

The Singing Bones: more notes

Most of the sculptures in *The Singing Bones* were originally created as illustrations for a German edition of Philip Pullman's *Grimms Märchen* (Grimm Tales), a retelling of fifty classic fairy tales, quite true to original sources while imbued with Pullman's own distinctive voice. Ever since I began working as a book illustrator I've been interested in tackling some version of these stories, especially as my own narrative style is typically short and fable-like: *Tales from Outer Suburbia* and *The Lost Thing*, for instance, both aspire to the simplicity and weirdness of much older fairy tales. However, I've often found the peculiar tone and illogical twists and meandering of traditional fairy tales difficult to relate to, particularly as a non-European suburban boy from Western Australia. And while I've admired the wonderful illustrations of Arthur Rackham and others, I've never found them entirely satisfactory or convincing: the images conjured in my own mind are far more nebulous, lacking specificity and not very literal... sometimes best left unillustrated altogether. Philip Pullman makes this same point himself, that the characters and situations in fairy tales are more like silhouettes or two-dimensional cut outs, and do not benefit from much great elaboration, written or visual. At the same time, my long term German publisher asked me to consider creating a cover illustration for Philip's book, since at the very least, books usually need one of these.

So this immediately posed the kind of problem that's always interested me as a visual artist, whether tackling the political difficulties of *The Rabbits* or the expressive difficulties of migrants in *The Arrival*: how to represent things that are hard to represent. It's a dilemma that often returns me to childhood, since this is the time every artist begins their practice, and also the time when one's vocabulary is the most limited. There's actually a kind of pleasure in that difficulty, which all children know. As a child I was obsessed with sculpture more than the kind of painting and drawing I mainly do as an adult, particularly using a papier mâché and tapioca-flour glue technique that my dad taught me (part of his own Malaysian-Chinese childhood). I also spent a lot of time carving soapstone with chisels, files and sandpaper after I was introduced to the medium by a primary school teacher; I mainly recall dusting myself of all the talcum powder which accumulated in piles along one corner of the backyard after school.

Part of the appeal of such a resistant material was that very resistance, that you have to work with what you find, following the shape of the rock – a fish, a cat or a face? – rather than imposing your will upon it. And mindful to avoid excessive detail and elaboration, just because it took too long! It's stone after all. And things often cracked due to random flaws in the stone, in which case you just sighed and changed the subject: the big fish became a smaller bear, boat or space-ship. The results were never great works – many ended up lining my parents garden as so many kids' creations do – but the process always stuck in my mind, and drew me to ceramics in high school. Since then the conventions and economics of a career in book-based illustration have dictated a more refined interest in drawing, painting and other 2D media: portable, easily stored, distributed and copied. Writing fits into that category also. But all along I've always been looking for an opportunity, an excuse, to include sculpture as a narrative medium, without ever finding an ideal fit.

More recently I've had the good fortune to travel to Mexico City and Vancouver for children's literature events, and found inspiration in ancient and contemporary folk art in museums and streets. In Mexico, the pre-Columbian figurines at the amazing National Museum of Anthropology feel entirely modern in artistic style and humour, and everywhere charged with narrative, regardless of whether the tales they refer to are known or have been lost in time. The people, animals and animal-people have a universal, timeless and elemental presence. The same is true of much Inuit sculpture, where the spirit of quests, hunts, courtships, conflicts and transformations are condensed as deceptively simple carvings in soapstone, walrus ivory or argillite. The surrealism of work from these cultures (and many other the world over, sharing an interesting kinship, either with or without bloodline) is at once bizarre and familiar. I can't help feeling that it finds a perfect parallel in folk tales coming from the very different soil – but the same human imagination – of dark European forests, mountains and rivers. Here are stories of mostly anonymous characters living and dying in dreamlike circumstances, changing into animals and back again, stumbling upon great treasures and difficult choices, choosing a path of good or evil, hiding dark secrets or revealing humane truths. Their personalities seem bluntly powerful: bereft of detail but not weight. And in spite of what is anachronistic to our own age – the feudal dilemmas, predatory wolves, the woeful shortage of women's rights – these tales are still compelling, in the same way that dreams, uncensored by reason, still have some deep truth to tell.

I produced fifty of these sculptures from 2011 to 2013, completing them just before the birth of our daughter Vida, to whom the book is dedicated (although she might find it ironic that she's not allowed to play with 'Daddy's toys'). I enjoyed making them so much that I continued the series even after the publication of *Grimms Märchen* in 2013, making sculptures for another 25 stories that were not included in Pullman's original selection, but which are equally fascinating, from the delightful adventures of *Thumbling* to the nightmarish *Mother Trudy*. Of course, I was very keen to make this work available to an English speaking audience, especially in Australia, and present a volume of Grimm that was slightly different to the many publications of recent years, celebrating 200 years since the original release of *Children's and Household Tales* in 1812.

The resulting format borrows more from museum displays than fairy tale anthologies, where an image is presented with a short extract from the original tale, intended the spark the imagination more than guide it (I imagine they could make for quite interesting writing exercises for students too, or professionals for that matter). Who are these sisters with gold and toads spilling from their mouth? What will happen if Death does not come down from his tree? What will become of the bride hiding from her murderous groom? What the hell is that grinning creature prancing about? I was particularly interested in what I could remember of a story, usually a central image such as Rapunzel's hair falling down the side of her tower, in the same way what one recalls a fugitive dream upon waking. And the images in Grimm's tales are so strange and hallucinogenic, and perhaps archetypal, that these are the elemental bones that come to mind; the stones washed round at the bottom of a river, when most other memories are carried off downstream.

This publication of the book was accompanied by an exhibition at No Vacancy gallery in Melbourne in October 2015, allowing a rare and probably singular

opportunity to present all of my *Singing Bones* sculptures in full dimension. Although the works were primarily intended as photographic elements, I still went to the trouble of sculpting them in the round and adding details that are ultimately lost in the conversion to a flat image. Of course, there is something inherently attractive about real objects in space too, as they are not just representations of things, they are actual things, with their own personality and pent-up energy, and hopefully my photography using various lamps and little theatrical 'sets', sustains much of that feeling. Unfortunately due to the practical difficulties of transporting and displaying so many sculptures, future exhibitions of the complete set are unlikely, but I'm glad that so many people were amused by the show and enjoyed making their own little sculptures courtesy of a large plasticine-covered table at the centre of the gallery.

I hope that this work, which was a great deal of fun for me, will inspire others to revisit the original fairy tales, especially those less familiar, while also suggesting some license to improvise a more personal interpretation, and even consider playful variations. The original Grimm tales are themselves products of cultural evolution, changing slightly with every retelling, and I hope that my small part in this is now global lineage is faithful to that spirit. And more importantly, that the viewer/reader is able to add the larger part of their own logic and feeling into the mix.