

Escaping to the Present

Nostalgia and the Uncanny Pleasures of Reinventing Childhood

By

Meghan Wawryk

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and
Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in Communication

Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario
September, 2008

© Copyright by Meghan Wawryk (2008)



Library and
Archives Canada

Bibliothèque et
Archives Canada

Published Heritage
Branch

Direction du
Patrimoine de l'édition

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-43502-1
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-43502-1

NOTICE:

The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

AVIS:

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protègent cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.


Canada

Abstract

Over the past three decades, adults have increasingly indulged in media that have a strong connection to childhood, prompting criticism in the public discourse about a new regressive and irresponsible adult. This thesis theorizes a framework to describe how pleasures are derived from the adult consumption of such childlike media, avoiding the tendency to assume that this is either an active resistance to cultural norms or a passive, simple desire for escape. Rather, it is argued that more complex forms of pleasure can be identified using the notions of ironized nostalgia, the uncanny, and reflexivity, carving a middle ground for the adult consumer. Specifically, for the new female readership of mainstream comics, popular texts like Bill Willingham's comic series *Fables* exploits and reinvents childhood material to stimulate a personal dialogue and produce both therapeutic and intellectual forms of pleasure.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere thanks and appreciation to my thesis supervisor, Dr. Sheryl Hamilton, for her invaluable insight, creativity, and openness to this anomalous topic. I am also greatly indebted to my second reader, Dr. Brian Johnson, for providing such in-depth comments and suggestions at a critical point in my research. I would also like to thank my external reader, Dr. Jennifer Henderson, for her incredibly thoughtful comments and queries during the thesis defence.

I am grateful to the School of Journalism and Communication for its funding support awarded to me through a scholarship. Furthermore, I would like to convey a special thanks to all the faculty members of the School who captivated and inspired me throughout my undergraduate and graduate degrees, especially Dr. Charlene Elliott, Dr. André Turcotte, and Dr. Ross Eaman.

Above all, my most heartfelt thanks, appreciation, and love to Rob Justus, who has been a pillar of confidence, support, and encouragement throughout these past two years. You never doubted my ability to achieve this goal and your belief in me is what kept me going throughout the most challenging of times.

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Wayne and Deborah Wawryk, and my brother, Todd, with whom I enjoyed the best of childhoods.

Table of Contents

Chapter I – Introduction: Carving a Place for Grown-up Comics and Fairy Tales ..	1
Aristotle and Pleasure as Experience	3
<i>Fables</i> – Storyline and Background.....	6
Chapter II – Review of the Academic Study of Fairy Tale Retellings	10
Contemporary Fairy Tales with a Twist	15
A Brief History of the Literary Fairy Tale.....	16
Scholarship on Revised Fairy Tales.....	21
Chapter III – Theory and Methodology: Contemplating Nostalgia, the Uncanny and Reflexivity	44
Ironized Nostalgia.....	48
The Work of the Reader – Reflexivity.....	52
The Experience of Dissonance – The Uncanny	57
Methodology	67
Chapter IV – Weighing Pleasure and Dissonance in Reading <i>Fables</i>	74
A Tension in the Balance: Ironic Nostalgia.....	76
Defamiliarization and The Uncanny	88
Reflexivity and Cerebral Pleasure	101
Conclusion: Dealing with Dissonance – The Reinvention of Snow White	109
Chapter V – The Cerebral and Therapeutic Pleasures of Reinventing Childhood	115
Appendices.....	124
Reference List.....	131

List of Appendices

Appendix A – *Cover of Fables: Legends in Exile*

Appendix B – Introduction to ‘Fabletown’

Appendix C – Nostalgia for ‘The Homelands’

Appendix D – Bigby’s Transformation

Appendix E – Bigby’s Transformation (Continued)

Appendix F – The Upstate Annex of Fabletown: ‘The Farm’

Appendix G – Reinventing Snow White and the Big Bad Wolf

Chapter I – Introduction: Carving a Place for Grown-up Comics and Fairy Tales

When I was a child, my mom would buy my brother and me comics to entertain us. My brother began developing his own interest in the medium, mainly in the superhero genre, but I did not. Fifteen years later, when I was reintroduced to the world of comics at the age of twenty-two, that world seemed much bigger than I remembered. Unlike most nostalgic experiences where things and places from childhood seem smaller than you recall, the realm of comics expanded before me to engulf many aspects of adult life. The Garfield and Batman comics that I enjoyed in passing as a child were still alive and kicking, but now alongside some decidedly serious “graphic novels” that struck me as purposefully inaccessible to children. I immediately assumed this was an innovation in comics, that something must have happened in the industry while I was not looking to make it more adult-centered, and thus more widely marketable. My presumption was based on a common stereotype (and misconception) of comics—that they are just for kids.

Browsing through a local comic book shop near my apartment downtown, I was struck by the range of genres and topics comics covered. I was surprised at how many series were for mature readers only. I was delighted by the vast range of artistic styles. And I was left wondering where all the children were. Do kids not read comics anymore? Or is it that adults read comics more openly now? These questions only led to further queries. Why do so many seemingly responsible adults read comics, even though it has been traditionally stereotyped as a childish medium? Similarly, why is a children’s book series like *Harry Potter* immensely popular among adults? Why is the average age

of today's video game player 33? Is the explanation as simple as 'it's just plain fun'?

Two small events shortly thereafter helped me develop a greater understanding of what was happening not only in the world of comics, but across a wide array of media types. The first was the appearance of the Prime Minister's Director of Communications in my local comic shop one winter day. As this high-ranking member of the Prime Minister's Office browsed through the monthly issues of comics in an expensive tweed coat, he spoke quietly and urgently into his cell phone about the tone his boss should be taking regarding the government's latest bill tabled before Parliament. The sharp contrast between this man's professional responsibilities and his interest in comics made me remember that we all need to escape and have some fun sometimes, even the most serious of people.

Around the same time, I began reading a comic series entitled *Fables*. The first trade paperback of the series, *Fables: Legends in Exile* (Willingham, 2002), was a compendium of the first five monthly issues and caught my eye immediately. The cover art was different from most comics. It was whimsical, chaotic, and eerie. I smiled as I read one of the tag lines next to the Vertigo insignia: "We hope this series lasts happily ever after". Flipping the book over, it read: "Who killed Rose Red? In Fabletown, where fairy tale legends live alongside regular New Yorkers, the question is all anyone can talk about". I was already anticipating why I would derive enjoyment from the book—it was familiar yet strange, fantastic yet mundane, new yet old, sophisticated yet violent. Reading this series made clear to me that the pleasure adults derive from such forms of entertainment is far from simple.

How is pleasure generated for the reader from these childhood texts revised in new ways? Who reads these texts? What notions in particular contribute to this unique pleasurable experience? How important is nostalgia to this type of reading experience? Why is a revised text from childhood enjoyable at all, beyond a return to childhood? How do uncertainties in the text and the fine line between the familiar and the unfamiliar (and other contradictory relationships) play a role in creating this pleasurable experience? This study attempts to answer these questions.

Aristotle and Pleasure as Experience

Thoughts on the role of pleasure in our lives and its contribution to human happiness can be traced as far back as Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (circa 350 B.C.). Aristotle's philosophy on pleasure is particularly constructive because it exemplifies the various ways in which people can experience pleasure, and posits that it is not simply explained as being purely good or evil. In an article discussing the function of art in understanding meaning in and of life, Rudolf Arnheim (1993) outlines Aristotle's ideas on pleasure. Arnheim explains that Aristotle did not believe that pleasure was simply a lack of pain or relief from pain, nor was it identical to happiness, but rather that pleasure is intrinsically linked to experience (1993, p. 196). For example, if pleasure is sought only as an antidote to the pain felt in everyday life, then this would be a negative form of addictive pleasure that would not satisfy the individual. Aristotle argued that pleasure is "an immature means of controlling the conduct of life, suited only for the education of children," and that no adult "would choose to live with the intellect of a child throughout

his life, however much he were to be pleased at the things that children are pleased at” (qtd. in Arnheim, 1993, p. 196). Therefore, pleasure can be considered childish and immature if it is sought as a temporary relief or escape from the difficulties of life, but most adults would not be satisfied by this type of pleasure alone.

Aristotle did grant one condition under which pleasure can turn into long-term happiness. Pleasure can satisfy adult happiness if the “discriminating or contemplative faculty” of the mind is completely focused on the object in question, like a beautiful piece of art (Arnheim, 1993, p. 196). Aristotle believed that while all other beings besides the human species hold no knowledge of meaning outside of their physical existence, humanity is “privileged to explore the full awareness of what is reported by the senses and understood through thought . . . there is no meaning to human life other than the full experience of its existence” (Arnheim, 1993, p. 196). What I have drawn from Arnheim’s discussion of Aristotle’s thoughts on pleasure is the notion that pleasure, especially the kind of pleasure that provides an easy escape from the hardships of life, has had negative associations attached to it for over two millennia. The immature and childish pleasures legitimately enjoyed by children cannot be equally enjoyed by adults. Furthermore, the pleasure adults derive from the experience of seeing a grand work of art for the first time involves a fullness of experience and a level of contemplation that childish pleasures do not provide. Following Aristotle’s line of thought, there seems to be at least three aspects of pleasure: the escapist, temporary, childlike pleasure; the pleasure of the senses and being fully absorbed with the object in question; and a more intellectual or cognitive pleasure.

In keeping with Aristotle's thoughtful consideration of the experience of pleasure, I have selected three notions to explain how adult texts borrowing from childhood materials produce pleasure. Looking at Aristotle's thoughts on pleasure alone indicates that there is much more to this particular experience of pleasure other than a return to childhood. Nostalgia, the seemingly simple longing for the times and places of our past, arguably can produce both emotional and intellectual responses from a reader and is commonly linked to the escapist form of pleasure. The sensation of the uncanny is a primarily emotional or affective response to the text that requires an involvement of the senses, but also of some contemplative thought. Finally, the notion of reflexivity is a thought-process primarily linked to intellectual pleasure provoked by the text itself.

I plan to explore the notions of nostalgia, uncanny, and reflexivity in order to generate a theoretical framework to analyze some of the complexity of the pleasurable reading experience produced by contemporary media that draw from childhood texts. The object of my analysis is the comic book series *Fables*, selected not only for its reliance on childhood material, but also for the medium in which it appears. Comics are particularly visually stimulating as well as incredibly engrossing for the reader. The graphic novel or single issue comic is held in the reader's hands, creating an intimate, personal, and absorbing reading experience. As a medium, comics are best known by the superhero genre, especially in North America. This genre has inadvertently generated a stigma around the entire medium that posits comics (to non-comic book readers) as a childish, escapist form of entertainment. In North America, comics are stigmatized as being a common and inferior art form, constantly battling for legitimacy (Groensteen,

2000, p. 35). Therefore, a comic book that draws from childhood texts and employs them in new adult contexts is particularly suited to my interest in the pleasurable reading experience. More importantly, exploring the way pleasure is produced from such texts for certain readers may serve to break down the stereotypes assigned to comics in general as well as the negative associations assigned to adult indulgence in childlike media. I believe that the pleasures produced from such texts are complex and involve much more than an attempt to return to childhood.

Fables – Storyline and Background

Fables is an ongoing comic book series that began in July 2001 under DC Comics prestige publishing imprint Vertigo. The series is written by a single writer, Bill Willingham, but is illustrated by a number of artists, primarily Mark Buckingham, Lan Medina, and James Jean. Every month a single issue of *Fables* is released, and approximately every six months, the single issues are compiled in trade paperback format (sometimes referred to as a graphic novel). The series has received fourteen Eisner awards in the past seven years, which is the comic book industry's equivalent to the film industry's Oscars. It has been called "the best comic currently being produced" by critics (Goldstein, IGN Entertainment, August 10, 2006) and tellingly, it has also been recommended specifically to readers who are new to comics (Cronin, Comic Book Resources, May 12, 2008).

The premise of *Fables* is to borrow familiar folklore, nursery rhyme and fairy tale characters that are in the public domain and combine them in one fictional universe and

in a contemporary setting. Altogether, these familiar characters from childhood stories, who call themselves ‘Fables,’ were forced from their ‘Homelands’ to come to the gritty streets of New York to escape an enemy only known as ‘The Adversary’. They arrived through magical portals several centuries ago, back when New York was still called New Amsterdam, thus the characters have become comfortable with their new surroundings. They have taken over an entire city block of New York City and dubbed it ‘Fabletown,’ an area that seems completely normal and non-magical to outsiders. Hiding among what they call ‘the mundanes’ or ‘mundys’ (us regular folk), the Fables must take on a human form to live in Fabletown or they are confined to a large swathe of land called ‘The Farm’. Located in upstate New York in an area magically invisible to mundane people, the Farm is where all the non-human looking, monstrous, unusual, or anthropomorphic animal Fables live.

Some of the greatest conflicts in the storyline of *Fables* involve the rights and freedoms of these non-human looking Fables. Other conflicts include defending Fabletown against invasion by The Adversary, keeping Fabletown’s finances afloat on a day-to-day basis, and ultimately returning to The Homelands and reclaiming what is rightfully theirs. Each character is several hundred years old, with some being several millennia old, their aging process stopped in its tracks by a magical, unknown force. The classic tales that readers may recall from their childhood do exist in the *Fables* universe, but we discover as the series moves forward that these familiar characters have grown in exciting and unexpected ways during their long lives. This is Willingham’s way of

slowly re-appropriating the characters as the series progresses, making them less and less like the classic characters we knew as children and more and more like his own.

The seemingly mainstream appeal of *Fables* is nothing new to its publishing imprint Vertigo. Created in 1993, Vertigo targets “an older, broader audience. . . Vertigo was the first to market trade paperbacks to an adult, literate, sophisticated audience. They lured a new readership, largely adult, significantly female, into the section” (Jennings, 2003). Attracting this new type of readership has come about in two distinct ways. First, Vertigo has taken the unusual approach of raising the profile of comic book writers and investing in the trade paperback and graphic novel formats of the medium. Vertigo’s series are driven by their stories and sell best in the longer formats, including *Fables* (Jennings, 2003). Secondly, women working at Vertigo have helped target more female readers.¹ Karen Berger, the Executive Editor at Vertigo, has been in the comics industry for over twenty years and she believes that her own gender has helped reach that sophisticated audience: “Being a woman brings a different perspective to the material we produce, and the kind of reader we attract. I didn’t grow up reading comics, so I didn’t come to the field with preconceived notions” (qtd. in Jennings, 2003).

Fables is a comic series that successfully attracts new readers to the comic book medium because it focuses on the story, it has a sophisticated premise that is accessible and familiar to readers, and it borrows from the fairy tale genre, which is arguably more attractive to female readers. Such readers are quite different from regular comic book readers who are more accustomed to the conventions of the medium and many of whom may not be as attracted to the narrative style of many of the Vertigo series. Not all

¹ *Fables* has always been edited by a primarily female team, led by Editor Shelly Bond.

readers of *Fables* can be placed in this category, as there are readers who are also fans of the superhero genre of comics; but it is a series that focuses on writing and narrative, which has been more successful in attracting greater numbers of female readers than the traditional superhero genre. This new reader, the adult, female, non-comic book fan, constitutes the type of readership I explore in my analysis of *Fables*. I theorize that the pleasure derived by this new audience is one that is more complex than simple escapism, nostalgia, or resistance. Rather, it is a cerebral and therapeutic pleasure that drives this new female audience toward the consumption of graphic novels and adult comic books for the first time.

Chapter II – Review of the Academic Study of Fairy Tale Retellings

The function and purpose of pleasure in our lives has been debated since ancient times, as demonstrated with Aristotle, but it also continued in modern times. How has the concept of pleasure been approached by scholars studying adult use of childlike media or more specifically, the adult reading experience derived from texts that borrow from childhood materials? Scholarship on adult use of childlike media exists, but it is scattered across various disciplines. Studies of adult play and media usage appear in the fields of sociology, psychology, behavioural studies, leisure studies, and media studies, to name a few. Public discourse attempts to expose the childlike adult by making moralistic judgments about shifts in their choices as consumers or in their behaviour more generally.

However, very few academics have attempted to explain why adults enjoy experiences involving childhood connections with a mature twist. Beginning with studies of adult play and adult use of media considered to be childlike, such as video games, my review of academic literature ventures into a niche of academic study that focuses on the retelling of fairy tales in adult formats. These studies reveal the ways in which pleasure is experienced by adult readers, primarily from the perspective of literary studies and criticism. The strengths and gaps in this small body of secondary literature will form the basis for my thesis.

The commercial media has taken notice of certain trends and shifts in the ways adults entertain themselves and the type of activities they are seeking today. Although literature on the success of media that draws on childhood texts is limited, hints can be found in public discourse that indicate that such shifts in adult leisure are tangible and

affect the way products are being sold to adults. Non-academic writers have coined several terms to describe people who indulge in childlike products or activities more generally, such as “rejuveniles,” “twixters,” “adultescents,” or “kidults” (Noxon, 2006, p. 4-5). Others have deemed such people to be irresponsible and plagued by an unprecedented disinterest in society, a condition coined as ‘Peter Pan Syndrome’ (O’Malley, 1995). Some in the advertising and marketing industry have argued that a consumer ‘panic regression’ caused by the events of September 11th 2001, can explain the recent resurgence in the consumerist instinct in adults to buy nostalgic products (Ebenkamp & Odiorne, 2002). However, there is no academic literature to support or dispute any of these arguments.

Since my object of analysis is a comic series, I attempted to seek out academic literature that studied adult comic book readers and their reading experiences. In the field of comics research, studies exist of adult-only comics, but for the most part these are textual analyses that focus on content and occasionally form, but not the pleasure derived from the reading experience (Castaldi, 2004; Doherty, 1996; Hughes, 2006; Mikkonen, 2006; Ueno, 2006). For example, Kai Mikkonen (2006) examines how comics communicate to the reader through semiotics, describing semiotics as a form of translation between image, text, and from language to language. Similarly, Thomas Doherty (1996) attempts to demonstrate the relationship between the reader and the images on the page of the graphic novel *Maus*, a story about the Holocaust depicted with mice and cats instead of people. Using a semiotic approach, Doherty argues that unlike the film reels of the Holocaust that are projected onto the viewer, comics reverse the

process of projection allowing for more reader involvement (Doherty, 1996, p. 77). In a survey of Italian adult comic books of the 1970's and 1980's, Simone Castaldi (2004) argues that adult comics provide a loophole to defend multiculturalism, to criticize the old official left, and to trespass the divide between high and low art (2004, p. 282). What Castaldi's study demonstrates is that comics have the power not only to reflect the times of a society, but also to have an active voice and ideological standpoint that is communicated to the viewer. Although these studies effectively scrutinize the form and language of comics as a means of communication, they do not expand their analyses to discuss what creates a pleasurable reading experience.

There are academic studies from areas such as sociology, behavioural studies, leisure studies, and gender studies that focus on adult playfulness from a number of perspectives (Abramis, 1990; Horna, 1994; Kelly-Byrne, 1984; Kjølrsrød, 2003; Register 1999). Some scholars, such as Woody Register (1999), have been able to go back over a hundred years to document adult playfulness, by marking the transition from a nineteenth-century mentality that condemned adult play to the twentieth-century consumer culture that marketed itself as the playground of kids (mainly boys) who never grow up (p. 200). Other studies have examined adult play in the workplace (Abramis, 1990), life course variations of leisure (Horna, 1994), intimate play (Kelly-Byrne, 1984), and adventurous play as process of individuation and social integration (Kjølrsrød, 2003). While each of these studies are interesting on their own in the way they attempt to explain the various types of play in the lives of adults, they are small in number and disconnected, with few, if any, commonalities in theory or methodology.

While there are bodies of literature that have identified shifts in the way adults use specific media, there are very few studies that have observed a shift in the way adults play in general (Abramis, 1990; Lauzen, Dozier, & Reyes, 2007; Meyrowitz, 1984). Two years after the publication of Neil Postman's book *The Disappearance of Childhood* (1982), Joshua Meyrowitz argued that not only is childhood disappearing, but that this is only half of the 'story'; Meyrowitz argues that there is an overall "merging of childhood and adulthood" (1984, p. 19). Meyrowitz's explanation for this merge is that new media, such as television in the 1980's, contribute to changes in the conceptualization of adulthood and childhood by removing "barriers that once divided people of different ages and reading abilities into different social situations" (1984, p. 31). Subsequently, Meyrowitz argues that adults are more childlike and children are more adultlike, resulting in changes in behaviour and consumption, and overlapping conceptions of what behaviour is acceptable for children and adults.

Whether this hypothesis is true or not, the overarching thesis of media changing the socialization process and subsequently society's concepts of adulthood and childhood seems credible, but is difficult to demonstrate empirically. However, piecemeal evidence can be found in everyday experience as well as some of the academic literature that followed Postman and Meyrowitz's arguments. David J. Abramis conducted research in the late 1980's that determined that play exists in the very adult realm of work and that certain types of play in the workplace seem to increase people's involvement with their work and subsequently their productivity (1990, p. 369). More recently, Martha M. Lauzen *et al.* studied primetime television and discovered that "acting one's age has

become increasingly elastic,” with teen characters acting older, those in their twenties enjoying an extended adolescence, and older adult characters rarely being portrayed at all (2007, p. 343). Altogether, the literature indicates that shifts are apparent in the way adults consume, work, and play, and the way they are portrayed in the media. Even so, studies are lacking that offer a conceptual framework that can explain the pleasure adults derive from using media that rely on a childhood connection.

More popular in the academic literature are studies that examine the use of media by adults stereotypically considered to be for children, such as men’s use of muscular action figures and its impact on male body image (Bartlett, Harris, Smith, & Bonds-Raacke, 2005). Similarly, there is a growing amount of literature dedicated solely to women’s and girls’ use of video games (Brown, 2001; Hayes, 2007; Lucas & Sherry, 2004; Royse, Lee, Undrahbuyan, Hopson, & Consalvo, 2007; Schott & Horrell, 2000; Taylor, 2003). In examining this particular group of studies, one can already identify developments not only in the way women play video games, but in the way academics approach their subjects. For example, Gareth R. Schott and Kirsty R. Horrell (2000) attempt an ethnographic study of self-described girl and women gamers, but fail to find adult female gamers who saw video games as more than just an activity to pass some free time. Many women in the study complained that their male partners played too much, refusing to perform housework, while they consigned gaming to second place following housework (Schott & Horrell 2000, p. 49). Studies such as this insist on an approach that pits the stereotypical domesticated female against the freewheeling, independent male who ignores his adult responsibilities. More importantly, Schott and Horrell fail to

examine how women derive pleasure from playing video games, dedicating much of their analysis to the negative side of gaming.

However, during approximately the past five years, studies that reveal the triggers for women's enjoyment of video games have become more prevalent. Recent studies now identify different types of female players, based on types of games played, the amount of time played, and the different ways pleasure is derived (Royse *et al.*, 2007; Taylor, 2003). T.L. Taylor's (2003) study of adult female gamers who played massive online games identifies the themes of choice, personal identity, and social capital as key to a pleasurable gaming experience. Pam Royse *et al.*'s (2007) study is even more elaborate, identifying different pleasure triggers dependent on whether the subject was a 'power gamer,' 'moderate gamer,' or 'non-gamer'. These more nuanced explorations of adult female game play acknowledge that more adult women are playing video games, that they are playing in unique ways rather than as a homogenous group, and that this trend is worthy of academic study. As this body of literature expands and develops, there is the potential to focus not only on gender issues, but on the factor of age in the use of media stereotypically conceived as being for children.

Contemporary Fairy Tales with a Twist

In order to situate my exploration of what creates a pleasurable experience from reading a comic like *Fables*, I sought out academic literature that analyzed more specifically the retelling of children's tales in a new adult form. Particularly, I examined studies that focused on the revision of fairy tales in modern, postmodern, and feminist

literary fiction. Most of these revisions were in the form of literary texts, such as novels or short stories. Some, however, are studies of films that borrow from the fairy tale genre for adult audiences.

While any approach to the study of literature or film is distinctive, both film and literature are relevant to this discussion because they can draw on childhood texts and reinvent them for adults. Even though comics have been deemed their own medium with their own unique language separate from that of film, especially since Francis Lacassin's 1971 seminal essay, "The Comic Strip and Film Language," it is possible to use film and literature comparatively due to the components of that unique language. Explicitly stated, the language of comics is a combination of image and text, or a hybrid of the literary and visual art forms that came before it. As Kai Mikkonen (2006) points out in his semiotic study of the comic *Nikopol*, the medium of comics is "inhabited by its own other, by the traces of other media. . . the word and image dynamic brings out the other media in the medium, the trace of the other that also determines the medium . . . they are also mutually parasitic" (p. 117). Thus, storytelling or narrative can be expressed not only through the written word, but out of "many disparate fragments, including such nonlinguistic elements as gestures, expressions, and other physical signs" such as the panels and illustrations in comics (Wilson, 1989, p. 780). I will thus draw on both.

A Brief History of the Literary Fairy Tale

A brief overview of the history of fairy tales will demonstrate how this genre of storytelling is particularly adept to change, easily blending with new media and social

conditions. Fairy tales as a literary genre have a long history dating back to the oral folk tale. The first literary fairy tales were paradoxically both hegemonic and subversive of those in power, with upper-class male scribes preserving and altering the voices of non-literate storytellers (many female), with misgivings by governing authorities about artistic and individual expression (Zipes, 2000, p. xx). The narrative frame of the genre would not be developed until the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, after the invention of the printing press, the presence of reading publics, and the genre's acceptance by the educated elite in Europe (Zipes, 2000, p. xx).

Europe was, therefore, the logical birthplace of the literary fairy tale. Even though Italian authors Giovan Francesco Straparola (1550) and Giambattista Basile (1634) created the first published examples of the genre, France is considered the specific birthplace of the literary fairy tale. In the 1690's French female writers (as well as Charles Perrault) began publishing famous works that would create a craze for the tales deemed *contes de fées* (fairy tales) (Zipes, 2000, p. xxii). These fairy tales caught on strongly in Germany in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Germany produced its own famous works, including the brothers Grimm's *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* (1812-1815) which subsequently spread outside Europe and throughout the Western world.

There has been a strong resistance to dissecting and defining the fairy tale, and no single, acceptable definition exists. Jack Zipes, a leading fairy tale scholar, argues that the fairy tale has not been examined thoroughly to arrive at a definition because this would serve to disenchant a genre associated "with the blessed realm of childhood and innocence" (Zipes, 2000, p. xv). However, what can be said of the fairy tale genre is that

although it is not the same as the oral folk tale or the wonder tale (also known as *conte merveilleux*), it does draw from these genres as well as the legend, the novel, folklore, and many other literary forms (Zipes, 2000, p. xv-xvi). Jens Tismar argued in his study, *Kunstmärchen* (1977), that the literary fairy tale is synthetic and elaborate compared to the oral folk tale, which is more indigenous in its formation, but is no better or worse (qtd. in Zipes, 2000, p. xv).

Although Zipes resists offering his own definition of the fairy tale, he does outline some motifs and characteristics of the genre that have remained stable over time. Drawing from Vladimir Propp's analysis of the wonder tale in 1928, Zipes identified three major motifs that survived the transition from oral folk tale to literary fairy tale: the motif of transformation (of anybody and anything); a sense of wondrous change (a hint of the supernatural causing astonishment, admiration, fear, awe or reverence); and the utopian spirit (the pursuit of a 'true' home, often a transformed home unanticipated by the protagonist) (2000, p. xvii-xix). The motif of wondrous change is especially distinctive for the literary fairy tale, separating it from moral story, novella, sentimental tale or other short works of fiction.

In terms of the characteristics of the genre, these have varied significantly. The genre originally focused on adult, upper class readers but strayed from this tendency, especially with the brothers Grimm who consciously tried to target both adult and child readers (Zipes, 2000, p. xxvi). The children's fairy tale subsequently came into its own between 1830 and 1900 (Zipes, 2000, p. xxvi). These tales were often secular, but many were in keeping with religious ethics and patriarchal gender roles (Zipes, 2000, p. xxvi).

The happy ending, dominant in the oral wonder tale, was not always assured in the literary fairy tale as the genre was sometimes a subversive tool for authors dissatisfied by those in power. For example, during the Romantic period at the turn of the nineteenth century, fairy tales addressed philosophical and practical concerns of the emerging middle classes and often ended unhappily (Zipes, 2000, p. xxiv). Fairy tales were also often associated with the uncanny. Zipes argues that the very act of reading or being read a fairy tale is an uncanny experience because there is an “estrangement or separation from a familiar world inducing an uncanny feeling which is both *frightening* and *comforting*” (1983, p. 174). By separating the reader from the restrictions of reality from the start, fairy tales allow the reader the freedom to revisit those things that were once familiar but may now feel strangely unfamiliar (Zipes, 1983, p. 174). One of the most revered classic European fairy tale authors, Hans Christian Andersen, is infamous for his use of the uncanny in his stories for children and adults (Lotz, 1998; Tartar, 2008).

By the mid-nineteenth century, parodies of fairy tales were common, with writers subverting the formal structure of the canonized tales of Perrault, Grimm and Andersen (Zipes, 2000, p. xxvii). Zipes states that the classic fairy-tale canon has existed in the Western world since the nineteenth century and was generally fostered by religious ritual, pedagogical standards, practical custom, and social communication. The canonical fairy tales include “Cinderella,” “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Sleeping Beauty,” “Hansel and Gretel,” “Rapunzel,” “Rumpelstiltskin,” “The Frog Prince,” “Snow White,” “Bluebeard,” “Beauty and the Beast,” “Jack and the Beanstalk,” “The Princess and the Pea,” “Puss-in-

Boots,” “The Little Mermaid,” “The Ugly Duckling,” “Aladdin and the Magic Lamp,” and “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” (Zipes, 2006, p. 1, p. 227).

With this canon in place the fairy tale became institutionalized as a genre by the beginning of the twentieth century, frequently used in school curricula in sanitized and simplified forms (Zipes, 2000, p. xxviii-xxix). Even though the genre had established a classic canon, it was still inherently intertextual in the sense that authors of literary fairy tales in the twentieth century not only borrowed the formula of classic fairy tales, but often experimented with new variations (including adult novels or novellas) and attempted to cultivate specific ethnic themes (Zipes, 2000, p. xxix). The blending and popularity of fairy tales from around the world demanded that readers transcend their nationalities to make connections between cultures in a universal sense (Zipes, 2000, p. xxix).

Although the literary fairy tale has been institutionalized as a genre for over one hundred years, there has been two major revolutions in the genre in the past century that have altered the way we perceive fairy tales today. First, the Walt Disney Company’s utilization of traditional stories that guarantee a happy ending has engraved one major fairy tale theme into the minds of most people: happiness will always come to those who work hard and are kind and brave (Zipes, 2000, p. xxx). In Disney’s animated films, a process of ‘Disneyfication’ occurs in which simplified versions of the aesthetic, intellectual, and moral standards of the fairy tale are applied to the film adaptation (Nel, 2003, p. 581). As a result, Disney has successfully associated the fairy tale’s utopian

spirit with the American Dream and reinstalled the happy ending as the most dominant conclusion to the fairy tale.

The second major revolution in the genre started in the 1960's when a backlash against the commodification of the fairy tale that Disney had cultivated became evident in the writings of feminist and postmodern authors of fairy tales. This trend, still prevalent today, questioned traditional gender roles and power structures, breathing new life into the genre (Zipes, 2000, p. xxxi). Since the 1980's especially, "magic realism and a postmodern sensibility" have resulted in much experimentation with the genre (Zipes, 2000, p. xxxi). It is this latest revolution in the history of the fairy tale genre that has provided much of the literature to be reviewed in the following section.

Scholarship on Revised Fairy Tales

Several fictional works emerged that garnered significant academic attention for the manner in which they revised, revamped, destabilized and deconstructed the traditional fairy tale. The most central fictional works of this type were those of Donald Barthelme (particularly his 1967 retelling of *Snow White*), Angela Carter (*The Bloody Chamber*, 1979), and Robert Coover ("The Dead Queen," 1973; *Pinocchio in Venice*, 1991; *Briar Rose*, 1996). These three authors have been analyzed thoroughly by scholars for their feminist and postmodern takes on the traditional tale (Bacchilega, 1988; Bond, 2004; Deszcz, 2002; Herrero-Olaizola, 1998; Kaiser, 1994; Lokke, 1988; Makinen, 1992; Nealon, 2005; Pizer, 1990; Redies, 2004; Wilde, 1976). In addition, famous works such as the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*, the fictions of Margaret Atwood, and the early

twentieth century literature of Vladimir Nabokov, have been analyzed by scholars for their reliance on fairy tale structures, devices and motifs (Kim, 1996; Wilson, 1993; Sweeney, 1999). What becomes obvious is that the vast majority of these studies were conducted starting in the late 1980's, despite the fact that fairy tales have been reworked and bowdlerized for centuries since their transition from oral tale to literary story. The difference now is the acknowledgment by academics that the retelling of the traditional fairy tale is also a re-reading of it; in other words, these retellings are an assessment of the fairy tale's narrative and cultural ramifications (Bacchilega, 1988, p. 2).

The recent surge in attention to the literary fairy tale by writers and academics can be attributed in part to feminist literary theories developed starting in the 1960's. Feminist literary theories have been used in wide-ranging, diverse, and even contradictory projects, impacting the academic study of literature in addition to the public discourse on literature and culture. There is virtually no field or genre of literature that has gone untouched by feminist literary studies (Rooney, 2006, p. 10). From this perspective, pleasure derived from reading can come from resistance, judgment, and critique of classic works, such as literary fairy tale canon. This type of pleasure can be described as 'the political pleasure of subversion,'² pleasure that revels in revealing the inadequacies and stereotypes of a popular genre like fairy tales. Alternatively, pleasure can come from a combination or balance of acquiescence and resistance to texts (Heng, 2006, p. 54). Readers are free to resist certain elements of the text while simultaneously accepting others. Some feminist literary theory has called for new strategies for reading,

² I would like to acknowledge my appreciation to Dr. Brian Johnson for allowing me to borrow his phrase "the political pleasure of subversion" to describe this particular type of pleasure.

such as 'reading' what is unsaid or 'unconscious' in the text (Heng, 2006, p. 54). It has created an impulse to read subtexts, residual texts, or emergent texts that exist alongside or within dominant ones (Heng, 2006, p. 54). In the academic literature discussed below, the balance between accepting the classical formula of fairy tales and resisting the common stereotypes of those tales will be discussed by a number of feminist and postmodern scholars.

One study positions an analysis of the film *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) as an example of the way in which the mass media must appeal to its audience by drawing people to its products. Helen Kim (1996) argues that a positive theory of popular pleasure has not been formulated because academics are overly focused on either popular culture being "the source of social decay" or on "romanticizing 'the people' as an autonomous source of political resistance" (p. 214). It is difficult under such polemic approaches to theorize a politics of pleasure. As Aristotle has already taught us, pleasure is neither purely good nor evil. Kim argues that because Western culture has constructed childhood "as a state of freedom from the normal restrictions of the adult world," genres like fantasy, and more specifically children's fantasy, are commonly used to draw audiences, consumers or readers toward a cultural product (1996, p. 217-218). Kim's study is the only such analysis in this review that acknowledges the importance of examining these types of texts in the context of understanding readerly pleasure: "If the type of appeal the mass media uses to construct its power is, thus, closely associated with the pleasures offered by children's fantasy, then an examination of the nature of this

discourse should reveal more about the way in which it is able to rouse and redirect readerly desires” (1996, p. 218).

The result of Kim’s discussion of *The Wizard of Oz* is that such texts can produce pleasures associated with escape as well as pleasures associated with oppositional readings. This is possible because Kim’s object of analysis is one of the best examples of a modern fairy tale that is both celebratory and critical in its use of the traditional fairy tale genre. Both the print and cinematic versions of *The Wizard of Oz* are commonly described as the first great American fairy tale because they depict the genre’s typical ‘hero on an extraordinary journey’ storyline (Bacchilega, 2000, p. 343). Kim identifies similarities between the popular mass media and the traditional fairy tale, stating that they both appeal to a person’s desire for ‘magical’ transformation and utopian transcendence (1996, p. 217). Moreover, it is the pleasure of “indulging in the delight and wonder of the impossible,” much like Dorothy does when her unconscious mind takes her to the magical land of Oz (Kim, 1996, p. 217).

Unlike some postmodernist takes on the traditional fairy tale, *The Wizard of Oz* maintained an atmosphere of enchantment (particularly with the magical transformation of inanimate objects into animate ones) while reflecting on its own status as a fictional, fantasy product. The reflexivity in Frank L. Baum’s books is well suited to the characteristics of the Hollywood musical, with Dorothy constantly thinking aloud about her strange situation through song. By frequently employing irony and self-reflection, the audience can derive pleasure from suspending their disbelief alongside Dorothy and enjoying the marvels of Oz created by the filmmakers. The story also offers oppositional

readings of the traditional fairy tale when audience is quickly brought back to reality, and all Dorothy wishes for after arriving in Oz is to get back home. Dorothy's desire to return home and her attempt to do so is interpreted by Kim "as the film working through the oppositional possibilities open to consumers: to 'get out' of mass culture's system of power once they have been enticed into it" (1996, p. 225). Altogether, Kim's study illustrates that massively popular texts that draw from childhood materials can bring about different types of pleasure, such as the pleasure of escaping the real world and the pleasure of subverting powers that are greater than the individual 'reader'. This is similar to the idea that pleasure can be found by giving and taking, or acquiescing and resisting, various aspects of the text.

There are other texts that expand on the fairy tale genre rather than offer oppositional readings. One is the 2006 film *Pan's Labyrinth* (*El laberinto del fauno*) directed by Guillermo del Toro. In a review in *Film Quarterly*, Paul Smith (2007) argues that the use of the fantasy realm in this war-time film reinforces real-life horrors. The film exposes a common assumption about the 'traditional' fairy tale – that they are non-violent and always end happily. To director Guillermo del Toro, in fairy tales the realm of fantasy is proportionate to the horror of the real (Smith, 2007, p. 8). Instead of softening the real world violence of the film with a child's eye view of a sentimental fairy tale (as this would be within audience expectations), del Toro does the opposite. This disruption of audience expectations using the fairy tale genre serves to reinforce the brutality of reality by keeping the film at a very adult level. *Pan's Labyrinth* seems to break down audience expectations while reaffirming the power of the fairy tale genre.

The story ends with the child, Ofelia, dying at the hands of her truly evil stepfather, with this sacrifice allowing her to take back her title of Princess and subsequently immortality as well. Despite the fact that the final moments of the film are chilling and violent, it is nevertheless a poignant and affecting ending to an adult fairy tale. Smith's review demonstrates that pleasure can be found in re-appropriating a genre like children's fantasy to provoke reflection on real world problems. By placing the genre in a new adult context, *Pan's Labyrinth* shocks its audience into reflecting about the violence and brutality of today's world.

Susan Elizabeth Sweeney approaches her analysis of Vladimir Nabokov's "A Nursery Tale," (1926) along similar lines as Kim (1996) and Smith's (2007) discussions. Sweeney discusses the gap between desire and reality in the tale and how fairy tale motifs and narrative devices are contrasted sharply with contemporary settings and adult themes. Nabokov, who would later write *Lolita* (1955), wrote the story of a man who fantasizes about raping young women using the pretext of the Sleeping Beauty story. In Sweeney's analysis, several narrative devices and motifs can be linked to the fairy tale genre in addition to the Sleeping Beauty pretext: the use of odd numbers, the granting of wishes, and the use of time limits (1999, p. 511-512). Nabokov's story is quite obviously an adult one, but relies heavily on the structure of the fairy tale. The fact that it is called "A Nursery Tale" is ironic, because it seems even more childlike than the fairy tale, yet it deals with such adult themes as male sexual desire, violence against women, and adult psychology (Sweeney, 1999, p. 512). This strikingly unhappy and mildly disturbing

story is an example of the type of “anti-fairy tale” that became popular in the last half century that has attracted so much attention from scholars and critics (Mieder, 1987).

Just as the potentially happy ending of *Pan's Labyrinth* was problematized by its violent nature, happy endings in general have “come to seem trivial and frivolous, appropriate only to Hollywood movies, light fiction, or children’s literature” (Pape, 1992, p. 180). Walter Pape argues that the happy ending, as a narrative device, has become a happy memory of childhood for adult readers; it is no longer expected in adult literature and film yet it is still longed for by adult readers (Pape, 1991, p.190). While both adults and children need to impose some sort of structure on the world’s chaos and both desire happiness, their conceptions of happiness are not the same (Pape, 1992, p. 181). This helps explain why so many authors of ‘adult’ fairy tales maintain much of the structure of the genre, yet make the endings more shocking, unhappy, or neutral. It is not necessarily the ending that brings pleasure to the adult reader, but rather the process leading up to and the potential for a happy ending. What grown-up readers require is a sense of an ending, of any kind. Without that sense there is frustration (Pape, 1992, p. 193).

While Kim (1996), Smith (2007), and Sweeney’s (1999) studies all revealed a tendency to foster oppositional readings by offering uncharacteristically dark or ironic content for a fairy tale, each example was fairly loyal to the general narrative style in which fairy tales are told. These scholars have indicated that self-reflexivity, the occasional use of irony, and the disruption of the happy ending as narrative devices are techniques employed by authors of modern adult tales. These modern tales do not seek to criticize the genre of fairy tales *per se*, but rather are celebratory of its storytelling style.

The study of *The Wizard of Oz* by Helen Kim is the only study discussed so far of a modern fairy tale retelling that delves into the particular characteristics that make the 'reading of the text' pleasurable. Kim argued that the self-reflexivity of the film, combined with the genre of fantasy and musical style of *Oz*, made the viewing experience pleasurable by clearly acknowledging the harsh realities of life (i.e. rural Kansas) while allowing entry into the fantastic and utopian realm of Oz (1996, p. 221). In other words, the self-reflexive nature of the film allows the viewer to accept its fictionality and escape into it temporarily. This is a major component of the pleasure derived from watching *The Wizard of Oz*. The studies discussed below by feminist scholars are concerned with the reading and writing of texts that go beyond simply disrupting reader expectations, but foster specific oppositional readings of the fairy tale genre, thus challenging its position as an innocent childhood genre.

Reams of examples of feminist and postmodern retellings have been published since the 1960's that are critical of both the narrative structure and content of classic fairy tales (Deszcz, 2004, p. 27; Joosen, 2004, p. 5). These types of retellings have unsurprisingly garnered a significant amount of attention and debate from feminist scholars. One of the most highly acclaimed and analyzed works of adult fairy tales is Angela Carter's short story compilation *The Bloody Chamber* (1979). Unlike the modern tales discussed above, Carter's stories are completely oppositional to traditional portrayals of male and female sexuality and to many fairy tale motifs and norms.

Three studies of Carter's stories in *The Bloody Chamber* discuss how her stories break down and expose the cultural norms of the traditional fairy tale genre (Bacchilega,

1988; Lokke, 1988; Makinen, 1992). So much so, as Merja Makinen (1992) points out in her analysis of *The Bloody Chamber*, that many readers find “the savagery with which she can attack cultural stereotypes disturbing, even alienating” (p. 2). However, it can also be exhilarating for readers, as they never know what to expect from “the avant-garde literary terrorist of feminism” (Makinen, 1992, p. 2). These three studies of Carter demonstrate how feminist deconstructions of fairy tales can expose and unsettle the cultural norms and motifs entrenched in the traditional genre. Makinen, however, is the only scholar to put forward a theory of what kind of pleasure is derived from the experience of reading Carter’s stories.

Makinen’s analysis provides examples of the way in which adult fairy tale retellings can be used not only as oppositional readings, but as a way to distance the reader from their preconceived notions about fairy tales. To achieve this effect, Carter presents a familiar set of fairy tale tropes and then quickly subverts them. One example that is apparent in many of *The Bloody Chamber*’s stories is the use of unusual and disquieting relationships between women and non-human creatures. As mentioned previously in my brief history of fairy tales, the genre is often seen as dealing with the uncanny. Makinen argues that Carter’s fascination with beasts and their relationships with human characters plays on the notion of the uncanny—the “distorted fictions of the unconscious revisited through homely images” (1992, p. 9). But the uncanny in Carter’s stories goes beyond the traditional promotion of this uncomfortable feeling to create an oppositional reading—female characters in her stories have willing sexual relations with beasts, an action that represents autonomous feminine desire. Makinen, therefore,

establishes that the uncanny can be used to foster oppositional readings of the classic fairy tale to deal with issues of gender, power, and sexuality. This goes substantially beyond the frightening and comforting effects of the uncanny previously outlined by Zipes for the traditional fairy tale, and serves to explain what some readers would derive from reading Carter's tales: a sense of empowerment.

Similarly to Makinen, Cristina Bacchilega's (1988) analysis determines that Carter's storytelling tactics are centered on the appropriation of the fairy tale structures and motifs and their eventual use of them as a critique on the genre itself (p. 16). An example of this is in Carter's retelling of the Snow White tale entitled "The Snow Child." In this short story, a Count wishes he had a girl as red as blood, as white as snow, and as black as a raven's feather. Once he wishes these three characteristics aloud, the girl magically appears. This is in keeping thus far with the use of magic, the motif of transformation, and the importance of the number three in fairy tales. However, Carter then disrupts the cultural norms of the genre by having her prick her finger on the thorn of a rose, die, and be raped by the Count. By exaggerating the motif of transformation, this version of Snow White "makes the inherent shallowness of [the] traditional cycle of transformation all the more dramatically visible" (Bacchilega, 1988, p. 18). This aggressive subversiveness combined with eroticism makes *The Bloody Chamber* problematic for some readers and critics, with some labelling Carter's work as pornographic and excessively violent (Makinen, 1992, p. 3). But as Makinen argues, Carter's rewritings of fairy tales give the reader the sense of being actively engaged in a feminist deconstruction of the same tales and stories they grew up with (1992, p. 3).

This theme of the reader being actively engaged is one that recurs for many postmodern and feminist retellings, by either forcing the reader to adjust to new forms of storytelling or by thrusting shocking, violent, sexual, or ironic content at the reader. Unlike modern tales like Nabokov's "A Nursery Tale" and the musical *The Wizard of Oz* which seek to tell moralistic stories with no heavy demand on the reader or viewer, Carter's fiction is constantly interacting with reader expectations. It is the readers who know fairy tales and who carry certain assumptions that make it possible for Carter to create a destabilizing and subversive text.

For example, Carter frequently employs irony to usurp common stereotypes. Kari Lokke (1988) finds in her study of Carter's retelling of the Bluebeard tale that the author will often portray the setting of her stories as beautiful, exotic, paradises, that are all at once hellish and hideous, such Bluebeard's castle³ (p. 10). While irony is frequently used in the traditional fairy tale to emphasize didactic messages, Carter uses this narrative device to criticize the fairy tale genre. Irony acts as "an unsettling vehicle for exposing ... the brutality of traditional patriarchal attitudes towards women" (Lokke, 1988, p. 12). Strangely, this is where the pleasure is derived for readers and it is a tactic also used by Robert Coover in his retellings of traditional tales (Bond, 2004, p. 279). As Mäkinen explains: "[o]ne does not need to be a feminist to read the texts, far from it, but if the reader does not appreciate the attack on the stereotypes then the payback for that level of engagement, the *sheer cerebral pleasure* and the enjoyment of the iconoclasm, will be missing" (1992, p. 6, emphasis added). This is a very different type of pleasure, one that

³ In the classic tale, Bluebeard repeatedly kills each of his brides as they discover the bodies of his previous wives locked away in his expansive castle.

depends on the reader learning to expect (and crave) the unexpected (Bond, 2004, p. 278).

Much of the secondary literature examines the ways in which authors of fairy tale retellings use the familiarities of the genre against itself to expose underlying and fundamental problems, producing a form of pleasure derived from subverting stereotypes and resisting the status quo. There are other studies, however, that examine the temporal nature of these retellings and the effects of displacing the stories in time and space, stimulating the sheer cerebral pleasure described by Makinen (1992) (Deszcz, 2004; Moore, 2000; Novoa, 2005). Similarly to the way Nabokov applied the fairy tale structure to a present-day setting, the use of the fairy tale in modern contexts can also emphasize its unsuitability for certain contemporary situations, further destabilizing the fantasy of the fairy tale genre (Moore, 2000). For example, John Moore (2000) examines the ways in which Gloria Naylor's novel *Linden Hills* (1985), "a tightly woven narrative of intertextualities," utilizes various familiar western texts including "The Frog Prince". Although they are familiar to the reader, they are used by Naylor to outline differences and conflict between her black characters and society: "... Naylor's intertexts teach us that these Western stories, though powerful in the history of ideas, cannot accurately reflect the history of her black characters, cannot tell their stories. When they try to live in the white narrative, they are doomed to failure" (Moore, 2000, p. 1411). Intertextuality can summon a longing for the familiar or underscore a feeling of tension and the unknown. Therefore, intertextuality is not only a prerequisite for all retellings of

fairy tales, but it is also a tool used by the author to criticize the cultural norms under which the genre has evolved.

Just as stereotypes of race and class can be used to expose the limitations of the fairy tale, other scholars have focused on the way issues of gender commonly surface in the retellings. However, unlike Angela Carter's stories, some retellings are not easily categorized as feminist. An example of one such discussion is Justyna Deszcz's (2004) study of Salman Rushdie's feminist fairy tale *Shame* (1983), a novel retelling of the Beauty and the Beast tale. In her analysis of this subversive tale, Deszcz argues that Rushdie exposes the fairy tale genre's alignment with patriarchal cultural practices and raises questions about how canonical tales like Beauty and the Beast sustain stereotypically gendered perspectives (2004, p. 27). In Rushdie's story, the female protagonist is both the beast and the beauty, married to a man who does not love and accept her until minutes before both their deaths. Similarly to Angela Carter's use of irony and the uncanny, this inversion of conventional fairy tale roles exposes and undermines forms of domination and "the basis on which such canonical constructions are founded" (Deszcz, 2004, p. 41).

Deszcz's discussion also reflects the confusion among literary critics around the novel's treatment of gender issues and the portrayal of female characters (2004, p. 35-36). Rushdie's understanding of feminism is not one where men and women are adversaries, but rather one in which they both share the responsibility to oppose domination (in *Shame* this would be in reference to social and political life in Pakistan in the 1980's). This perspective led to some criticism from feminists who wished he had

turned *Shame* “into a genuine feminist work” (Deszcz, 2004, p. 36). Rushdie left room for reader interpretation while creating a stimulating dialogue between feminist, postmodern and postcolonial critiques, using the fairy tale as a site of exploration for both himself and his readers (Deszcz, 2004, p. 40). Rushdie’s *Shame* indicates that some fairy tale retellings are open texts, allowing for variation in readers’ interpretations.

The intentional avoidance of prescribing meaning to postmodern texts is a characteristic that seems to frustrate feminist critics much like Salman Rushdie’s *Shame*. This freedom of the reader to interpret is characteristic of postmodern texts, which tend to focus on the plurality of meaning and the dynamics of narrative form. Rather than having one all-knowing narrator, postmodern texts tend to use multiple perspectives from several characters to emphasize the plurality of meaning in the text (Bacchilega, 1988, p. 11; Crew, 2002, p. 82). The scholars discussed below generally find that the postmodern style of storytelling tends to rely on parody, irony, and self-reflexivity to destabilize reader expectations and to disrupt the narrative structure, with the aim of either producing a political pleasure of subversion, or to stimulate the cerebral pleasure of readers by allowing an open interpretation of the text (Bacchilega, 1988; Bond, 2004; Herrero-Olaizola, 1998; Moore, 2000; Nealon, 2005; Pizer, 1990; Redies, 2004; and Wilde, 1976).

In her analysis of a postmodern film that borrows the story of *Sleeping Beauty*, Adriana Novoa argues that it “both exploits and reinvents traditional fairy-tale narratives with a view toward testing the bounds of the distinctions between the emotional and the rational, between moral and amoral” (2005, p. 225). In other words, such reinvented

tales have the freedom to play with boundaries, confronting the reader with their own limits and expectations. Similarly to Rushdie's *Shame*, the Spanish film *Talk to Her* (*Hable con Ella*, 2002) provoked mixed reaction among reviewers who either saw it as a disturbing recreation of Sleeping Beauty or as a strange, yet loving depiction of the fairy tale (Novoa, 2005, p. 224). The film features a traditional female character, a beautiful, innocent young woman trapped in a coma who only awakens after being raped. The man who rapes her is portrayed as truly loving her and has been caring for her for months in an unusual motherly fashion. While the film has obvious misogynist characteristics, it also seeks to reveal stories within stories and has great character depth and complexity (Novoa, 2005, p. 225).

Normally adding greater depth of character increases the chances for the audience to identify with that character (Crew, 2002, p. 78). However, the male protagonist in the film is strange and confusing; he is described as a hybrid character by Novoa, being both pathetic yet all knowing, a mother and a rapist, a lover yet impotent (2005, p. 233). His actions are neither completely right nor completely wrong. These confusing characters have the potential to fascinate the viewer by creating the same form of cerebral pleasure that Angela Carter's stories incite, but may also fail to do so. Novoa argues quite the opposite; the film disrupts audience expectations by developing characters that are morally confusing and distant, leaving the viewer disturbed as it makes no attempt to redeem Sleeping Beauty's dignity or to acknowledge her victimization (2005, p. 244). Altogether, Pedro Almodovar's film is another example of a text employing fairy tale devices, such as the magical lifting of the coma, then subsequently deconstructing the

traditional fairy tale by disturbing audience expectations to a point that it could inhibit a pleasurable viewing experience. Although Novoa did not explore this possibility any further, it is possible that complicating and altering childhood texts to the point of being completely unfamiliar would seem to have a negative effect on the reading experience.

Scholars have coined the term 'anti-fairy tale' to describe retellings that are satirical to such an extent that they are entirely critical of both the content and form of the genre (Mieder, 1987; Pizer, 1990). While several of the above retellings rely on the disturbance of reader expectations to make them pleasurable and possibly more meaningful, some examples of postmodern fairy tales take this one step further. In an analysis of modern and postmodern anti-fairy tales, Wolfgang Mieder (1987) argues that readers enjoy the anti-fairy tale because it "appears to give a clearer symbolic view of what the human condition is really like . . . adults tend to concentrate on the specific problems of the fairy tales since they reflect today's social reality in a striking fashion" (pp. 91-92). Similarly to Makinen's 'sheer cerebral pleasure' and the political pleasure of subversion found in many feminist retellings, the anti-fairy tale provokes an intellectual process that is stimulating for the adult reader.

John Pizer (1990) argues in his comparative study of Robert Walser (1836) and Donald Barthelme's (1967) retellings of the traditional Snow White tale that the difference between the modern and postmodern 'anti-fairy tale' is in the form in which the retelling is written. Pizer states that Walser's modern, "postromantic anti-fairy tale" was a direct response to the Grimm's *Children and Household Tales*; Walser's anti-fairy tale was deliberately senseless, amoral, and disenchanting, but was conventional in the

form of clear dramatic verse. Barthelme's work, on the other hand, is postmodern because it "deliberately undermines all attempts to find a unified, coherent meaning within its narrative" (Pizer, 1990, p. 331). Therefore, while the modern retelling of Snow White by Walser makes use of the structural attributes of the fairy tale form, Barthelme's more postmodern retelling breaks out of the traditional framework of the classic fairy tale (Pizer, 1990, p. 336).

Barthelme's rendition of *Snow White* has attracted much attention from scholars not only for his rejection of the traditional fairy tale structure, but for his use of disruptive narrative devices (Bacchilega, 1988; Herrero-Olaizola, 1998; Nealon, 2005; Pizer, 1990). It is commonly referred to as an 'anti-fairy tale' by academics because "Barthelme systematically refuses to provide a linear narrative with a satisfying ending" and by mocking reader expectations (Bacchilega, 1988, p. 12-13; Pizer, 1990, p. 330-331). For instance, when Barthelme is describing Snow White's beauty, he describes how she has beauty marks all the way down her body, from her neck to her ankle. He emphasizes this with a column of bullets printed down the left side of the page. This only "manages to disrupt or frustrate the reader's representational desire" (Nealon, 2005, p. 124). Acting as a parody of the conventional fairy tale's preoccupation with beauty, the reader is immediately notified that this story will be full of surprises.

Alejandro Herrero Olaizola (1998) states in his study of Barthelme's *Snow White* that the frequent use of parody forces readers to reassess their familiarity with the story and how it is constructed (p. 7). Such postmodern texts are more demanding of their readers, encouraging them to question the fairy tale genre and become fairy tale critics,

but not going so far as to prescribe specific meaning to their stories (Herrero-Olaizola, 1998, p. 7). While it is clear that this type of visual trick serves to destabilize the reading experience, it is not clear what exactly occurs when changes are made in such a visual manner to the traditional form of storytelling. More generally, this raises questions as to the importance of changes in form of these retellings, not just changes in content.

Alongside the frequent use of irony and parody, scholars have demonstrated that postmodern texts employ self-reflexivity by making characters self-aware in one way or another. In Barthelme's retelling of *Snow White* (1967), her awareness of being cast in a stereotypical nature results in a very different tale. Upon learning of a possible 'rescue' from her apartment in Manhattan by a prince, Snow White realizes that she is being portrayed as a stereotypical "lady in waiting" and declares "I would rather be doing a hundred other things" (Herrero-Olaizola, 1998, p. 6). Herrero-Olaizola argues that "the protagonist's consciousness-raising" combined with the use of parody forces readers to "reexamine our familiarity with the story, and in so doing we become critics, ultimately transforming our own familiarity with the folktale" (1998, pp. 6-7). Such self-awareness is also present in other postmodern texts, such as the prince character of Robert Coover's retelling of *Briar Rose* (1996). Sünje Redies illustrates in an analysis of Coover's story that character awareness is not only unheard of in the conventional fairy tale genre, it is also evidence of the limitations of the traditional fairy tale as an authoritative, didactic narrative form (2004, p. 15). Furthermore, this type of disruption in the flow of the story speaks to the 'ironic vision' of postmodern texts more generally (Wilde, 1976, p. 47).

The academic literature presents some clear strengths in the way scholars approached these fictional texts. Makinen (1992) and Novoa's (2005) studies of feminist and postmodern retellings both emphasize the importance of boundaries in creating or limiting pleasure for feminist reader, particularly in balancing the familiar with the unfamiliar, the inversion of conventional fairy tale tropes, and the political pleasure derived from the attack on stereotypes. The feminist and postmodern texts were discussed in the academic literature as rich sites of exploration of social commentary by contemporary writers of fiction. Each study outlined the variety of approaches and uses of traditional fairy tale themes, styles and forms of storytelling.

Some scholars identified the use of parody as a device to make the reader think of how the fairy tale is constructed, making it easier for readers to become potential critics of the traditional fairy tale (Bacchilega, 1988; Makinen, 1992). Many rewritings mocked and criticized stereotypical gender roles and sexual relations, but many postmodern retellings played with the narrative structure itself. The happy ending was uncommon in these particular retellings, with some postmodern ones refusing entirely even a sense of an ending.

The studies of modern retellings like Kim (1996) acknowledge that escapist pleasures offered by fantasy and childhood materials can be balanced with other more contemplative functions, such as textual reflexivity. Some of the studies mentioned the presence of a certain self-awareness or reflexivity in the retellings, either by undercutting conventional fairy tale stereotypes or structures, by characters and narrators being self-aware or even aware of their fictionality, or even by mocking feminist criticism of fairy

tales (Herrero-Olaizola, 1998; Kim, 1996). It is possible that such reflexivity present in these retellings may provoke the quiet contemplation that Aristotle insisted was the key to a fully pleasurable experience, drawing the reader in and inviting her to read beyond the story being presented on the page or screen. This can be achieved through sheer cerebral pleasure involved in open interpretations of the text or through the more direct political pleasure of subversion. Even the escapist pleasure of watching a film like *The Wizard of Oz* is a conscious experience, one that involves viewers purposefully suspending their disbelief and indulging in the pleasure of the impossible. This aspect of reading reflexive texts is that which is most significant for the adult reader, for without it the pleasurable experience would be mainly based on escape and stimulating the senses.

Overall, the literature examining these renewed, revamped and retold fairy tales is largely focused on the similarities and differences in content and form of the stories, rather than the reading experience. Since all of the fictions discussed in the literature were targeted at adults only (with the possible exception of *The Wizard of Oz*), it is a significant gap in the literature that none of the studies explored the pleasure of the adult reader in greater detail. Feminist literary theory contends that pleasure can be derived from making judgements about a text, resisting or creating an oppositional reading, and subsequently forming a critique of traditional or classic texts. However, these same theorists argue that pleasure can be equally created by a balance of accepting and resisting the text in the same reading. The latter argument coincides with what Kim (1996) argues is an escape into a world of fantasy based on the reader being able to suspend their disbelief and enjoy the text. Clearly there is room for further academic

debate when pleasure from this type of reading seems to be derived from the contradictory desires to accept, escape, resist, and criticize.

Many of the secondary texts analyzed by scholars have at least one common effect; these retellings attempt to problematize the fairy tale in a way that fascinates, enlightens, or even sometimes frustrates the reader. The reader's 'cerebral pleasure' referred to by Makinen (1992) seems to link the functions of intertextuality, irony, parody, and reflexivity. However, very few studies referred to the function of nostalgia. This seems to be a significant gap in the literature, especially since each retelling of an old fairy tale relies on something that would have been present in the reader's past, most likely in their childhood. For example, in feminist deconstructions such as Carter's critically acclaimed stories, how is the pleasurable reading experience maintained or altered when much of the magic and innocence of the classic fairy tale genre is significantly broken down? Does the reader become detached from the pretext on which the retelling is based? An exploration of the role of nostalgia in the reading experience may shed some light on these questions, since it deals with the loss or longing for a past time or place, such as childhood.

The concept of the uncanny, which is present in the traditional fairy tale genre, is only directly mentioned in relation to Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* (Makinen, 1992). If this is a commonly used narrative device in the traditional fairy tale, are contemporary writers no longer using this technique to frighten, cause discomfort, or add an air of the supernatural? Since the uncanny is an emotive device commonly used in the classic tales and because the uncanny deals with notions of the familiar and the home, it

may play a significant and complex role in producing pleasure for the reader.

Furthermore, the importance of the uncanny is emphasized by the fact that adult fairy tales often deal with liminality, stretching boundaries, and usurping what was previously familiar and comfortable. Therefore, the uncanny deserves further exploration into its role in the reading experience.

The media in which these rewritings are produced also point to a significant gap in the academic literature. Most of the studies discussed above analyze literary works, with some venturing into film adaptations. However, there are many other types of rewritings of fairy tales and other childhood texts, such as paintings, music, cartoons, comics and even clothing and toys. This bias towards the medium of literature may be explained partially by the fact that the modern fairy tale is primarily a literary genre. However, there also seems to be a scholarly bias towards critically acclaimed authors, like Rushdie, Carter, and Nabokov, who chose to adapt the childlike fairy tale genre with political and moral messages inherent in the text.

This leads to another type of bias or gap in the scholarship. Popular culture is largely neglected in the academic attention given to fairy tale rewritings, possibly due to the fact that the feminist movement and other ideological criticisms are what inspired many academics to study the fairy tale genre since the 1960's. However, postmodern and feminist literary experimentations with the fairy tale genre only play a marginal role in the production of fairy tales for adults in the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Bacchilega, 2000, p. 352). One only needs to think of the *Shrek* (2001; 2004; 2007) films or the self-mocking Disney film *Enchanted* (2007) for examples of humorous, popular culture

parodies of the classic fairy tale. There are further examples of retellings that attempt to recreate the enchantment that classic fairy tales have to offer, such as Robin McKinley's novels for teens, Anne Rice's erotica version of *Sleeping Beauty*, or Gregory McGuire's in-depth exploration of the character of the Wicked Witch of the West. In the medium of comics, there are a number of popular fantasy, myth and fairy tale themed comics for adults, such as Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series, Linda Medley's *Castle Waiting* series, and of course Bill Willingham's *Fables*. Overlooking these popular retellings constitutes a considerable gap in the literature which I intend to address with my analysis of *Fables*. Academic attention paid to contemporary revisions of fairy tales is arguably suffering from not only a literary bias, but more importantly a "high art" bias, taking notice only of those works that are considered art and worthy of scholarly examination.

The literature focuses a significant amount of attention on destabilizing the readers, making them deconstruct the text or become aware of the cultural norms and political conditions in which the classic tales originated. This is what is often referred to as the 'work' of the reader, or the active as opposed to the passive reader. I believe there is room for a more constructive debate about the realm of possibilities in between the active and passive reader, a middle ground that is neglected because it does not position the reader as either an active, resistant, participant or a disinterested, acquiescing consumer. These two general categories are inadequate to describe the mainstream consumer of today's adult popular culture, and they are not helpful in determining why a fictional series like *Fables* attracts so many new comic book readers, especially women.

Chapter III – Theory and Methodology: Contemplating Nostalgia, the Uncanny and Reflexivity

In order to theorize how new female readers of comics, who have an attachment to the past through childhood artefacts like fairy tales, find reading a text like *Fables* pleasurable, I have developed a framework that considers the effect of displacements in time as well as disturbances to what is familiar. Nostalgia is a concept that requires a displacement in time or space and subsequently a longing for the past, while sensations of the uncanny can only be provoked in relation to something familiar that becomes defamiliarized. More specifically, Linda Hutcheon's notion of ironized nostalgia, her theory of textual narcissism and reflexivity, and the concept of the uncanny combine to create a framework in which the female, typically non-comic book reader, derives pleasure from an adult retelling of fairy tales.

The academic literature on fairy tales demonstrates that many retellings, whether they are modern, feminist, or postmodern, make use of the narrative device of irony to add an adult twist or tone to the text (the prime example being Nabokov's "A Nursery Tale"). Parody is used in a similar fashion, but is more effective in drawing attention to the traditional form of the fairy tale and allowing the reader to criticize that formula. While irony and parody are both important to many adult retellings of childhood tales, they are not present in all contexts. More importantly, both parody and irony are reflexive functions that question the realist claims of artistic significance and truth, insisting that the reader accept the work as an invented, fictional entity (McCaffrey, 1982,

p. 5). For that reason, I would like to explore the notion of reflexivity of the text, rather than a specific form of reflexivity like irony or parody.

Intertextuality is a universal notion that applies to all fictional texts. Although not expressly acknowledged in most of the studies in the literature review, it can be argued that virtually all retellings rely on intertextuality as a foundational principle necessary to their development, many with clear aims to destabilize reader expectations by altering the events, themes, or formats of specific pre-texts or well-known genres. The fairy tale itself is inherently intertextual in its traditional and contemporary form (Zipes, 2000, p. xxix; Deszcz, 2002, p. 84). All revisions and retellings of fairy tales rely on the existence of one (or multiple) previous texts.

Depending on the style of retelling, the intertextual relationship between the new and old texts can be celebratory, critical, mocking, or deconstructive. For example, underlying Angela Carter's ability to deconstruct the traditional fairy tale is the inherent dependence on intertextuality. With all retellings of such tales, there is at least one clear pretext, such as Nabokov's use of the Sleeping Beauty tale. While intertextuality can provoke nostalgia in texts that are loyal to the original, in Carter's stories intertextuality transposes an entire system of codes (that of the traditional fairy tale) onto specific cultural moments, exposing problems in sexuality and power, for instance (Kaiser, 1994, p. 30). This has two major effects. The first is that it draws the reader's attention to the fact that the fairy tale is a product of very specific cultural, political and economic positions (Kaiser, 1994, p.33). In other words, the retelling is an ideal site to expose ugly truths about the past and present. The readers accept those truths with sad adult wisdom,

and according to certain scholars, possibly eschewing any sense of nostalgia (Berben-Masi, 1999, p. 602).

Subsequently a secondary effect is brought about—the readers question the assumption that fairy tales are universal, timeless myths that exist as a part of humanity's collective unconscious. Consequently, through intertextuality and the use of irony, Carter and other feminist deconstructionists are able to create highly oppositional readings of fairy tale stereotypes while questioning the very spirit of the genre itself. However, not all feminist retellings question the spirit of the genre. Margaret Atwood employs fairy tale themes of violence, cannibalism, dismemberment and transformation as tools to critique sexual politics (Bacchilega, 2002). In doing so, she purposefully maintains the magical spirit of the fairy tale in her stories in order to offer the possibility of transformation, for her characters and for all her readers as well (Wilson, 1993, p. 34).

Angela Carter's oppositional retellings are reflective of both common fairy tale criticism and other retellings since the 1970's (Joosen, 2004, p. 6). Both fairy tale criticism and recent retellings share an interest in expressing the same issues. However, some retellings have an added layer of intertextuality—they act as both an oppositional reading of fairy tales and as a parody of emancipatory feminism (Joosen, 2004, p. 12). As Vanessa Joosen argues in her analysis of several feminist retellings from 1974 to 2003, the aggressive feminist tone of some authors “has become in the mean time at least as stereotypical as Snow White's passive innocence” (2004, p. 12). So, a retelling of fairy tales can problematize stereotypical gender relations, while at the same time criticizing “overtly polemical” feminism (Joosen, 2004, p. 13).

What is evident from this overview is that the aspect of intertextuality has been explored, albeit briefly, in the academic literature. All literature is inherently intertextual; Roland Barthes described the text as “a tissue, a woven fabric” formed from the threads of the “already written” and the “already read” (qtd. in Allen, 2000, p. 6). What is known of this commonly used term is that intertextuality has promoted new notions of meaning, authorship and reading that are resistant to ingrained notions of originality, uniqueness, singularity and autonomy (Allen, 2000, p. 6). It is clear that each retelling of a childhood text in the adult context can never be original and it must draw from previous texts, established styles, and practices. The past perpetually blends with the present, but is never perfectly reproduced. Acknowledging this, I would like to leave the underlying concept of intertextuality aside and accept it as a fundamental assumption at work in all renewed childhood texts. This will allow me to focus on other notions that I believe are more unique to this particular type of text.

As I stated in the introduction, I plan to explore the notions of nostalgia, reflexivity and the uncanny and how they function individually and as a framework to create a pleasurable reading experience as a way of investigating the niche of the new female comics consumer. This trio of concepts has been selected and developed in part out of my own reading experience as such a consumer, but also out of the academic literature discussed in the previous chapter.

Ironized Nostalgia

Although it seems inherent in any retelling of childhood tales, the notion of nostalgia was not touched upon by most scholars in the literature. Those few that do mention nostalgia do not attempt to explain how nostalgia is operating during the reading process. Pape (1991) argues that the happy ending, as a narrative device, has become a happy memory for adults. Since the happy ending is generally associated with traditional fairy tales, and many retellings choose not to incorporate happy endings, what does that mean for the reader? Does it mean that the reading is no longer enjoyable or satisfying? Are these retellings no longer nostalgic experiences, but entirely new ones? Cristina Bacchilega (1988) argues along these lines, stating that any sense of nostalgia is eliminated in feminist retellings like Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* because of its oppositional nature (1988, p. 16). However, I would argue that this does not apply to most adult retellings of childhood tales. The desirability of many of the feminist, modern, and postmodern revisions is in the maintenance of a semblance of magic, transformation, or utopia. It is in indulging in the delight and wonder of the impossible, in a storytelling framework that is at least somewhat familiar, that provokes a nostalgic reading in these texts.

It is clear that many retellings incorporate a component of irony when presenting the classic tales in a new context. Irony is a device used in fiction that provokes moments of reflection, therefore it is possible that nostalgia and irony operate simultaneously in these adult tales. Nostalgia summons an affective longing for childhood experiences, such as reading a familiar story of fantasy, while irony anchors this affective longing in

the adult realm of contemplation and reflection. This balancing act serves to satisfy my female adult reader's intellectual tendency to reflect on the text she is enjoying, due to its nostalgic indulgence in the past, and to possibly critique the conditions of her present reality. Based on this characterization of nostalgia in relation to irony, I require a theory that does not position the experience of nostalgia as purely regressive.

Academic literature on nostalgia reveals that it is a concept that is commonly thought to be uncomplicated yet proves to be surprisingly paradoxical (Hutcheon, 2000, para. 3; Muller, 2007, p. 739). To support the need for a conceptualization of nostalgia that is non-regressive and supports the possibility for reflection, I borrow from Linda Hutcheon. Specifically, I am drawing from her article "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern," (2000) which developed the idea that nostalgia is much more than longing for a lost past and memories. Rather it is a "complex projection; the invocation of a partial, idealized history merg[ing] with a dissatisfaction with the present" (Hutcheon, 2000, para. 9).

Hutcheon draws mainly from Mikhail Bakhtin, particularly his concept of 'historical inversion,' "the ideal that is not being lived now is projected into the past" (Hutcheon, 2000, para. 9). Present values and ideals become 'memorialized' in the past, 'crystallized' into moments in time, reorganized and distorted in memory (Hutcheon, 2000, para. 9). Nostalgia is "[s]imultaneously distancing and proximating . . . exil[ing] us from the present as it brings the imagined past near" (Hutcheon, 2000, para. 9). The idealized past is constructed in part, then combined with the present, which is seen as complicated, difficult, ugly, and confrontational (Hutcheon, 2000, para. 9).

The power of nostalgia today is seemingly two-fold in Hutcheon's argument. Nostalgia's power depends on the inaccessibility of the past for its emotional impact and appeal (Hutcheon, 2000, para. 9). It is the longing for a time, and sometimes also a place, that is no longer accessible, allowing it to burgeon into an idealized time of life. On the other hand, it is a projection of what is desired in the present, which is unattainable, into a nostalgic object or experience. Therefore, it is logical to conclude, as Hutcheon has in her essay, that this power is in part derived from the "structural doubling-up of two different times," an inadequate present and an inaccessible, idealized past (2000, para. 14). Hutcheon explains more specifically: "nostalgia is not something you 'perceive' *in* an object; it is what you 'feel' when two different temporal moments, past and present, come together for you and, often, carry considerable emotional weight. In both cases, it is the element of response—of active participation, both intellectual and affective—that makes for the power" (2000, para. 15). So, in adult texts that draw from childhood pretexts, the past and present are coming together, prompting an intellectual and emotional response.

Scholars have applied Hutcheon's conceptualization of ironized nostalgia to popular culture (Enns, 2007), to postmodern texts (Schlippacke, 2006), and even to writers of ancient times (Lyons, 2006). Each of these scholars emphasized the importance of the way Hutcheon is able to reconcile the differences between irony and nostalgia. John D. Lyons describes the relationship between irony and nostalgia as "separate attitudes or discursive ploys that can be used against one another with variations in dosage and timing" (2006, p. 96). Therefore, the space for reflection

provided by ironized nostalgia can be significant or trivial depending on the degree of irony and nostalgia present in the text. Similarly, Heidi Schlipphacke (2006) argues that Hutcheon has reconceptualized nostalgia so that irony and affect are no longer at odds with one another, allowing for that space for reflection that regressive and reactionary conceptualizations of nostalgia prohibit (p. 72). In such moments of reflection, ironized nostalgia can create a dialogue between the past and the present, addressing and critiquing cultural stereotypes through popular culture (Enns, 2007, p. 479). Hutcheon's ironized nostalgia, therefore, has the potential to explain the pleasure of contemplation in female readers of cultural texts like *Fables*.

The context in which Hutcheon positions her ironized nostalgia is critical. Hutcheon not only locates the concept in relation to irony, but also to the postmodern. Both irony and nostalgia are seen as key components to contemporary culture today. In the 1980's, it was ironic texts that captured the attention of scholars and mass media critics alike; in the 1990's, it was nostalgic texts in popular culture that held sway (Hutcheon, 2000, para. 5). Now, Hutcheon argues, nostalgia has become an obsession of both mass culture and high art, often pointing to a dissatisfaction with the present (2000, para. 6). Nostalgia is most powerful today in the way it is invoked in texts, "but, at the same time, [nostalgia is] undercut, put into perspective, seen for exactly what it is—a comment on the present as much as on the past" (Hutcheon, 2000, para. 26). Hutcheon's 'ironized nostalgia' is, therefore, nostalgia with a contemporary twist, one that "creat[es] a small part of the distance necessary for reflective thought about the present as well as the past" (2000, paras. 26-27). I propose that it is the celebration of an idealized past that

brings about a positive emotional response in readers, and then the opportunity for reflection brings about a pleasurable cognitive or intellectual response. This latter response is directly connected to the notion of reflexivity.

The Work of the Reader – Reflexivity

As mentioned in Kim's (1996) study of *The Wizard of Oz*, a tool available to authors of re-envisioned adult fairy tales is reflexivity. Traditionally, the classic fairy tale genre does not lend itself easily to reflexivity (the genre tends to be more prescriptive and didactic), but retellings of fairy tales have become a vehicle or an elastic framework for complex feminist debate, criticism and social commentary (Deszcz, 2004, p. 29). For example in *The Wizard of Oz*, Kim explains, the filmmakers purposefully enhanced the artificiality and self-conscious nature of Oz by dramatically introducing Technicolor part way through the film and exaggerating the unrealistic set designs (Kim, 1996, p. 224). Some of the pleasure for viewers was, therefore, derived from conceding that Oz is not real or not having to be convinced of it being real. The audience's acceptance of the film's unrealistic setting allows them to access the "kernel of utopian fantasy whereby the medium constitutes itself as a projected fulfillment of what is desired and absent within the status quo" (Stam qtd. in Kim, 1996, p. 228). Kim's study reiterates why the fairy tale as a formula for storytelling can be so appealing, with the modern take on the genre expanding audience pleasure by the fact that the film exhibits a sort of self-reflexivity, a notion that is absent in traditional tales.

Reflexivity is an especially useful tool for feminist deconstructionists and postmodern authors because it assists in destabilizing the expectations of the reader and forces the text to turn inwardly and expose its make-up. In the literature review, reflexivity operated on several levels, ranging from the characters in a story being self-aware of their fictionality, to the narrator consciously addressing the reader, to the author deconstructing the text and its narrative devices using parody or irony.

Although reflexivity is mentioned in the literature, the implications for reading experiences are not elaborated on by scholars. The literature indicates that reflexivity can make readers aware of the structure of the fairy tale genre, for example. Similarly, self-aware characters and the use of parody and irony are all tactics employed by the storyteller to point to weaknesses of the structure and stereotypical cultural norms inherent in traditional fairy tales. It can also allow readers to suspend their disbelief and escape to a fictional world. However, it is unclear as to how reflexivity draws readers in and how exactly it adds to the pleasures of the reading experience.

To assist me in clarifying the concept of reflexivity, I will again borrow from Linda Hutcheon, specifically her exploration of textual 'narcissism' (1980). Textual or narrative 'narcissism' was a non-derogatory term Hutcheon coined to describe the textual self-awareness that became popular in literature in the 1960's. Metafiction, that is "fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity," was said by some critics to be the death of the novel. Hutcheon defends this trend, explaining that as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century, the interpretation of texts had become "interiorized, immanent to the work itself, as the

narrator or point of view character reflected on the meaning of his creative experience” (1980, p. 12). Hutcheon explains this further: “In overtly or covertly baring its fictional and linguistic systems, narcissistic narrative transforms the authorial process of shaping, of making, into part of the pleasure and challenge of reading as a co-operative, interpretative experience” (Hutcheon, 1980, p. 154). Such a transition from realist fiction, where the main interest was on the writing process and its product, to such introspective writing that takes into account the reader’s experience, has allowed for the transformation of form into content (Hutcheon, 1980, p. 12).

This is especially useful for my analysis in the sense that although the literature review revealed some discussion of changes in form of the fairy tale, very few analysts expressed what this meant for the reading experience. This new focus made apparent in textual narcissism not only clarifies the way artists create art, it changes the activity of readers to being not just a consumer of stories, but rather one of learning, appreciating, deconstructing and interpreting the text for themselves (Hutcheon, 1980, p. 14). The changes in the traditional form of the fairy tale genre became part of storytelling.

One example of a study of textual reflexivity is R. Rawdon Wilson’s (1989) analysis of Shakespeare, in which he argues that the use of the reflexivity in creating a text requires a thorough understanding of content and form “in order to play with it” (p. 789). More importantly for my own analysis, Wilson states that an artist is placing a higher level of expectation on the reader to appreciate the act of playfulness and the exercise of skill by the creator of the text (Wilson, 1989, p. 789). The reader has work to do when reading reflexive texts, whether it is making order out of an imaginary world,

making sense of a self-aware character or narrator, or rethinking the form and content of pretexts. Forcing the reader to rethink classic fairy tales, for example, allows them to re-evaluate the context in which they were made popular in the first place and the reasons why.

There are two major types of textual narcissism according to Hutcheon. There are those which are diegetically self-aware, as demonstrated through the narrator or the narrative itself. Then there are those texts that are reflexive in their use of language, demonstrating an awareness of their linguistic constitution (Hutcheon, 1980, p. 7). Both of these types can be expressed overtly and self-consciously through explicit themes, allegories, metaphors or even narrational commentary (Hutcheon, 1980, p. 23). These overtly reflexive texts place fictionality, structure, or language at the content's core (Hutcheon, 1980, p. 29). Most postmodern retellings of fairy tales would fall into this overt category.

Diegetic and linguistic textual narcissism can also be expressed covertly in the text, which is to say in an implicit and possibly structural way (Hutcheon, 1980, p. 31). Hutcheon explains that covert textual narcissism is more difficult to identify, but one approach is to note recurring structural models in the text, such as the use of conventions of a particular genre in new, reflective ways or through the use of linguistic wordplay and puns that force the reader to reflect on the language itself (1980, p. 31, p. 34). Texts can be overt in some ways and covert in others, but generally modernist retellings of fairy tales tend to fall into the covert category of textual narcissism.

Reflexive or narcissistic texts are created with the reading experience in mind. Examples of covert, diegetically reflexive texts are often found in fantasy, so this will be used as an example. Fantasy is covertly narcissistic because it forces readers (rather than overtly asks) to create a fictive and imaginary world which is separate from the one in which they live. To place such a demand on the reader requires “all writers of fantasy . . . to make their autonomous worlds sufficiently representational to be acceptable to the reader” using only the language available from the real world (Hutcheon, 1980, p. 32). Therefore, textual reflexivity requires a certain expertise of form and content on behalf of the creator of the text and a certain appreciation of that expertise on the part of readers.

The knowledge of the creator of the text not only relates to the content and structure of the pretext, but also to the desires of the present in relation to the past. The process of world-building on the part of the author of a text is tied in with his or her manipulation of the past as a complex projection of the disenchanted present. In Lyons’ (2006) analysis of ancient European writers, he concludes that creators of texts can distance themselves from the present “without need to return to the past because he realizes that the ‘past’ is his creation and resides in him” (p. 103). Moreover, it can be safely assumed that a writer can be directly involved in a critique of or commentary on the present social order because it is safely contrasted it with an artificially constructed, idealized past. For the reader, however, the manner in which such a contrast can occur may be unsettling or defamiliarizing. Contemplation and reflection about the inadequacies of the present in relation to the past can result in defamiliarization, or a sensation of the uncanny.

The Experience of Dissonance – The Uncanny

The theme of nostalgia as a projection of ideals into the past is one that can be transferred over to the concept of the uncanny. The uncanny deals with what once was familiar no longer appearing as such, causing fear, discomfort, or fascination. I have chosen to draw partially from Sigmund Freud's seminal essay "The 'Uncanny'" (1919) as well as the more contemporary theorists who have attempted to develop the concept further. While there are many disparate studies relating to the uncanny, there is no commonly accepted definition or theorization of the uncanny. Some argue that it is by nature indefinable (Spurr, 2002, p. 67). It has been argued that although Freud attempted to define the uncanny in his essay, he was not entirely successful (Masschelein, 2002, p. 60; Royle, 2003, p. 8). The fascination with the uncanny since Freud's essay did not result in a clear conceptualization of the uncanny. Even now, its conceptualization is still in progress (Masschelein, 2002, p. 59).

Despite Freud's inability or unwillingness to provide a definition for the term, his essay still provides a wealth of information on the uncanny. He was the first to foreground the distinctive nature of the uncanny as not simply something weird and mysterious, but something strangely familiar (Royle, 2003, p. vii). The essay has been the site of debate about the various paradoxical lines of argument and examples Freud provides, with many scholars commenting that the essay seems uncanny in itself (for example Hélène Cixous, 1976).

It is not the focus of this study to discuss the various peculiarities of Freud's essay, but there is one lesson learned from his courageous attempt to tackle the uncanny

that scholars have been unable to ignore. Nicholas Royle (2003) explains in the first book length study of the uncanny that Freud taught us that “[t]o write about the uncanny is to lose one’s bearings, to find oneself immersed in the maddening logic of the supplement, to engage with a hydra” (2003, p. 8). In other words, there is always something more or less at work than what is being said about the uncanny. Instead of a concrete definition, Royle provides a sort of grocery list of all the things the uncanny can be, and I found it particularly useful as a point of reference and departure point.

The uncanny can be: ghostly; concerned with the strange, weird, mysterious, a sense of the supernatural; linked to feelings of uncertainty; a sudden sense of oneself (personality or sexuality) being strangely questionable; a critical disturbance of what is proper; a crisis of the natural; something familiar unexpectedly arising in a strange or unfamiliar context; a sense of homeliness uprooted; a mechanical repetition of a word; a coincidence or a sudden sense of fate; the fear of losing one’s eyes or genitals; realizing someone has a missing or prosthetic body part; something that can be felt in response to mechanical or automatic life, like a trance, insanity, a seizure, hypnosis; a feeling in response to dolls or other life-like objects; something gruesome or terrible, involving corpses, death, cannibalism, live burial, the return of the dead; something strangely beautiful, bordering on ecstasy; *déjà vu*; something beautiful yet frightening; something that comes in the uncertainties of silence, darkness, or solitude; inseparable from an apprehension of something that should have remained secret but has come to light; the strangeness of framing and borders, an experience of liminality; something that happens within oneself but is not oneself – its significance has to do with others, with the world

itself; thus a foreign body within oneself; the experience of oneself as a foreign body; the sense of repetition or the return of the repressed; the most extreme nostalgia or ‘homesickness’; a (perhaps unconscious) desire to die, a death drive; something comic: humour, irony, or laughter; intimately tied up with language – how we conceive and represent what is happening within ourselves, to ourselves, to the world; the unsettling of time and space, order and sense (Royle, 2003, pp. 1-2).

Thus, what can be said about the uncanny from the outset is that it is highly subjective. However, at the risk of being defeated by the nine-headed hydra monster of Greek mythology, I plan to provide a brief overview of what has been said about certain aspects of the uncanny and build my own theory of the uncanny that can be applied to fiction generally, the narrative structure, and the reading experience.

The uncanny has been the focus of critical, literary, philosophical, and political reflection from at least the mid-nineteenth century to the present (Royle, 2003, p. 3). It is a concept that is characterized by its attention to things that are ancient, archaic, and timeless, especially in the way old can seem new (Royle, 2003, p. 9). It is particularly tied up with the history of the Enlightenment and with European and North American Romanticism (Royle, 2003, p. 8). But it did not become a common term until around 1850, when it first appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary as “[p]artaking of a supernatural character; mysterious; weird; uncomfortably strange or unfamiliar” (qtd. in Royle, 2003, p. 22).

The connection to the supernatural has its source in pre-modern society, when the uncanny was largely veiled by the “area of the sacred and untouchable” (Dolar, 1991, p.

7). Uncanny experiences were largely explained symbolically by the power of the sacred and the values emanated by religion before the Enlightenment made the uncanny “unplaceable” and without explanation (Dolar, 1991, p. 7). As Mladen Dolar (1991) explains, popular culture, which has always been extremely sensitive to historical shifts, took hold of the uncanny resulting in “the immense popularity of Gothic fiction and its romantic aftermath” (p. 7). The uncanny took on a new power when it could no longer be accounted for or explained by the sacred, a struggle accentuated by the difficulty scholars still have today in defining and theorizing the concept.

By the time Sigmund Freud wrote his essay on the uncanny, the concept had expanded considerably from the Oxford English Dictionary’s mid-nineteenth century definition. Freud explains the word *unheimlich* (translated literally to mean ‘unhomely’) to describe something old and familiar that has come to light, becoming frightening or disturbing, or just giving a ‘bad feeling’ (1953, p. 220, p. 224). Freud clarifies early on in the essay that although the uncanny and *unheimlich* are seemingly opposites of their root words, they are actually a subspecies of those words (Freud, 1953, p. 220). This is one of the most significant contributions by Freud in clarifying how the uncanny operates as a concept because it separates it from being confused with other less complicated fears, like the fear of the unknown or the unfamiliar. It is precisely the way the uncanny causes fear because of something that was once familiar that is no longer so, or the feeling incited by strangeness of something familiar materializing in an unexpected situation, that makes it such a unique concept. It is the ‘un’ of the uncanny that gives the term its meaning, and

without this layering, this sense that all at once something is strange and familiar, this expression would simply be a fear of the unfamiliar.

The layering implied at the core of the uncanny can be linked to boundaries, especially in the way the uncanny is associated with the “experience of the threshold, liminality, margins, borders, [and] frontiers” (Royle, 2003, p. vii). Along those same lines, Royle describes the ephemeral nature of the uncanny as “a flickering moment of embroilment in the experience of something at once strange and familiar” (Royle, 2003, p. vii). David Spurr (2002) argues that the unique quality of the uncanny is a “disturbing oscillation, sometimes called anamorphosis, between familiarity and strangeness, in particular the tendency of that which is most familiar and most real to turn on us, to become suddenly defamiliarised and derealised” (p. 68). Whether it be an oscillation between the familiar and unfamiliar, or the experience of the strange and familiar at the same time, it seems that time is important to the concept of the uncanny. The uncanny is sudden and fleeting in the way it is experienced, and it is dependent on a component of the past, something that has been familiar before but is suddenly revealed as strange, unhomely, uncomfortable, or unfamiliar.

Before moving on to explain how the uncanny fits in with literary theory and the reading experience specifically, it is important to mention the academic spheres in which the uncanny has resided and currently resides. It is clear that due to Freud’s essay, the uncanny was a concept most often associated with psychoanalysis at the beginning of the twentieth century. Royle argues that psychoanalysis is an uncanny “mode of thinking” which was itself uncanny because it lays bare hidden notions of the self, in desire,

memory, and everyday language and behaviour (2003, p. 24). Furthermore, psychoanalysis teaches its students to be uncertain, to question, and to experience in strangely new ways (Royle, 2003, p. 24). However, the uncanny “overflows” psychoanalysis, with psychoanalysis seeming like a branch of the uncanny rather than the other way around (Royle, 2003, p. 24).

One process or discourse that does capture much of that overflow is deconstruction. Deconstruction, a term coined by Jacques Derrida in the late 1960’s that is used in philosophy, literary theory and the social sciences, shows how difference operates at the heart of identity, and how the strange and unthinkable is a necessary condition of what is conventional, familiar and taken for granted (Royle, 2003, p. 24). Deconstruction can make the most familiar texts strange by exploring “surprising, indeed incalculable effects of all kinds of virus and parasite, foreign body, supplement, borders and margins, spectrality and haunting” (Royle, 2003, p. 24). This deconstructive approach has resonated with scholars of philosophy and literary studies, particularly in the way the uncanny signals “a disruption of time; a fracturing, splitting, or doubling of subjectivity; a deconstructive repetition-with-a-difference” (Arnzen, 1997, p. 316).

The way the uncanny lends itself to deconstruction can be linked back to the specific dimension of the concept that emerges with modernity. With no ability to explain uncanny experiences with the power of the sacred, the uncanny moment remains disquieting, incalculable, and beyond comprehension. Spurr (2002) argues that this is because the experience of the uncanny, especially as experienced through literature, is the subjective experience of modernity itself (p. 69). What is important to note is that

postmodernism has brought about “a new consciousness about the uncanny as a fundamental dimension of modernity” (Dolar, 1991, p. 23). The uncanny does not go beyond the modern, but rather it is an illustration of the awareness of modernity’s limits (Dolar, 1991, p. 23). Therefore, the uncanny is inherently a modern notion, but this realization only came when postmodernity allowed scholars to react to modernity itself.

As Linda Hutcheon states in her overview of metafiction, the ‘post’ of postmodernism does not mean ‘after,’ so much as it designates an extension of modernism and a reaction to it (1980, p. 2). Just as the uncanny forces the subject to acknowledge the past in the new and sometimes strange context of the present, postmodernism forced scholars of the uncanny to stumble across its integral connections to modernity. The uncanny, therefore, represents the moment in which the reader is involuntarily and unexpectedly distanced or removed from that which is familiar, separating her from the innocence of and the nostalgia for the past.

Similarly to ironized nostalgia, instances of the uncanny carve a space for the reader to reflect on the way the past is being portrayed in the present. In the nineteenth century, issues of uncanny ‘otherness’ revolved around sexuality, class, race, age, imperialism and colonialism (Royle, 2003, p. 22). In the twentieth century, the uncanny was primarily thought of in relation to automatons, technology, and programming (Royle, 2003, p. 22). Today, what is most valuable and instructive about the uncanny, according to Royle, is that it is a theory of the ghostly—the ghostly-ness of machines (technology),⁴

⁴ In fact, since the 1970’s, scientists working in robotics studying human-robot interaction have explored the notion of the uncanny through Masahiro Mori’s theory of ‘The Uncanny Valley’ (1970). This theory describes the point in which human-looking robots no longer provoke a feeling of empathy, but rather a

feelings, concepts, religion, and beliefs (2003, p. 23-24). Falling into this contemporary use of the uncanny, I would argue, are our beliefs about what is appropriate adult leisure, where are the boundaries located between adulthood and childhood, and other questions of that nature. The uncanny's evolution from modernism to postmodernism, increasingly complex and abstract, directly mirrors the reader's migration from childhood to adulthood, the present seemingly a harsh environment for memories of the past.

The attention dedicated to the uncanny by the area of literary studies followed a similar evolution as that of modernity and postmodernity. Around the same time that Freud was writing 'The Uncanny,' Russian formalism was having its impact on literary theory, philosophy, culture and politics. Specifically, it was Russian formalism's emphasis on *ostranenie*, the notion of defamiliarization or 'making strange' that added context to the uncanny in the twentieth century (Royle, 2003, p. 4). Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky was compelled to affirm "the power of literature (especially poetry) to make strange, to defamiliarize, to make unfamiliar all sorts of familiar perceptions or beliefs" (Royle, 2003, p. 5). Royle points out that looking back on the work of Russian formalists addresses a key aspect of defamiliarization, that the familiar and unfamiliar are never fixed, but rather constantly altering, paralleling the difficulties in pinpointing the uncanny in the content of fictional texts (2003, p. 5).

As a starting point to develop my own theory of the uncanny as it relates to fiction and the reading experience, I would like to draw from the baseline formed by psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and Russian formalism. As Nicholas Royle succinctly

strange revulsion and disgust. Today, the uncanny valley is applied to characters in video games because they have become lifelike enough to evoke a feeling of eeriness in gamers.

points out, these three uncanny modes of thought or discourses have made it clear that there has to be certain “laws of the house” in place before the uncanny can be experienced (Royle, 2003, p. 25). First, there must be an attachment to the familiar, even if it is a suspicious or distant attachment; similarly, there must be a sense of the home and homeliness within and beyond which to think of the unhomely (Royle, 2003, p. 25). Second, there must be a grounding in the rational in order to experience its disintegration or break-up (Royle, 2003, p. 25). In the context of fiction this means that the story must be set up in such a way that there appears to be some rules or ‘laws’ that govern the fictional world in the text. I would also add a third requirement in line with these two notions, and that is that there must be acquiescence and resistance to create an uncanny, and strangely pleasurable, reading experience. Just as many feminist deconstructions of literary texts require a knowledge and acceptance of traditional forms of storytelling in order to resist those forms, the uncanny requires an agreement that there is something pleasantly familiar in the text, but also the sense that it has been strangely altered.

An immediate question that arises from this discussion is how pleasure can be derived from such a theory of the uncanny. As Freud made clear in 1919, the uncanny is predominantly a frightening sensation, and is quite distinct from the euphoric pleasure brought about by the beautiful and attractive sublime (1953, p. 219). I propose that it is in the confrontation of the strangely familiar inspired by texts that incorporate childhood connections that brings about pleasure. It is in acknowledging the difference between the past and present, the concept of repetition-with-a-difference and the deconstruction thereof, that brings about a curiosity and pleasure on the part of certain readers. This is

similar to the 'cerebral pleasure' brought about in readers who are given the chance to deconstruct their favourite literary genres and themes through postmodern and feminist rewritings of fairy tales. As Samuel Weber argued in his essay 'The Sideshow' (1973) there is a moment of defence that comes with the uncanny "which expresses itself in the compulsive curiosity . . . the desire to uncover the façade and to discover what lurks behind" (p. 1132). It is this moment of defence, combined with nostalgia and the pleasure of reading reflexively, that is rewarding for the reader.

These texts offer a unique challenge to readers, by seemingly exhibiting and celebrating the characteristics of childhood texts and subsequently breaking these down and laying them bare for the reader. However, these deconstructed texts often leave interpretation open for a reader to re-construct the text. This process is partially made possible by inserting the nostalgia for the past uncannily into the present in a manner that allows readers to reflect on the strangeness and pleasure of childhood in new adult contexts. As mentioned previously, contemporary nostalgia idealizes the past, but in a way that distorts the present, making it seem complicated, ugly, difficult and confrontational. The uncanny epitomizes this distortion of the present in the way it twists the familiar into the strange and disturbing. Finally, it is this process of distortion and defamiliarization that makes the idealized past distant enough for reflexivity to play a role, allowing readers to reflect about the present as well as the past.

While nostalgia, reflexivity and the uncanny function separately in the text, it is the combination of these three notions, each dependent on the other, that provides the conceptual framework accounting for the enjoyment of the text. I hope to demonstrate

this in more detail in my analysis of *Fables*, a text that depends for certain readers on an attachment to childhood fairy tales, but presents these tales in a playful, mature, and intricate storytelling style. It is anticipated that all three notions will be present in the text and will operate together to explain the reading experience of the female non-comic book fan. Specific reading strategies for each concept are presented below.

Methodology

Since I am attempting to develop a theoretical framework that encompasses the pleasurable reading experience derived from revised childhood texts, my methodological approach will be qualitative and focus on reading strategies rather than individual meaning formation. My analysis attempts to balance form and content to reveal how the uncanny, reflexivity and nostalgia are used to shape the reading experience in general. When referring to ‘the reader,’ or ‘readers,’ in the analysis, I specifically mean the new adult female readership of comics, specifically those readers who are not fans of superhero comics and who are familiar with and attached to the genre of fairy tales.

Most of my data draws from the pages of *Fables*, however, occasional reference is made to the online fan forum Clockwork Storybook for additional support. Since my analysis does not rely on the reaction of individual readers to the text, I will not seek out fans of *Fables* or interact with them online, beyond quoting old posts anonymously to add support to my argument. I am trying to theorize a category of readership more so than account for specific individual experiences, which, of course, always vary.

Since there are almost seventy issues of the comic *Fables*, plus one special edition graphic novel, some criteria must be used to help narrow the object of analysis. These criteria are based on the content of the comic so as to provide consistent material for analysis. Because my thesis involves themes related to the dichotomies of the familiar and the unfamiliar, the new yet old, the fantastic yet the mundane, I will focus my analysis on a particular storyline involving two classic fairy tale characters. The stories of Snow White and Bigby (the Big Bad Wolf) quickly converge starting in the first issue of the series, and develop throughout the story arc. However, I will not include issues or storylines that are solely focused on Bigby, making Snow White the primary character for this analysis. Snow White appears in just over one third of the entire series. This both limits the object of my analysis and provides a substantial amount of material on which to focus. More importantly, by focusing on the story between two familiar childhood characters, it will be possible to see changes and similarities between the old and the new. It will also be easier to observe notions of the uncanny, reflexivity, and nostalgia since it can be assumed that these two well-known characters have a pre-existing history in the mind of my reader as well as in the mind of the author of the text, Bill Willingham.

The form of comics will be significant to my analysis as the medium is often thought of as childlike, similar to the genre of fairy tales. It has been argued by many scholars for some time now that comics as a medium has a unique language that is separate from that of prose, film, or other visual arts (Lacassin, 1972). Thierry Groensteen, a prolific comics scholar from France, recently developed what he describes as a new semiology of comics in *The System of Comics* (2007). Originally written in

French in 1999, this book is one of few inquiries into the form of comics in English-language scholarship. Groensteen attempts to use semiotics to ask not simply what signs mean in comics, but how they mean (2007, p. viii). While comics can be studied from historical, sociological, and economic perspectives, this perspective regards comics as a language and is most useful in my attempt to determine how the uncanny, nostalgia and reflexivity contribute to the reading experience. This methodological approach will explain the role a medium like comics would contribute to the revision of childlike texts, because it can break down the components of the 'language' of comics and how it communicates meaning to the reader.

Unlike film that has the power of illusion of the filmic image and a fluent connection between images, readers of comics must fill in the gaps between the panels on the page (Groensteen, 2007, pp. 10-11). Groensteen uses a macro-semiotic approach that seeks to take in everything that is going on in the double page spread of a comic. He argues that breaking the analysis down too far (for example breaking down the components of an image in a panel) can result in a study of a particular comic artist rather than the language of comics, and should subsequently be avoided (Groensteen, 2007, p. 5). Rather, the entire 'spatio-topical system' of comics should be considered in the analysis of comics because it brings together the concepts of space and that of place, like the word balloon, the panel and its frame, the strip, and the page (Groensteen, 2007, p. 4).

More specifically, Groensteen states that comic artists are aware that the most naturally privileged places on the double page are the upper left hand corner, the geometric centre, and the lower right hand corner (2007, p. 29). These positions on the

page are related to what Groensteen calls 'braiding,' a key concept in the language of comics: "...key moments of the story coincide with these initial, central, and terminal positions to 'rhyme' the first and last panels of a page, instituting a manner of looping that [is the] effect of braiding" (2007, p. 29).

In addition to this effect of braiding in the spatio-topical system, Groensteen has created a method to study the relations between panels which he calls arthrology. Arthrology describes the level of integration between the narrative flux (or narrative energy) and the spatio-topical system (Groensteen, 2007, p. 21). Concepts like the panel, the double page, the margin, and how they are spaced and placed, reveals relevant information about communication through the language of comics. Understanding this language and focusing on the storylines of two classic fairy tale characters is the best approach to understanding how nostalgia, the uncanny, and reflexivity cooperate to produce a particular pleasurable reading experience.

For each notion in my proposed framework, I have developed specific reading strategies to employ in my analysis of *Fables*. It must be noted from the onset that there will be some overlap in reading strategies and the three concepts of nostalgia, the uncanny and reflexivity are inherently linked. The first set of reading strategies are for nostalgia. Nostalgia identifies those components of the story that are consistent from past narratives, in plot, characterization, and form. Form includes the style of narration put in place by the author, the use of traditional fairy tale techniques, tropes, stereotypes and literary devices, and also the consistency and differences in the way the story is visually (or graphically) presented. Nostalgic 'items' will be sought in the illustrations, the

written word or text balloons, and the way the panels are 'braided' together. As I mentioned previously, attention to braiding is key to narrative in comics, because it controls the narrative 'energy'.

Since nostalgia is much more than simple consistency between the past versions of fairy tales and *Fables*, I will be seeking out examples in the text that overtly idealize the traditional fairy tale genre and its components. At the same time, I will examine whether Willingham has attempted to add irony to these idealized items, as Hutcheon argues that contemporary, twenty-first century nostalgia is one that is 'ironized'. For example, are characters portrayed in such a way that they are ideal representations of the past while also being some sort of commentary on the present? Are characters smarter, more attractive, more skilled or even more evil or lethal than they are normally depicted in classic fairy tale style? What effect does this have on the reading experience?

The second notion I explore in the text is that of the uncanny. The fundamental question I answer in this portion of the analysis is what items in the text are seemingly familiar, yet remarkably strange and possibly disturbing or frightening? Or, what components seem similar to the traditional fairy tale, yet are altered in such a way that it seems to have a negative affect on the reading experience? I offer examples of fairy tale components that are presented in a way that they seem to be only ghostly versions of their traditional selves. Examples could include literary devices used in new or strange ways or strange characterizations of familiar fairy tale characters. In relation to narrative technique specifically, examples of the uncanny can be found when the author keeps certain key plot components secret for an extended portion of the text. As Maria Tartar

argues in an article on the uncanny and the haunted house, it is knowledge that transforms the uncanny into the secure haven of a home, because knowledge disenchants the text (1981, p. 182). By withholding information, the author may be able to incite uncanny feelings in the reader, making the safety and security of the world of fairy tales they knew as a child absent in the reading experience.

Other reading strategies producing a sense of the uncanny in the text include shifts in narrative style that make the reader stop and think, wondering why the text has irrupted into a new style, reminding the reader of other narrative genres, for example. This form of *i(nte)rruption* is a narrative effect associated with an uncanny feeling (Bernstein, 2003, p. 1116, *emph. added*). I also demonstrate instances where the text exhibits a destabilization of binary oppositions, most obviously making that which is normally familiar, unfamiliar, or that which is normally human, non-human, or even that which is normally animalistic, human. Such instances of destabilization are some of the most easily identifiable instances of the uncanny. They are particularly straightforward to identify visually through the comic's illustrations.

Altogether, the uncanny materializes in unexpected ways, as this is its nature as a concept. With the nostalgic components of the text described in detail prior to this portion of the analysis, I have an understanding of what lies in the realm of familiarity and tradition and what lies outside those boundaries. The uncanny can be located somewhere along, but in close proximity to, such boundaries.

Finally, the notion of reflexivity has some fairly clear reading strategies that lend themselves easily to the analysis of a comic book. The way in which the narrator can

juxtapose his or her thoughts on the page next to those of the characters creates opportunities for reflexive narration. The narrator can take on a playful or tongue-in-cheek tone, hinting at the fact that the author wants the reader to think about the text as fiction and think about their reading experience. More obvious examples of narrative reflexivity include the narrator making reference to the text as a fictional story, or even some level of self-awareness on the part of the characters as to their fictionality. Wilson describes this type of reflexivity as “metadiscursive commentary” (1989, p. 775).

The final type of reflexivity I identify in the text is what is frequently called the *mise en abyme* mode of reflexivity, or a picture within a picture. This includes references to the writing process, to the classic fairy tale genre, or to stereotypical fairy tale devices or tropes either visually in the text or through the written word. Altogether, these reading strategies enabled me to conduct an in-depth, qualitative analysis of *Fables* that clarifies how the text produces pleasures relating to ironized nostalgia, the uncanny, and reflexivity. More specifically, these reading strategies helped me distinguish between the pleasures of escape, cerebral pleasure, and the political pleasure of subversion.

Chapter IV – Weighing Pleasure and Dissonance in Reading *Fables*

Reading *Fables* as an adult woman who is familiar with the stories of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, Charles Perrault, Hans Christian Andersen, as well as the Walt Disney versions of fairy tales, is a surprising and refreshing experience. Picking up Bill Willingham's comic series for the first time, I never would have anticipated the sophisticated, humourous, crass, ironic, shocking and sometimes disturbing nature of the text produced 'for mature readers'. In direct juxtaposition were the whimsical, elaborate, and attractive depictions of many of the settings and characters (both visually and narratively) that were once very familiar to me, presented in a story telling style that was reminiscent of the old oral folk tale. As I re-read the series for my formal analysis of the text, this juxtaposition seemed even more poignant, allowing me to draw out examples of ironized nostalgia, the uncanny, and reflexivity, as well as examples of all three concepts operating simultaneously on the page.

In my analysis of approximately one third of the entire *Fables* series, all three concepts were in operation within the text. My analysis focussed on the characters of Snow White and Bigby Wolf, eliminating any issues or volumes of the series that did not include Snow White in the story. Snow and Bigby's stories are central to the series for the first few major story arcs. Starting out in the present day as nothing more than colleagues working for the Mayor of Fabletown, the two characters become permanently linked when Snow becomes pregnant with Bigby's 'cubs'. 'The reader' (who I intend to mean the adult female reader who is familiar with fairy tales but not necessarily with superhero comics or comics more generally), follows the unusual couple through good

times and bad, in a pairing that is not only unprecedented in the classic fairy tales, but also in the physical sense that Bigby is part wolf. In the *Fables* universe, however, stranger pairings have happened, and Bigby, Snow and their seven children are eventually granted a happy ending by Willingham.

In order to conduct my analysis with the new female readership in mind, I have made some fundamental assumptions about their previous knowledge of the characters and the fairy tale genre. I assume that most readers' knowledge is based on Western culture, since *Fables* began in North America and then expanded abroad after becoming successful. More specifically, I assume that most readers' previous knowledge is based on their childhood memories of the classic fairy tales as well as Disney versions of the tales depicted in the animated films. Finally, I am also assuming that some readers are aware of the more contemporary depictions of these classic characters from modern, postmodern and feminist perspectives, whether they have read these retellings or not. These assumptions allow me to identify examples of nostalgia, the uncanny, and reflexivity in the text that are consistent with a specific type of readership.

Throughout the story, nostalgia takes precedence over the uncanny at times, and vice versa. Reflexivity also appears throughout in a number of different forms. Since nostalgia is used as a baseline for the other two concepts, I begin by demonstrating how *Fables* relies on nostalgia, especially ironized nostalgia to set up the tone of the story and create a familiar base for the female reader who is not a comics fan. This is followed by a description of how the uncanny serves to defamiliarize well-known characters and foster curiosity and discomfort. Lastly, I describe the various ways *Fables* produced

reflexivity, through the role of the narrator, through references to fiction in general, and by reaching out to the reader overtly or covertly.

A Tension in the Balance: Ironic Nostalgia

In analyzing *Fables* it quickly becomes apparent that Willingham does not rely only on nostalgia to maintain the readers' interest throughout the series. Rather, nostalgia is used to initially capture readers' attention, allowing them to recognize familiar characters and stories within the series. Nostalgia's secondary role is to maintain the charm of the series, meaning that the motifs of a utopian spirit, wondrous change or the potential for transformation from the traditional fairy tale genre are reinforced from time to time, no matter how gritty the storyline becomes in its contemporary setting.

However, nostalgia also operates in a number of more subtle ways throughout the series.

An example of nostalgia functioning in these two main roles is, not surprisingly perhaps, the very first issue of the series. In this issue, nostalgia is evoked through the characters and by way of the artistic presentation of the story within the comic book medium. The first issue of the series is important and will be discussed in-depth for the following reasons: first, it must draw the reader in, to the point that she will buy the next issue; second, it must set the tone or overall atmosphere of the story for the rest of the series; and finally it must establish some of the rules of the fictional *Fables* world. The same can be argued for the first volume (a collection of issues) of the series if the reader

has decided to read it through the trade paperback format, as I have for my analysis.⁵

However, the first issue of the first volume is still very important, as it introduces readers to the fictional world of *Fables*.

A reader's first impression of *Fables* is that it takes familiar characters from fairy tales and nursery rhymes and inserts them into an urban, modern world. Starting with the cover of the first volume, *Fables: Legends in Exile*, the first impression is a complex one because the art is sophisticated and busy (see Appendix A). The image is brimming with characters, some immediately recognizable and some not, all cramming onto a New York subway car. The art extends onto the back cover of the book so that if you open the book and lay it face down, you see the whole image. At the top and bottom edges of the page, fairy tale themed imagery creeps into the picture, in the form of twisted tree branches, vines, and flowers. The female characters are particularly identifiable, like Cinderella with her glass slipper and Beauty with her Beast. But these familiar images, the ones that would be responsible for inciting nostalgia in the reader, are at the edges of the page for a reason. It is made clear in this first cover of *Fables* that there is much more going on than a simple longing for childhood characters.

Rather, as Hutcheon (2000) explains with her theory of ironized nostalgia, it is a complex projection of a partial, idealized history merging with a dissatisfaction with the present. In this image we see that the present is chaotic – Snow White, one of the central characters, is running with high heels in hand to catch the subway, an activity one could imagine of everyday New Yorkers. Yet, on the subway and all around, there are

⁵ When citing specific pages of the *Fables*, I will refer to the volume of the series and the page number, rather than the issue. This is because the pagination is continuous by volume, rather than by issue in the trade paperback format.

fantastical beasts and goblins, a young boy blowing on a trumpet, Cinderella on the roof of the subway car, and an old woman pushing a strange creature in a stroller, rather than a baby. The female characters, in particular, are drawn in such a way that a reader could easily associate them with the beautiful and elegant characters of childhood stories.

The nostalgic images represent the past in the mind of the female reader in particular and are loyal to the traditional representation of at least Snow White, Cinderella, and Beauty and the Beast. As the reader moves through the text she will discover that many characters have maintained their traditional appearances, but have complex personality traits and histories. Therefore, the cover of *Fables: Legends in Exile* exhibits a chaotic, gritty present that overwhelms an idealized past, pushing it to the edges of the page. This is the first hint at the tension Willingham maintains throughout the series, one of reminding the reader of the magic and wonder of the classic tales in one moment and then bringing her back to reality with the struggles of the contemporary world.

As I conducted my analysis it became increasingly clear that nostalgia is always operating on two levels in the text. The reader I am theorizing is simultaneously confronted by the joys of revisiting her childhood memories of fairy tales and the cultural and cognitive dissonance of seeing those memories displaced into a strange, urban environment. This is what Hutcheon means when she states that nostalgia is “[s]imultaneously distancing and proximating” (2000, para. 9). The past is brought forward for the reader to indulge in nostalgically, then pushed away by the conditions of the present. Similarly, the present can also be pushed aside for the past. The reader is

continuously aware of both her emotional connection to the past and her more political acknowledgment of an unruly present in this type of nostalgic text.

Moving to the first pages of the comic, we are presented again with images of New York City (see Appendix B). On the left side of the double page (not shown in the Appendix), there is a depiction of the city at night, with a rough looking man lighting a cigarette, a woman looking off into the distance, a wolf with glowing eyes, and a monkey with wings. This intriguingly strange, dark imagery is contrasted sharply with the bright hustle and bustle of the city in the daytime on the right page.⁶ The written text opens with the following words written on old-fashioned parchment paper: “Once upon a time” (Willingham, vol. 1, p. 5). This calming opening that is undeniably a homage to the classic fairy tale storytelling style is contrasted by the character’s word balloon below it (“Hurry! Can’t you go faster?”) and the all too familiar skyline of New York City (Willingham, 2002, vol. 1, p. 5). This type of contrast is found throughout the series and is a prime example of ironized nostalgia in the text.

Another example of the use of contrast between nostalgic items in the text and contemporary scenes is the frequent use of elaborate framing around flashbacks to the Homelands and to the past in general. There are many instances of this throughout the series. Most often there will be a frame that is ornately decorated, like an old-fashioned frame of a painting. For one example of this, see the top left panel in Appendix C. The frame looks to be of carved wood and the panel inside depicts Fables in the Homelands hiding from the Adversary. This ornamental framing has two major functions: it separates this panel out from the rest in time and sometimes also in space; secondly, it

⁶ This is a different type of contrast at work, the contrast between night and day, both in the present context.

adds an air of dignity to that particular panel, and the past in general. Nostalgia, therefore, appears not only in the content of *Fables*, but operates in its the form as well.

Similarly to the storytelling and filmmaking device of using flashbacks, Willingham's narration is also an important nostalgic component. On this first page we can distinguish between the character's dialogue and the narrator's voice because the narrator's text has been enclosed in a frame of old-fashioned parchment, and is also written in slightly more ornate lettering (see Appendix B). It is significant that the parchment frame around the narrator's written text is beige, while the character's word balloons are white, the same colour as the margins. Not only does this evoke an aging effect on the words of the narrator, like faded, yellowed paper, it serves to bring out and add emphasis to the narrator's words, rather than those of the characters.

Willingham's narrator comes across as not only an age-old storyteller, but also as one that is enjoying the story with the reader: "Chapter One: Old Tales Revisited. In which we meet many of our principal players and get just the first hint or two of some of the myriad troubles to come" (Willingham, 2002, vol. 1, page 5). The pronouns 'we' and 'our' are critical here as they attempt to involve the reader in the story and to invoke the oral tradition of the fairy tale genre. It is as though the reader is sitting with a group, all reading the same thing or being told a story by a narrator who is sitting right in front of them.

By being inclusive and using 'we', Willingham is attempting to mimic the atmosphere in which fairy tales and nursery rhymes were traditionally told in groups orally. He is also establishing the narrator as an all-knowing entity that will share his

wisdom and guide the reader through the story. This narrative tone and approach of inclusiveness is one that Willingham maintains throughout the series, invoking nostalgia by reminding readers of the childhood practice of sitting together and hearing tall tales told aloud, whether it was from a professional storyteller, a parent, or a teacher. His presence at the beginning of each issue is a technique used to warm the reader up and draw her into the experience of reading and being told a story.

Other nostalgic instances in the first issue include direct references by the characters to their fairy tale pasts. For example, the first conversation depicted between characters Jack and Bigby Wolf:

Bigby: “You look out of breath, Jack. Been climbing beanstalks again?”

Jack: “Huh...huh... No. Blown down any piggies’ homes lately?” (Willingham, 2002, vol. 1, p. 7).

At this early point in the story, it is important for the reader to know that the Fables are aware of the same personal history that Western society has assigned to them through the classic canon of fairy tale stories. The reader is comfortable that she knows something about these characters, but obviously not everything; therefore a baseline is established upon which intertextual comparisons can be made. The reader can begin to evaluate whether Willingham’s series is celebratory of the pretexts it utilizes, or whether it is mocking or resistant to those texts. Questions start springing to mind as to what the character’s new circumstances are, creating a desire to read on and learn more about these familiar characters. How do they manage in the modern world, of all places New York City? Why is Bigby Wolf not a wolf at all? How long have the Fables been in

existence? These questions are answered slowly throughout the series, keeping the reader intrigued with the story.

In analyzing parts of the first issue, it is clear that nostalgia is used to initially capture the interest of the reader by establishing a certain level of familiarity. While the Fables depicted in these first pages do not necessarily appear to be the same ones in the mind of the reader, their pasts are verified through the verbal sniping of the characters and through the information provided by the narrator. Nostalgia is used in other ways as the initial set-up is complete and the plotlines progress. The role of the narrator is not only to tell the story, but to contrast the fairy tale traditions with the cynical reality of the present, as demonstrated in the plot summary on the back of the third volume, *Fables: Storybook Love*: “A fairy tale ending? Not likely. In the Fables’ world, there isn’t a lot of happily-ever-after to go around. As refugees from the lands of make-believe, the Fables have been driven from their storybook realms and forced to blend in with our gritty, mundane reality” (Willingham, 2003, vol. 3, back cover). In instances like this, Willingham makes use of nostalgia in the way that Hutcheon describes modern day nostalgia, overtly pairing it with irony and contrasting the complicated present with an enchanted past.

Nostalgia is not always used in an ironic fashion in *Fables*. Much of the nostalgic charm of the series comes from the animal Fables, characters that have not been able to transform into humans and must live on the Farm, a secluded colony sheltered from the eyes of the ‘mundane’ world. Since they have maintained their original forms, they can easily conjure up a purely nostalgic reaction in the reader. For example, in the second

volume of the series, *Fables: Animal Farm*,⁷ we meet the Three Little Pigs (who are not so little), the Three Bears, the animals of Jungle Book fame, the Billy Goats Gruff, and the three Blind Mice, among many other animal characters. These characters remind the reader that the Fable universe is a diverse and magical realm, and everything is not as it seems. Each of the animal characters can speak, are intelligent like their human-looking counterparts, and are portrayed as equals, whether they are depicted as such in their classic tales or not.

It is interesting for the reader to see, as the series progresses, just how many characters from childhood texts exist in the Fables' realm. This is one of the ways Willingham is able to go above and beyond the nostalgic appeal of fairy tales. Much of the excitement and freshness of the story is from the interactions between characters that would have never encountered one another before in their separate fictional universes. For example, Bigby Wolf is the only Fable in the mundane world who is not allowed to visit the Farm, due to his atrocities in the Homelands before the general amnesty. He obviously negatively impacted the lives of many non-human Fables, and thus implies that there has always been some kind of continuity between all the Fable worlds and stories. This has much potential for storyline and character development, and Willingham has the freedom to create new stories out of the old texts using this premise. A reader may begin to wonder about the possibilities for new character interaction among old favourites, or possibly re-evaluate the way she conceived of the classic tales she remembers from childhood.

⁷ This title is an allusion to George Orwell's novel *Animal Farm* (1945), the satirical allegory to Soviet totalitarianism.

How would this have altered the reading experience then if there were continuity between fairy tale worlds and stories? In *Fables*, I would argue that this continuity serves to solidify the existence of the characters in more realistic terms and to add a level of complexity and sophistication to Willingham's narrative. The isolation of the classic fairy tales from one another keeps the stories simple and helps develop classic archetypes. The separation between tales makes each one an original story. In the *Fables* universe, however, stories overlap and interact, each character influenced by the others, breaking down their status as archetypes in the mind of the reader. It is this breakdown that allows readers to conceive of these characters in greater depth and to possibly re-evaluate the way they are traditionally depicted.

Occasionally, Willingham will go a step further and make that reassessment of character for the reader. This is primarily achieved by applying a self-mocking tone to a character and having that character hint at the absurdity of their traditional characterizations. One humorous (albeit crude) example of this tactic is found in a conversation between Cinderella and Pinocchio at a celebration in Fabletown. Pinocchio is complaining to Cinderella that he would like to track down the blue fairy that made him into a real boy from a wooden doll and "kick her pretty azure ass" (Willingham, 2002, p. 87). Confused, Cinderella asks why, and Pinocchio responds: "The ditzy bitch interpreted my wish too literally. I'm over three centuries old and I still haven't gone through puberty. I want to grow up, I want my balls to drop, and I want to get laid" (Willingham, 2002, p. 87). This honest, coarse statement by Pinocchio, who is depicted as a little boy in a tuxedo, occurs in the bottom right panel of the page, adding the

emphasis of finality to this surprising statement. This example is particularly insightful, not only because it points to the absurdity of the original tale, but because it reminds the reader that she would not want to be a child forever, no matter how nostalgic she is for that time in her life. It implies that being an adult has its own benefits and is in fact what many children are longing for – to be grown up. The theme of being careful of what you wish for is a recurring one throughout the series.

It is likely safe to assume that if a female reader chooses to continue reading *Fables* beyond the first issue and the first trade paperback collection, that she has some sort of interest in fairy tales, fantasy, or childhood material in general. At the very least, it can be said that the fans of *Fables* do not have an explicit dislike of fantasy and fairy tales, because the main complaint by those who do not like the series is that they do not like the particular genre. In a discussion on Clockwork Storybook, the *Fables* online discussion forum, one reader of the series suggests: “The closest I can recall to a negative review is somebody saying, ‘I just never liked fairy tales or stories with fairy tale characters very much.’ Not a specific criticism of *Fables*, but a generic criticism of an entire class of stories. And you can't really argue with that. Some people say the same thing about superhero stories, or police procedurals, or whatever.” (Anonymous, Clockwork Storybook, April 5, 2007). It is important to clarify this aspect at this point because my analysis revealed a form of nostalgia in the text that was somewhat unexpected, that being a mirroring effect of readerly nostalgia with character nostalgia for their own past lives and homes. One of the most stable motifs of the traditional fairy tale is that of the utopian spirit, in which the protagonist is searching for his or her ‘true’

home, which is often right before their eyes and they simply cannot see it until the end of the story. In *Fables*, one of the main goals of the entire Fable community is to return to the Homelands and take back what was stolen from them by the Adversary. Although this seems like a simple way to build the plot of the story, it is also an acknowledgment of the characters experiencing a parallel nostalgia for the fairy tale world as the reader.

Further evidence of character nostalgia can be found in the first volume of the series. Prince Charming, whom the reader learns is the same individual in all the helpless princess stories, plans to sell off his title and lands back in the Homelands during the most nostalgic time of year for Fabletown, Remembrance Day. Prince Charming intends to take advantage of the one day where all the Fables gather together and remember their Homelands: “This is the one time of year when everyone gets nostalgic for the Homelands, and starts believing we actually have a chance of winning them back someday” (Willingham, 2002, vol. 1, page 37). Just as the world of princesses and fairies is inaccessible to adult readers (if only through fiction), the characters in *Fables* are suffering from an inadequate present and quite literally an inaccessible past. They long for a place that has been taken over and destroyed. Thus, there is a layering of nostalgia – one layer is outside the text and entirely in the mind of the readers, and the other layer is reflected in the text itself through the characters. The greatest difference is that the readers are pining for a lost time (childhood) and the practices associated with that lost period of their lives (reading fairy tales and fantasy), and the characters are longing for a lost place. What gives each of these their power is their inaccessibility.

The nostalgia of the Fables for their lost homelands is reiterated further in a speech given every year at the Remembrance Day Ball (see Appendix C). The Mayor of Fabletown, King Cole, reads: “And now, predator and prey, prince and pauper, we are all of a single community—allied in our undying memory of the Homelands, and the unshakable determination that one day we will return to win those lands free of the hated one” (Willingham, 2002, vol. 1, page 84). While such speeches by the characters further the plot and foreshadow events in the series, they also serve to reinforce the notion that the Homelands are something worth pining for and that it is acceptable for the reader to remember her own childhood as an ideal time of life. Similar examples will be outlined in relation to reflexivity in which the narrator even more directly encourages readers to indulge in the nostalgic memories of childhood.

Altogether, nostalgia is a function of the text and part of the baggage some readers bring with them when reading *Fables*. It is used to capture the reader’s attention in the early stages of the series, establishing a baseline of familiarity and curiosity. Nostalgia is used to add charm to the story and its characters, as well as to contrast the mundane contemporary existence with that of the fantastic Fable worlds (past and present). Nostalgia is brought about through not only the plot, but through the narrator’s storytelling tone and the appearance of the comic itself, with its beautiful and beastly characters. The intertextual relationship between *Fables* and the original texts it borrows from seems to be both celebratory and mocking, but not aggressively resistant. Flashbacks to the Homelands and the past in general are almost always ornamentally framed, adding a sense of dignity or beauty to the past in sharp contrast to the plain white

frames of the panels showing current events. And finally, the characters themselves long for the distant Homelands that the reader can only reach through fictional stories like *Fables*. One of the most appealing aspects of the series is that it is an access point into our own pasts and into the pasts of so many characters we thought we knew as readers. The feeling of having an exclusive view into their lives, guided by a storyteller who always sets up the story so agreeably for us, is a major part of the pleasure derived from *Fables*.

Defamiliarization and The Uncanny

As the series progresses, however, the use of nostalgia to maintain the charm of the story is increasingly pushed aside to reveal the complex problems of today's *Fables* in New York City. For example, in the third issue of the first volume, the narrator's summary is still present, but it is not placed on the parchment paper to distinguish it from the rest of the text (Willingham, 2002, vol. 1, p. 51). Willingham's narration blends in with the background and it seems that the story is suddenly just about regular New Yorkers. It invokes the sense of being in the present without referencing the past. The tone is suddenly hard and crass as the reader witnesses the *Fables* in action in a contemporary situation – an ugly, complex, murder investigation. At times like these in the series, the *Fables* seem stripped of their powers and riches, seemingly turned 'mundane' just like the rest of the world they now inhabit. In other words, they seem only ghostly versions of their classic selves.

It is in these moments of mundane activity that Willingham can establish a sense of the uncanny. The uncanny requires a darker side of the Fables' world to surface for the reader. Although these are the same famous characters we know from the classic fairy tale canon, they are often presented in ways that challenge the female reader's conception of what that character should be like. For example, the introduction of Snow White's character in the first volume depicts her as cold, professional, and almost callous, yet strikingly beautiful. Snow White is the Director of Operations of Fabletown, also known as the Deputy Mayor of the New York City Fable community. At first, Snow is portrayed as only physically reminiscent of the traditional fairy tale character her name evokes, more or less just an uncanny resemblance or ghostly version of herself.⁸ The Snow White who is likely familiar to most readers in the western world is the one depicted in the Disney film or in the classic tales, one who is a young, innocent, helpless and naïve princess waiting for her Prince Charming. But this Snow White is a hard-nosed leader of Fabletown.

This ghostly version of Snow White is what Freud would have referred to as a 'double,' or 'doppelgänger' (Freud, 1953, p. 234-236). According to Freud, the uncanny sensation brought about by the double "can only come from the fact of the 'double' being a creation dating back to a very early mental stage, long since surmounted—a stage, incidentally, at which it wore a more friendly aspect" (1953, p. 236). Snow White exists in a state of bilocation, in the reader's mind as a projection of the past, and presently in the text. The 'past' version of her character was more rosy and pleasant, and the present

⁸ Snow's physical appearance in this introductory issue is similar to that of the Disney version: long, shiny black hair, pale white skin, and red, heart shaped lips. Crucially, however, she is missing her characteristically rosy cheeks and joyful demeanour.

version is cold and callous. Therefore, the uncanny is evoked not only by the sense that Snow White is somehow different, but in the way she is starkly contrasted with our memories.

The way Snow White is perceived in the past can be thrown off, or sidetracked, by doubling. As Samuel Weber argues, “[t]he uncanny is thus bound up with a crisis of perception and of phenomenality, but concomitantly with a mortal danger to the subject, to the ‘integrity’ of its body and thus to its very identity” (1973, p. 1131). If this ‘mortal danger of the subject’ is thought of as a danger to the reader’s childhood perception of Snow White, then the uncanny representation of her character momentarily threatens the ‘integrity’ of Snow White in the mind’s eye. The greatest threat of the uncanny is, therefore, its disruption or violation of our idealized perceptions of the past.

However, the sense of the uncanny is relieved soon thereafter, maintaining a balance (or tension) between the classic Snow White and the Fables Snow White. We learn in the following pages ‘the double’ is in fact the Snow White we are all familiar with because of a remark about her past made by Beauty: “And just who is she to criticize anyone’s personal life, after what I heard about her tawdry little adventure with those seven dwarves” (Willingham, 2002, vol. 1, page 12). This sarcastic comment offends Snow White, and the reader learns that there is much more to Snow White’s character than what we know from her fairy tale history. More importantly, the reader is eager to discover what led Snow White to become so cold; we want to look beyond the façade she has created to cover up her past. This is the moment of defence that Weber argued was so important to the concept of the uncanny, and part of what makes the

uncanny pleasurable (1973, p. 1132). In addition to the conflict of perception generated by the doubling of Snow White, there is a secondary moment of defence against this crisis of perception, “a defence which is ambivalent and which expresses itself in the compulsive curiosity . . . to discover what lurks behind” (Weber, 1973, p. 1132).

Although hesitant, this curiosity makes the reader crave more and ultimately learn to expect the unexpected.

This example of Snow White’s first appearance as a character in *Fables* amply demonstrates that the uncanny often operates in an oscillation between what is familiar and unfamiliar. Snow White seemed unfamiliar in character at first, then we are reminded of her well-known past and she no longer seems so strange. This oscillation depends on what is already known of the character in question, or a component of the past, and whether the depiction of that character is in line with the past the reader has in mind. Therefore, it must be acknowledged that not all readers will find Snow White strange in the way she is depicted in this first issue of the series.

For instance, if you have already read certain retellings of fairy tales in which Snow White is portrayed as an evil character, such as Neil Gaiman’s *Snow, Glass, Apples* (1994) in which Snow White is the evil step-daughter and her step-mother is the one trying to save her kingdom, your familiarity with Snow White and perception of her character in *Fables* will be quite different. On Clockwork Storybook, a reader of *Fables* wrote: “Gaiman’s *Snow, Glass, Apples* is a classic. His version so affected my viewing of the tale that I was reading *Snow* very carefully when I started *Fables*” (Anonymous, Clockwork Storybook, April 4, 2008). Therefore, the initial depiction of Snow White

being callous and cold would have been consistent with this reader's previous experience with the (rewritten) character. By acknowledging this I am demonstrating the importance of the rules of the uncanny. The reader must have an attachment to the familiar and a grounding in the rational.

If a new reader to *Fables* has an attachment to the evil version of Snow White depicted in Gaiman's short story, then perhaps she will encounter an uncanny sensation when she sees Snow White having a loving and caring relationship with Bigby and their children later on in the series. Consequently, as I move forward with my analysis of the function of the uncanny in the text, I must reiterate my fundamental assumptions about *Fables* readers' previous knowledge of the characters and their classic stories. Readers who are familiar with fairy tales in the context of Western culture, including the Walt Disney versions of the tales, may have some awareness of retellings like Gaiman's, but generally are accustomed to the traditional stories.

Keeping along the same thread of the uncanny, that of the oscillation between the familiar and unfamiliar, is the uncanny function of defamiliarization. An example of a classic character that is defamiliarized in *Fables* can be found in Prince Charming. This character is introduced as a smarmy ladies' man who sleeps with 'mundy' women and uses them for their money. Traditionally, Prince Charming is of noble character, for example in *Sleeping Beauty* where he must truly love her to wake her from her eternal slumber.⁹ We quickly realize in *Fables* that the Prince Charming of *Cinderella*, Snow

⁹ Similarly to Snow White's physical representation, Prince Charming's physical appearance is in keeping with his traditional representation: a dashing, well-dressed, gentleman. With his jet black hair, dark blue eyes, square jaw and sharply defined nose and cheekbones, Prince Charming is the most handsome male Fable in the series, and his appearance is more in line with what one would imagine in the traditional tales

White and Briar Rose's (Sleeping Beauty) tales is the same man, a man with commitment issues. As comical as this is, it is particularly strange to see the Prince having intercourse as our introduction to his character, making it clear that he is no longer loyal to any of the princesses he wooed in the classic tales, and more importantly, that he is seemingly not the noble or innocent character that readers may recall from his numerous classic tales (Willingham, 2002, vol. 1, p. 18).

While the scene in which Prince Charming seduces a waitress he randomly meets serves to defamiliarize his character for the reader, it also makes sense for Willingham to take his character in this direction. One of the most strangely enjoyable aspects of *Fables* in general is the way we see characters from childhood in highly provocative, adult situations. Not only are the Fables depicted in scenes of a sexual nature, they also often appear in very violent situations and contexts. This is where the idealized past and the ugly present combine to provoke uncanny sensations in the reader that are strangely satisfying. It is no wonder that Prince Charming would become a womanizing sleaze over thousands of years, when his greatest skill is his ability to charm women. Therefore, as strange as it is to see Prince Charming in such an adult context, it does not require too much of a mental leap for the reader for the depiction of his character to become comical and enjoyable. This analysis demonstrates that where the uncanny can exist in one moment, it can easily disappear in the next as the reader reflects on what she is seeing.

Just as much of the nostalgic moments in *Fables* revolve around the animal or non-human looking Fable characters, this is also the site for many examples of the

or in the Disney films. Unlike Snow White, however, this traditional depiction is still compatible with his contemporary personality as a seemingly shallow, manipulative ladies' man. Unless he is in bed with a woman, Prince Charming is always finely dressed in an expensive-looking suit and tie.

uncanny. It is clear to the reader that Fables can appear in human or non-human form and that they are all equal in status. These are the ground rules made clear in the first two volumes of the series. However, this knowledge does not take away from the uncanny appearance and disposition of many of the animal Fables. For example, Colin, one of the Three Little Pigs, escapes the Farm and Bigby allows him to sleep on his couch. In a panel showing the two having a conversation about how Bigby cannot allow Colin to keep hiding out in his house, Colin responds “Why not? You still owe me big time for destroying my house” (Willingham, 2002, vol. 1, p. 29). It is not only uncanny in the way Colin speaks to Bigby, just like any other human, but also the way his face is drawn, the way he is sitting upright at the kitchen table, lighting a cigarette, and how human his facial expressions are. There are numerous examples of animals or even objects acting like humans throughout *Fables*. Virtually anything can be depicted as living: mirrors, clocks, playing cards, wooden soldiers, even the dead. Based on the premise that the uncanny can be evoked through the destabilization or confusion of opposites, such as living versus dead, or human versus non-human, the uncanny appears often in the text.

One of the main sources of pleasure derived from reading *Fables* is Willingham’s use of humour, satire and parody. There were several instances of the uncanny revealed in the analysis that are effective precisely because they combine humour with something strange or even creepy. One of the earliest examples in the series of this is on the cover of the second volume of the series, *Fables: Animal Farm*. This cover depicts Shere Khan, the tiger from *The Jungle Book*, attacking Snow White. It is meant to look frightening and succeeds in doing so because it foreshadows our central protagonist being

close to death. However, in the top right corner of the page, a prominent location within comics, a rabbit is holding two old-fashioned revolvers across its chest, forming the symbol of a cross or 'x'. This combined with the stoic expression on the rabbit's face is strangely humorous and almost ridiculous, and it is up to the reader as to whether it should be taken seriously or not. This is an example of how Willingham could have easily made *Fables* into a farce. Instead, he only occasionally takes on a self-mocking tone and encourages the readers to laugh at the absurdity of some of the fairy tale traditions and devices.

Another example of the uncanny operating in a humorous sense is when the Farm Fables are gearing up to rebel against the human-looking Fables in the second volume. Here, the 'old woman who lived in a shoe' of nursery rhyme fame gathers all her grandchildren together and tells them: "Arm yourselves!" (Willingham, 2003, vol. 2, p. 45). In the three panels below, we see children of about age eight holding machine guns and searching for ammunition. One complains: "Okay, 'fess up. Who kiped my Teflon-coatled magnum rounds?" (Willingham, 2003, vol. 2, p.45). This is comical because these characters look like small children, but really are hundreds of years old and are well versed in the modern arms of war. Later on in the same volume, a similar image is depicted of all the Farm Fables who are capable of holding a weapon doing so in a circle, waiting for orders to attack (Willingham, 2003, vol. 2, p. 83).

Although *Fables* does rely on humour quite frequently, which is part of the reason why the series is so pleasurable to read for the new female audience, the series also has its serious, gruesome, and sinister moments that easily incite an uncanny sensation under

the right circumstances. One of the best examples of this is in the first depiction of Bigby transforming back into wolf form (see Appendix D and Appendix E). In this double-page spread Bigby is seen making his way down to the detention cell in Fabletown's headquarters to confront Bluebeard who is torturing information out of the murder suspect, Jack. On the left center panel we see Bigby starting his transformation, then the bottom left panel only a giant shadow reveals that his transformation has been completed. This panel is reminiscent of a children's story, where the reader would see an intimidating shadow before seeing the monster. Transformation is also a key fairy tale motif, used to cause astonishment, admiration, fear or awe. Therefore, such scenes are anticipated by the reader. However, Willingham always adds his own twist to make these predictable scenes engage the attention of the reader.

The right side page is a full panel depicting Bigby yelling (or roaring) at Bluebeard. Although Bigby is returning to the familiar form of a wolf, as big and bad as he is, the reader is pushed to the limit of this familiarity due to the aggressiveness of the artist's drawing and the words coming from his mouth: "Drop the knife and back away from the boy—or I'll rip your fucking throat out" (Willingham, 2002, vol. 1, p. 64-65). Quite suddenly Bigby is terrifying again as he has been solidly placed in an adult context. Again, just like Prince Charming, it is a smart approach for Willingham to depict Bigby in this fashion, because it is satisfying seeing a more realistic, mature portrayal of 'The Big Bad Wolf'. Part of the pleasure of *Fables* is conjuring up images of the classic villains and demonstrating how terrifying they would be in a more contemporary, adult context.

Fables is not without its sense of balance, however. In the pages following Bigby's transformation, he is shown in his apartment in a state that is completely juxtaposed to what we have just seen. He is back in human form, wearing only a towel, and on the bottom right panel, he is sitting in an armchair with his head in his hand looking exhausted (Willingham, 2002, vol. 1, p. 71). His apartment is minimalist in its décor and the atmosphere is dark. Willingham and the artists are effectively evoking a complex characterization of Bigby, showing two extremes of his personality. While he is capable of being completely terrifying, he is also human enough to appear weak. Bigby is both human and animalistic, loyal yet fierce, thoughtful and intelligent, and yet ruthlessly violent. His character is the embodiment of the most binary oppositions exhibited in one single character in all of *Fables*. In absorbing all the different ways Bigby is being depicted, his depth incites uncanny feelings no matter what form he is in, human, wolf, or somewhere in between. His complex characterization serves to destabilize the expectations of, and to complicate the nostalgic experience for, the reader by teaching the reader to crave the unexpected.

However, as readers of *Fables* become increasingly familiar with the character of Bigby Wolf as depicted by Willingham and the artists, his ability to invoke the uncanny weakens. This relates to the Russian Formalists' theory of defamiliarization, specifically that the familiar and unfamiliar are never fixed, but rather constantly altering, paralleling the difficulties in pinpointing the uncanny in the content of fictional texts. As the series progresses, instances of the uncanny are less likely to be related to the depiction of characters in their classic fairy tale backgrounds. Instead, the uncanny appears more in

relation to the more frightening side of the uncanny and has more to do with destabilizing the reader's level of comfort while reading the text. This has been done in several ways throughout *Fables* by using a number of motifs associated with the uncanny, such as the use of ghosts, clones, wooden soldiers, cannibalism or the living dead in the text.

One significant example of this type of the uncanny is the history of Frau Totenkinder's character, a witch who is thousands of years old and holds great powers in the series. Her past is shown slowly over time, revealing that just like Prince Charming, she is the same witch in many different tales and her actions have affected many of the other characters in *Fables*. For example, she was the witch of Hansel and Gretel fame, the same witch who cursed the Beast, as well as the one who cursed another Prince into a frog. It is fascinating to imagine how interconnected all the characters are in the *Fables* universe, but possibly even more intriguing is how a character like Frau Totenkinder gains her power and immortality. This is explained as part of a special volume released in hard cover format entitled *Fables: 1001 Nights of Snowfall* (Willingham, 2006). Ostracized from her tribe thousands of years ago, Frau, already a powerful witch, chose to increase her power in sacrificing the most innocent life she could find, that of her own newborn son (Willingham, 2006, p. 103). With all the violence and disturbing imagery that *Fables* contains as a series, this is probably the most disturbing element of any character. Frau Totenkinder ('Totenkinder' translating into 'dead children' in German) keeps her power by spilling the blood of newborn children. Even though the reader had limited familiarity with this character up to this point in the series, the revelations about her past actions incite an uncanny feeling that is both frightening and disturbing.

The special volume *Fables: 1001 Nights of Snowfall* tells the background of a number of important characters and there are other examples in this volume that are disturbing on a similar level as Frau Totenkinder's story. One worth noting is the story of Snow White's 'true' history with the seven dwarves. Told without explicitly depicting the action, it is divulged that when Snow was a young woman back in the Homelands, she wandered into the woods and arrived at a cottage that seemed abandoned. While staying there seven dwarves came to the cottage and sexually assaulted her. She escaped, married Prince Charming, and in the years following the event, Snow learned fencing from her husband and slowly tracked down each of the dwarves and killed them. This almost provoked a war between the dwarves below ground and the human kingdom above it. No one but Prince Charming knew she was the one who had killed the dwarves, and he only found out after the fact. He lost all trust in Snow and subsequently cheated on her with her sister, Rose Red.

A number of aspects of this background story incite the uncanny. It is disconcerting because Willingham is taking a story that is primarily familiar to the reader through classic fairy tale stories and likely the Disney film and inserting it into an adult realm involving the taboo of rape. It is clear from Makinen's (1992) analysis of Angela Carter's retellings of fairy tales that the uncanny can be used to foster oppositional readings of classic fairy tales in order to deal with issues of gender, power, and sexuality. Therefore, in examples like these, when Willingham goes above and beyond using the uncanny to make the reader uncomfortable, the reader is forced to reflect back on her familiarity with the traditional tale while contemplating the cruelties of the present story.

Having Snow achieve the revenge of hunting down each dwarf and killing them all does grant power to her female character, but as the story shows this sense of empowerment is fleeting. She loses Prince Charming's trust and subsequently her marriage ends, not to mention the fact that Snow loses all respect for her sister in the process. Willingham is empowering women in this tale, but at the same time reminding readers that everyone is responsible for the repercussions of their actions. It is a surprisingly balanced perspective of power and gender relations, only momentarily satisfying for the characters and for the reader as well. This is a consistent theme in the series, namely that good will triumph over evil, but always at a cost.

The special edition graphic novel *Fables: 1001 Nights of Snowfall* was released four years after the first volume of the series was released, and five years after the first issue. Each of the stories went back in time to when the Fables still lived in their Homelands and back to when their classic tales actually occurred, such as Frau's experiences as a witch and Snow's encounter with the dwarves. Up until this point in the series, Willingham had rarely gone back this far in the timeline of the Fables universe, leaving the classic tales readers know from childhood intact. However, as Frau and Snow's backgrounds in *Fables* clearly show, Willingham has chosen to not only borrow the characters from the public domain and place them in a modern context, but he has taken the liberty of rewriting the classic tales as well. The result is a change to the intertextual relationship established in the first few years of the series. Willingham both celebrates and makes fun of the classic fairy tale canon, especially some of the tactics

employed by the genre. However, up until this point, he has not infiltrated the original stories themselves and altered them.

In a sense, Willingham is stealing those innocent and charming fairy tales kept safe in our memories and replacing them with more relentless tales of violence, survival, death, and vengeance. He has fundamentally altered the reader's perception of Snow White, Prince Charming, and many other characters, to the point where they will not be able to hear or read the traditional stories without at least thinking of Willingham's grim revisions. This is Willingham's way of making the series entirely his own creation, at first borrowing the classic tales for ease of reference and familiarity for his readers. Once Willingham had clearly established a comfortable fan base, he ventured into the past to alter reader perceptions of these characters in the most fundamental way. To this end, there now exists a *Fables* version of Snow White: strong, independent, resourceful, vengeful and intelligent, a far cry from the innocent and naïve Snow White of Disney fame, the fairy tale canon, and the female non-comic book fan's childhood.

Reflexivity and Cerebral Pleasure

Nostalgia and the uncanny have demonstrated that part of the work being done by readers as they progress through a story like *Fables* is to rethink the form and content of the traditional fairy tale. But there are other ways that the reader must negotiate the text, and that is achieved primarily through the function of reflexivity. I found reflexivity operating on two main levels: reflexivity provoked by the narrator, either by addressing the reader directly or by making reference to the fictionality of the text, and reflexivity in

the fiction itself, either by inserting references to other fictional works, character awareness and discussion of the fairy tale stories about their past, or social commentary about the present, ‘mundane’ world as told through the characters.

I previously described how Willingham takes on the role of the storyteller in an effort to bring the readers back to a nostalgic phase in life where stories were told to them at home or at school in groups. Willingham will occasionally go further than this and overtly address the reader. The following quote of Willingham’s introduction to *Fables: 1001 Nights of Snowfall* illustrates how his role as narrator is to set the tone for the reader, but also to bring her up to speed on what has happened so far in the story:

Welcome to the enchanted world of *Fables*. For those of you who’ve read *Fables* stories before, welcome back. I’m always glad to see you here. Grab a comfy seat and make yourself at home. . . *Fables* is about the continuing modern day adventures of a group of characters who are already well known to you. Snow White? Prince Charming? The Big Bad Wolf? You’ve met them before, along with many others who’ve populated beloved folklore and fairy tales of your youth. But now you’re about to learn some of the things that have happened to them after (and sometimes before) the stories you already know. . . Since these are all new stories about characters you already know, you’re not really new to *Fables* after all. . . welcome back to a world you knew once upon a time. We’ve certainly missed you (Willingham, 2006, p. 6).

This introduction to the special volume of *Fables* not only helps introduce new readers to the series, but it also reiterates why so many readers enjoy the series: because it brings you back to your childhood days of stories and fantasy with the sophistication and shock of the real adult world. It also reinforces the notion that the readers are already familiar with the characters and their stories. Willingham is helping his readership make sense of the fantasy world he has created by describing the premise of the Fables’ universe. Most importantly, though, Willingham is granting the reader permission to indulge in a

shameless bout of nostalgia. However, as my overview of Snow and Frau's back stories demonstrated, the readers of this special edition may be in for a surprise as their classic childhood tales are altered to fit into a more complex adult world.

It can be speculated that one of Willingham's goals is to disarm the reader to the point where she can indulge in the fiction guilt-free, with the full knowledge that she is reading something fictional and that she should, therefore, suspend her disbelief while enjoying the text. He is effectively preparing the reader to become part of the storytelling experience. An example of Willingham purposefully making reference to the fictionality of the story is on the very first page of the first issue (see Appendix B). The narration states: "Once upon a time. In a fictional land called New York City" (Willingham, 2002, vol. 1, p. 5). The reader may halt momentarily on the word fictional because as the art shows, this fictional land has a striking resemblance to the real New York City, especially with the easily recognizable Chrysler building in the background of the top left panel on the same page. I believe that Willingham is starting his story this way to remind the reader that this is just a story and that it should be enjoyed as such. The reader should not dwell on whether the story is properly reflecting the 'real' world. Rather, just as in Kim's (1996) study of *The Wizard of Oz*, the overt fictitiousness of the text allows the reader to concede that the story is not real, granting access to the 'kernel of utopian fantasy' that allows the reader to fulfill her desire for a (ironic) nostalgic reading experience.

Willingham frequently employs a tongue-in-cheek tone not only in his narration, but through his characters. In the same speech given by King Cole at the Remembrance Day ball, Cole is describing the invasion of the different worlds in the Homelands by the

Adversary: “Then the Kingdom of the Great Lion Fell, and again we did nothing, because we always found the old lion to be a bit too pompous and holier-than-thou for our tastes” (Willingham, 2002, vol. 1, p.83). For those who have read C.S. Lewis’ stories involving Narnia and the Lion King Aslan, there are many Christian connotations, but also preachy tones, in Lewis’s novels. Willingham could not make an explicit reference to Lewis’ characters because they are still under copyright protection, but for those who have read the story it is a clear jab at the fictional world created by Lewis and possibly an enjoyable attack on a revered member of the classic canon of children’s literature. This type of tongue-in-cheek tone used in *Fables* is only really enjoyable if the reader is aware of the critiques surrounding Narnia and is, therefore, able to appreciate it.

Willingham is not afraid, however, to poke fun at his own stories and characters while making reflective comments about other fictional stories or genres. For example, when Bigby has discovered who murdered Rose Red, he gathers everyone together for what he calls ‘the parlor scene’: “This is it. In the mystery novels this is called the ‘parlor scene,’ where the clever detective reveals all. If this were a work of fiction, the author would pause the story here to ask the readers if they’d put all the clues together yet” (Willingham, 2002, vol. 1, p. 94). Referring again to the possibility that this story is fictional, Willingham effectively makes a parody of borrowing the mystery genre to tell his story. Adding to this effect is the fact that Bigby does not look like a clever detective at all because he is standing beside a large swimming pool in a bathrobe, looking very much like an intoxicated partygoer. Willingham also borrows the storytelling framework of spy novels, caper stories, conspiracy thrillers, and of course, the love story.

More covert references to other fictional works are common throughout the series. One of the most recognizable ways to reference another fictional work is to have one of the characters drawn reading a book with the title of the book visible. For example in *Fables: March of the Wooden Soldiers*, Pinocchio is seen reading Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (Willingham, 2004, vol. 4, p. 78-79). Earlier in the series three characters are drawn carrying fictional comic books like 'The Un-Mundy,' 'Stalk Thing,' 'Redhood,' 'Oz-Men,' and 'Fairytale Four' (Willingham, 2003, vol. 3, p. 100). Any comic book fan would appreciate these made-up fairy tale comic book references. Other examples of fictional references include characters wearing Superman t-shirts (Willingham, 2002, vol.1, p. 114), quotes from traditional nursery rhymes (Willingham, 2005, vol. 5, p. 166), statues of Frank L. Baum's Oz characters Dorothy and Toto in Fabletown's park (Willingham, 2002, vol. 1, p. 31), and a reference to William Golding's (1954) book *Lord of the Flies* (Willingham, 2002, vol. 2, p. 24-25). There is even one character reading the first issue of *Fables* on the cover of *Fables: Legends in Exile* (see Appendix A).

All these subtle references to fictional texts are examples of the reflexive technique called *mise-en-abyme*, or a picture within a picture. They remind the reader of the context in which *Fables* exists – it is both aware of other real-life fictional texts and the fact that it, itself is fictional. They also acknowledge a very specific type of reader, one who reads *Fables*, but who is also well-read in general and possibly well aware of the comics industry. This type of reflexivity targets a different readerly experience, one that can take pleasure from references to comics and the dynamics of the industry. Characters

are often portrayed reading comic books, and the Fabletown bookstore, called Nod's Books, has a sign on the sidewalk that reads: "Visit our Comics Nook – New This Week..." (Willingham, 2003, vol. 3, p. 78). This small reference hints at the way the comics industry recently broke through the barrier of major bookstores to establish a small space of shelving for graphic novels. Comics are still only a 'nook' in these giant stores, but comics released by Vertigo, like *Fables*, are frequently found on those shelves.

These overt and covert references to literature and comics are only one small aspect of the vast references to the 'real' world in *Fables*. As the series progresses, more and more social commentary appears through the dialogue between characters (and never through the narrator). The social commentary is clearly marked as being part of the fiction, part of the entertainment value of the series. Although it is not rampant, Willingham will occasionally hint at his own political views. The most blatant example of this is 'The Israel Analogy,' a chapter of one issue in which Bigby compares Fabletown to Israel with the aim of warning the Adversary against attacking Fabletown again: "Israel is a tiny country surrounded by much larger countries dedicated to its eventual destruction. . . Some in the wider world constantly wail and moan about the endless cycle of violence and reprisal. But since the alternative is non-existence, the Israelis seem determined to keep at it. They have a lot of grit and iron. I'm a big fan of them" (Willingham, 2006, vol. 8, p. 76). This is a rare example of Willingham's political views entering *Fables*, something he generally avoids.

However, beyond provoking a reaction in the reader who may have her own opinion about Israel, it places the series temporarily at a higher level of seriousness than

it normally occupies. It depicts the reader's world as violent and inadequate, possibly reinforcing the desire to lose themselves in the nostalgia of an idealized past or the pleasures of fiction in the present. Overt political references also disrupt the flow of the fiction, removing the reader temporarily from the enjoyment of reading. Beyond agreeing or disagreeing with Willingham's Israel analogy, including such an overt political reference may actually be unpleasant for the reader because it is so out of context. If the text had been overtly political in this sense from the beginning of the series, perhaps this would have been a manifestation of 'the political pleasure of subversion'.

One final way that *Fables* offers an opportunity for the reader to reflect on the series and on the traditional fairy tales is through character commentary on their own famous stories and the power granted to them by the popularity of those stories. In the series, the most memorable and popular Fable characters are essentially immortal. Certain characters, like Snow White, Bigby, and Goldilocks are extremely difficult to kill. Throughout the series, both Snow White and Bigby are shot through the head and live. Goldilocks has an axe taken to her head, is hit by a transport truck, and is slowly eaten by fish at the bottom of a river and still survives. The most powerful Fable character in the series, Frau Totenkinder, actually dies and comes back to life after being completely burnt to ash by Hansel and Gretel. This is all possible because these characters are revered by the 'mundys' through their traditional fairy tale stories that became canonized in the western world. As Rose Red complains to her sister, Snow White: "They keep making their godawful animated movies and writing their endless

children's stories about you. So you can't die! They'll never let you!" (Willingham, 2003, vol. 2, p. 108).

The system of power operating in *Fables* is a commentary on the power of the consumer in today's world, as well as the power of holding onto the past and the memories of childhood. The power granted to Fables based on their popularity with the 'mundys' is a type of magic that mirrors the power of the consumer as part of a larger economic system, and the power of the individual to hold on to their dreams and fantasies. Willingham is giving voice to popular culture, mass culture, and ultimately childhood culture as well. This power system in the series is also consistent with other power systems found in many universes of the superhero comic genre – the power of the superhero is almost always explained, one way or another. But this power system has an added twist – it is entirely dependent on the popularity of each Fable with people in the real world, in other words, every single reader of *Fables*. The reader feels directly involved in granting the characters their power, making her feel actively, though indirectly involved in the plot of the series. Each of us has inadvertently participated in making our favourite fairy tale characters so powerful they have become immortal.

Altogether, reflexivity can operate as a function of the narrator, as a function of the author through his characters and their dialogue, and through an array of overt and covert references to other types of fiction and literature and even some social commentary. It can be particularly enjoyable when readers can identify the various intertextual references inserted into the text, either overtly or covertly. This is a type of pleasure that can best be described as 'sheer cerebral pleasure,' but it is not confined to

the function of reflexivity. It is also found in ironized nostalgia and the uncanny.

Nostalgia can make the reader indulge in an idealized past and an ironic present. The uncanny can provoke sensations of discomfort, fear, and curiosity in relation to the complex characterizations of the Fables and the very adult contexts in which they are portrayed. Finally, reflexivity can hail the reader to stop and think about the text and its pretexts.

Conclusion: Dealing with Dissonance – The Reinvention of Snow White

There are two final examples that I have selected because they illustrate how all three of these concepts can be found on a single page in the text (see Appendix F). This is a double page illustration of the Farm, the reader's introduction to the upstate annex of Fabletown. It is borderless at the left and right sides, indicating the vastness of the area as it spreads off the page. The images are a blend of nostalgic and uncanny items, with the uncanny impression emphasized further by the way the buildings from various fairy tales and nursery rhymes are side-by-side in the same town. There is the giant shoe from the nursery rhyme of 'The Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe,' there is a toadstool house, a pumpkin house and part of a castle that seems to be supported by some kind of magic. All these fairy tale settings alongside more modern-day items, like a tractor and Snow White and Rose Red's truck. The image is also uncanny because it is virtually deserted. The characters provide the reflective comments, possibly reinforcing what the reader was already thinking: "Wow, so this is the famous Farm. I'm impressed, Sis. Sort of like Old

MacDonald meets Walt Disney meets Munchkinland” (Willingham, 2003, vol. 2, p. 10-11). Even the human-looking Fables find the Farm a strange place when they first arrive.

It is images like these that blend the nostalgic with the strange, and add humour or commentary through reflexivity in the text that makes the experience of an adult thinking about childhood stories so interesting and enjoyable. It is not just a longing for the past memories of childhood, or the re-contextualizing of childhood memories in adulthood, or just smart social commentary or oppositional readings. It is a balance of all three of these experiences in one that makes such a text so incredibly satisfying and a pleasure to read.

As the story progresses, Willingham’s creative hold on the material becomes stronger. As mentioned previously, he eventually alters the classic stories to his liking, making the characters his own and liberally (re-)building the past and present world of Fables. One of the best examples of this appears about half-way through the series in a full page panel of Snow reuniting with Bigby, while he is in wolf form (see Appendix G). Fabletown has just survived an attack by The Adversary and Bigby arrived just in time to save his fellow Fables. The image shows a pregnant Snow White leaping up to hug Bigby around the neck, in the pouring rain. Bigby fills the page in wolf form, his eyes glowing yellow and claws extended (Willingham, 2004, p. 216).¹⁰ The panel is encased in a bronze frame with a shield at the top, encapsulating the moment in time and hailing the reader. By closing the panel off from all others, and providing a distinct border with a thick margin all around, the reader is notified that a significant moment in the storyline is unfolding before her.

¹⁰ In the pages preceding this, Bigby’s eyes are glowing red. They immediately change to a softer yellow when Snow appears, showing the Big Bad Wolf’s love for Snow White.

This instant in the story is unusual and unexpected because it is a rare moment of transformation for Snow. For the first time in the series, and perhaps since her marriage to Prince Charming several centuries before, Snow White is depicted as being fragile, happy, and in love (albeit with a giant wolf). This is what makes the image uncanny. Her character as we have come to know her through *Fables* is distant and cold, but she is now transitioning to a characterization that is reminiscent of the classic tales, yet with greater depth. Just as Bigby is portrayed as simultaneously powerful and weak, Snow is portrayed as both strong and loving from this point on in the series. These are two gendered perspectives that go against stereotypes, offering a more sophisticated development of these two central characters. This moment of this transition of Snow provokes a sensation of the uncanny in the reader and a reconsideration of her character by the reader once more. The image is nostalgic because it symbolizes a happy ending for the two characters. And a reflexive reaction by the reader is encouraged further by the characters themselves showing their surprise at Snow's behaviour.

This image represents Willingham's effort to make the story of Snow White and the Big Bad Wolf his own. By building new attachments between characters and between the series and its fan base, readers are decreasingly attached to the classic versions of each character's story. Similarly to what Novoa (2005) argued was the strength of the postmodern cinematic retelling of *Sleeping Beauty*, *Fables* as a text grants the writer the freedom to play with boundaries, to both exploit and reinvent the story of Snow White and many others, and to explore themes of the rational and emotional (p. 225). This particular image was selected by the artists who work on the series to be cast

into a statue to sell to fans, reiterating the importance of the panel as a ‘moment’ in the series. In a discussion of their favourite artistic representations in *Fables*, one reader explains why he chose this particular image: “I personally love the image they chose for the first statue[,] a pregnant [S]now running out to see Bigby, and she had abandoned all pretenses [sic] and admitted she really cared for him” (Anonymous, Clockwork Storybook, April 7, 2006). Another reader goes further, commenting: “[I] think it’s perfect because the art perfectly, iconic-ly (?) portrays the feeling of what’s happening, and what’s happening is something we’ve been waiting for for a while. [S]o [it is] nice to see those complicated characters with 0% guise. [I]t’s so absolutely genuine” (Anonymous, Clockwork Storybook, February 7, 2008). The image is iconic among fans of *Fables* because it represents the creativity and uniqueness of the series through affective, complex imagery.

This image represents how Willingham has created a new text out of entirely borrowed material, slowly altering the characters and their pasts. This assists readers in dealing with the feeling of dissonance caused by the disturbing historical re-write of Snow White’s past. Although Snow White will never be associated with the same innocence and charm of her classic story, female readers of *Fables* are now able to become reacquainted with her character from a new, more complex, perspective. Female readers who are familiar with the classic tales can reflect on the simplistic ways characters in the fairy tale genre are often portrayed. Through contemporary texts like *Fables*, such readers are able to counteract the simplification of aesthetic, moral, and

intellectual codes brought about by the ‘Disneyfication’ of fairy tales, without forcing a highly subversive message.

Altogether, Bill Willingham’s *Fables* is an example of an adult retelling of fairy tales that acknowledges the enchanting power of fairy tales while grounding the genre with a humourous, sharp, often ironic tongue-in-cheek tone. Based on my analysis I would argue that this tone is primarily light-hearted, and would not be consistent with ‘the political pleasure of subversion’ that many of the feminist and postmodern retellings evoked as discussed in the literature review. Although occasionally Willingham does venture into political territory, the text cannot be defined as a subversive deconstruction of fairy tales (feminist or otherwise). Instead, *Fables* is a celebration of a well-known, highly popular storytelling format translated into an adult context through the evocative art of comics.

In both celebrating and critiquing the past through ironized nostalgia, the new female reader of comics can derive satisfaction from a text that draws on the familiarity of fairy tales, but in a way that locates the pleasure in the present rather than in the inaccessible past. Dissonance, caused by the sensation of the uncanny, creates occasional and fleeting hiccups in that pleasure, sparking moments in which the simplicity of the traditional fairy tale genre is exposed. Reflexivity, operating independently and as a result of ironized nostalgia and the uncanny, allows the reader to replace the simplification of aesthetic, intellectual and moral codes with something more sophisticated. Ultimately, the new female reader of comics derives both intellectual and

affective pleasure from the story, as simultaneously a form of conscious escape and cerebral stimulation.

Chapter V – The Cerebral and Therapeutic Pleasures of Reinventing Childhood

When comments about the childlike adult consumer began surfacing as early as the 1980's in academia, the warning that childhood and adulthood were merging (Meyrowitz, 1984, p. 19) was not considered as significant as the supposed 'disappearance of childhood' (Postman, 1982). But since the turn of the millennia and since the events of September 11, 2001 in the United States, public discourse has exhibited a tone of concern about the status of adulthood. A new market segment is being explored, one of adult men and women who enjoy indulging in the therapeutic pleasure of nostalgia. However, those critics who deem this behaviour as either a regressive reaction to the tensions of a post-September 11th world (Ebenkamp & Odiorne, 2002) or a shirking of adult responsibility in general (O'Malley, 1995) made two assumptions. First, that nostalgia is always inherently regressive; and second, that the only form of pleasure sought by these adults was therapeutic, passive and escapist.

Conversely, much of the academic literature that took notice of adult retellings of fairy tales chose to focus on the other end of the critical spectrum. Many scholars argued that readers of postmodern and feminist texts were actively engaged in resisting and rejecting the political and cultural context in which the classic canon of fairy tales were created (for example Lokke, 1988; Makinen, 1992; Mieder, 1987; Nealon, 2005; Pizer 1990). Helpless and naïve princesses no longer needed or desired a noble, charming prince to rescue them. Female characters were especially granted a sense of empowerment by their fictional creators, and this sense was transferred to the readers as they actively chose to either accept or resist. But these analyses neglected the role of

nostalgia, that painful form of pleasure that involves the longing of a lost time or place. Some authors attempted to explain the middle ground, like Helen Kim's (1996) analysis of the film *The Wizard of Oz*. Kim argued that such nostalgic texts are enjoyable for adults because they knowingly, or reflexively, suspend their disbelief to allow themselves an escape into a world of fantasy. Kim's study points to a gap in the literature that she began to explore, and also to a gap in the logic of many critics warning of adult regression. If the pleasure derived from such texts, objects, and media is only an escape to childhood, then why do adults not simply indulge directly in children's toys, media, and activities? Why bother re-appropriating childhood material into adult contexts?

There is a more complex form of pleasure than pure escapism or pure resistance, a middle ground that I have explored using the concepts of ironized nostalgia, the uncanny, and reflexivity. Rather than forcing the pleasure of the reader and the role of the reader into simplistic categories, my argument creates a home for texts that both exploit and reinvent childhood material. In popular and mass culture, there are many products for adults that strike a balance between capturing the attention through nostalgia and engaging with the complexities and issues of adult life. This middle ground helps to explain why this series is so popular with a new comics audience: women who were not fans of superhero comics but who are familiar with the classic fairy tales.

Through my analysis, nostalgia, the uncanny and reflexivity all played a role in creating possibilities for this pleasurable reading experience. Texts that rely on borrowing childhood material and re-appropriating it in mature contexts, like *Fables*, present that material as ironic or self-aware so that readers may consciously suspend their

disbelief and enjoy the experience. The mechanism that allows this to happen is what Linda Hutcheon (2000) calls ironized nostalgia, the type of nostalgia that projects an ideal past into a complex present. This ironized nostalgia is the departure point for the rest of the framework, since it establishes a tension between acceptance of the traditional fairy tale and the grittiness of the present adult context. Nostalgia enraptures the reader by reminding them of a pleasant past (e.g. “Once upon a time”), then quickly contrasts that pleasant past with various complications from the present. The text brings the pleasantries of the past forward through a number of techniques. Most notably, this reader can find solace in the narrator, who allows her to suspend her disbelief and reminds her how to sit back and listen to an all-knowing, old, wise storyteller. The readers’ senses can linger on the ornate framing of certain panels, halting their attention on single iconic moments in the story. Similarly, both male and female readers can take pleasure in the beautiful and handsome artistic renderings of many of the characters, and the comical and endearing depictions of the animal Fables. These are examples of the indulgences made possible by nostalgia, a form of escape to the past.

Such components are most often simultaneously contrasted by present day, adult complexities. These complications can cause moments of cognitive dissonance in the reading experience in which the reader has three ways to deal with the contradictions in the text. She can ignore the complications of the present, reject the nostalgic items from the past, or alter her conceptualization of both the past and the present.

For example, a reader may concede that perhaps the fairy tales she loved as a child were not as utopian and magical as she recalls, or perhaps the present world is not

completely disenchanted and bleak, or lastly some kind of combination of these two cognitive adjustments. If she chooses to re-evaluate her conceptions of the present, then she does not have to abandon her nostalgic longing for the past. She can still indulge in that escapist pleasure, it will simply not be as powerful because her present condition is not conceived as negatively. On the other hand, if the reader chooses to abandon her idealized past in favour of acknowledging the difficulties of both the past and present, there is the potential for her to enjoy the political pleasures of subversion. I would argue, however, that many texts that draw from childhood connections would naturally aim to maintain a sense of nostalgia for their appeal.

Working alongside ironized nostalgia is the evocation of the uncanny. The experience of dissonance in the text is not only provoked by contradictions between an idealized past and an unsatisfactory present, but can manifest in disturbances to the familiar. The uncanny is a tool available to creators of texts that is used to periodically disrupt and violate the ideals or memories of the reader, defamiliarizing the characters, genre, and the other items considered familiar. Through the employment of various uncanny motifs, such as the double, transformation (of animals, humans or objects), the living dead or the inability to die, the displacement of past and present, and the conversion of childhood characters into adult situations, the uncanny is consistently used to incite contradictions in the readers assumptions and perceptions. Pinocchio complaining that he can never reach puberty and Prince Charming's manipulative womanizing are both examples of attacks on the integrity of the 'original' Prince Charming and Pinocchio and their stories. By attacking the integrity of the pretexts on

which the story is built, the reader undergoes the process of defamiliarization described by Russian Formalists. This makes “unfamiliar all sorts of familiar perceptions or beliefs,” causing discomfort but also provoking curiosity (Royle, 2003, p. 5). The uncanny is ephemeral in nature, thus the reader’s embroilment in the sensation of the uncanny flickers and disappears as they learn to expect and crave the unexpected (Royle, 2003, p. vii).

The oscillation between the familiar and the unfamiliar is a process that can be disconcerting, and for the most nostalgic of individuals, it may even be shocking. Often, it is the tendency of those things which are most familiar to us to turn on us. Sudden defamiliarization of the strong, idealized memories of childhood and its objects is what makes the experience of the uncanny so intensely unsettling. It is this oscillation that allows the individual to re-assess his or her own place in the real world, separate from the fictional realm that violates the integrity of the past. As Hutcheon explains, the act of ironizing nostalgia (and I would argue also of the uncanny), undermines the claims of authenticity and originality that the idealized past encapsulates (2000, para. 25). As a result, readers are free to re-evaluate their assumptions about the past and re-assess whether the past should be idealized at the expense of the present.

The use of the uncanny and irony to bring about cognitive dissonance in the female reader not only disarms the power of her familiar perceptions and idealized past, it also prepares her to loosen her grip on her memories of how the past should be portrayed. This allows the creators of a text to reinvent the material and make it a product of the present. With *Fables*, Willingham slowly builds his own fairy tale realm around the

readers' memories of the classics, then ultimately replaces that foundation with his own rewritings of character histories. While this does serve to tarnish the purity and innocence of the classic tales, it also plants the seed that perhaps the classic tales had other hidden meanings that the reader may have missed simply because she was too young at the time. The final step is that creators of fictional texts can set up their own 'laws of the house' and make the text work for them as their own fictional creation.

At various points in the reading experience, the reader is granted opportunities to silently reflect on the oscillations and tensions between the past and present, between escape and reinvention. Both the uncanny and ironic nostalgia provide opportunities for reflection about the text and the reader's preconceived notions of what is normal and commonly accepted. The art of *Fables* houses many overt and subtle intertextual references through the technique of *mise en abyme*. References by the narrator and characters to the classic of fairy tales, especially in relation to the popularity of these tales, allows the reader to reflect on their own relationship with the pretexts. Because the text is one that is primarily celebratory, however, there are moments of reflexivity that are disruptive to the reading experience. In a text that is normally politically neutral, Willingham will occasionally insert politically conservative comments, such as 'The Israel Analogy' or criticism of social welfare systems. Even though these political statements are expressed through the plot and through the characters, they seem out of place and awkward. This is why I am sceptical to conclude that texts that borrow from childhood material tend to produce a political pleasure of subversion consistently. Unlike the anti-

fairy tale or the postmodern retellings, many popular culture texts do not require resistance and rejection from the reader. Rather, they require openness to reinvention.

On a larger scale, the classic canon of fairy tales represent a set of values and preconceived notions that are open to be accepted, exploited, reinvented or rejected by the adult reader. If these four reader reactions could be placed on a sliding continuum or spectrum, with full acquiescence at the left, and resistance and rejection at the right, *Fables* would occupy a left of centre position. The dynamic tension developed by Willingham in the series is one that celebrates fairy tales, but does not fully accept the politics, gender relations, and cultural norms of the classic tales. Instead, it exploits certain aspects, such as the form and presentation of the narrative, and reinvents others, such as the histories of the characters and their relationship to one another.

There are moments in the text that could provoke a more political pleasure of subversion, such as Snow White's victimization by the dwarves and her subsequent revenge. But these moments are almost always portrayed as bittersweet rather than triumphant. And there were instances where Willingham purposefully mocks the fairy tale and its themes of magic, transformation, and the utopian spirit. However, this rarely frustrates the reader or defamiliarizes the fairy tale to the point that Willingham cannot bring them back. *Fables* is a satisfying text that borrows, exploits, and reinvents familiar material, and is purposely designed as such because it is a product of popular culture. If DC Comics' high-end imprint Vertigo were to completely disregard the satisfaction of the reader in favour of rejection or complete reinvention of the fairy tale, they would likely achieve critical acclaim, but low sales. From a marketing point of view, it is not

logical for Vertigo to convert a premise that is familiar in form and content to most of the Western world into something purely politically subversive. This would sever the connection between all those potential comic book readers from the very aspect of the series that initially draws them in, which is nostalgia for the childhood enjoyment of stories and fairy tales.

Altogether, the interaction of ironized nostalgia, the uncanny, and reflexivity in texts that draw from childhood materials produces two types of pleasure operating in a balance for the reader with whom I am concerned. There is the escapist, therapeutic pleasure of retreating into a fictional realm that is already familiar in form and content, made possible through the functions of intertextuality and nostalgia. Then there is the cerebral or intellectual pleasure that Merja Makinen identified in her study of Angela Carter's revised fairy tales. One does not need to be an expert on fairy tales or a feminist or political conservative or liberal to read and enjoy these texts. Rather, the reader must simply appreciate the playful attack on her own assumptions and those of the previous texts by the author or creator of the work. Without this playful appreciation, "the payback for that level of engagement, the sheer cerebral pleasure and the enjoyment of the iconoclasm, will be missing" (Makinen, 1992, p. 6). Subsequently, adding a sense of reflective humour, irony or the uncanny provokes cultural or cognitive dissonance, forcing the reader to reflect on her beliefs and expectations of the text. The interaction with the reader's assumptions is playful and light-hearted, and this becomes part of the anticipation the reader builds in reading the text. Once the reader has had the opportunity to be reflexive about her preconceived notions, she is prepared to follow the text as it

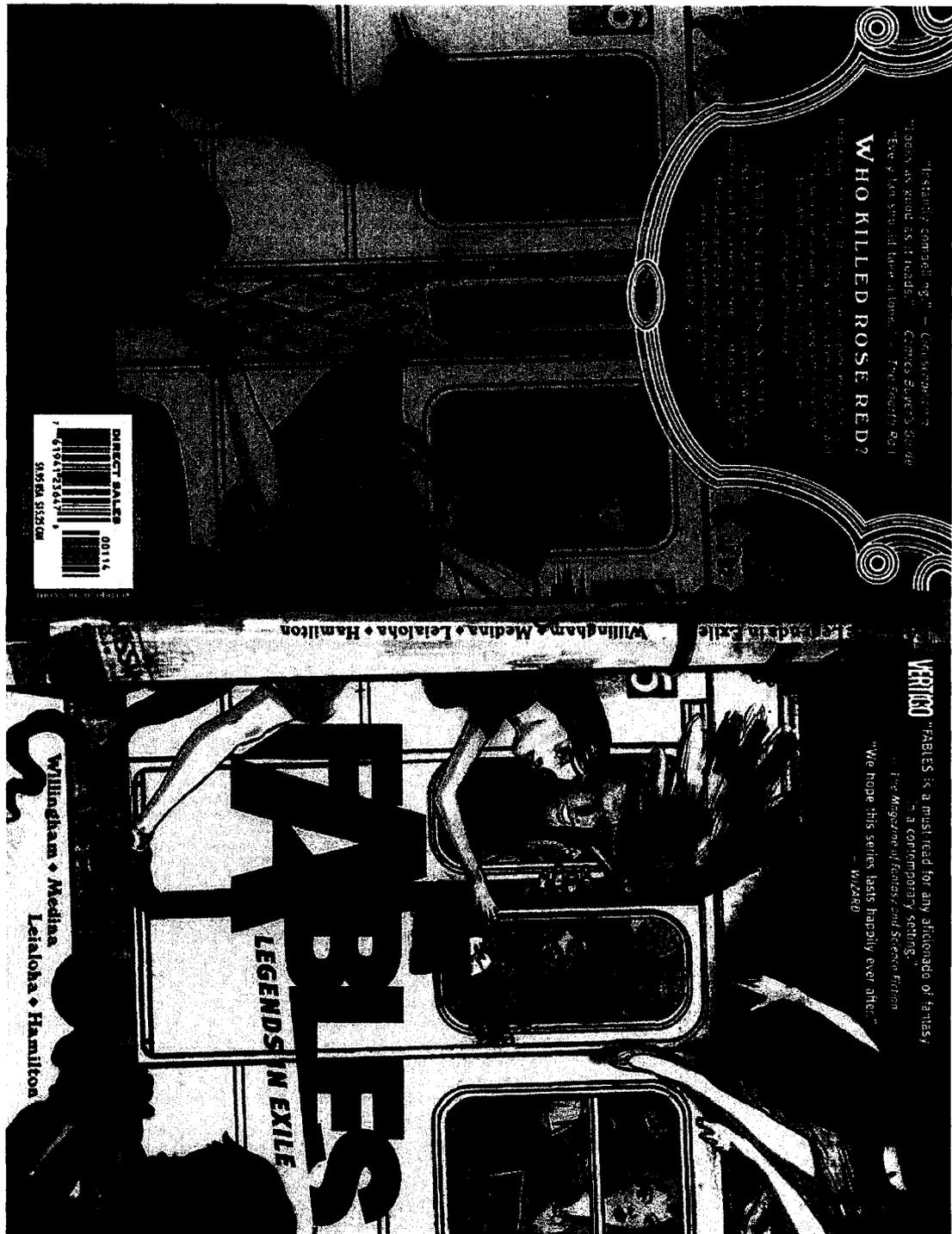
rewrites, recreates, or reinvents the past from an adult perspective. The result is a story, video game, or film that is far more enjoyable for a mature adult and that is inaccessible to children.

Fables is therefore an example of a smart, stimulating and unpretentious object of popular culture that has used the formula of borrowing childhood texts to produce new, sophisticated stories, characters, and fictional universes. As Aristotle stated, human happiness and satisfaction is achieved by being fully immersed in an experience of both contemplation and pleasure, derived from a high-quality, stimulating object (Arnheim, 1993). I believe that the combination of ironized nostalgia, the uncanny and reflexivity produce a fluctuating dynamic of affective, escapist pleasure, and a cerebral or cognitive pleasure that maintains an equilibrium between pleasure and contemplation. Above all else, these texts are satisfying because they are neither overly demanding nor simplistic.

In a society that worries about the regressive nature of nostalgia and its power over its citizens during times of crisis, it is important to remember that some popular or mass cultural objects that adults commonly indulge in are not mindless escapes from adult responsibilities. While comic books and fairy tales are not considered high art, and need not be, they do offer their readers a level of engagement that stimulates a personal dialogue, one that has the potential to question their attachments to the past and to encourage the fullest possible experience of the present.

Appendices

Appendix A – Cover of *Fables: Legends in Exile*



© 2002 B. Willingham. *Fables: Legends in Exile*. New York: DC Comics

Appendix B – Introduction to ‘Fabletown’

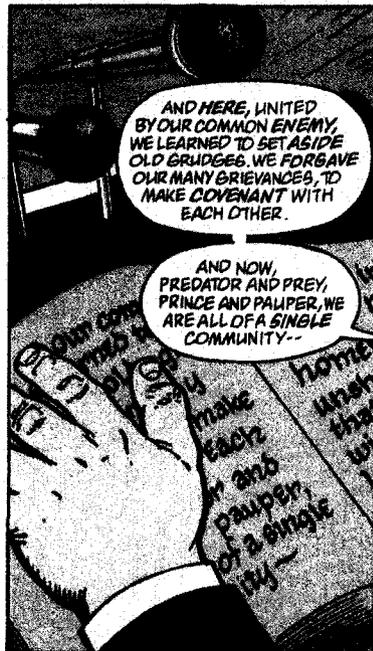
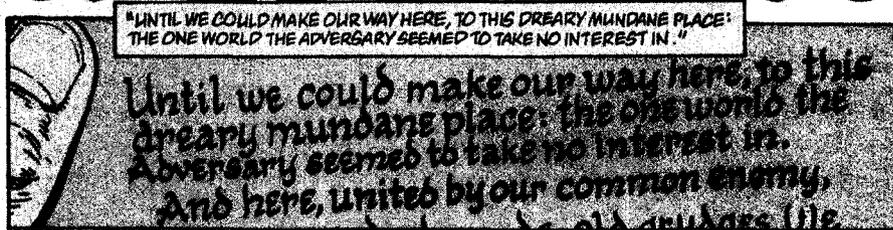


FABLES #1, July, 2002. Published monthly by DC Comics, 1700 Broadway, New York, NY 10019. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to FABLES, DC Comics Subscriptions, PO. Box 0528, Baiter, NY 11810. Annual subscription rate \$30.00. Canadian subscribers must add \$12.00 for postage and GST. GST # is R123621072. All foreign countries must add \$12.00 for postage. U.S. funds only. Subscriptions to this title are offered only to readers who attest they are 18 years of age or older, or who written parental approval to readers under 18 years of age. FABLES is Copyright © 2002 Bill Willingham and DC Comics. All Rights Reserved. As characters featured in this issue, the distinctive likenesses thereof, and all related indicia are trademarks of Bill Willingham. Verlags: Trademarked DC Comics. The stories, characters and incidents mentioned in this magazine are entirely fictional. Printed on recyclable paper. DC Comics does not read or accept unsolicited submissions of ideas, stories or artwork. Printed in Canada.

DC Comics, A Division of Warner Bros. - An AOL Time Warner Company

- JENETTE KAHN, President & Editor-in-Chief • PAUL LEVITZ, Executive Vice President & Publisher • KAREN BERGER, Executive Editor •
- SHIRLEY BOND, Editor • MARIAN HUSHNER, Assistant Editor • GEOFF BREWER, VP-Design & Retail Product Development •
- RICHARD BURNING, VP-Creative Director • PATRICK CALDON, Senior VP-Finance & Operations • DOROTHY CROUCH, VP-Licensed Publishing •
- TERRI DUNNINGHAM, VP-Managing Editor • JOEL BIRNLIICH, Senior VP-Advertising & Promotions • ALISON GILL, VP-Manufacturing •
- LILLIAN LASERSON, VP & General Counsel • JIM LEE, Editorial Director-WISestore • DAVID MCKILLIPS, VP-Advertising •
- JOHN HEE, VP & General Manager-WISestore • CHERYL RUBIN, VP-Licensing & Merchandising • BOB WAYNE, VP-Sales & Marketing •

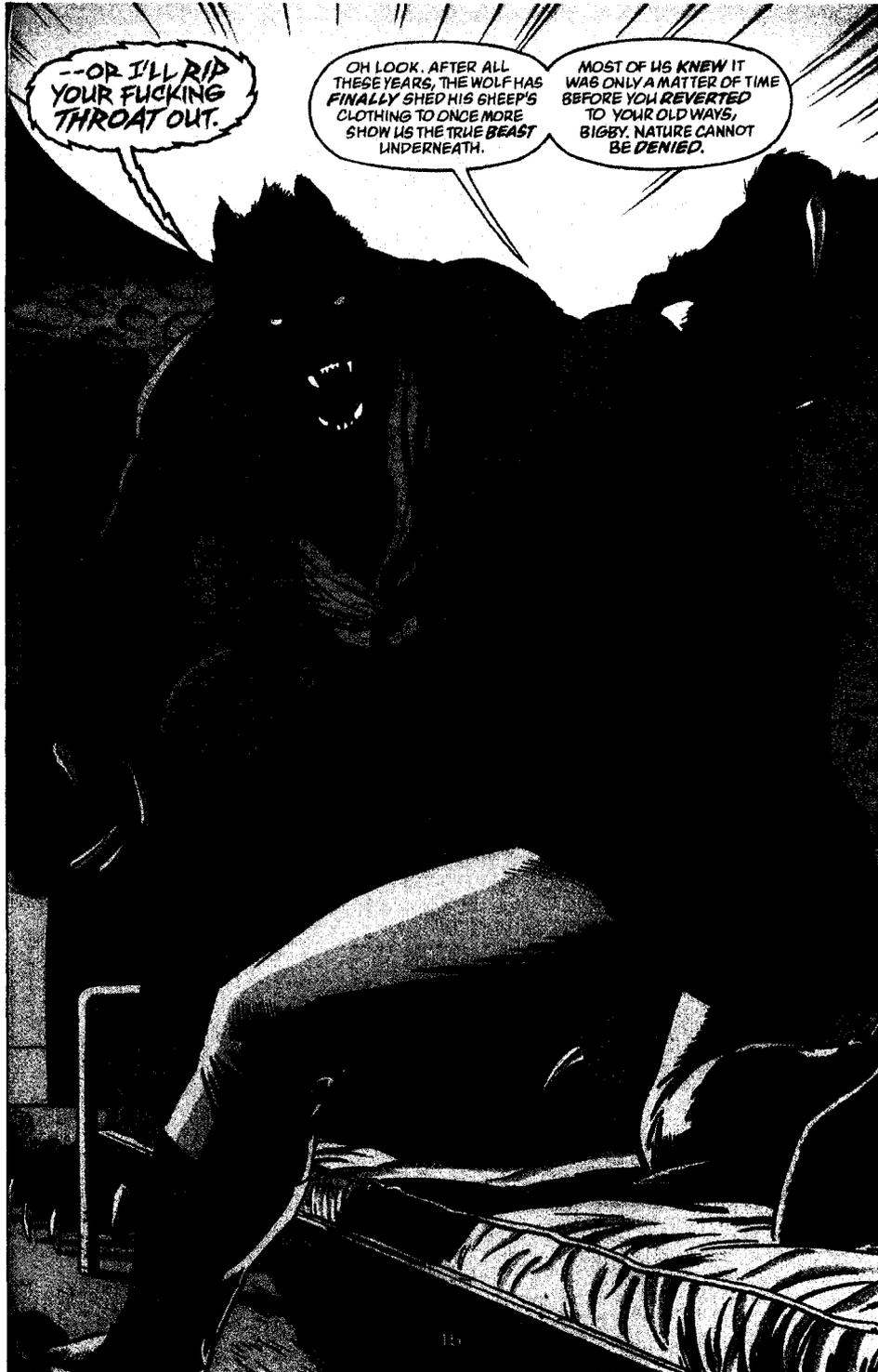
Appendix C – Nostalgia for ‘The Homelands’



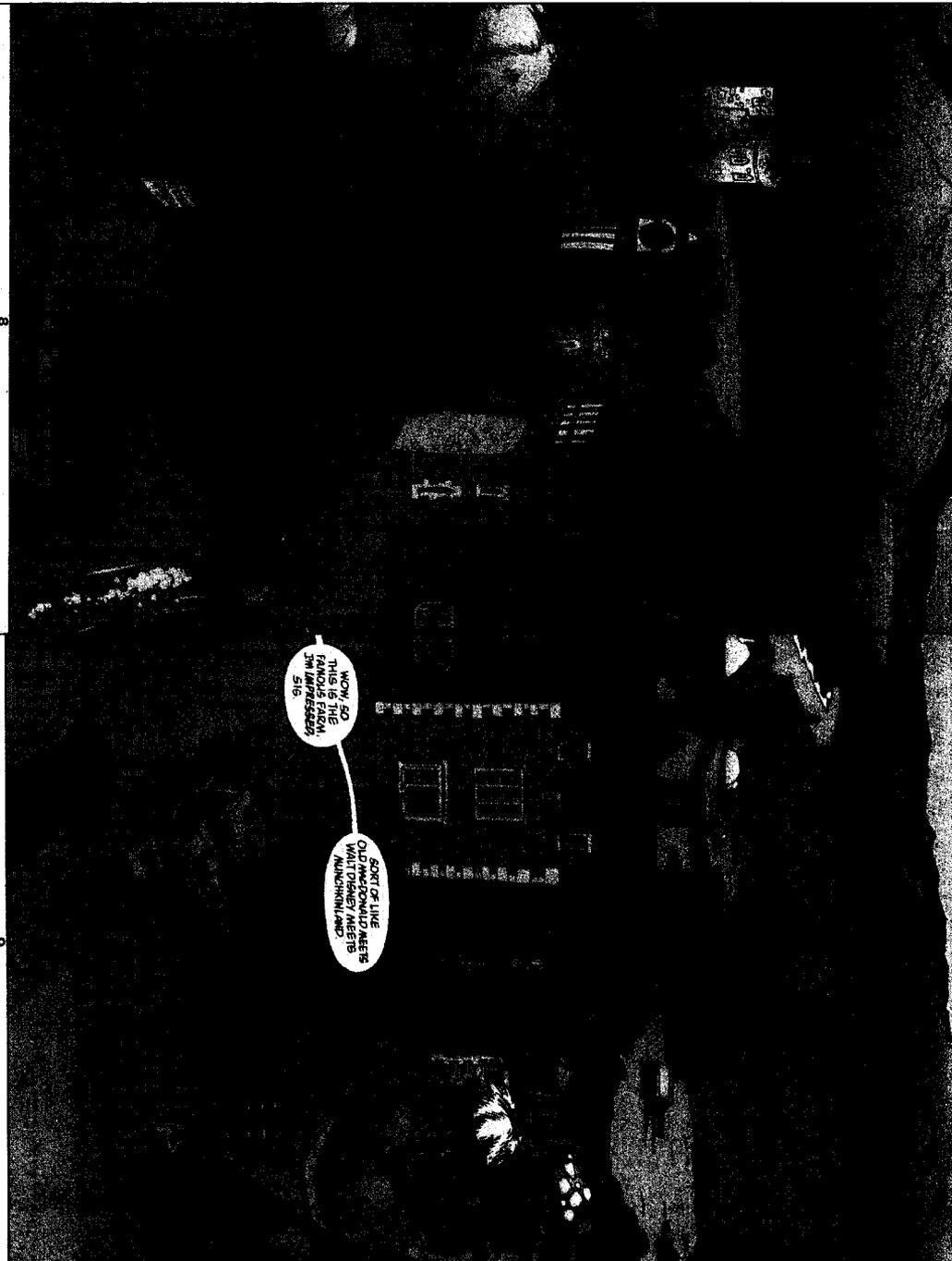
Appendix D – Bigby’s Transformation



Appendix E – Bigby’s Transformation (Continued)



Appendix F – The Upstate Annex of Fabletown: ‘The Farm’



© 2003 B. Willingham. *Fables: Animal Farm*. New York: DC Comics, pp. 10-11

Appendix G – Reinventing Snow White and the Big Bad Wolf



Reference List

- Abramis, D. J. (1990). Play in work: childish hedonism or adult enthusiasm? *American Behavioral Scientist*, 33(3), 353-373.
- Allen, G. (2000). *Intertextuality*. New York: Routledge.
- Anonymous, (2006, April 7). Favorite pieces of art in the Fables series? Clockwork Storybook. Message posted to <http://www.clockworkstorybook.net/forum/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=2323&st=0&sk=t&sd=a&hilit=statue>
- Anonymous, (2007, April 5). Outside thoughts from new Fables readers. Clockwork Storybook. Message posted to <http://www.clockworkstorybook.net/forum/viewtopic.php?p=25307>
- Anonymous, (2008, February 7). Favorite pieces of art in the Fables series? Clockwork Storybook. Message posted to <http://www.clockworkstorybook.net/forum/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=2323&st=0&sk=t&sd=a&hilit=statue&start=20>
- Anonymous, (2008, April 4). Fairy tale stories are really a popular topic these days. Clockwork Storybook. Message posted to <http://www.clockworkstorybook.net/forum/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=1625>
- Arnheim, R. (1993). From pleasure to contemplation. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 51(2), 195-197.
- Arnzen, M. (1997). Introduction: The return of the uncanny. *Paradoxa: Studies in World Literary Genres*, 3(3-4).
- Bacchilega, C. (1988). Cracking the mirror three re-revisions of "Snow White". *Boundary 2*, 15(3), 1-25.
- Bacchilega, C. (2000). North American and Canadian fairy tales. *The Oxford companion to fairy tales*. J. Zipes (Ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Bacchilega, C. (2002). Atwood, Margaret. *The Oxford companion to fairy tales*. J. Zipes (Ed.). Oxford University Press. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. Carleton University. Retrieved March 23 2008, from <http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t193.e42>
- Barlett, C., Harris, R., Smith, S., & Bonds-Raacke, J. (2005). Action figures and men. *Sex Roles*, 53 (11/12), 877-885.

- Berben-Masi, J. (1999). Mother Goose and Brother Loon: The fairy-tale-in-the-tale as vehicle of displacement. *Callaloo*, 22(3), 594-602.
- Bernstein, S. (2003). It walks: The ambulatory uncanny. *MLN*, 118(5), 1111-1139.
- Bond, B. (2004). Postmodern Mannerism: An examination of Robert Coover's Pinocchio in Venice. *Critique*, 45(3), 273-292.
- Brown, J. A. (2001). *Black superheroes, Milestone comics, and their fans*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Castaldi, S. (2004). Adult Fumetti and the postmodern: poetics of Italian sequential art in the 1970's and 1980's. *Word & Image*, 20(4), 271-282.
- Cixous, H. (1976). Fiction and its phantoms: A reading of Freud's Das Unheimliche (The Uncanny). *New Literary History*, 7(3), 525-548.
- Crew, H. S. (2002). Spinning new tales from traditional texts: Donna Jo Napoli and the rewriting of fairy tale. *Children's Literature in Education*, 33(2), 77-95.
- Cronin, B. (2008). *Comics should be good! Question of the month*. Comic Book Resources. Retrieved August 8, 2008 from <http://goodcomics.comicbookresources.com/2008/05/12/comics-should-be-goods-question-of-the-month/>
- Deszcz, J. (2002). Beyond the Disney spell, or escape into Pantoland. *Folklore*, 113(1), 83-91.
- Deszcz, J. (2004). Salman Rushdie's attempt at a feminist fairytale reconfiguration in Shame. *Folklore*, 115, 27-44.
- Doherty, T. (1996). Art Spiegelman's *Maus*: Graphic Art and the Holocaust. *American Literature*, 68(1), 69-84.
- Dolar, M. (1991). "I shall be with you on your wedding-night": Lacan and the uncanny. *October*, 58, 5-23.
- Ebenkamp, B. & Odiorne, J. (2002, January 28). Panic regression. *Brandweek*. 43(4), 14-15.
- Enns, A. (2007). The politics of *Ostalgie*: post-socialist nostalgia in recent German film. *Screen*, 48(4), 475-491.

- Freud, S. (1953). The Uncanny. In J. Strachey (Ed.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (pp. 219-256). London: The Hogarth Press.
- Goldstein, H. (2006). *The Ten Best DC Comics*. ING Entertainment. Retrieved August 8, 2008 from <http://comics.ign.com/articles/724/724919p1.html>
- Groensteen, T. (2000). Why are comics still in search of cultural legitimization? In A. Magnussen & H-C. Christiansen (Eds.), *Comics & Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics* (pp. 29-42). Copenhagen, Denmark: Museum Tusulanum Press, University of Copenhagen.
- Groensteen, T. (2007) [1999]. *The system of comics*. University Press of Mississippi: Jackson.
- Hayes, E. (2007). Gendered identities at play: case studies of two women playing Morrowind. *Games and Culture*, 2 (1), 23-48.
- Heng, G. (2006). Pleasure, resistance, and a feminist aesthetics of reading. In E. Rooney (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to feminist literary theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Herrero-Olaizola, A. (1998). Revamping the popular in Snow White and Pubis angelical: The residual fictions of Donald Barthelme and Manuel Puig. *Journal of Popular Culture*, 32(3), 1-16.
- Horna, J. (1994). Studies of life course variations in leisure. *The Study of Leisure*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 91-111.
- Hughes, J. A. (2006). "Who watches the watchmen?": Ideology and "Real World" Superheroes. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 39(4), 546-557.
- Hutcheon, L. (1980). *Narcissistic narrative: The metafictional paradox*. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press.
- Hutcheon, L. (2000). Irony, nostalgia, and the postmodern. *Studies in Comparative Literature*, 30, 189-207.
- Joosen, V. (2004). Feminist criticism and the fairy tale. *The New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship*, 10(1), 5-14.

- Kaiser, M. (1994). Fairy tale as sexual allegory: Intertextuality in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*. *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 14(3), 30-36.
- Kelly-Byrne, D. (1984). Continuity and discontinuity in play conditioning: The adult-child connection. *The Masks of Play*. B. Sutton-Smith & D. Kelly-Byrne (Eds.) New York: Leisure Press, 171-180.
- Kim, H. M. (1996). Strategic credulity: Oz as mass cultural parable. *Cultural Critique*, 33, 213-233.
- Kjølsrød, L. (2003). Adventure revisited: on structure and metaphor in specialized play. *Sociology*, 37 (3), 459-476.
- Lacassin, F. (1972). The comic strip and film language. *Film Quarterly*, 26(1), 11-23.
- Lauzen, M. M., Dozier, D. M., & Reyes, B. (2007). From adolescents to zoomers: an examination of age and gender in prime-time television. *Communication Quarterly*, 55(3), 343-357.
- Lokke, K. E. (1988). Bluebeard and *The Bloody Chamber*: The grotesque of self-parody and self-assertion. *Frontiers*, 10(1), 7-12.
- Lotz, M. (1998). The uncanny in Hans Christian Andersen's writings. *The Scandinavian Psychoanalytic Review*, 21, 77-91.
- Lucas, K. & Sherry, J. L. (2004). Sex differences in video game play: a communication-based explanation. *Communication Research*, 31, 499-523.
- Lydenberg, R. (1997). Freud's uncanny narratives. *PMLA*, 112(5), 1072-1086.
- Lyons, J. D. (2006). The Ancients' ironic nostalgia. *Paragraph*, 29(1), 94-107.
- Makinen, M. (1992). Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" and the decolonization of feminine sexuality. *Feminist Review*, 42, 2-15.
- Masschelein, A. (2002). The concept as ghost: Conceptualization of the uncanny in late-twentieth-century theory. *Mosaic*, 35(1), 53-68.
- Mieder, W. (1987). Grim variations: From fairy tales to modern anti-fairy tales. *The Germanic Review*, 62, 90-102.
- Mikkonen, K. (2006). The paradox of intersemiotic translation and the comic book: Examples from Enki Bilal's *Nikopol* trilogy. *Word & Image*, 22(2), 101-117.

- Meyrowitz, J. (1984). The adultlike child and the childlike adult: Socialization in an electronic age. *Daedalus*, 113(3), 19-48.
- Mori, Masahiro (1970). The uncanny valley. (K. F. MacDorman & T. Minato, Trans.). *Energy*, 7(4), 33-35.
- Moore, J. N. (2000). Myth, fairy tale, epic, and romance: Narrative as re-vision in Linden Hills. *Callaloo*, 23(4), 1410-1429.
- Muller, A. (2007). Notes toward a theory of nostalgia: Childhood and the evocation of the past in two European "Heritage" films. *New Literary History*, 37, 739-760.
- Nealon, J. T. (2005). Disastrous aesthetics: Irony, ethics, and gender in Barthelme's Snow White. *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 51(2), 123-141.
- Nel, P. (2003). The Disneyfication of Dr Seuss: Faithful to profit, one hundred percent? *Cultural Studies*, 17(5), 579-614.
- Novoa, A. (2005). Whose talk is it? Almodovar and the fairy tale in Talk to Her. *Marvels & Tales*, 19(2), 224-248.
- Noxon, C. (2006). *Rejuvenile: Kickball, cartoons, cupcakes, and the reinvention of the American grown-up*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- O'Malley, W. J. (1995). The Peter Pan syndrome. *Spirituality for Today*. 1(1-4).
- Pape, W. (1992). Happy endings in a world of misery: A literary convention between social constraints and utopia in children's and adult literature. *Children's Literature*, 13(1), 179-196.
- Pizer, J. (1990). The disenchantment of Snow White: Robert Walser, Donald Barthelme and the modern/postmodern anti-fairy tale. *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, (Sept-Dec), 330-347.
- Redies, S. (2004). Return with new complexities: Robert Coover's Briar Rose. *Marvels & Tales*, 18(1), 9-27.
- Register, W. (1999). Everyday Peter Pans: work, manhood, and consumption in urban America, 1900-1930. *Men and Masculinities*, 2(2), 197-227.
- Rooney, E. (2006). *The Cambridge companion to feminist literary theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Royse, P., Lee, J., Undrahbuyan, B., Hopson, M. & Consalvo, M. (2007). Women and games: technologies of the gendered self. *New Media & Society*, 9(4), 555-576.

- Schlipphacke, H. (2006). Postmodernism and the place of nostalgia in Ingeborg Bachmann's Franza fragment. *German Quarterly*, 79(1), 71-89.
- Schott, G. R. & Horrell, K. R. (2000). Girl gamers and their relationship with the gaming culture. *Convergence*, 6(4), 36-53.
- Smith, P. J. (2007). Pan's Labyrinth (El laberinto del fauno). *Film Quarterly*, 60(4), 4-9.
- Spurr, D. (2002). Spectres of modernity: Notes on the uncanny in modern literature. *Rivista di Letterature Moderne e Compare*, 55(1), 67-81.
- Sweeney, S. E. (1999). Fantasy, folklore, and finite numbers in Nabokov's "A Nursery Tale". *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 43(3), 511-529.
- Tartar, M. (1981). The houses of fiction: toward a definition of the uncanny. *Comparative Literature*, 33(2), 167-182.
- Tartar, M. (2008). *The annotated Hans Christian Andersen*. New York: Norton & Company.
- Taylor, T. L. (2003). Multiple pleasures: Women and online gaming. *Convergence*, 9(1), 21-46.
- Ueno, J. (2006). "Shojo" and adult women: A linguistic analysis of gender identity in "Manga" (Japanese Comics). *Women and Language*, 29(1), 16-25.
- Weber, S. (1973). The sideshow, or: Remarks on a canny moment. *MLN*, 88(6), 1102-1133.
- Wilde, A. (1976). Barthelme unfair to Kierkegaard: Some thoughts on modern and postmodern irony. *Boundary 2*, 5(1), 45-70.
- Willingham, B. (2002). *Fables: Legends in exile* (Vol. 1). New York: DC Comics.
- Willingham, B. (2003). *Fables: Animal farm* (Vol. 2). New York: DC Comics.
- Willingham, B. (2004). *Fables: March of the wooden soldiers* (Vol. 4). New York: DC Comics.
- Willingham, B. (2004). *Fables: Storybook love* (Vol. 3). New York: DC Comics.
- Willingham, B. (2005). *Fables: The mean seasons* (Vol. 5). New York: DC Comics.
- Willingham, B. (2006). *Fables: 1001 Nights of Snowfall*. New York: DC Comics.

- Willingham, B. (2006). *Fables: Arabian nights (and days)* (Vol. 7). New York: DC Comics.
- Willingham, B. (2006). *Fables: Wolves* (Vol. 8). New York: DC Comics.
- Willingham, B. (2007). *Fables: Sons of empire* (Vol. 9). New York: DC Comics.
- Willingham, B. (2008). *Fables: The good prince* (Vol. 10). New York: DC Comics.
- Wilson, R. R. (1989). Narrative reflexivity in Shakespeare. *Poetics Today*, 10(4), 771-791.
- Wilson, S. R. (1993). *Margaret Atwood's fairy-tale sexual politics*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Zipes, J. (1983). *Fairy tales and the art of subversion: The classic genre for children*. New York: Routledge.
- Zipes, J. (2000). Introduction: Towards a definition of the literary fairy tale. In J. Zipes (Ed.), *The Oxford companion to fairy tales* (pp. xv-xxxii). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Zipes, J. (2006). *Why fairy tales stick: The evolution and relevance of a genre*. New York: Routledge.