

# Around the World with Cinderella

What do you value most in a person? What do you value most in a friend? What qualities and actions does your society cultivate and encourage? Learning about different cultures from textbooks can only get you so far—you can learn facts about population, environment, history—but to get to know a people, you need to know its stories, its jokes. Sometimes you can really relate what “they” are saying—other times you are left confused and wondering what was so great about that story. Often when we explore folktales, we think about how alike humans are—and less often—we appreciate how individual we are. That is the beauty of studying a culture’s fairy and folk tales; you get a look at what makes people tick.

Cinderella has been around for an awfully long time—she has been called by different names, lived in different places and worn different clothes, but she is essentially the same: persecuted, belittled, forced into servitude, but bright and beautiful, and destined for something greater. Almost every culture in the world has a Cinderella story. There are some 350 registered variations of the Cinderella story—over 1500 if one counts all the retellings of said 350 versions. The qualities about the heroine that are emphasized can give us clues to what the storyteller and therefore his/her audience valued most.



Yeh-hsien, heroine of Chinese Cinderella story

The earliest recorded version of Cinderella is Chinese. The story was written down between 850 and 860 C.E. by Chinese scholar Tuan Ch’eng-shih, though, doubtless, the story was far older. The story differs in many points from the version most Americans know. For instance, the Cinderella character is named Yeh-hsien, her “fairy godmother” was a magical carp, and her slippers were of gold. She was clever, “and good at making pottery on the wheel” (note that this trait is highlighted at the beginning of the story, a clue that such skills were valued in this Chinese community). Familiar to us is the lost slipper and the search for the tiny foot which can fit it—this emphasis on the tiny foot may reflect the Chinese standard of beauty and refinement which led to the binding of baby girls’ feet. While the story is different in detail the literary motifs remain the same.

The next published version of the Cinderella story is that with which we are most familiar, published in a collection of stories entitled *Tales of Mother Goose*, compiled, and improved by Charles Perrault. This version includes the fairy godmother, magical transformations of pumpkins and mice, glass slippers, a midnight deadline and a happily ever after.





*Cedrillon, Perrault's Cinderella with her Fairy Godmother*

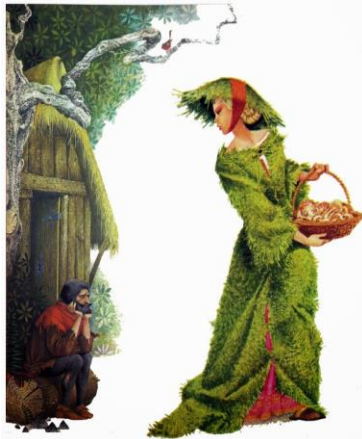
Interestingly, in this French tale, written during a very autocratic, patriarchal time, Cinderella's most important and valued features are her patience, grace, beauty, and obedience. Even Walt Disney recognized that an American audience would never conscience such a lack of initiative when he created his animated adaptation of Perrault's classic tale and gave his Cinderella a little more fire. Nonetheless, the beauty of this tale of goodness rewarded has endured.

The passivity of Perrault's Cinderella, which many find

annoying, is by no means universal. In the German version of the story, *Ashputtel*, the essentials of the tale remain the same, but she shows some resourcefulness and spine (much of which is adopted by Disney in his famous version), completing all of the impossible tasks her stepmother demands and creating opportunities for herself with the help of her dead mother's spirit and her faithfulness to her mother's memory.



*Ashputtel from Childhood and Household Tales, by the Brothers Grimm*



*Cap O' Rushes, illustration by Severino Baraldi*

Perhaps the most resourceful and proactive Cinderella is the English Cap O' Rushes. This popular tale was displaced in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by Perrault's version, but remains my favorite, for the girl's cleverness and wit. In this version, our heroine is cast from her father's house because when asked how much she loves him, she replies "Why, I love you as fresh meat loves salt." Her father does not understand this pithy reply and accuses her of not loving him. She finds herself banished from her home with nothing but her fine clothes. She then makes herself a cloak and cap of rushes to hide her finery and asks for a job as a scullery maid at a nearby manor. Much of the rest is as we know, but there are no magical interventions. Cap O' Rushes shapes her own destiny, marrying the master's son and reconciling with her father to create a happy ending.

There are as many versions of this tale as there are cultures to tell it. It answers the universal need we all have to be valued for our qualities and vindicated after unjust treatment. Some psychologists hold that fairy tales help children and adults navigate various stages of development, but ultimately these stories are whatever the listener or reader takes from them—and how they pass them along to their children.



# Around the World with the Storytellers

Many cultures tell stories that are remarkably similar. Often, we never hear the oldest stories, which made up the oral tradition of storytelling and mythmaking. In the articles below, we explore some of the people who have brought us the fairytales we are familiar with today. Had it not been for these men, it is unlikely that these stories would be so ingrained in our cultures and in our nurseries.

## Tuan Ch'eng Shih



Emperor Xianzong of Tang was the emperor when Tuan Ch'eng Shih was active.

The earliest version of the fairytale that we know as Cinderella was written in China in the mid-ninth century C.E. by a man named Tuan Ch'eng-shih. We know little about Tuan Ch'eng-shih's life—much must be extrapolated from tantalizing glimpses of his personality in his many writings or hints dropped in articles about Chinese art during the Tang dynasty. Tuan Ch'eng-shih lived from around 800 to 863 C.E. and came from an influential family. His father was a gifted diplomat who dealt successfully on multiple levels with the native peoples in the South China, filling important, high-level posts throughout the empire. Tuan Ch'eng-shih, if one can infer from his anecdotes, was a bit of a dreamer. His greatest interest was hunting—both for animals and rare books. One story about him which marks the beginning of his scholarly career recounts how he was supposed to help his father with his governmental duties serving in Szechuan. Unfortunately, Tuan Ch'eng-shih was always away, occupied on some hunting trip or another. The frustrated father sent a dispatch to his son, declaring his absence unacceptable and irresponsible. In reply, Tuan Ch'eng-shih sent a brace of pheasants or hares to each and every one of his father's staff members, each including a folk tale concerning the animal received. Each recipient story was unique—not one was duplicated.

This successful parry was followed by a series of influential posts of his own, the most important of which was as the prefect of the office of imperial ancestor worship. Here he was to write the work for which we know him today: *Miscellany of Forgotten Lore*, in which he recounts the tale of Yen-hsien, the Chinese Cinderella.

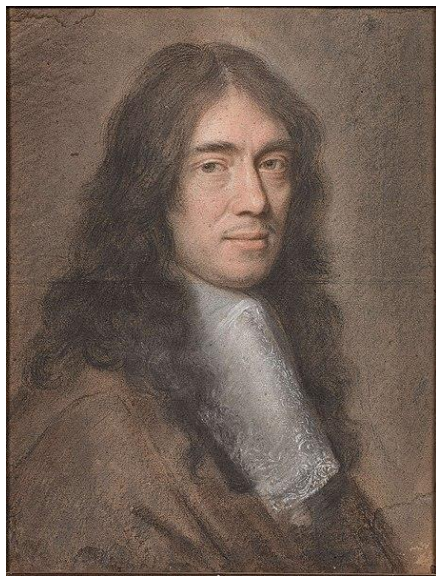




The rest of the book indicates an interest in all things foreign—and some mild distress at what folklorists call “diffusion” (the appearance of similar stories in multiple cultures), considering them “wrong” or “incorrect” when they bore too close a resemblance to Chinese stories. This is perhaps due to his attitude that these stories were fact, not literature. Tuan Ch’eng Shih viewed them as indicative of truths beyond and beneath the visible.

Miscellany is one of the last of Tuan Ch’eng-shih’s works, written between 850 and 860, when he was already an old man. His myriad other works include commentaries on art, architecture, and travelogues, but his most accessible legacy remains his Cinderella story.

## Charles Perrault



Charles Perrault by Charles le Brun

While Perrault was no great innovator and wrote little original fiction, his contribution to the field of children’s literature is massive and started with a little volume named *Tales of Mother Goose*, published in 1697, and subsequently translated and published in England by John Newbery in 1729. While not all the stories in Perrault’s compendium were intended for children and dealt with disturbing topics (*Blue Beard* is one that springs to mind), the stories were re-told with charm and clarity, which quickly endeared them to children.

Perrault was born in Paris on January 12, 1628. He started out as a lawyer, working for the government as property manager for some royal buildings. By 1660, his poetry was earning him a literary reputation—enough of one earn him membership in the influential *Académie Française*. Here he became embroiled in the intellectual equivalent of *Waterloo*, a very public and personal battle between the “Ancients” and “Moderns.” The disagreement is reminiscent of Dr. Seuss’ star-bellied sneetches and those with “none upon thars.” The “Ancients” side of the argument held that all the great literature had already been written and would never be surpassed. The “Moderns” (who is cause Perrault championed) believed in the evolution of literature, by which they meant that the writers of the past could not help but be less refined than the writers of the present. The argument, in and of itself, was unimportant, but the resulting freedom allowed contemporary writers to adapt and discard classical forms as they pleased.

Perrault compiled his stories for *Tales of Mother Goose* to entertain his own children. There is some argument as to whether he himself adapted them or whether his son also participated, but they include: “*Cinderella*,” “*Puss in Boots*,” “*Little Red Riding Hood*,” “*Blue Beard*” and “*Sleeping Beauty*.” He died in Paris in May of 1703.



## The Brothers Grimm



Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm in a drawing by younger brother, Ludwig Emil Grimm. 1843

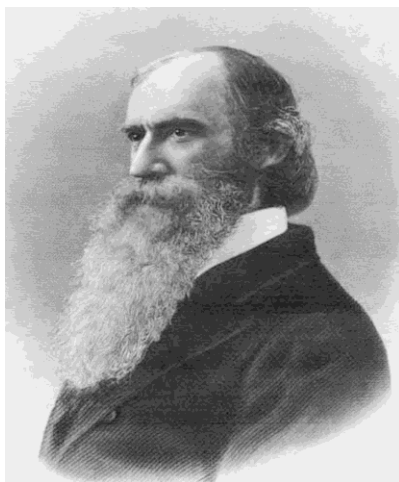
The Brothers Grimm were Jacob Ludwig Carl and Wilhelm Carl Grimm, the eldest brothers in a family of five. They are credited with originating the scientific study of folklore. While they devoted their lives to literary and scholarly pursuits, their most famous contribution was several volumes published between 1812-1822, entitled *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, which translates to *Children's and Household Tales*. In English, they are simply Grimm's Fairy Tales. These versions have become definitive.

What is most remarkable about these stories is how they were written down and catalogued. There are two hundred stories, compiled from mostly oral sources. The stories are not really "cleaned up" or rewritten to fit societal mores, but presented "as is," although sometimes the Grimms would take stories with multiple

versions and mix and match some elements and motifs to make them coherent whole.

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica:

"The great merit of Wilhelm Grimm is that he gave the fairy tales a readable form without changing their folkloric character. The results were threefold: the collection enjoyed wide distribution in Germany and eventually in all parts of the globe (there are now translations in 70 languages); it became and remains a model for the collecting of folktales everywhere; and the Grimms notes to the tales, along with other investigations, formed the basis for the science of the folk narrative and even of folklore."



John Strong Newberry

## John Newberry

Newberry was not an author himself, nor did he originate the idea of books designed for children. What he was, was a shrewd businessperson with a keen eye for quality, a love for books and publishing, and a master marketer. Newberry was the first to succeed in the business of publishing books for children that were both entertaining and educational, by correctly assessing the public's needs and filling those needs with a high-quality product, well packaged and marketed. By the death of his son, Francis, Newberry's publishing company had amassed four hundred titles of children's books, and children's literature was never the same.



John Newbery was born in 1713 to a farmer, although John's passion was for books. He was given the basic education necessary for a farmer, but as an avid reader, he cobbled together a more extensive knowledge base. Fortunately, other members of his family were in the publishing business and at 16 John left home to begin his printing career, apprenticed to a publisher in Reading, England. His master was William Carnan, and upon Carnan's death, Newbery joined his brother as a partner in the business.

An enterprising young man, Newbery traveled throughout the country exploring what markets wanted and needed. He sold and advertised patent medicines, which he featured in his newspaper. He then opened a new publishing house, The Bible and Sun, and began the most productive and lucrative years of his publishing career. His first success was in 1744 with *A Pretty Little Pocket Book*, a beautifully bound, gilded and illustrated book, which sold 10,000 copies in the next 50 years.

Until his death, John Newbery continued to publish high quality children's books, assembling the finest authors and illustrators available to write them.

John Newbery died just 20 years later in 1767, at 54 years old. His accomplishments in children's literature are now honored by the American Library Association with the Newbery Award, given to the outstanding children's book of the year since its inception in 1922.

