whatever reason they're lost. Maybe their car broke down far from home; maybe there's no forest, but a city, all public housing high-rises. They've taken a wrong turn, suburban types with a BMW, and they're in a part of town that is wilderness as far as they're concerned. So they're lost, no cell phone, and maybe the only option turns out to be a crack house. What you've got in this hypothetical tale is a fairly dramatic setup that's already fraught with possibility. All perfectly modern. No woodcutter. No bread crumbs. No gingerbread. So why dredge up some moldy old fairy tale? What can it possibly tell us about this modern situation?

Well, what elements do you want to emphasize in your story? What feature of the plight of these young people most resonates for you? It might be the sense of lostness. Children too far from home, in a crisis not of their own making. Maybe the temptation: one child's gingerbread is another's drugs. Maybe it's having to fend for themselves, without their customary support network.

Depending on what you want to accomplish, you may choose some prior tale (in our case, "H&G") and emphasize what you see as corresponding elements in the two tales. It may be pretty simple, like the guy wishing they had a trail of bread crumbs because he missed a turn or two back there and doesn't know this part of town. Or the woman hoping this doesn't turn out to be the witch's house.

Here's the good deal for you as writer: You don't have to use the whole story. Sure, it has X, Y, and B, but not A, C, and Z. So what? We're not trying to re-create the fairy tale here. Rather, we're trying to make use of details or patterns, portions of some prior story (or, once you really start thinking like a pro-

O'Brien. Louise Erdrich. Toni Morrison. Thomas Pynchon. On and on and on. But you don't have to use "Hansel and Gretel" just because it's the flavor of the month. Or even of the last half century. "Cinderella" will always have her uses. "Snow White" works. Anything in fact with an evil queen or stepmother. "Rapunzel" has her applications; even the J. Geils Band mentions her. Something with a Prince Charming? Okay, but tough to live up to the comparison, so be prepared for irony.

I've been talking here as if you're the writer, but you know and I know that we're really readers. So how does this apply? For one thing, it has to do with how you attack a text. When you sit down to read a novel, you want character, story, ideas, the usual business. Then, if you're like me, you'll start looking for glimpses of the familiar: hey, that kind of feels like something I know. Oh wait, that's out of *Alice in Wonderland*. Now *why* would she draw a parallel to the Red Queen here? Is that the hole in the ground? *Why?* Always, *why?*

Here's what I think we do: we want strangeness in our stories, but we want familiarity, too. We want a new novel to be not quite like anything we've read before. At the same time, we look for it to be sufficiently like other things we've read so that we can use those to make sense of it. If it manages both things at once, strangeness and familiarity, it sets up vibrations, harmonies to go with the melody of the main story line. And those harmonies are where a sense of depth, solidity, resonance comes from. Those harmonies may come from the Bible, from Shakespeare, from Dante or Milton, but also from humbler, more familiar texts.

So next time you go to your local bookstore and carry home a novel, don't forget your Brothers Grimm.