

NESCBWI 2015 Conference Workshop

Something Borrowed, Something New: Mining Myths, Legends, and Fairy Tales to Write Fantasy

Presented by Katie L. Carroll (<http://www.katielcarroll.com>)

Quotes from Authors and Recommended Reading

Retellings:

- **Robin McKinley** (<http://www.robinmckinley.com/>) – *Beauty, Rose Daughter, Spindle's End*
Essay on the author's website "The Story Behind *Rose Daughter*"
(http://www.robinmckinley.com/essays/essay_rosedaughter.php)

"Beauty and the Beast has been my favourite fairy-tale since I was about six; I still have the book I first read it in. When I wrote *Beauty*, I sat down, as I thought, to write a short story, and found I had more to say than I expected."

"Beauty and the Beast is still my favourite fairy-tale...it was the only fairy-tale around that didn't have the heroine waiting limply to be rescued by the hero."

"I wrote *Rose Daughter*, as I say, in a six-month hurtle. And in hindsight I realize what fueled the hurtle, why, having tapped into a new lode of Beauty and the Beast in my mind and heart and bloodstream, the story shaped itself and shot out onto the page as it did. It is my grief for the loss of my little lilac-covered cottage in Maine. It's as if my lost home has given me a last gift: this book. It's as if my old American life and my new English life have wound themselves together — *and from her heart a red, red rose, and from his heart a briar* — and produced *Rose Daughter* between them."

- **Gail Carson Levine** (<http://www.gailcarsonlevine.com/>) – *Ella Enchanted, Fairest, Ever*
Author's website (<http://www.gailcarsonlevine.com/ella.html>)

"I wrote [*Ella Enchanted*] because I love fairy tales and I'd just read *Beauty* by Robin McKinley, which I admired enormously."

"I was starting a new writing class and needed an idea, so I thought maybe I could expand a fairy tale too. "Cinderella" is such an important tale, it's the first one I thought of. But when I considered it, I realized I didn't like Cinderella or understand her. She's so disgustingly good! And why does she take orders from her horrible stepmother and stepsisters?"

- **Malinda Lo** (<http://www.malindalo.com/>) – *Ash, Huntress*
Interview on Cynsations
(<http://cynthialeitichsmith.blogspot.com/2009/09/new-voice-malinda-lo-on-ash.html>)

"Ash has gotten a lot of attention because it is a lesbian retelling of Cinderella. But my first draft had nothing gay about it--Ash, the main character, fell in love with the prince."

“After I got some feedback from a friend, I realized that Ash was actually much more interested in one of the female characters, the huntress. That realization was startling to me; I had written all of that into the story without even consciously knowing it.”

“I decided, through many drafts (on my own and with the help of my editor), that the world of Ash does not contain homophobia. People in this world simply love whomever they love.”

“That enabled me to write Ash as a true fairy tale, rather than a coming-out story. Ash simply falls in love with her Prince Charming--in her case, this person just happens to be a woman.”

- **Mary Waibel** (<http://marywaibel.blogspot.com/>) – *Quest of the Hart*, *Charmed Memories*, *The Mystery Prince*
E-mail from author

“*Quest of the Hart*...the first book in the Princess of Valendria series, is a reverse Sleeping Beauty. This story all started when a friend suggested I write a book where the girly-girl saves the guy. While thinking about how to adapt this idea, I kept thinking of the princess in the tower needing rescue, and Sleeping Beauty popped into my mind. I pulled out my DVD, sat down with pen and paper, and jotted down the sequence of how things happened in the Disney version. Armed with a plan, I started working on my own version, and *Quest of the Hart* was born.”

“*Charmed Memories*, started out as a twist on Mark Twain’s *The Prince and the Pauper*. I never intended to borrow from another fairy tale in it, and it wasn’t until someone messaged me and said, {SPOILER ALERT} “This is a twist on The Little Mermaid, isn’t it?” that I realized what I’d done.”

“I think it’s important to incorporate as many elements of the original story as you can, but give your own spin to them. For example, In Sleeping Beauty, Aurora is pricked by the spindle and the spell is cast. In *Quest of the Hart*, Devlin is cut by a magic dagger and the spell is cast.”

“...make a twist. I tend to reverse roles. Have the princess go on the quest, do the dangerous stuff the guy usually does.”

“Of course, a fairy tale isn’t complete without a Happy-Ever-After (and this is probably why I love them so much.) No matter what improbable odds are stacked against them at the beginning...or what obstacles are thrown in their paths...the characters will be together at the end.”

- **Rosamund Hodge** (<http://www.rosamundhodge.net/>) – *Cruel Beauty*, *Crimson Bound*
Interview on the Enchanted Inkpot
(<http://enchantedinkpot.blogspot.com/2014/07/interview-with-rosamund-hodge-author-of.html>)

“...crazy potpourri is one of my favorite styles of writing—and the spark was realizing how some of the legends were connected.”

“True confession time: when I was a child, I actually was not a big fan of Beauty and the Beast. I liked it just fine, but it felt like nothing special to me. (Heresy, I know.) What I did love was the

Greco-Roman myth of Cupid and Psyche. Briefly—an oracle tells the king he has to sacrifice his daughter to a “monster.” But the daughter, Psyche, isn’t devoured by a beast as she expects; instead, the wind carries her to a strange palace with invisible servants who tell her that she is a bride. And every night her husband comes to visit her—but he forbids her to see his face. When her jealous sisters persuade her light a candle anyway, she discovers that he’s Cupid, the god of love. But because she broke his command, he becomes a prisoner of his mother Venus, and Psyche must complete a series of impossible tasks—ultimately going to the Underworld—in order to free him.”

“I read the fairy tale *East of the Sun, West of the Moon*, which is basically a half-and-half mix of *Beauty and the Beast* with *Cupid and Psyche*. (The girl marries a polar bear, who turns out to be an enchanted prince trying to escape the princess of trolls.) Suddenly I realized that all three stories were the *same* story, working itself out in different ways. That was when *Beauty and the Beast* became truly interesting to me, and that was the birth of *Cruel Beauty*.”

Interview on Epic Reads

(<http://www.epicreads.com/blog/cover-reveal-cruel-beauty-by-rosamund-hodge/>)

“What I love the most about myths and fairy tales is how you are never just reading a story. You are reading the hundredth iteration of a story that’s been told for thousands of years. And when stories are told and retold for that long, they acquire a life of their own. They follow a peculiar, dream-like logic that doesn’t always make sense, but feels like it *would* make sense if you could just peel back a few more versions of the story. You can feel the bones beneath the skin. You look at the story, and it looks back at you.”

“And a good fairy tale retelling taps into that sense of story-behind-story. It feels inevitable. You read it and you think, *Yes, obviously, this is what happened. This is what it means.* Writing a fairy tale retelling feels like discovery, not invention. Why did I combine *Beauty and the Beast* with *Bluebeard*? Because I was thinking about those stories one day and I realized, *Beauty* married the *Beast* in order to kill him. She’s afraid she will die like his previous wives. That’s what happened. How else could it be?”

Mythology:

- **Rick Riordan** (<http://www.rickriordan.com/home.aspx>) – Percy Jackson and the Olympians series, Kane Chronicles
Interview on author’s website
(<http://www.rickriordan.com/about-rick/an-interview-with-rick.aspx>)

“My son Haley asked me to tell him some bedtime stories about the Greek gods and heroes. I had taught Greek myths for many years at the middle school level, so I was glad to comply. When I ran out of myths, he was disappointed and asked me if I could make up something new with the same characters.”

“I thought about it for a few minutes. Then I remembered a creative writing project I used to do with my sixth graders — I would let them create their own demigod hero, the son or daughter of any god they wanted, and have them describe a Greek-style quest for that hero. Off the top of my head, I made up Percy Jackson and told Haley all about his quest to recover Zeus’ lightning bolt in modern day America. It took about three nights to tell the whole story, and when I was done, Haley told me I should write it out as a book.”

- **Megan Whalen Turner** (<http://meganwhalenturner.org/>) – The Queen’s Thief series
Interview on Enchanted Inkpot (<http://enchantedinkpot.livejournal.com/50628.html>)

“Those gods [in *The Thief*] were inspired most strongly, I think, by the Undying in Diana Wynne Jones's *Dalemark Quartet*. I read *Drowned Ammet* and *Spell Coats* and came away feeling that the mythology in those books must have been based on one somewhere in the real world, but as far as I know, they weren't. I wanted to create a mythology that felt as real. Moreover, I wanted to do it with a female in charge of my pantheon. I knew it would be difficult to make my gods and goddesses so conventional that they seemed real while there was this one glaringly unconventional aspect that might disturb my illusion. I measure my success by the number (the increasingly disturbing number) of reviews that mention the Myths of the Greek Gods included my books. You can measure my concern by the increasingly frantic author's notes in which I say, Fiction Here! All Made Up! TOTALLY FABRICATED!”

- **Kelly Hashway** (<http://www.kellyhashway.com/>) – Touch of Death series
Email from author

“My free short story, *Curse of Death*, is actually the myth behind the Touch of Death series. I came across this lesser-known myth about Medusa while I was research Ophiuchus for another book. The two are connected because the Goddess Athena gave Ophiuchus two vials of Medusa’s blood as a gift. I looked deeper into this and discovered that in one myth, Medusa was actually the victim in a dispute between Athena and Poseidon. Medusa was persuaded by Poseidon because she was so beautiful. Since he was a god, she couldn’t refuse, but the goddess Athena was secretly in love with Poseidon and when she caught Poseidon and Medusa together in her temple, she cursed Medusa, turning her into the monster that most know her as today. I wanted to show Medusa in a different light because I felt she was wrongfully cursed. The Touch of Death series emerged from there.”

- **Suzanne Collins** (<http://www.suzannecollinsbooks.com/>) – *The Hunger Games* trilogy, *The Underland Chronicles*
Interview for *School Library Journal* (<http://www.slj.com/2008/09/authors-illustrators/a-killer-story-an-interview-with-suzanne-collins-author-of-the-hunger-games/#>)

“[*The Hunger Games* is] very much based on the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, which I read when I was eight years old. I was a huge fan of Greek and Roman mythology. As punishment for displeasing Crete, Athens periodically had to send seven youths and seven maidens to Crete, where they were thrown into the labyrinth and devoured by the Minotaur, which is a monster that’s half man and half bull. Even when I was a little kid, the story took my breath away, because it was so cruel, and Crete was so ruthless.”

“The message is, mess with us and we’ll do something worse than kill you—we’ll kill your children. And the parents sat by apparently powerless to stop it. The cycle doesn’t end until Theseus volunteers to go, and he kills the Minotaur. In her own way, Katniss...is a futuristic Theseus. But I didn’t want to do a labyrinth story. So I decided to write basically an updated version of the Roman gladiator games.”

- **Hilari Bell** (<http://www.hilaribell.com/>) – Farsala series
Email from author

“I stole...ah, used part of the old Persian myth of Rostam in my Farsala books. This trilogy has three POV characters, and after the army of their (vaguely) ancient Persian country is wiped out by (vaguely) Roman conquerors, they have to organize a resistance and fight off the invading army themselves.”

“The part of the of myth of Rostam (or Rustam, or a couple of other variant spellings) that I borrowed can be briefly summarized as: The heroic warrior goes to a parlay with the enemy, and the daughter of the enemy leader takes one look at Rostam and goes, “Mmmm. Hubba hubba.” They boink, the negotiations fall apart, and Rostam departs before she even finds out that she’s pregnant. She never tells anyone who her son’s real father is. When the child is in teens, Rostam and his son, Sohrab, meet in battle and the father slays his son. The truth comes out, and there’s a lot of drama and angst.”

“...the myth of Rostam and Sorahb made an amazing springboard for my own continuance of the story—and also really helped me set up my Farsalans, based on—but emphatically not—ancient Persia.”

History:

- **Ellen Oh** (<http://www.ellenoh.com/>) – *Prophecy, Warrior, King*
Interview on Bookslut (http://www.bookslut.com/features/2013_01_019776.php)

“I chose ancient Korea for two specific reasons: the first was just practical -- I couldn't find anything like a fantasy adventure story set in ancient Korea in libraries or bookstores; the second was more personal -- ancient Korea was such a fascinating, turbulent time with kingdoms changing, collapsing, being taken over, dealing with amazing politics and endless intrigue. But the specific moment I realized I had to write about ancient Korea was when I read a Genghis Khan biography and came to a point in the book when the Mongols invade Korea, and the entire royal court flees to Ganghwa Island (which is at the mouth of the Han River), where the Mongols aren't able to cross the river to get to them. The Korean leaders are out there laughing, while the poor peasants are getting raped and killed by the Mongols. And then the royals, who've been safe and sound in their island fortress, come back to tax the hell out of the peasants and steal all their food. All those layered dynamics between the haves and have-nots were just so visual, interesting, and ultimately inspiring to me. That was feudal society at its best -- from my perspective as someone who's interested in the history -- and at its worst -- from a human perspective because you really see the worst of what people in power do to their citizens. And through it all, the common peasants endure and survive.”

- **Robin LaFevers** (<http://www.robinlafevers.com/>) – His Fair Assassin series
Interview on Enchanted Inkpot (<http://enchantedinkpot.blogspot.com/2012/04/interview-with-robin-lafevers-of-grave.html>)

“Weaving the historical with the fantastical is one of my favorite pastimes. This is especially true since one of my fascinations with history revolves around the spiritual mysteries and mythology of the time period.”

“About 80% of the book is based on true historical fact—the duchess, her family, her suitors, her councilors—all plucked from the actual history of the time. However, the political intrigue and backstabbing that went on in real life was actually about *double* what it was in the book.... The hard part was pruning it back so that the political and historical elements didn’t swamp Ismae’s story. It was hard because it was all so interesting! Ultimately, I had to decide what was most important to the core story of Ismae’s journey. But the original *dramatis personae* had about twice as many names on it, which should give you an idea of how complicated the first draft was.”

Folktales/Ballads:

- **Grace Lin** (<http://www.gracelin.com/>) – *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon*
Interview on Paper Tigers blog (<http://www.papertigers.org/wordpress/blog-tour-welcome-grace-lin/#more-6004>)

“While I did not write *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon* as an attempt to create an Asian Dorothy, it is probably one of the reasons why I felt so strongly that the main character needed to be a girl and why this book is an Asian-inspired fantasy (a story influenced by my Asian-American values rather than an attempt at a traditional Chinese tale).”

“*Where the Mountain Meets the Moon* is very, very loosely based on the Chinese folktale “Olive Lake,” Aside from adding many layers and changing plot points, I also changed the main character from an adult male to the girl, Minli. In some ways it may have been easier to leave the character male; I would not have had to worry about how I bent /ignored some Chinese customs that inhibit women — like the fact that there is no foot binding, for example. But I very much wanted the main character to be a girl, a strong and brave and clever girl who (now that you mention it) was someone I would’ve wanted to pretend that I was as I child.”

- **Nancy Werlin** (<http://www.nancywerlin.com/>) – *Impossible, Extraordinary, Unthinkable*
Interview on Librarianly Blonde <http://blogs.bccls.org/carlie/index.php/?archives/157-Interview-Nancy-Werlin-and-her-Impossible-talent.html>

“I first began thinking about [*Impossible*] well over ten years ago. At the time I didn't think of it as having fantasy elements, but as a technological puzzle novel. I'd been listening to the Simon & Garfunkel version of the song "Scarborough Fair," and it struck me that the singing lover was making impossible demands. I thought, "He's angry at her; he won't ever forgive her," and I wondered why. What had she done? Later I discovered that this was only one version of an old ballad with many versions, none of which answered my questions but some of which -- the Elfin Knight branch of the song -- specified an unearthly rather than a human lover making the demands. Now, that was interesting!”

“Now, after the fact, I believe I was really inspired to begin writing by the novel's central question: What is true love? That interested me even more deeply than the puzzles. I've grown used to the fact that all my books dwell on questions or themes that I'm trying to figure out for myself. Normally I don't come to conscious realization of the central question or theme is until the book is done.”