

Fairy Tales and a Dose of Reality

By Catherine Orenstein

The most recent crop of reality television shows taps the fantasies we first learned from fairy tales: castles and fortunes, true love and romantic destiny, and above all that most perfect storybook union, the "fairy tale wedding." On the rose-strewn finale of *The Bachelorette*, Trista chose the shy fireman Ryan, who promptly got down on one knee and held out a diamond. "I don't think that I could have imagined a better ending to this fairy tale story," she sighed. Meanwhile, on *Joe Millionaire*, 20 would-be Cinderellas competed for the hand of a modern-day Prince Charming.

Of course, in addition to pandering to our storybook fantasies, reality television plays to far crasser conceits - lies and manipulation, an ample display of female flesh and a sadistic interest in the rejected suitors' humiliation. Fox's new show *Married by America*, which premieres tonight, will take love out of the equation entirely, with viewers picking who gets paired off. In NBC's coming *Race to the Altar*, a sort of hybrid of *The Great Race* and *The Bachelor*, couples will compete for a fantasy prime-time wedding.

Sounds like fairy tales run amok. In fact, though, this reality comes closer to the true storybook than one might imagine. Those who wish for a real-life fairy tale romance might want to read their fairy tales again. The first published contes de fées, as they were called by the Parisian aristocracy at the end of the 17th century, did indeed revolve around courtship and weddings, but they told of unions that were anything but sweet and loving. Charles Perrault's 1697 collection, *Tales of Times Past with Morals*, better known today as the *Mother Goose Tales*, featured cruelty, deceit, greed, murder and nasty in-laws.

His pre-Disney Sleeping Beauty is not chastely awakened by a kiss, but rather impregnated by a passing prince and hidden in the woods. Years later the prince's mother tries to eat her. The young bride in Perrault's *Bluebeard* appears to have made a better match by marrying a wealthy widower. Alas, it turns out her groom is a serial killer. One day she discovers the corpses of his former wives hanging in a secret chamber.

As for Cinderella, Hollywood's various versions may preach about true love transcending class, but in Perrault's original story Prince Charming falls for Cinderella's gown and slippers but fails to recognize her face. He mistakes her for her stepsisters, and has to rely on shoe size to be sure he gets the right bride.

These early fairy tales suggest how much our expectations of love and marriage have changed in three centuries. Perrault's "fairy tale wedding" was not entirely make-believe. It was based on the prevailing aristocratic marriage of the 17th century, the *mariage de raison*, where newlyweds were often strangers, money was more important than romance and love was not the key but rather an impediment to a successful marriage.

Orchestrated by parents, marriage was a business affair. Take, for example, the noble but indebted Grignan family, who sold their son to the daughter of a wealthy tax collector for the sum of 400,000 livres. "Console yourselves for a *mésalliance*," urged a cousin of the groom's mother in a 1694 letter, "by the relief you will feel at no longer being harassed by creditors when you sojourn in your large, beautiful, magnificent chateau."

The modern romantic understanding of the fairy tale, and especially the romantic ideal of a "fairy tale wedding," owes most to the 20th century, when Americans began to glorify marriage and domesticity. In 1937, Walt Disney's first full-length animated feature, *Snow White and the*

Seven Dwarfs, showed the cartoon heroine whistling and singing with rabbits and deer while she cooks, darns and scrubs the dwarfs' bachelor pad. Similarly in 1950, the heroine of Disney's *Cinderella* sings and dances with mice and birds while she cleans house and stitches her ball gown, chores that anticipate her future life as happy housewife to Prince Charming.

Those films transformed the message of the fairy tale, just as today we continue to spin our own romantic wives' tales, recasting Prince Charming and Cinderella as prime-time bachelors and bachelorettes who court, propose and even wed for cash, beauty and network profits - not to mention America's entertainment. The fantasy is not that reality television is delivering a fairy tale romance, but that there ever was one at all.

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