



Science in Wonderland: The Scientific Fairy Tales of Victorian Britain

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In Victorian Britain an array of writers captured the excitement of new scientific discoveries, and enticed young readers and listeners into learning their secrets, by converting introductory explanations into quirky, charming, and imaginative fairy-tales; forces could be fairies, dinosaurs could be dragons, and looking closely at a drop of water revealed a soup of monsters.

Science in Wonderland explores how these stories were presented and read. Melanie Keene introduces and analyses a range of Victorian scientific fairy-tales, from nursery classics such as The Water-Babies to the little-known Wonderland of Evolution, or the story of insect lecturer Fairy Know-a-Bit. In exploring the ways in which authors and translators - from Hans Christian Andersen and Edith Nesbit to the pseudonymous 'A.L.O.E.' and 'Acheta Domestica' - reconciled the differing demands of factual accuracy and fantastical narratives, Keene asks why the fairies and their tales were chosen as an appropriate new form for capturing and presenting scientific and technological knowledge to young audiences. Such stories, she argues, were an important way in which authors and audiences criticised, communicated, and celebrated contemporary scientific ideas, practices, and objects.

Science in Wonderland: The Scientific Fairy Tales of Victorian Britain Details

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Iris Bratton says

A really interesting parallel between science and fantasy! It's amazing to see the cultural shift towards acceptance of new scientific discovery. The authors mentioned are not very well-known, but they are very clever and have amazing writing styles. The illustrations are gorgeous as is the book itself.

As much as I enjoyed this book, I think I came into it with the wrong mindset. This book felt less like a nonfiction book and more like a dissertation. It uses college level language that as a college student even I had to Google the definitions. You definitely have to give it your full attention. I often found myself having to reread certain passages in order to understand what the author meant. It's not a light read. It is also heavily referenced. Though it gives the book legitimacy, I often found it hard to decipher between the voice of the author and the voice of her references.

Despite its difficulties, it really was a fascinating read! It covers a very specific topic during the Victorian Era which I have never seen done before. I'm glad I read it.

Brian Clegg says

It's an odd one this, though I was pleased to have it to read, as it makes a distinct change from the usual diet of heavy duty science.

Cambridge historian of science Melanie Keene introduces us to a genre I was unaware of - a peculiarly Victorian idea of putting across science for children using the mechanisms of fairy tales. Sell-out demonstrations at venues like the Royal Institution had shown the public appetite for science, when presented in the best way, and writers were enthusiastic to get these true wonders of the age across, but felt that children would best be introduced to science using intermediaries like fairies (relatively newly transformed from human-sized mischief-makers like Puck to insect-sized, much more attractive winged creatures) and wizards.

An obvious opportunity that was seized with both hands were the parallels between the dramatic revelations of the prehistoric existence of dinosaurs and storybook tales. Here the science was simply presented with some of the language of storytelling - dinosaurs would be described as monsters and dragons. But elsewhere, fairies, for instance, became intermediaries for getting the message across. In one chemistry book, for instance, different fairies represented different elements, bonds were the fairies holding hands and so forth.

One topic that inevitably got the fairytale treatment was evolution. Although the science was sometimes watered down, with the author making sure that there was room for a creative guiding hand, evolution was a natural fit for wonderland. It was fascinating to discover, for instant that Kingsley's The Water Babies was a book that was powerfully driven by evolution. I can see that now looking back, though when I read it as a child I just found it mawkish and silly, lacking the imagination, drive and wit of the Alice books with their explicit dismissal of fiction that had a worthy message.

Unfortunately, the author hasn't learned a lesson from her topic - that a good presentation of non-fiction

makes use of some of the tools of fiction. Specifically, one of the big differences between a textbook and book to sit down, read and enjoy (as I presume this is supposed to be) is that good non-fiction should have a narrative arc. This book really doesn't. It doesn't appear to be going anywhere or drawing any significant conclusions from its observations. It takes us on a random tour, littered with unnecessary academic wording (I don't think I have ever read a book with so many occurrences of the word 'quotidian') unsupported by a feeling of purpose or direction.

Certainly an interesting topic, then - covering one of the predecessors of popular science, and a subject that is widely unknown and deserves a wider audience - but the way it is put across is not ideal.

Jayne Elizabeth says

Interesting link between fairy tales from the old world and having characters explain science in the modern world. It discusses folklore, entomology, work evolution, looking to the sky and space, magic, travel, and quantum physics- fun words in this book.

Lana says

Loved the topic and enjoyed learning about this genre of literature but, as other reviewers have noted, the writing style detracted somewhat. Three and a half stars but can't give it a four, sorry!

D says

In Victorian Britain, scientific fairy tales imparted “useful knowledge” to children. The goal was to avoid “the dull conveying of facts”. Ironically, this book falls victim to a dull conveying of facts and an excessive use of the word “quotidian”.

Rachel says

I was very disappointed in this book. I thought it would be interesting, and it probably is, but I couldn't get passed the very dry and dull delivery. I haven't finished this book and doubt that I will.

Mills College Library says

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