

Francesca Lia Block's Use of Enchantment: Teenagers' Need for Magic in the Real World

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Once upon a time. What is that supposed to mean?

What time are we upon, and where do I belong?

— *Witch Baby* (2,3)

Francesca Lia Block began publishing novels for adolescents just over ten years ago, while she was in college. As consolation for being away from Los Angeles too long, she wrote a short book about a character she developed in high school, Weetzie, the "punk princess" (Campbell). While the plots of her subsequent books tackle a range of subjects often found in adolescent literature, they are consistent in that, as Rebecca Platzner writes in the winter 1998 edition of *The ALAN Review*, they blend real fairy-tale elements. It is this melding of the magic and the ordinary that makes Block's work special. Magic is what makes people dream, and what better time is there to dream than the teen years, when there is still time to make one's dreams come true?

Magic in the Real

In *Speaking for Ourselves, Too*, Block describes her slipping of fairies, genies and witches into late twentieth-century Los Angeles as "a kind of magic realism" (17). Although it may appear that "magic realism" is a phrase she made up on the spur of the moment, magic realism is a legitimate literary phenomenon that has been around more than fifty years; a Cuban novelist named Alejo Carpentier developed the technique as a means of incorporating everyday life with the mythic qualities of Latin American geography and history. In magic realism, what is "real," even ordinary, is enriched by incorporating elements of religion, myth, and magic ("magic realism," *Benét's*). It is different from fantasy in that the fantasy novel depends on the strangeness of its characters and setting ("fantasy"). In magic realism, imaginary events are treated as if they were normal, everyday occurrences ("magic realism," *Merriam-Webster's*).

Francesca Lia Block is doubtlessly familiar with the concept of magic realism since she has a background in English literature and poetry (Campbell 59). In college she "...fell in love with ...the magic realism of Gabriel Garcia Marquez" ("F.L. Block," *Authors and Artists*). Additionally, Block indicates in a 1996 interview that one of her favorite authors is

Jeanette Winterson, whose best-known book, *The Passion*, is a novel set during the Napoleonic wars with characters that walk on water and see for miles ("Cool Block"). Block's taste for magic realism is evident in her novels when her teen-aged characters carry fairies around in their pocketbooks and are granted wishes from genies. The strange lady next door, the one whom the neighborhood children call a witch, probably is a witch if she happens to live in one of Block's stories.

A Real Need For Magic

Block's books are a pleasure to read. Typically they are short, quickly paced and filled with well-to-do teenagers living exciting lives as actors, photographers, and models in Los Angeles. Any reader expecting a typical adolescent problem novel where even the stuff of teen fantasies is given straightforward, realistic treatments will soon realize, however, that Block's fiction is not the typical teen novel: the prose

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is fanciful and plots often draw on fairy tales or folklore. Although Block apparently focuses on her own experiences and aesthetic sensibilities rather than a perceived sense of teenagers' needs, she has inadvertently tapped into what psychologist Bruno Bettelheim

believes is a developmental necessity. Bettelheim, author of the seminal psychological study, *The Uses of Enchantment* (1972) asserts that children, including teenagers, need to read works that incorporate magic to understand and navigate their world. A child who dislikes a new classmate because he is standoffish, for example, would not understand that the newcomer might be shy or nervous and will be friendlier later on, when he is used to his new class. But a child familiar with the fairy-tale canon would know that frightening beasts can magically turn into friendly princes, and will therefore understand that people can change (50).

While children in American society are allowed some flights of fancy, the age at which they are expected to take on adult responsibilities seems to be getting younger and younger. Even a typical teenager is increasingly bombarded with a world filled with problems, problems that were perhaps shielded from the youths of preceding generations. At school, even young teenagers are constantly warned about the dangers of drug abuse and sexually transmitted diseases, and at home, they are often alone or supervising younger siblings until six or seven o'clock each day. Additionally, teenagers face the

ordeal of separating from their parents and maturing into independent adults. The adolescent problem novel has long attempted to reflect these aspects of teens' lives through relentlessly realistic books; however, according to Bettelheim, people as old as twelve and a half think as children, not as adults (46). If Bettelheim is correct, then an almost exclusively realistic canon of adolescent literature deprives young teenagers of a literature they can truly comprehend.

Though Francesca Lia Block's interest in magic realism and her personal experiences as a teenager in Los Angeles seem to be the impetus for her books, rather than any interest in Bettelheim's theories, her books do fill the void in literature that Bettelheim believes is crucial because they reveal truth through magical means that young teenagers can understand. When adolescents read that a genie gives Weetzie Bat three wishes, they can learn to articulate and create their futures. When Cherokee Bat makes gifts for her friends that magically transform them, teenaged readers will think about what gifts they possess. When Witch Baby saves Angel Juan from the den where teenagers are turned into mannequins, young adolescent readers learn that easy answers are traps.

According to Bettelheim, those who do not get the chance to enter the world of fairy tales as children will find some way of getting magic into their lives in late adolescence, almost as if they realize that they cannot meet the expectations of adult life without the chance to see the world magically. To get access to the magic they were denied in childhood, these young adults will use any means necessary:

Many young people who today suddenly seek escape in drug-induced dreams, apprentice themselves to some guru, believe in astrology, engage in practicing "black magic," or who in some other fashion escape from reality into daydreams about magic experiences which are to change their life for the better, were prematurely pressed to view reality in an adult way (51).

While the reading of a book is not a substitute for actual experience, Francesca Lia Block's later books offer a far less destructive avenue through which older teens can seek the magic Bettelheim believes they so desperately crave.

Unlike Block's earlier novels, which heavily draw on Block's upper-middle-class childhood experiences in and around Los Angeles, Block's more recent books appeal to older adolescents because they feature teens who are thrust into adult circumstances where they confront serious problems, circumstances high-school students are either facing prematurely as adolescents or contemplating encountering in the future (Campbell). While adolescent novels frequently examine similar themes, the teens in Block's novels learn to handle their problems through some sort of magical intervention, the "enchantment" Bettelheim hypothesizes they need. In *Baby Be-Bop*, for example, Weetzie Bat's best friend Dirk struggles with his sexuality, and by extension, his identity. When a band of skin-heads attack him because he is gay, a magic lamp connects Dirk with his past and identity by giving him the chance to meet the great-grandmother, grandfather, mother, and father he has never known. Barbie Marks, the protagonist of *I Was a Teenage Fairy*, takes Mab, her tough-talking fairy friend, almost everywhere she goes. The two remain inseparable until Barbie is able to confront the fact that her mother allowed her to be sexually abused. In *The Hanged Man*, Laurel uses the Tarot to tell a story that seems

to be about her slipping into a spiral of anorexia, sexual promiscuity, and drug abuse because she is grieving her late father, but is actually about how she is trying to forget that she was his mistress.

The Real in the Magic

Block's most recent book, *The Rose and the Beast: Fairy Tales Retold* takes the magically realistic fiction she has been producing the last ten years to a new level. Reading these tales is like taking a walk in a fairy-tale forest: there are surprises hidden everywhere. Even the cover of the collection is designed to astonish and stun the most casual browser. A beautiful young girl with flowing long hair, wearing a filmy dress and a crown of flowers, waits patiently for her prince to save her. The bottom half of the girl's figure wraps around to the back of the book, however, where a different story is told. The maiden's fingernails, incongruously long and claw-like, are painted an eerie silvery-green color. They are the hands of an old woman, with wrinkles and age spots, jarringly out of place on this beautiful teen's body. The cover of the book is designed so the girl appears to be lying down, but the back of the book, with its placement of bushes and trees, shows clearly that the figure is standing. With the truths of the back cover revealed, the face of the girl on the front cover that, just a minute ago, looked peaceful and submissive now seems hard and angry. She who looked beautiful is now frightening.

The figure on the front of this book foreshadows the kaleidoscopic instability that is found within. In sharp contrast to the highly specified setting of Block's earlier books, the settings of the tales in this book jolt from the "once upon a time" in "Rose," a retelling of "Snow White and Rose Red" set in a fairy-tale forest to the back of a city bus in twentieth-century Los Angeles with a girl heading to her grandmother's house in the desert to avoid her father, the wolf. Additionally, the reader is bumped in and out of the stories with self-referential remarks. The unnamed protagonist of "Bones," for example, says, "I dreamed of being a part of the stories—even terrifying ones, even horror stories—because at least the girls in stories were alive before they died" (153). She is, of course, making these remarks as a part of a story, a retelling of "Bluebeard." These violent shifts from the past to the present and in and out, instead of confusing the reader, combine with Block's usual magic realism to underscore the universal nature of the tales.

Bettelheim writes that "...more can be learned from [fairy tales] about the inner problems of human beings, and of the right solutions to their predicaments in any society, than from any other type of story within a child's comprehension" (5). The tales Block chooses to "retell" particularly focus on the trauma that young adults face as they make the transition from childhood to full adult members of society. The pain and uncertainty of this transition, hypothesizes Bettelheim, may seem so great that the adolescent might be tempted to cling to childhood. Block seems instinctively to realize that those on the verge of adulthood need one final connection with the world of fairy tales to make that most traumatic transition. Fairy tales about growing up might serve as both a chance for the young adult to "practice" his experience in fantasy before he must in reality and as a warning to those who attempt to remain behind:

These stories also convince the hearer that he need not be afraid of relinquishing his childish position of depending on others, since after the dangerous hardships of the transitional period, he will emerge on a higher and better plane, to enter upon a richer and happier existence. Those who are reluctant to risk such a transformation, such as the two older brothers in "The Three Feathers," never gain the kingdom. Those who got stuck in the pre-oedipal stage of development, such as the dwarfs, will never know the happiness of love and marriage (215).

The stories Block chooses to revisit in *The Rose and the Beast* seem relevant to the bittersweet rites of passage involved in growing up even if the particular circumstances, like the circumstances of the original Snow Whites, Cinderellas, and Rapunzels, are extreme. While there is no evidence that Block draws directly on Bettelheim's theories, they are clearly echoed in her focus on teenagers' struggles to separate from their families and live effectively as adults.

In "Snow," Block's version of "Snow White," a story of "a mother's jealousy of her daughter's budding sexuality," Snow's mother, not her stepmother, is cast as the witch, and the hunter, recast as a gardener, is her mother's lover (Bettelheim 207). In "Snow" there is no prince; Snow and her mother battle for the love of the gardener. Instead of overcoming "the dangerous hardships of the transitional period" to "emerge on a higher plane," as happens in "Snow White," however, Snow tries to stall herself in Bettelheim's "pre-oedipal stage" by staying with the dwarfs, bringing devastating results. When Snow returns to the cottage and happily declares, "I am a freak," she ominously hears "seven pairs of boots climbing up the stairs to find her" (30-31). Snow has sentenced herself to a life as cramped as her dwarfed guardians simply to avoid the trauma of the transitional stage.

In "Charm," Block's version of "Sleeping Beauty," the needle is a syringe filled with heroin, and the sleep is a drug induced haze designed to shield Rev, the sleeping beauty, from horrifying life her parents give her. A childhood friend named Charm who is the long-lost love of her life saves her from her self-destructive spiral. Rev, like Snow, has neither separated from her parents emotionally nor accepted responsibility for her own life:

And then, finally, when her chance had come to ornament her beauty the way she wished, for the imagined forbidden lover with the small high breasts and sweet, wet hair and gentle eyes, she had pricked herself and fallen into the death sleep.

Perhaps it was what she deserved for wanting to make herself more beautiful. And for wanting what she could not have (92).

Unlike Snow, however, Rev eventually wakes up, makes the break, and finds happiness with Charm.

"Love is a dangerous angel," writes Francesca Lia Block at the end of her first book, *Weetzie Bat* (78). Block's subsequent work shows that life, for some teens, is also a dangerous angel: discrimination, drug abuse, sexual abuse, AIDS, and neglect are all parts their lives. Like the fairy tale charac-

ters whose stories precede them, the teenagers in Block's book experience far more trauma than does the average teen; however, their stories, also like those of the fairy tales, resonate with young adults because they all must go through a period of intense upheaval in order to enter the adult world. Francesca Lia Block's "fairy tales with an edge" offer these teens a last chance at the enchantment they need to help them make the leap to the next exciting stage of their lives (Block, *Authors and Artists*).

Annotated Bibliography of Block's Books for Adolescents (In order of publication; all published by HarperCollins)

Weetzie Bat (1989)

Weetzie's story is the first in the series, now collected as *Dangerous Angels* (1998), about herself and her family. Weetzie, the "punk princess," lives in Los Angeles and goes to a school "where no one understands her" (3). Her life is transformed when her best friend's grandmother gives her a lamp with a genie, and she makes and receives three wishes. Although these wishes all come true, the "happily ever after" implied in this almost-fairy tale is questionable as she and her friends face betrayal and disease.

Witch Baby (1991)

Witch Baby is the dark child of a union between "Secret Agent Lover Man," Weetzie's long time lover who functions as her husband, and Vixanne, a witch-like woman with whom Secret has an affair. Because

Witch Baby doesn't know that Secret is her biological father, she doesn't feel she belongs in a family that consists of Weetzie, Secret, Dirk, Dirk's lover Duck, and Cherokee Bat, her "almost sister" who is the biological daughter of Weetzie and any one of the three men in the family. With wild, dark curling hair and cowboy boot roller skates, Witch Baby embarks on a search for self-identity.

Cherokee Bat and the Goat Guys (1992)

Cherokee Bat's story is about the lure of power. When Cherokee, Witch Baby, and their boyfriends, Raphael and Angel Juan start a band called The Goat Guys, they have immediate success because of special gifts Cherokee makes each band member, gifts that enhance their performances on stage. Their success begins to turn sour, however, when Witch resorts to stealing horns for Angel, and Cherokee attempts to gather all of the power for herself by wearing everyone's gift at once. Unlike Block's other books, which draw on elements of European fairy tales, *Cherokee Bat* draws on Native American folklore.

Missing Angel Juan (1993)

This novel is Witch Baby's second story. In this book, Witch Baby continues her search for identity when she follows the love of her life, Angel Juan, to New York City. In a plot twist that borrows from the story of Bluebeard, and with the help of a fairy godmother-like figure in the person of Charlie Bat, Weetzie's deceased father, Witch finds Angel in a chamber of mannequinized teenagers. If *Witch Baby* is about finding one's identity in the family, *Missing Angel Juan* is about finding one's identity in the world.

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The Hanged Man (1994)

In her first departure from the Weetzie Bat books, this book is the story of a girl who attempts to deal with the death of her father by living a wild and self-destructive life in Los Angeles. In this book, Block draws on the folklore of the Tarot. Each chapter begins with a drawing of a card, a description of its meaning, and its place in the pattern of the fortune telling. At first, the stories that accompany each card seem tenuously connected, but, as in a Tarot reading, the pattern, or the story, is revealed when all the cards are in place. Eventually, the reader learns that Laurel is not acting in response to the pain of the loss of her loving father, but to the pain of his incestuous relationship with her.

Baby Be-Bop (1995)

With *Baby Be-Bop* Block returns to the characters from the *Dangerous Angel* books to tell the back-story of Dirk, Weetzie's best friend. In her first and thus far only book with a male protagonist, Block takes the reader back to Dirk's early life and his struggle with his sexuality. When Fifi, his grandmother, gives Dirk a golden lamp, he gets a chance to meet some of the many deceased members of his family, including his parents, who help him forge his identity.

Girl Goddess #9 (1996)

A collection of mostly previously-published short stories, this book is interesting because Block has developed, in her novels, many of the themes that she introduced first in these stories. Some of the stories, such as "Tweetie Sweet Pea," which draws on Kurt Cobain's suicide (although he isn't mentioned by name), take their themes from popular culture, and others, such as "Blue," the story of a fairy, draw on the magical realism that are found in most of Block's longer works. Notable stories in this collection are "Dragons in Manhattan," a story drawing on *The Wizard of Oz* that shows Tuck finding her long-lost father in the form of one of her lesbian mothers, a transsexual, and the title story, "Girl Goddess #9," told in the form of a 'Zine about two girls realizing that their rock-god fantasy is another form of fairy tale.

I Was a Teenage Fairy (1998)

Barbie Marks is a teenage model under the thumb of her mother. Her best friend is Mab, a fairy who lives in a birdcage in her room. Mab helps Barbie hold onto herself in the turmoil around her, and eventually Barbie faces up to truth that she and other models have been sexually abused by a photographer with their parents' full knowledge. Barbie achieves self-actualization when she saves a new child model from the photographer's abuse and becomes a photographer herself.

Violet and Claire (1999)

Violet and Claire has fewer allusions to magic and fairy tales than do any other of Block's books. Dark Violet is obsessed with films, and she makes friends with light, fairy-like Claire because she sees Claire as a potential subject and star for the film she is making. Violet sells her script and becomes caught up in the glamorous and frightening Hollywood lifestyle, while Claire becomes involved with her poetry teacher. The novel concludes with the two coming together in the desert with the realization that they need each other to make it in the adult world.

The Rose and the Beast: Fairy Tales Retold (2000)

Block deftly connects the realities of teenagers' lives with traditional fairy tales showing the tales' continued relevance (see text).

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