



Gossip from the Forest

Sara Maitland

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Fairytales are one of our earliest and most vital cultural forms, and forests one of our most ancient and primal landscapes. Both evoke a similar sensation in us — we find them beautiful and magical, but also spooky, sometimes horrifying.

In this fascinating book, Maitland argues that the two forms are intimately connected: the mysterious secrets and silences, gifts and perils of the forests were both the background and the source of fairytales. Yet both forests and fairy stories are at risk and their loss deprives us of our cultural lifeblood. Maitland visits forests through the seasons, from the exquisite green of a beechwood in spring, to the muffled stillness of a snowy pine wood in winter. She camps with her son Adam, whose beautiful photographs are included in the book; she takes a barefoot walk through Epping Forest with Robert Macfarlane; she walks with a mushroom expert through an oak wood, and with a miner through the Forest of Dean. Maitland ends each chapter with a unique, imaginative re-telling of a fairystory.

Written with Sara's wonderful clarity and conversational grace, *Gossip from the Forest* is a magical and unique blend of nature writing, history and imaginative fiction.

Gossip from the Forest Details

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From Reader Review *Gossip from the Forest* for online ebook

Andrea says

This is well written, often lyrical. It is full of fascinating information I didn't know about the forests I love, a richness of lore about trees and their ongoing, shifting relationship with human beings. It's interspersed with delightfully re-told (but unreconstructed) fairy tales, as well as more about fairy tales themselves. It was sometimes close to five stars.

Still, it consistently referred to a 'we' that I found profoundly alienating. Disturbing. I would read along happily about coppicing and then jolt awkwardly, hitting a wall of unshared assumptions. Partly this had to do with its middle-classness, but more disturbingly to some idea of Germanic Britishness having some kind of deep ancestral connection to forests and the fairytales that she claims comes with them. I don't think it was really thought through, but it could go some ugly places. With an English mother and a passport I suppose I could lay claim to some of this feeling if I tried hard, but I don't want to. I don't want to belong to a European 'we'. I look around Brixton and see no place for it, and I'd be glad to see it go forever. Forests are wonderful and magical without that. You can see the obvious ties to some of the fairy tales she describes, but I don't think we need to make everyone read fairytales for them to appreciate the forest, or want to care for and keep it. I understand the plea, but I think I'm rather with some of the feminists on my lack of love for stories that make us ache to be beautiful on the outside so we can be loved, where princesses can kill off their suitors and still be desired, where a man will cut off the head of his faithful horse to feed some talking ravens and be rewarded. I do like kindness and hard work, but in most of those stories there's too much other shit to put up with.

I also quite like the monstrous, the grotesque, the ugly, the weird, the things that don't fit that fairytales seem to put in their place. Usually violently.

The other odd thing, tied in to this almost royal 'we', is a weird determinism she grants to landscape. She says at one point 'Efficient slave cultures need open land: it has to be difficult to run away.' I almost stopped reading right there, maybe I should have. Her example is Egypt, and I think she must not have kept up with the new research showing that those massive wonderful stone creations along the Nile were almost certainly not in fact built by slave labour. Nor does she seem to have grasped Britain's long history of slave owning based in British cities and colonised tropical areas, such as once-forested islands deforested to plant sugar cane, and the once forested American South. They had their share of slave-labour demolition as well. A casual statement like that really has no place in any books at all.

The more I write, the more I worry...these issues of identity and blood and tales and forests struck me most in the beginning but they were fuzzy, I've given them more clarity here and so they disturb me more. Perhaps I've got it wrong. I skimmed through them as I almost always finish what I have started, and came out the other side. I enjoyed much of the middle. I have new forests I can't wait to visit. But I don't think I got it wrong. Maybe this should have been three stars or none.

Arielle Walker says

I don't know why it took me so long to finish this one. It's beautifully written, informative yet succinct, and even lyrical at times. I found it absorbing, engaging, even read aloud excitedly (to whoever poor sod was

nearby at the time) at more than a few points. And then I hit the last few chapters and stalled completely, and it seemed to drag from there. Nothing had changed, maybe it was a case of "it's not you, it's me" - or maybe you truly can have too much of a good thing?

Regardless, it's a fantastic book. I'd actually love to hear it aloud sometime (instead of inflicting my own readings on other people, that is).

Barb in Maryland says

I finally threw in the towel at about the 3/4 point. I so wanted to like it and I was very interested in the premise.

Maybe if I had read it a chapter a day (or every few days) I wouldn't have become bored...

The pure forestry bits were fascinating, especially the bits about the New Forest, Epping Forest and the Forest of Dean. However, it took the author several chapters to explain key terms such as 'pollard' and 'coppice'; I had to resort to dear ole' Wikipedia for definitions. Her theory about the ties between forests and the fairy tales of Northern Europe was also interesting; but the author nattered on just a bit too much, telling us the same sort of thing over and over.

The retelling of individual fairy tales was hit or miss for me; some of her versions seemed to be the antithesis of the point she had been trying to make. (and so often the POV character of her version did NOT get the happy ending which, in her version, they deserved).

Big disappointment.

Skye says

A great concept - exploring the relationship between woods and fairy tales. Maitland has introduced me to many woods (and books about woods) which I look forward to exploring. Unfortunately, it was poorly edited, had a tendency to repetition and limited research leading to some factual errors. I was most irritated that, while writing almost exclusively about British woods, she completely ignored British fairy tales in favour of the Grimm's collection. A nice introduction, rather than a work of erudition.

Sharman Russell says

Dipping into this book was like sitting on a creek bank and dabbling bare feet into the cool water. Pleasant and refreshing. Only the creek was in my own house and somehow my Kindle was involved.

Travis Bursik says

I have an interest in folklore and really wanted to like this. She spends each chapter writing some hippie earth-mother bullshit about a forest and then tells a fairy tale. Repeat. That's it. No insight, no analysis, just overwrought, florid, breathless wankery.

Sienna says

This book at the intersection of forests and fairy tales has so much potential. It alternates between authorial forays into nature and re-tellings of familiar stories, and contains a meander through the not-so-wilds of Epping Forest with Robert Macfarlane, author of my favorite read last year. There are some wonderful tidbits on history and storytelling and the environment. Did you know that most land plants are dual organisms? Fascinating. I should love it. But I don't, and the title hints at one of the main reasons for my antipathy.

Gossip from the Forest is heavy on conjecture and disappointingly light on research, favoring speculation over thoughtful analysis. Lines like this frustrated me:

Based on no real evidence beyond anecdote, I believe that the beech is the species that people are most likely to be able to identify on sight, and the one which is most often named as their 'favourite' tree.

Maitland's knowledge of British woodland seems to derive almost exclusively from Oliver Rackham, and with respect to the Grimm brothers she acknowledges her debt to the work of Jack Zipes. I've no doubt that both are authorities in their respective fields, but this book would have benefited from an exploration of their footnotes and works cited. Why not dip into JSTOR or Project Muse or drop by the local library to see what folklorists and anthropologists and ecologists and archeologists and sociologists other -ists are saying about forests and fairy tales, or hit up the Internet Archive for not-so-recent views on the wildwood. Maybe this is my inner academic talking, or writing, but if I have a question or a hunch I want to see what other people have to say on the subject to gauge whether my idea is rooted in ignorance or naivety or is really something worth pursuing and sharing.

There's a lack of precision here that bothers me, as when Maitland argues that the "whole tradition of storytelling is endangered by modern technology." What she means (I think) is the oral tradition of storytelling. But this statement neglects the role, for instance, of said technology in record-keeping and sharing. I'm reminded of a college friend who spent her childhood moving from one tiny Central American village to the next. Her linguist parents created makeshift records on which they recorded the dialect unique to each place. Homemade turntables! I think they'd find it a bit easier now. Last month, I used an iPod to record my grandfather's experiences with atomic testing in the middle of the last century. This is all to say that, sure, modern technology is changing the way we share stories. So did the development of written language and the invention of the printing press. I'm not convinced that our desire to tell and hear stories will die out as a result, though, just... change.

We also get claims about scholarship — "Feminist criticism has interpreted fairy stories as inherently sexist" — with no supporting footnotes. (I can't count the number of pleading notes for references I wrote in response to various assertions. "Reference?" soon turned into "Do some effing research!") What footnotes Maitland has written often veer into weirdly personal territory or continue to omit external sources, as in these successive points from Chapter 3:

4. *I say 'almost because I was also influenced by having spent a very happy weekend here many years before in a little cottage deep in the woods, with my friends Sabine Butzlaff and Alan Green.*

5. *In the very earliest version of Robin Hood, he was not in fact a nobleman at all, but a 'yeoman'. His steady elevation through the ranks of British culture for 600 years rather emphasises my point.*

Writing an enjoyable, thoroughly *readable* work of popular history while maintaining a reasonable degree of scholarly analysis is a delicate balancing act, but it's not impossible. Maitland's friend Macfarlane, for instance, wears his erudition lightly. But it feels as though *Gossip from the Forest* was written over the course of a relatively short period, cringing beneath the ever-lengthening shadow of an inflexible deadline and unable to pursue any of the interesting avenues it passes by. Maitland may be a skilled, talented writer — I highlighted a number of beautiful lines and passages — and is probably a really lovely person. I feel terrible writing such a grumpy review. It's just that, for me, the issues mentioned above combined with poor editing and some awkward phrasing made it impossible to feel any hint of the magic I'd expected from such a book. You may have better luck. I hope so.

Chris says

Sara Maitland can write beautifully about nature. Some of the passages in this book describing trees are wonderful.

However, it is not really about the sub-title. And quite frankly, just read Zipes who Maitland draws heavily on. Most of her "facts" are guesses and sometimes she is just plain wrong. I'm sorry but there are books out there about the forest in the fairy tale besides this one.

Josie says

I was reading this book in public when a stranger came up to me and asked me what I thought of it. "Well," I said tactfully, in case she liked it or was actually the author's niece or something, "I think I would prefer it if she'd done a bit more research..."

It turned out my random stranger hated this book too. Bonding over a good book is nice, but mutual bashing of a bad book is infinitely more fun. So we had an enjoyable conversation where we both agreed that Sara Maitland is a barefooted hippie and that *Gossip From The Forest* is nothing more than Maitland's vague nonsensical ramblings on how beautiful bluebells are, and how terrifying mushrooms are. I'm not even kidding:

I had come to tackle my sense of terror through another phenomenon of the forests -- much smaller, more commonplace, and absolutely real -- which can also give me the same strange shiver of fear as the dream of wolves and as the fairy stories themselves, a sense of being in the

presence of something eerie: fungi.

Seriously? It's a fucking mushroom. Get over yourself.

ANYWAY. The only saving grace of this book was that I did like most of the retold fairytales. But since the bulk of the book is Maitland's own opinions presented as facts... yeah. :| Also, her constant references to evil stepmothers really got on my nerves. I thought it was generally accepted that a lot of evil stepmothers were actually mothers in the original tales?

Mark Hartzler says

I wanted to like this more than I did, but despite some fine insights and pretty good writing, there was just too much stupid.

First, this is set in Great Britain. I get it. But extrapolating all forests from there is just not possible. Forests are determined by climate, soil conditions, topography, etc... Maitland is of the impression that a forest cannot be 'healthy' unless it is managed by people. Frankly, that is conceited to the extreme.

Second, pollarding or coppicing is NOT good for trees. Maitland is of the idea that a tree that has not been subject to this sort of butchery is not going to be 'ancient' because it has not undergone centuries of care. Good grief.

Third, Maitland pulls 'facts' out of thin air with no supporting documentation. I was particularly irked at her suggestion that the term 'kid' as in children derives from young goats. Really? Evidence please?

Finally, her propensity to let dogs off the leash led her and her idiot companions to blandly announce the dachshund puppy was was mauled by another roaming dog with '...a good deal of human and dog blood shed,...' and then continue with her story leads to the inevitable conclusion that she is a total wanker. (Also, trespassing and cutting down trees that don't belong to you are crimes.)

While I liked the premise regarding fairy tales and forests, I cannot get over the inescapable fact that Ms. Maitland is a twit.

Lynn Spencer says

3.5 stars I love fairytales. I think I probably read all of Andrew Lang's Fairy Books growing up and have read a great many other collections besides. I've wondered about the origins of some of these stories, but hadn't found a really satisfying book on the subject. This one definitely comes closer than Bettelheim's famous (and somewhat scandal-plagued) book, though still not entirely compelling for me.

Maitland theorizes that many of the fairytales recorded by the brothers Grimm are different than others because of *where* they came from. The villagers of northern and central Europe lived in and near forests and she believes that these forests shaped their imaginations in ways that wouldn't have happened for peoples dwelling on the shore on in deserts. I found the idea interesting, and I wanted to see where the author took it.

Each chapter opens with the author's journey to a particular forest, and then is followed by a retelling of a fairytale. The portions narrated by the author were of varied interest to me. I definitely picked up some interesting tidbits of forestry and history as well as some analysis of how forest life may have influenced particular stories. However, it all gets mixed into a bit too much of the author's own navel-gazing and I have to admit that portion of things rather put me off. It felt self-absorbed rather than interesting.

The retold fairy stories are a mixed lot. I enjoyed most of them, including a vision of Hansel and Gretel living as adults, marked somewhat by their encounter with the witch in the forest. However, a few of them do fall flat, including the account of Sleeping Beauty that ended the book - and bored me senseless.

Sian Lile-Pastore says

this is my kind of book - it's all about forests and their link with fairy tales, but it's also about our links with forests and with nature in general. I also really enjoyed (perhaps even a little more) Maitland's previous book *A Book Of Silence* and I love how she gets completely absorbed in a subject and examines it from all angles.

She's losing a star though for what I assume to be her support of 'controlling' (ie killing) deer in forests...

my only other mini gripes are that I didn't feel that the photographs added anything to the text. She says she added them because all books on fairy tales have to have pictures, but in that case, I think some wood cuts or something would have gone down a treat. I could also have done with a bibliography or a further reading list - although the notes were great.

made me think and made things a little more magical.

Kichelchen says

First of, I absolutely adore Maitland's updated fairy tales. However, that is about as good as it gets. I don't think I have ever read a book so badly written. It is a lot down to bad editing, a lot of spelling mistakes, repeated or omitted words, which makes it look very unprofessional. In addition to that, she claims a lot of things without providing evidence (ex. she mentions the influence of goats in fairy tales and on the development of 'kid' as an affectionate word for children, no evidence) and she gets other things completely wrong. The French Revolution didn't start in 1787, but in 1789, she misquotes Tolkien (whom she consistently misspells as Tolkein), and there are a lot of redundancies and cross-references throughout her book that just make it a very tedious read.

I must say, I am glad I got this book on offer, it is really not worth the whole 20 pounds. I do hope there is a second edition coming out soon to at least get rid of all the mistakes. A shame really, that the fairy tales are overshadowed by the unprofessionalism of the rest of the book.

Sally Howes says

In *GOSSIP FROM THE FOREST*, Sara Maitland asserts that while many scholars study the similarities between the myths, legends, and folk tales of different cultures, not enough attention is paid to their differences, which are often influenced by the landscapes that gave them birth. Focusing on the fairytales

that originated in Northern Europe, Maitland believes that: "The mysterious secrets and silences, gifts and perils of the forest are both the background to and the source of these tales." It seems apparent that *GOSSIP FROM THE FOREST* is a book not about generalities but about specificities and uniqueness. Each chapter explores a specific theme by recounting Maitland's own experience in a specific forest at a specific time of year, and ends with her own radical revisioning of a specific fairy story. This structure had the potential to make the overall book feel too formulaic, but the author's skill, playfulness, and unique flair for storytelling rescue it from this fate. Every chapter is so very individual and so very beautifully written that the book is never boring; instead, it is full of hidden gems and delicious surprises.

GOSSIP FROM THE FOREST is a delightful mixture of the personal and the academic. In essence, it is our friend Sara Maitland telling us about her life and all the different kinds of knowledge she has collected along the way, offered in a tone of intimate and thoughtful conversation. While it is true that this book focuses on the magic and mystery of forests, it is no mere whimsical journey through folklore. It also displays a confidently knowledgeable engagement with scholarship in ecology, paleontology, psychology, anthropology, and economic history. Put bluntly, Sara Maitland really knows her stuff! But she never gets too caught up in academia, instead skipping effortlessly and even joyfully from natural history to folklore and back again, making this wandering through the woods a singularly entertaining as well as informative affair.

The fairy stories Maitland deals in are the original versions (or as near as possible to them), definitely NOT the contemporary "Disneyfied" versions with which the current generation of children is most familiar. The original versions (a la the Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault et al.) that *GOSSIP FROM THE FOREST* explores often involve children undergoing horrific and terrifying trials but always overcoming them through simple level-headedness and good sense. Maitland suggests an interesting correlation between contemporary censorship of the original fairy tales and excessive supervision and coddling of children that denies them free time in wild places like forests - time during which they can have adventures and learn self-reliance. Maitland's retellings of fairy tales at the end of each chapter are sometimes very radical retellings indeed, but always in keeping with the theme of the chapter. She says that: "The stories are so tough and shrewd formally that I can use them for anything I want - feminist revisioning, psychological exploration, malicious humour, magical realism, nature writing. They are generous, true and enchanted." Her own unique versions of the fairy stories are always thought-provoking and sometimes stunning. The story of the woodsman who saves Little Red Riding Hood from the wolf will stay with me for a long time.

Maitland shows that fairy stories are inherently subversive, and I was excited to find that *GOSSIP FROM THE FOREST* gives credence to a concept that has long fascinated me and become the cornerstone of why I am passionate about stories: the concept that intellectually radical ideas first see the light of day not in philosophical texts but in popular tales. As Maitland says: "These are radical, not conservative, tales; stories about overcoming distressing poverty and alienation, subverting the normal social order and achieving a new life of comfort and security."

The author has a very elegant turn of phrase that somehow seems to complement the beauty of the scenery in which the book is immersed. Her retellings of fairy stories exhibit a strangely endearing spectrum of language ranging from childlike innocence to adult themes and expressions. Her writing style, especially in some of the fairy stories, can be quite breathtakingly beautiful. Whether she is being humorous, frank, playful, or earnest, she wields words effortlessly, weaving them into delicate cobwebs brightly spangled with dew. One of my favorite passages reads: "She had aligned herself to the silence of the forest, the deep energetic silence of growing things, of seasons turning and of the soundless music of the stars. In spring it was lovely; in summer it was happy; in autumn it was fruitful; and in winter it was grim."

As the book progresses, it becomes clear that, as if by magic, fairy stories largely evade scholarly encapsulation. Where fairytales came from, why they mean so much to us, and even how they can be defined are questions whose answers remain as stubbornly elusive as, well, fairies. GOSSIP FROM THE FOREST elegantly, thoughtfully, enchantingly shows us that: "... forests, like fairy stories, need to be chaotic - beautiful and savage, useful and wasteful, dangerous and free."

Paul says

In this book Maitland is looking at the role that woods and forests have played in our national identity, primarily through stories, by also as a source of employment, fuel and food.

the book is split into 12 chapters, with 12 sub chapters. Each chapter describes a visit to a different wood or forest that she goes to. She visits these woods all around the country, one each month, as they are significant in some way, either for the variety of the species, or they historical or cultural significance. In these she explores the links that woods have with fairy stories, and the types of characters in these stories.

The small sub chapters are modern interpretations of well known fairy stories that she herself has written.

I really enjoyed the main part of the book about the forests and the history and cultural significance that trees have in our national psyche. Less enjoyable were the fairy tales. She speaks in the final chapter about children and new citizens being given a little book of classic fairy tales, and I feel that if she was going to include these she would have been better including the originals.
