"Little Red Riding Hood" as a Canadian Fairy Tale

PERRY NODELMAN

In another time and another place, our European ancestors made up the stories we call fairy tales to entertain each other. In doing so, they expressed their own values and described a world similar to the one they actually lived in. Our lives in Canada are far removed from theirs; but we still tell some of their stories. One of them is "Little Red Riding Hood"; in a number of years of teaching children's literature to university students, many of whom have lived all their lives in Manitoba, I have never found one who did not know this story, or who did know how he first came to know it.

In fact, and despite the many versions of it available in books, "Little Red Riding Hood" still has the characteristics of the oral tradition it emerged from. We remember it, even though it seems to have so little to do with our lives. It exists in our minds without attachment to specific experience, without memory of when or even how we first heard it. We still think it is worth telling, and we tell it without the aid of a printed text. And it continues to delight new audiences, especially young ones, no matter what specific words we tell it with.

These qualities are unusual. We rarely tell children the stories written especially for them without the aid of a printed text; while such stories ought to be more meaningful to us than the tales of our European ancestors, we seem to respect their literary origins, and realize that they lose their power over us when told in words different from the ones their authors chose. Nor do we remember and retell the stories that have emerged from and that describe the place we live in – the folk tales of native North Americans so beloved by Canadian publishers of children's books. Despite their oral characteristics, and contrary to the attempts of many Canadian writers to forge a distinct cultural identity out of a deeper consciousness of the land we live in, these North American tales have less to do with us than we assume they should.

Intrigued by the durability of "Little Red Riding Hood," I asked the students in my course in children's literature to write down the story as they would tell it to children. I had not mentioned "Little Red Riding Hood" before, and I had not told my students in advance that their class would be spent in this way. Yet all forty-one of them knew the story, and all but one wrote it without hesitation. Even the one exception told the story in some detail until Little Red talks to the wolf about his big teeth, and then wrote,

"I cannot for the life of me remember the ending."

But while my students all knew the story, they all told it a little differently. Both the variations in their versions and the similarities between them reveal much. They show the current condition of what has to be considered a genuine Canadian folk tale, a story told and remembered by Canadians. They also say much about our attitudes toward children, and, just as important, toward stories for children.

My students wrote in a room without windows, in the centre of a city, at least fifty miles from the nearest forest, and with the threat of snow in the air. But almost all of their versions of "Little Red Riding Hood" take place in a forest, on a warm, sunny day, "once upon a time." Their Little Reds live at great distances from other people, but close to wild animals, and their saviours are hunters and woodsmen, who usually carry no weapon more sophisticated than an axe. The one instance in which a lumberjack rescued Little Red elicited laughter when I reported it to the class. They felt it wrong for a North American, even an old-fashioned one, to appear in this story. The story still has its original setting – despite its apparent irrelevance to our lives.

Only two of my students were enough bothered by that to attempt a modernization of the story. Both of them showed they were conscious of a story different from the one they actually told, and both implied some discontent with the original. One says, "The reason she was called Little Red Riding Hood is that she hated red because it made her throw up," and describes an obnoxious youngster who has a temper tantrum when asked to visit Grandmother, but "agreed to go when her mother gave her five bucks." It turns out that Grandmother isn't home, having gone to play poker with the woodcutter; and the wolf wants Little Red's cookies, not Little Red herself. The other revised version, while less contemptuous of the original and less determined to subvert it, still insists on the contemporary relevance of its details; Little Red gets a telegram from Grandmother, takes a bus to her house, is saved by a construction worker, and is made at the end to listen to Grandmother "read aloud all the interesting articles in *People* magazine"; it is hard to determine if this is a reward or a punishment.

Since my students had frequently expressed the conviction that literature for children ought always to be immediately relevant to them – something they could "relate to" or "identify with" – I was surprised that so few of them tampered with "Little Red Riding Hood." But most contemporary versions of fairy tales are neither contemporary nor local; we seem unable to separate the events of the story from their original settings.

Perhaps those settings are not irrelevant after all. Citizens of a complex urban society, we value the primitive. We believe that the real truth about us resides in our unconscious, that our unconscious works the way the conscious minds of people in primitive societies worked, and that children,

who have not yet learned to be civilized, are more primitive than grownups. The products of minds more "primitive" than our own, fairy tales may be ideally suited to children, and memorable to grownups because they speak deep truths to our buried selves. Perhaps the forest world of tales like "Little Red Riding Hood" is recognizable and meaningful to us, even if we have never actually experienced anything like it.

Almost all of my students began their stories by saying "once," or, above all, "once upon a time." "Once upon a time" is certainly not now. Since this is *not* the world we live in, things can happen in it that do not happen in our world; savage beasts can confront little girls, and even eat them. Furthermore, we enjoy such things happening; we can forget our usual values and indulge a paradoxical but undeniable pleasure in horror. In carefully separating the world they describe from the one we usually experience, fairy tales may satisfy needs we are not conscious of, and would prefer not to be conscious of.

Since I suspect that to be true, I make no attempt to describe those needs. They belong to our buried selves, and our buried selves deserve their privacy. Critical attempts to define the psychological content of "Little Red Riding Hood" are interesting only because they contradict each other so much. Little Red is facing an Oedipal conflict, or a maturation process, or a fear of maleness; her hood represents lust or menstruation.[1] Some or all of these things may be true, but they are not helpful; and they are not helpful because they account for the otherworldliness of fairy tales only by turning them into something more immediately recognizable. If fairy tales depict a world different from the one we are usually conscious of, our critical obligation is to describe that world – not to show that it is really our own world in disguise. We gain nothing by turning a mysterious "once upon a time" into an all too familiar "now," except, perhaps, a dissipation of our pleasure in the mystery. I suspect my students understood that, when they preserved the otherworldliness of "Little Red Riding Hood."

Nevertheless, they were quite conscious of the fact that "once upon a time" is not now. Their versions of the story were obviously shaped by their ideas about what contemporary children ought to hear. And what children ought to hear now is quite different from what they were once allowed to hear.

In the first printed version of the story, Charles Perrault's "Le Petit Chaperon Rouge" of 1697, Little Red was eaten by the wolf, upon which the story immediately ended.[2] In the version of the story the Grimm brothers collected a century or so later, "Little Red Cap" was still eaten; but then a hunter came along, slit open the wolf, rescued both Little Red and her grandmother, and killed the wolf.[3] In the numerous versions of the story currently available in bookstores, Little Red is rarely eaten. Her cries bring a hunter or woodsman, who sometimes kills the wolf but usually just scares him off. Grandmother escapes death too; the wolf locks her in a

closet. In one version, she isn't even home when the wolf comes to call.[4]

Obviously the story has changed in relation to changing ideas about children. As the years have passed, we have become less willing to tell children about violent acts, and "Little Red Riding Hood" has turned into a story which threatens horror rather than one which describes it.

Like most contemporary printed versions, my students' "Little Red Riding Hoods" are reticent about violence. Some carry it to an extreme; rather than describe exactly what happens when Little Red is rescued, one says only that the woodcutter "took care of that Big Bad Wolf, who was never heard of again"; how he "took care" of him is not made clear. Furthermore, only ten of my students allowed the wolf to actually eat Little Red, and seven of those were obviously familiar with the Grimm version, and had a hunter rescue Little Red and then place stones in the wolf's stomach. One of the remaining three versions was incomplete, and the students who wrote the other two both told me afterwards that they had done some research and discovered the original Perrault story – and both said they were surprised by what they found. In the nineteen seventies, the death of a child in a children's story is alien to our ideas about children.

On the other hand, and unlike almost all the printed versions published in the last decade, more than half of my students killed off the wolf at the end; and almost half offered a graphic demonstration of the wolf's villainy by allowing him to eat Grandmother – a thing he rarely does in current printed versions. Even when Grandmother was merely locked in the closet, my students sometimes threatened something more. In one instance, the wolf "was about to eat [Grandmother] when he heard Little Red Riding Hood coming. So he stuffed her in the closet." And another wolf expresses some disappointment about discovering that Grandmother "is much too tough and boney to eat." In this respect, at least, my students' versions are closer to the original story than most printed versions are.

But while they are somewhat less reticent than printed texts, and somewhat more willing to let the true delicious horror of the story surface, my students' versions are still clearly governed by a fear of frightening children. A quarter of them do not even allow an earlier meeting between the wolf and Little Red in the forest, from which children who hear the story can come to understand and enjoy the enormity of the situation. In these versions, the wolf is astute enough to figure out Little Red's destination without even asking her; as one says, without much concern for logic, he "followed her and knew exactly where she was going."

Most of my students do report an earlier meeting with the wolf; but their treatment of it is surprising. If, as seems likely, we model our conception of Little Red's character on our ideas about children in general, her response to the presence of the wolf on the path might suggest why we are so

unwilling to describe violent events to children. For Little Red is almost always ignorant of the meaning of this scary encounter, or the danger it implies. She clearly needs protection, just as, apparently, the children who hear the story need to be protected from its inherent violence.

Sometimes, she is blissfully oblivious of bad possibilities. Perhaps "she had never seen a wolf before." Or perhaps she was, simply, "unafraid of the wolf." Even if she realizes the wolf is hungry, she does not realize what he is hungry for: "my granny is sick, and my mother packed those goodies for her. No-one can have them but granny." Most typically, my students leave Little Red's reaction to the wolf unclear; but only one is frightened, and she is just "a little scared."

Little Red's innocence is confirmed by her mother's instructions to her at the beginning of the story. When the mother in the Grimm version instructed her daughter not to leave the path, it was only because she was afraid the bottle of wine Little Red was carrying would be broken; she wasn't concerned about her daughter's vulnerability. But while many of my students' versions mention no instructions, the ones that do all imply the same thing – Little Red is exceedingly vulnerable.

Six mothers warn Little Red not to talk to strangers, one not to talk to "strange creatures," and one to watch out for "bad things" in the forest. Two give a specific warning about the wolf. Eleven express a more general fear about the forest, and tell Little Red not to dawdle, or to go straight to Grandmother's, or to stay on the path. These mothers are convinced that Little Red cannot look after herself.

Their fears are substantiated by the visual picture many of my students present of Little Red's innocence. Well over half of them insist that Little Red "skipped merrily" or "happily" or "gaily," or "skipped and hopped, hopped and skipped," or "scampered" down the forest path, and many of them have her sing as she does it. Some versions even suggest that it is Little Red's ignorance of the forest specifically that gets her into trouble. For the forest has two faces, a sensuous beauty that makes Little Red skip gaily, and a savagery represented by the wolf; and Little Red's blind appreciation of the one seems inevitably to bring her into contact with the other. As one version suggests, it was only after Little Red "got distracted by all the beautiful flowers" that "she met a big bad wolf." This is a parable about trusting nature too much, about being taken in, as another version has it, by "the sweet-smelly and seemingly innocent forest." For the innocence is only seeming; there is, inevitably, a savage beast "looming in the dark behind the trees."

If Little Red gets into trouble because of her innocence, she must be rescued by someone who knows better – a grownup. When Perrault told the story, and left Little Red unrescued, the meaning was clear; as the moral

verse he appended to his version suggests, she ought to have known better:

> Small wonder if these guileless young beginners
> Provide the wolf with some of his best dinners.[5]

This Little Red did not know how to look after herself, and she ought to have known. In providing a rescue, the version the Grimms collected confirmed Little Red's inability to look after herself; but it also suggested that, rather than learn to look after herself, she must learn to acknowledge her need of grownup protection. Little Red says herself, "Never again will I leave the path and run off into the wood when my mother tells me not to." Unlike Perrault's Little Red, she is allowed to continue in her vulnerability; but she is not allowed to maintain a blind trust either in herself or in the safety of her environment.

Surprisingly, my students' versions imply neither of these things. For them, it was not Little Red's faith in her own judgement that caused her trouble. For whether or not she takes the path, whether or not she talks to a wolf, whether or not she does what mother told her to do, the results are always the same; she faces disaster, and there is rarely any suggestion that she could have done anything to avoid it.

Consequently, even though Mother may offer Little Red a warning at the beginning, it seems to function more as an obligatory element in the pattern of the story than an attempt to make the story meaningful. None of my students show Little Red remembering the warning once she gets into the forest or deciding not to pay attention to it. And almost none of them offer a confirming moral statement at the end of the story – a message Little Red is conscious of learning. In one case, Little Red finally decides "never to stop on the way to Grandmother's house," and in another, we are told that "after this episode, Little Red Riding Hood went straight home without talking to strangers." But the story usually ends with no suggestion of moral significance. It seems that Little Red, and the children who read about her, are not required to learn anything from the experiences of the story, except, perhaps, that they are too young to learn anything, and should simply enjoy their blissful innocence, in the faith that grownups will always be around to keep them safe. In fact, one of my students even suggests that Mother was the one who needed to learn a lesson: "I don't think her mother will be too eager to send her out alone in the woods again."

Furthermore, a number of my students replace moral commentary of the Grimm sort with statements intended to create a sense of security for their audience. "They were forever rid of their terrible enemy the Big Bad Wolf," or "Little Red Riding Hood would never again be bothered by the Big Bad Wolf," or "from then on, the wolf never bothered them again, and

they all lived happily ever after." The significance of such endings is made especially clear by one of my students: "ever since, little boys and girls can walk alone in the forest and not feel scared." The story Perrault told to frighten children into a realization of the stupidity of innocence in a dangerous world has become a story about how grownups protect children from danger, and how children are free to be innocent in a world from which frightening elements have been eliminated. A surprising number of my students – almost half – end the story by saying that everyone lived happily ever after, as if this one encounter with a wolf were enough to keep all wolves away from the door forever.

A poll of my class revealed that most of the students thought Little Red Riding Hood was likely to be about eight years old; and given their knowledge of real children in the actual world around them, their defence of her right to be innocent might be surprising; most contemporary eight-year-olds are not so innocent, nor is the world so safe. In fact, some of my students *did* adjust the circumstances of the story in terms of their ideas about contemporary children. In eight versions, Little Red seems to have no mother, and decides to visit her grandmother all by herself; obviously there is no-one around to warn her about the dangers of the forest. But these Little Reds need no warning, for as it turns out, they are quite capable of looking after themselves. One of them "pulled Granny out of the closet and quickly shut the door, locking in the Big Bad Wolf." Another "hit him on the head with the picnic basket, and he ran away," and another even gets an axe and "chopped the wolf to death." A less exuberant Little Red simply "managed to escape and run back to town to tell her mother."

It is appropriate that the last Little Red lives in town; her character is more like those of contemporary children than most of the Little Reds my students described. The surprising thing is that so few of my students made such things happen. Apparently, the story's original values are, like its original setting, an important part of what makes it memorable to us. It remains entertaining only when its integrity is not distorted by attempts to make it more meaningful or relevant to contemporary audiences – at least not distorted too much.

In fact, the most distinctive quality of my students' versions of "Little Red Riding Hood" is that they simply do not make much sense. For the most part, the events of the story are merely reported, without any obvious attempt to make them meaningful in moral or intellectual terms. What meaning they have is implied rather than stated; it probably derives from attitudes being unconsciously expressed, and is not deliberate. Furthermore, my students report the events of the story with little concern for logic. Almost none of them bother to explain why the wolf didn't simply eat Little Red when he first saw her in the forest, instead of developing his elaborate and unnecessary scheme. In the Perrault version, the wolf noticed

some "faggotmakers" nearby, and was afraid they would hear him; my students' wolves never realize how easily they could have what they want.

Yet for the most part, their versions still work as stories. The series of events that describe a day in the life of Little Red Riding Hood are entertaining even when they are separated from the meaning Perrault gave them, or the quite different meaning they have in the Grimm version; in fact, commentators on fairy tales frequently suggest that one, or the other, or both of these versions are distorted by the prejudices of Perrault or the Grimms, and that the "real" "Little Red Riding Hood" has never been written down. In their lack of viewpoint, my students' versions may come closer to that "real" tale than Perrault or the Grimms did.

At least some of my students must have read versions of "Little Red Riding Hood" that offered moral instruction; they have remembered the story, and forgotten the instruction. It is clearly not the instruction that makes the story memorable, no more than it is the story's contemporaneity. And given the variety of different ways my students told it, it is certainly not the magic of carefully chosen words that gives the story its power. While it is easy to say that the story satisfies unconscious needs, it is not easy to come to grips with how it does so; "Little Red Riding Hood" can be changed in many ways and still be satisfying.

But a few elements do remain the same from version to version. They are in Perrault, they are in Grimm, they are in current printed versions, and they are in my students' versions. I can only assume that these are the things about the story that really matter: an opening sentence containing the phrase "once upon a time" or some variation thereof; the information that Little Red wears red, lives in a cottage, and has a sick grandmother on the other side of the forest; a basket of food for Grandmother as a rationale for Little Red's trip; a picture of Little Red "skipping merrily" and meeting a wolf, who then runs off to Grandmother's house and disposes of her; and above all, a conversation between Little Red and the wolf, which is the same in version after version, and ends in this way:

> "Grandmother, what big teeth you have."
> "The better to eat you with," said the wolf.

I suspect that we remember the rest of the story in order to have the opportunity to repeat these words; they almost never vary, while everything else does, and this is usually the only conversation actually quoted in the story. Furthermore, after the conversation has been reported, consistency disappears. My students dispose of Little Red and the wolf in many different ways, and as I mentioned earlier, one of them did not even remember the rest of the story after this climactic point, even though she had quoted the discussion of the wolf's physiognomy word for word.

A clear consideration of the small list of persistent elements makes one thing clear. The essence of this story is its pattern of terror, its contrast in scene after scene between the innocent vulnerability of a child in a dark and savage world and the awful horror of a despicable, savage beast with no respect for innocence. The contrast comes to a climax when innocence does not even know what "great big teeth" are for.

Whether Little Red is saved from the wolf or not, whether the wolf dies or not, whether the presentation of events is logical or not, the story engenders horror, and then finds a way of coping with it. The ways of coping are many, and account for the changes in the meaning of the story; the horror is always the same. It is the horror we find memorable, and, apparently, pleasurable.

As I suggested earlier, that may be for reasons known only to our buried selves. Or it may be because the story allows us to indulge in illicit pleasures that we find objectionable in reality, that it has a cathartic effect on us. It may be simply because we like to be scared. But if a version of "Little Red Riding Hood" does not attempt to scare us, it is not doing its job.

If that is true, then one can do whatever one wants with the story, as long as one preserves the significant elements. This point is made best, perhaps, by the obviously unnecessary details my students provide at various points in the story. For instance, they fill Little Red's basket with every sort of food: chicken soup, chicken sandwiches, chocolate cake, cookies, fresh fruit, jam, freshly baked bread, popcorn, wine, every sort of "good things to eat" and "delicious tidbits."

They invent other irrelevant details also. Some turn Little Red into a fashion-plate, charming in a calculated way: "she put on her red-checked blouse with a red velvet jumper. She pulled on some pretty white socks and then her red patent shoes. And finally she draped a brilliant red cape over her shoulders to keep herself warm." Others say nothing about her clothes at all. Some go to great lengths to describe the forest flowers; others say nothing about them at all. A surprising number make an unconscious borrowing from the Walt Disney version of "The Three Little Pigs," and turn the wolf into a "Big Bad Wolf," while others simply call him insulting names: "ugly," "old," "huge," "evil-looking," "ferocious," "mangy," "very mean," "a strange-looking creature with horrible fangs and noxious breath."

But most, in fact, simply call him a wolf. And that is important. Like most of the Grimm tales in their original versions, and unlike most printed versions of "Little Red Riding Hood," most of my students did not add many details to their versions. The authors of printed versions explain everything from the nature of Grandmother's illness ("she is running short of the good things in life. But she's too proud to mention the fact")[6] to the

contents of the song Little Red sang ("it was a funny little song about a Squirrel in a Top Hat and a Hedgehog which had lost all its prickly spines.")[7] And they frequently turn the wolf into a clumsy oaf, whose encounter with Grandmother's nightgown is more comical than terrifying. My students take a much more matter-of-fact attitude toward the events they describe. They simply tell the story without apology for, explanation of, or excitement about its oddities. Yet once more, their versions are closer to the folk roots of the story than most printed versions are. Given time, some of them may have added their own unnecessary details. Not given time, they told the story more or less as it has always been told.

Finally, then, my students' versions reveal nothing more significant than that "Little Red Riding Hood" still maintains the qualities of the oral tradition it sprang from. Despite the sizable number of printed versions, despite our distance from the world it describes and our attempts to change or distort its meaning, this story still operates for us as a folk tale.

The fascinating thing is that it is "Little Red Riding Hood" and a small number of other European fairy tales that have this power over us, not *Stuart Little* or *Jacob Two-Two Meets the Hooded Fang*, and not the legends of Glooscap the Indian or Agayk the Eskimo. We may enjoy these stories; we do not remember and retell them as we do fairy tales. Apparently these tales still speak to us in a special way. Why this should be so is unclear, the important thing is that it is so. Margaret Atwood says, "Fairy tales do not examine themselves. They just *are*, they *exist*. They are stories that people want to hear . . . . You can ask all sorts of questions about *why* people wish to hear these particular stories, but popular art itself does not ask these questions. It merely repeats the story."[8]

And so, surrounded by open prairie, we are still gripped by the dark forest. We still want to tell about the wolf, and we still want to hear about him. We still repeat the story – even if, as is the case for most of us, we have never seen a wolf.

NOTES

[1]Psychological interpretations of "Little Red Riding Hood" can be found in Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Knopf, 1976), Eric S. Rabkin, *The Fantastic in Literature* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), and Lee Burns, "Red Riding Hood," *Children's Literature* 1 (1972), 37-41.

[2]The first English version of the story is reprinted in Iona and Peter Opie, *The Classic Fairy Tales* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).

[3]*Grimm's Tales for Young and Old*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1977), pp. 98-101.

[4]*Bedtime Stories*, illus. Tibor Gergely (New York: Golden, 1972).

[5]The moral, not present in *Classic Fairy Tales*, can be found in Margery Fisher, *Intent Upon Reading* (London: Brockhampton, 1964), p. 75.

[6]R.C. Scriven, *My Fairy Tale Cookbook* (Peter Lowe, 1974).

[7]Jane Carruth, *The Sleeping Beauty and Other Fairy Tales* (London: Hamlyn, 1975).

[8]Linda Sandler, "Interview with Margaret Atwood," *Malahat Review* 41 (1977), 10.

Perry Nodelman teaches children's literature and recent literature at the University of Winnipeg. He is Associate Editor of the Children's Literature Association Quarterly.